

RUSSELL BRICKEY

Turning Away From the Blast: Forms of Nuclear Protest Poetry

All nuclear poetry is protest poetry, as are virtually all movies, novels, and popular music that deal with nuclear bombs, Cold War geopolitics, or nuclear science in general.¹ American newsreels and *LIFE* magazine spreads made immediately after World War II implicitly justify the use of atomic weaponry against Japan,² but creative expression from this time onward consistently revolves around notions of annihilation, futility, explicit and implicit protest. Nuclear end-time (a skeletal landscape beneath a nuclear winter sky, disease-ridden survivors in a state of Neolithic barbarism, the irradiated wasteland) is such a well worn *topos*, a cliché really, that I will not gloss the subject further. Suffice that poetry as “discursive resistance” is a foregone conclusion, a presence counted as one of the myriad expressions of resistances to nuclear armaments. Not surprisingly, the relationship between nature and technology is frequently exploited and the unsurprising implication is that nature should be revered. The same could be said of the relationship to humanity and technology.

At this juncture, however, sits a paradox: the actual nuclear event, the explosion and its literal violence, is left virtually absent. This is the act of “turning away,” a leap into abstraction and avoidance. To put matters simply, poets avoid direct confrontation with the detonation—that which alters nature and humanity—to concentrate on the periphery where the survivors must deal with the awful consequences. In this way the modern Prometheus escapes the delicate focalizing

lens of poetry. Poets tend to beseech the reader to take action, any kind of action (even if the action taken is never really explored) by imaging the vulnerable. This is a latter iteration of the Romantic dispensation, limning a world of natural processes which offers, perhaps implicitly, reasons against nuclear proliferation, but leaving the politics of the situation in the realm of the spiritual.

It should be mentioned up front that this act of turning away is not always the case. Allen Ginsberg, when he says in his anti-capitalistic “America,” “America when will we end the human war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb” takes his attitude to the streets; and in “Plutonium Ode,” Ginsberg waxes with an ecstatic diction of rage.

Yeah monster of Anger birthed in
fear O most Ignorant matter ever created unnatural to Earth! Delusion
of metal empires!

Destroyer of lying Scientists! Devourer of covetous Generals,
Incinerator of Armies & Melter of Wars!

(I. 30-34 *Atomic Ghost* 246-247)

These are poems which confront the Bomb through an explicit denunciation. Ginsberg is rather rare in this respect.³

When poets do witness the atomic explosion directly, the interiority of contemporary lyric poetry tends to stymie language, to limit presentation. Such a declaration is admittedly problematic (and even wrong) for the obvious reason that some poets unquestionably attain the necessary power of description. But these appear to be a fairly rare find. More likely, poets who directly image the event attempt to describe the nuclear fireball through metaphoric language that, frankly, over-reaches in an attempt to capture the violence and sense of terrible, cosmic drama. For instance:

And then the man-made flash—
twice as large as the sun—photographed the moment
in fire. Flames burning the sands,
slashing the face of the calm.

The ball of thunder strangled
the sky.
 (“Creation” by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *Atomic Ghost* page 3)

While it begs personal preference to suggest that “Creation” is less well written than any other particular poem, the use of the pathetic fallacy (“slashing the face of the calm”; “strangled the sky”) without irony illustrates the problem of describing a phenomenon as spectacular, and as frankly familiar, as atomic detonation: the poet, striving to capture the dread sublimity of nuclear explosion, falls into the fallacy of reification. The language appears haphazard, a struggle to force a response from bodily images in the nuclear cloud, to press the obvious connotations through rather clichéd, anthropomorphizing metaphors. A less polite way of saying this: the poet attempts to illicit emotion by overwriting the subject. Language and image fail in an overcooked attempt at pathos.

