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Human-Made and Natural Catastrophes Reflected in Western Literature: From Antiquity to the Present

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Abstract

We continue to live in an academic world where the natural sciences and the humanities are clearly demarcated from each other. However, recent years have witnessed a significant rapprochement, especially in light of the enormous need to come to terms with natural disasters that continuously strike human societies all over the world throughout time in scientific and intellectual terms. There is no doubt that we must understand those as precisely as possible, but there is also no doubt that both poets and literary scholars have always been in charge of probing and channeling the human responses and to contextualizing the catastrophic conditions in a wider context, and this also philosophically and religiously. While pre-modern literature seems to have responded to natural catastrophes only tentatively, since the nineteenth century at the latest writers, poets, and artists increasingly have interacted with those disasters and reflected on their impacts in human life more in depth.

Keywords: *Black Death, Boccaccio, Marguerite de Navarre, Flooding, Heinrich von Kleist, Johann Peter Hebel, Avalanches, Theodor Fontane, Storm, Josef Haslinger, Tsunami.*

Introduction: Stemand the Humanities

The debate about the conflict between STEM and Humanities continues unabatedly. What is more relevant within academia, scientific analysis, or humanist investigations? Of course, this opposition is an artificial one because it does not take into consideration that human existence consists both of material and spiritual elements. We all need food, shelter, and health, and the sciences serve us exceedingly well to tackle many of those challenges involved. However, once those material needs are met, the other component of our lives enters the picture, requiring much more difficult answers, pertaining to our spiritual dimension. That dimension pertains to global features, addressing happiness and sorrow, emotions, and worries, and especially the quest for meaning in a highly confusing and intractable world. The outside, material existence, however, as concrete as it seems to be, is only the mask of much more elusive forces or powers. The most important processes of human existence take place only there, not within the physical framework. This might be a simplistic answer to a complex problem, but it might be the most convincing one (Ertas 2011; Carrell, Keaty, and Wong, 2020).

This phenomenon has already been addressed countless times, both by poets and religious leaders, by philosophers and historians, whereas scientists appear to be content with the exploration of the material properties of all things without investigating deeper levels of meaning.

Altogether, however, we are really talking about the same metaphorical coin with its two sides, and only when STEM fields and the Humanities cooperate and exchange their findings, can we hope to gain deeper insights into the reasons why we are here and what we are supposed to do, that is, to comprehend this coin we call our existence, studying the material and spiritual conditions (Classen 2022).

The Purpose of Literature in Face of Natural Catastrophes

The purpose of literature is to engage with highly complex and indefinite issues that depend on countless

different factors. In particular, the literary narrative has always served as a medium for human emotions, whether in face of death or of love, whether in response to an experience with the Godhead or something else that proves to be ineffable. One critical component has always stood out in virtually all societies throughout time, the narrative response to natural disasters, or catastrophes (Walter 2010; Frömming 2006). Nature, as welcoming as it might be to human beings, has always produced major forces of greatest destructive impact, such as volcanoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, wildfires, heat waves, freezes, droughts, flooding, etc. As a consequence, countless numbers of people have lost their lives, houses, properties, and livestock. Irrespective of the entire debate concerning global warming and climate change, it is simply a fact of life that the earth is a restless place.

As chroniclers throughout time have reported and as journalists and scientists today confirm, every day at some place on earth, a natural catastrophe takes place. While it is debatable whether there are more cataclysmic events today than in the past (global warming?), it is an unquestionable fact, however, that there is nothing absolutely firm and safe anywhere in the world. Floodings can occur in the desert; volcanoes long thought to be extinct, can come back to life; tsunamis have struck unexpectedly, and so have earthquakes. We humans live precariously, and the history of the literary discourse has reflected on that globally in momentous works.

Sciences have offered explanations, maybe sometimes practical solutions, but when tragedy strikes, such as in the case of the fire that burned down the entire city of Lahaina on Maui, HI (early August 2023), the facts are what they are and can be put aside fairly quickly, whereas the need for emotional responses constitutes the greatest challenges a long time after the fire because so many people were affected by it. When massive numbers of people lose their lives because of such a catastrophe, the poetic voice is called upon to engage with that experience in a spiritual, poetic manner.

Throughout times, devastating natural catastrophes have had a huge impact on human society, which we are familiar with through some of the best literary reactions. Already in Genesis books six through nine, the writer commented most powerfully on the deluge and the bare survival of human kind through Noah and his family only (Cohn 1999). Classical Latin literature knows of the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius in C.E. 79 through many sources, but also through literary narratives, such as by Pliny the Younger who provided a first-hand account of the eruption ca. 27 or 28 years after the event in two of his *Epistulae*, or *Letters* (Foss 2022).

There would be many occasions to identify such natural catastrophes and literary responses. The purpose of this paper is not to race throughout the centuries in the futile hope of being comprehensive. A comparative book-length analysis might achieve that task best (cf. Rigby 2015; see also the contributions to Ballengee and Kelman, ed., 2021). Instead, here I will consider a number of most relevant and representative cases of literary reflections on natural catastrophes from the fourteenth to the twenty-first century as illustrations of human responses to such events. Those examples will clearly signal to us the relevance of the literary discourse because the enormous suffering by people throughout time has not necessarily been met best by scientific investigations. Instead, the literary (religious) narrative has regularly served most meaningfully to remind the reader of the natural facts and to present literary expressions for those emotions. But even poets and writers have commonly faced great challenges in coming to terms with those catastrophes and have mostly turned their attention away from the specific suffering to alleviate people's lives with entertaining or instructive narratives instead (for a sample of recent approaches, as disjointed as they might be, see van Asperen and Jensen, ed., 2023. The contributors reflect on disaster and emotions, disaster and blame, and disaster and time, and this mostly concerning situations in the Netherlands, but then also Mesoamerica and Japan).

The Black Death and Boccaccio

COVID-19 was a traumatic wake-up call for humankind concerning our contingency here on earth. A virus more dangerous than the nuclear bomb regarding human health and survival rates. Similarly, the Plague of Justinian (541–549 C.E.) and the Spanish Influenza (1918), circa thousand four hundred years apart, and numerous other epidemics throughout time have struck mercilessly and killed millions of people (for a list of epidemics, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ List_of_epidemics_and_pandemics; for a study, see Gabaglio, 2021). Medical research in recent years has created miracles to combat those epidemics (such as with HIV/AIDS), but the emotional impact of the massive death of people remains with us as an incomprehensible wound. Even though we have now available vaccines at least against COVID, Ebola and many other epidemics remain horrifying threats we are hopelessly exposed to if and when they appear. The suffering continues, especially when we consider the almost daily onslaught of global news concerning earthquakes, flush-floodings, avalanches, volcanic eruptions, or fires.

Oddly, the Black Death from ca. 1347 to ca. 1351 and many times thereafter left barely any traces in contemporary literature. Boccaccio's *Decameron* from ca. 1350 seems to be the only major work explicitly predicated on that plague, with the ten narrators fleeing from Florence to spend ten pleasant days outside in their

rural estates, telling each other stories about love, conflicts, adultery, marriage, violence, or ignorance. But none of those stories addresses the Black Death or other catastrophes. Only in the seventh story told by Panfilo on the second day, the narrator reflects on a natural disaster, since Alatiel, the daughter of Sultan Beminedab, supposed to marry the King of the Algarve, suffers from a shipwreck in which all the crew and most of her maids perish (Boccaccio 1972/1995).

However, Boccaccio at least offers most famously specific comments on the devastating impact of the Black Death on Florence. Those have been discussed already for a long time, so a few remarks will suffer to highlight the unique importance of the literary discourse in light of the natural catastrophe (Byrne 2004; Meier, ed. 2005; Aberth 2011). It seems stunning at first sight that the collection itself turns so completely away from the traumatic experiences in the city and elsewhere, replacing those with accounts of love, sex, violence, and comic scenes (Ruggiero 2021). Nevertheless, the prologue serves exceedingly well as a commentary on human suffering in almost unprecedented terms.

As the narrator comments right at the beginning, “To take pity on people in distress is a human quality which every man and woman should possess, but it is especially requisite in those who have once needed comfort, and found it in others” (1). But he then admits himself that his stories will consist of “a variety of love adventures, bitter as well as pleasing, and other exciting incidents, which took place in both ancient and modern times” (3). Where then does the plague enter the picture? The introduction to the first day explains that the epidemic had hit Florence in 1348, after it had already ravaged badly in the Middle East, with no one knowing its cause or reason (5). People were helpless in face of this epidemic: “all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing” (5). The narrator describes in graphic terms the physical manifestations of the plague, and then goes into details concerning the various types of reaction by people, either resorting to excess or seeking complete isolation.

The worst impact of the plague was that moral values suffered extensively, leading to an ungluing of society at large, with the dying and the dead being disregarded or left unattended (11). All social classes, professions, age groups, and genders became subject to mistreatment, contempt, or abandonment in the worst situations. In the countryside, for instance, people were “dying more like animals than human beings. Like the townspeople, they too grew apathetic in their ways, disregarded their affairs, and neglected their possessions” (12). For the poet, profound sadness filled his heart (11), but then he resorts to his actual purpose of storytelling, relating what happened with those seven ladies and three gentlemen, the future company determining the *Decameron*. Ironically, the subsequent establishment of a literary circle serves to forget the consequences of the plague. Only in the epilogue are we somewhat reminded of it again when the narrator emphasizes the contingency of all human affairs: “the things of this world have no stability” (802). In short, even the most famous literary work predicated on the outbreak of the Black Death ultimately ignores it and focuses instead on the narrative’s quality and meaning.

Certainly, contemporary chroniclers had much to say about this and other natural catastrophes, but writers such as the Bernese Franciscan fable author Ulrich Bonerius entirely ignored the devastating plague in his *Der Edelstein*, also from ca. 1350 (Bonerius, 2022). We would search in vain for literary responses to the epidemic even in the major works by Geoffrey Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, Franco Sacchetti, or Heinrich Kaufringer (all around 1400). However, art in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was certainly deeply influenced by the plague, with death motifs growing tremendously in influence (Meiss 1951; Jost 2016). In other words, we face here a rather curious disconnect, an intellectual gap that was closed more specifically only in later centuries.

Death and Flooding: Johannes von Tepl and Marguerite de Navarre

One of the reasons for this dearth of concern might be that poets tended to address primarily individual forms of suffering, the dying of a beloved person, such as in the case of Johannes von Teple’s *The Plowman* (ca. 1400), where the male speaker vehemently attacks death for having robbed him of his wife (Johannes von Tepl, 1964). Only when we turn to one of the most important contributions to sixteenth-century French literature, Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron* (1558/1559), do we encounter another major treatment of a natural catastrophe, with the framework very similar to Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (Marguerite de Navarre 1984; cf. the contributions to Ferguson, ed., 2013). The narrative is set in the Pyrenees where many tourists and ill people have assembled in a spa town, Cauterets, hoping to regain their health from the mineral waters. But at one-point, heavy rains set in that soon create a flooding so severe that everyone is escaping from the spa town trying to save their lives. As the narrator describes it:

> It fell in such torrents and with such extraordinary force, you would have thought that God had quite forgotten that once He had promised to Noah never again to destroy the world by water. In Cauterets the huts and houses were all so badly flooded that it was impossible for anyone to stay there. (60)

In other words, it is a catastrophe. While some manage to leave the town in fairly safe conditions, many others face roaring rivers, destroyed roads and bridges, and horrible conditions that bring death to many. Those who rely on their physical strength and courage have to realize that the forces of nature are stronger than they themselves, so they succumb to death. To make the situation even worse, some of the tourists encounter wild beasts and criminal bandits, which increases their suffering. Some individuals, however, survive, helped by locals who seem to be unaffected by the torrents of water, such as a shepherd (64). One by one, a group of lucky individuals assemble in an abbey where they are more or less welcomed by the miserly abbot, and that's where they then have to wait for ten days until a bridge has been rebuilt that would help them find the way back to safety.

Upon the recommendation of an old lady, Oisille, they resort to reading the Holy Scripture, attending Mass, and praying, which then would give them the permission to turn to lighter pastime after lunch. As one of the gentlemen, Hircan, proposes: "Between dinner and vespers I think we should choose some pastime, which, while not being prejudicial to the soul, will be agreeable to the body. In that way we shall spend a very pleasant day" (67). They thus decide on following the example set by Boccaccio and turn to storytelling (69). In this way, the natural catastrophe turns into the decisive catalyst for a major literary enterprise, competing with this Italian master poet. The external conditions, the swollen rivers, the blocked roads, and so forth by then no longer matter; sunshine has returned, and the company seeks out comfortable shelter for their activity (69).

Since the *Heptaméron* has been left as a fragment, with story seventy-two ending the storytelling enterprise, we do not know the outcome of the frame story and the further impact of the natural disaster. But, to be sure, Marguerite compellingly utilized that account of the torrential rain as a convenient and convincing explanation for her group of story tellers to assemble in the remote location where they are undisturbed by the external world and can dedicate themselves completely to their tales (Classen 2010; Classen 2014).

Shakespeare and His Tempest

We could also consider William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* from ca. 1610–1611, the last one he wrote all by himself, representing a mixture of comedy and tragedy. The tempest itself, however, is artificially triggered by the magician Prospero, the former duke of Milan exiled to an island, with the help of the spirit Ariel to set up a new configuration of various power players that would allow him to return home and resume his previous position. The tempest had destroyed the ship carrying his treacherous brother Antonio and his supporter, Alonso, King of Naples (see, for instance, Coursen 2000). However, Shakespeare did not investigate the consequences of a natural disaster in greater detail; instead, the protagonist resorts to magic to bring about a tempest, which thus serves his political purposes. Once the shipwrecked individuals have arrived at the island occupied by Prospero, many machinations set in that are driven by love, hostility, envy, and the desire for justice to restore Prospero to his original political position. Nevertheless, even here we come across a very common literary motif, the shipwreck, which countless authors and poets have addressed throughout time (Classen 2014; cf. also the good overview article at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tempest; see now Charry, ed., 2022).

Johann Peter Hebel: Chronicler and Poet

The next witness to be called upon is the Swabian poet, Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826), famous until today both for his dialect poetry (in Alemannic; highly praised by such luminaries as Goethe and Jean Paul) and especially his collection of calendar stories, His *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes*(Treasure Chest of the Rhenish House Friend) (Hebel 1999). He was born in Basel but lived most of his life in Karlsruhe. He received the rank of prelate of the Lutheran Church of the region, which also gave him a position in the Karlsruhe Upper House of the Parliament (*Ständeversammlung*) of Baden. In that role, he was mostly dedicated to education and social conditions, but his dream of becoming a pastor was never fulfilled.

Most importantly, Hebel contributed regularly to the *BadischeLand kalender*(Calendar for Baden) from 1803 onwards and then particularly to its successor, the *Rheinländischer Hausfreund* from 1807 onwards. A collection of his stories appeared in 1811, the *Schatzkästlein*, which was reprinted in 1816 and 1827. Many famous contemporary and later authors and philosophers highly praised Hebel (the Brothers Grimm, Goethe, Gottfried Keller, Martin Heidegger, W. G. Sebald, Tolstoy, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Hesse, Theodore W. Adorno, Elias Canetti, and Marcel Reich-Ranicki (see, for instance, Pietzcker 2010; Helwig 2010).

Hebel was not only a religiously devout Lutheran, he also demonstrated considerable interest in the natural sciences, so it is not surprising that in many of his stories he engaged with natural catastrophes, more than most of his contemporaries and posterity. In contrast to our previous examples, Hebel focuses on the various disasters directly and discusses them individually. For him, there was no need to relegate the accounts of the disaster to a frame story because human suffering is addressed directly. We must keep in mind that his stories were written for a calendar, which appealed to a

wide readership, so Hebel was mostly concerned with offering excitement and teachings at the same time, very much in the Horatian vein of "delectare et prodesse." He did not operate as a journalist, but his narratives could also assume the function of offering general information about major events as they affected human society.

In the calendar for 1810, the narrator refers to a catastrophic event that had occurred in Switzerland the previous winter. He immediately takes this as an occasion to remind his reader of the medieval and still relevant proverb, "Media vita in morte summus" (in the middle of our lives we are in the hands of death), originally formulated by the St. Gall monk and poet Notker Balbulus (ca. 900), cited by Hartmann von Aue in his *Der arme Heinrich* (ca. 1190), and translated into early modern German by Martin Luther in 1524. Other famous poets quoted this line as well, such as Rainer Maria Rilke in his "Schlußstück" (in his *Buch der Bilder*, 1902) and Hermann Hesse in his poem "Media in vita" (1921). Various English poets, such as Thomas Cramner (1489–1556) and Miles Coverdale (1488–1569) translated it, and John Merbecke (1550) and Henry Purcell (1695) set it to music.

With great precision, Hebel details the natural conditions during the night of December 12 when warmer weather and a storm made deep layers of snow on the top of the mountains to melt and move, which quickly translated into massive avalanches. At first, people resorted to prayers and religious devotion, fearing things as they were about to happen. Then the snow came suddenly tumbling into the valleys, in ever greater volume, thundering down the slopes, destroying whole forests, farmhouses, stables, and other buildings in its way. The poet offers a highly vivid description, replicating the thunderous sounds, referring specifically to the experiences of one lucky survivor. The report then turns to tragic destinies by other people, and some miraculous rescues, which altogether personalizes the horrible events in a dramatic and deeply moving manner. Hebel emphasizes how much people tried to appease God through prayer, but the subsequent events were nothing but catastrophic. Moreover, we are confronted with the account of people who were dug out of the snow, survived for a short time, and then succumbed to their death after all.

At the end, the narrator summarizes the number of victims and the amount of damage done to the areas affected, but he also reminds his reader that the death of a beloved person could not be calculated in monetary terms (274). While the story itself presents the specific events in very concrete terms, it also proves to be a literary account because we are taken imaginatively directly into the settings, are invited to listen to the thunderous noise of the avalanche and can observe with our inner eyes how the masses of snow smash houses, stables, and huts, with many human and animal victims. Hebel powerfully describes the result of the catastrophe with regard to the forest, for instance: "the trees were packed upon each other, smashed and burst, like the grain in a field after a hailstorm" (274; my translation). The reader is indirectly called upon to empathize with all that suffering, as little as anyone could do in that horrible situation.

In one of Hebel's most famous stories, "Unverhofftes Wiedersehen" (528–32; Unexpected Meeting Many Years Later), again a combination of a journalistic report about a tragic event in Falun, Sweden, and a literary reflection, we hear of a young miner who is about to marry, but shortly before the wedding he does not return from his work, having died in an accident. The details of that disaster are not related to us, we only hear that his body disappeared. Thereupon, many decades pass, and we hear of the many different historical events that took place over time. Eventually, his corpse is discovered fifty years later, completely preserved because it is infused with vitriolic acid. However, at that point, no one recognizes him; only his former bride, by then an old woman, can identify him, and she welcomes him with the same emotions as in the past, treating him as her returned bridegroom. When he is then buried, she tells the corpse that she would soon join him, which transforms the account into a highly emotional narrative about enduring love and the dangers of mining. The accident in the mine had taken her beloved away from her, but nature, or God, was later kind enough to let her see him once again before he received his final burial.

In his story "Grosse Feuersbrunst" (166–67), the author relates of a terrible fire which a peasant unintentionally triggered in Italy on April 5, 1808, when he wanted to burn the shrubbery near his village of Bevra to make room for a better pasture. Unfortunately, strong winds fanned the flames, and the fire quickly got out of control. Soon, both the entire forest and also the village nearby burned down because no one could fight the fire effectively until five days had passed, by which it was basically already too late, with the entire area being completely devastated. Evoking the pastoral setting before the fire and contrasting it with the present condition, the narrator projects a highly emotional scenario and highlights the feelings both of the surviving villagers and especially those of the involuntary arsonist (167).

In "Steinregen" (217–18), we hear of a strange natural occurrence in Moravia where during a thunderstorm there was a rain of stones. Here as well, the narrator situates himself and thus his readers right in that situation and recreates the horrible natural disaster in most dramatic terms, evoking the sounds and the impact of the stones, many of which of the size of a child's head. The storm lasted six to eight minutes. Whether people or animals died from that strange and dangerous rain, we are not told, and the narrator concludes by

stating that no one could explain this phenomenon, not even the scientists (218). Many of those stones were later collected, some of which weighed up to eighty pounds. We are left with a stunning report that occurred only once and does not seem to have caused particular damage, as strange as that rain of stone must have been.

Hebel also took careful note of the appearance of comets (229), offering a historical list of such events, and also the most current scientific explanation of those heavenly bodies, though offered here in rather simplistic terms. He specifically considered the popular opinion that comets were prophesying evil or catastrophic events, but humorously and yet convincingly he demonstrated that there were just too many events, too many deaths of important people to justify spuriously correlating the appearance of a comet with those local or national incidences (wars, the death of a ruler, epidemics, burning of whole cities, etc.) (231). Granting them prophetic power would be too random and pure speculation.

The author also reports of extremely cold temperatures when a deep freeze gripped all of northern Europe, with many lives lost (494–95). Walking outside during the coldest days constituted a risk to one's well-being. However, after the dramatic comments about the animals in the forests, the birds, and the domesticated animals dying from the cold, the narrator quickly turns the attention around to efforts by craftsmen (coopers) in Mainz to create the biggest barrel ever and to place it in the middle of the Rhine. Those efforts were matched by the Heidelberg bakers who built an oven in the Neckar to trump their colleagues. Although the catastrophic cold threatened people everywhere, the narrator thus also knows of examples illustrating the human spirit defying even some of the greatest natural challenges (495).

Already early on, we hear of an account about human nature that can sustain both extreme cold and extreme heat, which reports about disastrous weather conditions in various parts of the world confirm (46–50). He refers to situations in Siberia, in North America, and also in the Sahara. All these examples confirm for him that people have the greatest abilities to adapt to almost life-threatening conditions, especially when they assume catastrophic dimensions. However, the author also tends to inject a voice of reason in response to hysterical reports about alleged rain of sulfur, blood, and other objects and offers rational explanations, humoring those who easily become victims of sensational rumors (53–58). In response to speculations that a rain of stones might have originated from the moon, he only offers this remark: "Was wohl für ein mutwilliger Schleuderer dort sitzen mag" (57; What a mischievous stone-thrower might be sitting there!). He notes in a rather satirical fashion that some of those phenomena might have happened, but it would be necessary to have a strong faith to believe them (58).

In another report about the danger resulting from avalanches, he offers a specific explanation of how they come about and describes the horrific disaster for people and animals. In his typical modest and ironic fashion, Hebel then concludes that it would thus better after all not to live in the Swiss Alps; instead, to carve out one's existence in shallow valleys between small mountains would be much safer even if that life would not offer everything one might desire (95).

Finally, life always proves to be contingent, and people would never know in the morning what the situation might be like in the evening. In a report about the Dutch city of Leiden, we hear of how all people pursued their ordinary life, when suddenly a ship loaded with gun powder suddenly exploded, destroying whole sections of the city, with scores of dead. Movingly, however, although England and Holland were engaged in a war with each other, the city of London sent numerous ships with goods and money to help the miserable city. Hebel praises that humanitarian aid and comments: "denn der Krieg sollnie ins Herz der Menschen kommen" (103; because war should never enter people's hearts).

The Battle Between Human Technology and Nature

Theodor Fontane

Modern times have increasingly witnessed a critical collision of technology with nature. Hurricanes, earthquakes, mass flooding, heat waves, deep freezes, and tsunamis have represented (as actually already in the past) major challenges to human society. The more technology is available, the more its collapse when struck by natural forces has horrified people. The destruction of the Japanese nuclear power station Fukushima Dai Ichi Nii through a tsunami on March 11, 2011, was such a dramatic and traumatic reminder of the fundamental limitations of human efforts to control nature (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fukushima_nuclear_accident). But long before that event, other catastrophes occurred, of course.

The one to be discussed here pertains to a railroad bridge crossing the Firth of Tay in Scotland between Dundee and the suburb of Wormit in Fife. It was erected in 1878 and regarded as a technological miracle, but a strong storm on October 28, 1879, triggered the collapse of the entire bridge. After long testing and new plans, a second bridge was built in 1887, which has lasted until today (Lewis 2004).

The Prussian-German poet Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) used that engineering disaster as the topic of his ballad "Die Brücke am Tay" from 1880, which has ever since been regarded as one of the most powerful poetic

reflections on human hubris in its vain defiance of the natural forces (for critical comments, see Frank, 2005, 50; Beck 2014; for the critical text edition, see Fontane 1962, 165–66; for an online text version, see https://www.deutschunddeutlich.de/contentLD/GD/GT61caBruckTay.pdf; or https://www.deutschland-lese.de/streifzuege/balladen/die-bruecke-am-tay/; for a bilingual edition, see https://www.lieder.net/lieder/ get_text.html?TextId=71713). This ballad has been recognized as one of the most powerful lyrical compositions in nineteenth-century German literature; until today, its philosophical reflections and commentary about human hubris in its struggle against the natural forces have not lost any of their significance (for online comments, a good bibliography, and references to modern forms of reception, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Die_Br%C3%BCck%E2%80%99_am_Tay).

Beginning with a motto from Shakespeare's *Macbeath*, the ballad sets in with the exchange of three witches who are determined to attack this famous bridge and to bring it crashing down because it would serve as a good reminder that "'Tand, Tand / Ist das Gebilde von Menschenhand!'" (end of first stanza; worthless is everything made by human hands). Irrespective of the various reasons for the collapse of this famous bridge, the poet imagines that those ferocious storms would come from three sides and collaborate to achieve their goal, to destroy what human engineering has brought about and thus to demonstrate that people cannot rely on the endurance and stability of whatever they might have constructed. In face of this natural disaster, we are thus reminded once again of the global contingency all human life is subject to, both then and today

In the first stanza, the parents of the train engineer gaze toward the south, apprehensive of the thunderous night and the fragility of the bridge. Their fear is clearly expressed through the noun "Bangen" (second stanza, v. 4; deeply seated fear). Of course, they hope that the train will make it, and the stanza replicates the general assumption that human technology can defeat the natural forces roaring at night. Johnny the engineer laughs at the attempts by the storms to block the train; instead, he insists that the strong engine will achieve its goal to defeat the elements roaring outside across the firth. The bridge itself becomes the metaphor of human triumph over the forces of nature. However, when the train is crossing the bridge, the force of the gales intensifies, and after a fiery explosion that lightened up the sky, darkness settles in again, the catastrophe has taken place.

The three witches exchange words again, promising to relate to each other how many victims died in that accident. And they also comment on their own achievements in blowing the bridge into pieces, emphasizing that the scaffold structure broke like splinters, which then leads over to the refrain about the vanity of people who trust their technology and building power and ignore that everything is only "Tand" (detritus). The young engineer still fully trusts the achievements of modern technology, but what ultimately matters, is, as we learn in the following ballad, "John Maynard" (1886), individual heroism, sacrifice for the common good, and leadership (burning of a ferry ship).

Fontane did not develop a full program of ballads commenting on the relationship between human activities and natural forces. But these two ballads by themselves have stood the test of time as powerful poetic responses to human illusions about their own agency whereas nature proves to be much more forceful than people can imagine.

The Tsunami: Josef Haslinger

On December 26, 2004, a major earthquake hit the area west of northern Sumatra, which subsequently triggered a major tsunami, with waves up to 30 meters high, causing massive damage along the coastlines of the Indian Ocean. Almost 230,000 people in fourteen countries died as a consequence; this Boxing Day Tsunami has so far been the worst natural disaster in the twenty-first century. The earthquake was the worst ever recorded in Asia, and the third worst earthquake ever recorded since 1900. The energy released was ca. one thousand five hundred times stronger than the Hiroshima bomb in 1945. Scientists have discussed the earthquake and tsunami at great length and have been able to explain most of the causes, development, and consequences (Rajamanickam and Subramaniyan 2006; for a good summary, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake_and_tsunami; see also Samuels 2019). At the same time, moviemakers, composers, and authors have made valiant efforts to come to terms with this horrendous experience, one of the worst, if not the worst natural disasters over the last two decades or so.

The Austrian author Josef Haslinger (1955–), famous for numerous novels (especially his *Opernball*), essays, and short stories, was directly impacted by that tsunami and barely survived together with his family. His account, *Phi Phi Island: Ein Bericht*, appeared in 2007 (English translation 2011) and can serve us well as the last example of the significant role of the literary discourse for the coming of terms with natural disasters in the lives of people all over the world. Although both Haslinger and his wife, and their two twin children survived the harrowing experience, which led numerous critics to call upon him to keep quiet about it all, his report then turned into a major literary endeavor to find the right words for all people who had become victims and those who in the future might go through the same experience. As we remember, the earth is an unstable place, and natural disasters happen all the time, whether expected or not, and for Haslinger, the tsunami was a

trauma he could not really deal with in rational terms: “my memory of the tidal wave was a barrier. i wanted to get past it, but there didn’t seem to be any way. the past lay behind me and at the same time in front of me. it surrounded me” (2011, 2; absence of capitalization was the poet’s choice).

Haslinger and his wife returned to Phi Phi Island a year later, and the shocking realization that most things had been cleaned up, leaving behind an eerie landscape with only scraps of human culture as reminders of how many lives had been lost, lingers large at the end. Disasters such as that one do not simply come and go and are subsequently ignorable. The trauma itself remains deeply in the background casting a huge shadow on the writer and many other survivors: “the memory of having survived an immense catastrophe by pure chance follows its own logic. . . . it’s a memory of terror” (2011, 3). The book thus emerges as a profound reminder of life’s contingency, lack of control within an autonomous nature, and the elusiveness of human happiness that can be struck down within minutes. Haslinger’s narrative proves to be a worthy continuation of a long tradition of reflective writing on the impact of natural disasters and deserves wide recognition for its literary accomplishments.

As much as the author provides, at first sight, nothing but a journalistic report, he pursues a personal perspective and attempts, in a rather sober fashion, to come to terms with the trauma, which was obviously shared by millions of other people, not to mention the large number of deadly victims: “that’s a question that has tormented me all these months, why am I still alive? why are we all still alive?” (2011, 24).

The literary discourse serves, and here as well, as a critical medium to come to terms with trauma, large and small. Although the Haslinger family survived, the memory of the catastrophic development remained and forced him to reflect also on his own social environment back home and the global uncertainty of all his existence. This short narrative thus transformed into a literary mirror for everyone impacted by this tsunami. Haslinger’s reflections, as sober as they appear on the surface, translate, ultimately, into a narrative about human existence in a contingent world. As the author states at the end: “i want to lead a normal life, i say,” and then goes on: “for me, it’s normal to drive away and come home again” (138). Ultimately, however, the report concludes with nothing but general remarks on his endeavors to track down other people who might have died in that tsunami, and the quest continues, so to speak, beyond the text. As Thomas S. Hansen notes, “For Josef Haslinger, the very act of writing produces the cure for the effects of the trauma he memorializes. . . . By recovering his ordeal in detail, facing facts and remembering specific names, faces, and places, Haslinger turns haunting fear into objective memory and can lay the ghosts of Phi Phi Island to rest” (trans., 2011, 151).

Only few other writers engaged with this natural catastrophe, perhaps because the traumatic experience had shattered the survivors too deeply which made composing a narrative or a poem about it rather difficult (Rinderknecht 2008). A major narrative, however, was produced by the Sri Lankan author Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wave: Life and Memories after the Tsunami* (2013), and we should also consider Edie Fassnidge’s graphic novel *Rinse, Spin, Repeat* (2016). Historical distance matters considerably to view the events somewhat objectively, if that is really ever possible, even when the author uses a literary lens, such as Heinrich von Kleist with his novella “Das Erdbeben von Chile” (1807; The Earthquake of Chile) or Margriet de Moor with her novel *De verdronkene* (2005; trans. into German in 2006, into English in 2010). The devastating earthquake of Lisbon in 1555 left a deep impact on world literature (Weinrich 1971; Jacobs 2007). But that was, of course, fully to be expected because of the enormous human suffering in the wake of it. While scientists went hard to work to analyze every relevant aspect in material and physical terms, writers and artists responded in kind (for further reflections on this phenomenon, see the contributions to Collett and Murphy, ed. 2019).

Conclusion

In light of the continuously occurring natural catastrophes, it seems completely unnecessary to separate the sciences from humanities. Both sides have an important function in the critical engagement with those phenomena. The sciences are called upon to analyze the causes, conditions, and future developments in material terms. The humanities, and especially writers, poets, artists, musicians, and others are tasked with engaging with the survivors and those unaffected directly by the disaster to reflect on the horrendous suffering and pain. Heinrich von Kleist’s famous novella “Das Erdbeben in Chili” (1807) would be another great example for our further discussion of the often-catastrophic impact of nature on human life, bringing out the best and the worst in people. By means of literary analysis, scholars are empowered to translate existential experience into an epistemological vehicle to comprehend the meaning of human life in all of its contingencies. In fact, those natural disasters quickly prove to be critically important to contrast people’s ordinary lives out of harm’s way with the devastating, deadly situation in a tsunami, volcanic eruption and the subsequent lava flow, earthquake, forest fire (see Greece, August 2023), city fires (Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii, also August 2023), or flooding (Libya, September 2023).

Wars have regularly triggered literary responses, from Homer’s *Iliad* to Rainer Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on*

the Western Front (1929). The human suffering from war is simply staggering, but to this we must also add the suffering from natural catastrophes. The sciences examine the hard-core data; the humanities are concerned with the human dimension, the emotions, the trauma, and the existential threats. The strict separation of both fields of academic investigations has gone on for much too long, and particularly in light of the continuous experience with natural catastrophes, there is no question as to the critical need to study those through the lenses of both areas. Human suffering has been the tragic consequence of endless natural disasters, but we could observe that particularly the last two hundred years witnessed a considerable growth in literary responses to give vent to all that pain and sorrow, certainly yet another angle to recent efforts by ecocritics and ecopoets.

As Theodor Storm's famous novella, "Der Schimmelreiter" (1888) signals, human beings have always struggled to survive in a rather hostile natural environment (here, the coastline of the North Sea and people's efforts to build secure dikes against floods). Their ingenuity and endurance have achieved many triumphs, but nature has always demonstrated its absolute superiority. We need the scientific data for a close analysis of these phenomena, and we need the poetic word to reflect on them and the personal impact of those disasters. Surprisingly, in the pre-modern world, human suffering as a result of natural catastrophes was less focused on, but since the nineteenth century, the discourse changed considerably, as our selection of text samples has indicated.

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