Overall, nuclear poetry seems to reify some tacit understanding of this conundrum between language and image, and most poets spotlight a few specific details of the blast before quickly turning away to watch the outcome, a move which seems more suited to the poetic register. A successful example of this is found in Kimiko Hahn’s “The Bath: August 6, 1945.” Hahn, a child of a Japanese-American mother and a German-American father, imagines herself in the position of observer with a more successful tragic reserve; her narrator hears the familiar air-raid siren and then slips out of her bath reluctantly (“one more moment / *one private moment* / before waking the children / and mother-in-law”) when—

Caution drew me to the window
and there an enormous blossom of fire
a hand changed my life
and made the world shiver—
a light that tore flesh
so it slipped off limbs,
swelled so
no one could recognize
a mother or child (*Atomic Ghost* 11-12)

The human image of the mother, moving from the most private moment to the most nakedly public, witnessing the destruction of her city, her family and herself (“so even today / my hair has not grown back”) is a much more sympathetic approach to a tragic event and summons a far greater pathos than apocalyptic images of fire and bubbling dust. Note that the image of the actual blast (“an enormous blossom of fire”) is clothed in abstraction which then quickly swivels to watch the effects of the explosion in a form of prolepsis. Issues of war, geopolitics, and science are here

subsumed into the more honest, more easily accessible pathos of the naked human body which is exactly where the poetic gaze turns.

It is this focus on the bodies of living things that gives atomic protest poetry its present form. Again, most atomic protest poetry focuses not on the terrible power of the device itself, but on the creatures on the periphery. For instance, Robert Vasquez in “Early Morning Test Light over Nevada, 1955,” like Hahn, imagines the atomic flash only briefly and then moves on to the most unlikely of subjects:

When the sky flared,
our room lit up. Cobwebs
sparkled on the walls, and a spider
absorbed the light
like a chameleon and began
to inch toward the outer rings
as if a fly trembled. (*Atomic Ghost* 43)

This is the tract—the focus on the vulnerable and victimized—that most atomic poetry takes.

A more dramatic example of the refocused poetic detonation can be found in Elizabeth Spires’ “Sunday Afternoon at Fulham Palace” (1988). Set in London sometime in the present tense, the narrator is on a family outing to “the fair at Fulham Palace,” idly looking at the people (“old couples / taking the air along the Thames [...] while the young press forward”) and the remnants of courtly life (“overfed goldfish [...] in the crumbling courtyard fountain” and “a white peacock” that “stands still as a statue”) when her daughter says suddenly and inexplicably, “I was thinking about what kind of anesthesia / they’ll give me when I have my first baby.” In the midst of life and activity, this sudden reference to future generations jars the narrator’s consciousness and she experiences a paranoid vision:

Easy to see the great gray plane hovering briefly overhead,
the gray metal belly opening and the bomb dropping,
a flash, a light “like a thousand suns,”⁴
and then the long winter.

This is a specific threat to the unborn generations, a facet that is significant and specific to the nuclear sublime. In typical nuclear protest fashion, the narrator turns to the most helpless creatures in the scene:

The white peacock. Erased. The goldfish in the fountain
swimming crazily as the water boils up around them, evaporates.
The children's castle. Gone. The children. The mothers and the fathers.
As if a hand had suddenly erased a huge blackboard.
(*Atomic Ghost* 291-292)

Sharon Olds' poem "When" (1987) likewise presents the child as nuclear victim. It is perhaps a dangerously homey vision which nevertheless manages to remain above the melodramatic threshold through stark reportage and tonal reserve.

I wonder now only when it will happen,
when the young mother will hear the
noise like somebody's pressure cooker
down the block, going off. She'll go out in the yard,
holding her small daughter in her arms,
and there, above the end of the street, in the
air above the line of the trees,
she will see it rising, lifting up
over our horizon, the upper rim of the
gold ball, large as a giant
planet starting to lift up over ours.
She will stand there in the yard holding her daughter,
looking at it rise and glow and blossom and rise,
and the child will open her arms to it,
it will look so beautiful.
(quoted in Gery 96)

These visions of innocent children bring to mind Francis Ferguson's inferences about the future of post-atomic people, if any such are to exist. Ferguson relies on the description of nuclear war in Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Avon Books, 1982) for the dire predictions of life after nuclear war. Ferguson writes:

Schell's invocation of the 'unborn' gestures toward the consciousness of the future in amiable enough fashion, but there seems to be also a note of horror that attaches to the 'unborn' in whose name Schell would authorize our preservation of the species. For the 'unborn' sound curiously like the 'undead' out of science

fiction; like the 'undead,' the 'unborn' compromise the position of the living. To think the thought of the 'unborn' may represent the achievement of the sublime project to find objects of consciousness that definitively cannot exist in the absence of the perceiving subject, but the residual horror of the notion of the 'unborn' lies in the way the argument for the existence of generations now living lies in our mere instrumentality. (8)

The greatest liability of the nuclear sublime, then, is the effect on the children of tomorrow; the "mere instrumentality" of nuclear science threatens future generations in a way that war, weaponry, and science has never done before—this is precisely the moment that Spires observes: her daughter's innocent curiosity about childbirth turns the mother into a visionary of the beginning of the end of her daughter's fertility. Yet even in the midst of this threat to hearth and home, Spires' diction remains passive, pleading. The final couplet of "Sunday Afternoon at Fulham Palace" reads:

As if, if it did happen, we could bow our heads
and ask, once more, to enter that innocent first world.
(*Atomic Ghost* 292)

Turning-away from expressed anger may be the perceived helplessness of the observers when confronted with this particular aspect of the geopolitical sublime.⁵ This formulation of the sublime event tends to marginalize the observer at the same time that it creates a sense of the awesome and the fantastic. In the event of an atomic detonation, this conundrum of perception creates a passive-aggressive reaction. Possibly the most powerful atomic protest poem in this vein is Philip Levine's elegy "The Horse," written "*for Ichiro Kawamoto, humanitarian, electrician, & survivor of Hiroshima.*" These aspects of turning-away from moral outrage present a new world order of organic life helpless beneath the geopolitical juggernaut of nuclear war.

They spoke of the horse alive
without skin, naked, hairless,
without eyes and ears, searching
for the stableboy's caress.
Shoot it, someone said, but they
let him go on colliding with

tattered walls, butting his long
skull to pulp, finding no path
where iron fences corkscrewed in
the street and bicycles turned
like question marks.

Some fled and
some sat down. The river burned
all that day and into the
night, the stones sighed a moment
and were still, and the shadow
of a man's hand entered
a leaf.

The white horse never
returned, and later they found
the stable boy, his back crushed
by a hoof, his mouth opened
around a cry that no one heard.

They spoke of the horse again
and again; their mouths opened
like the gills of a fish caught
above water.

Mountain flowers
burst from the red clay walls, and
they said a new life was here.
Raw grass sprouted from the cobbles
like hair from a deafened ear.
The horse would never return.

There had been no horse. I could
tell from the way they walked
testing the ground for some cold
that the rage had gone out of
their bones in one mad dance.
(*Atomic Ghost*, pages 17-18)

The visceral images of agonized, wounded animals and helpless, kindly people expressing their empathy in a vacuum of power (like “gills of a fish caught / above water”) are juxtaposed to the unexpected assertion of fragile life (in which “Mountain flowers / burst from the red clay walls”). Rather than denunciation, these images lead to the anti-intuitive but nevertheless fulfilling denouement: “the rage had gone out of / their bones in one mad dance.” To deny that there had ever been a horse is to deny that an atrocity had ever occurred, the reaction of a defeated and traumatized nation. This is the terrible nuclear sublime which treats the actual detonation with free-association and symbolism, aversion (as if from a blinding light) and turning-away from overt statements of outrage.

What is ironic about this situation, however, is that “The Horse” is the product of a victorious-nation poet writing well after the fact.⁶ The animal stands for the collective trauma of poets, readers, and ‘unborn’ generations—all potential victims to the same techno-enemy. The true impetus for “The Horse” is the inhuman nature of governments, particularly when the deadliest weapon in existence still waits on the wings; the poem’s real motive is to interrupt what might happen in the future.

Thus the future, harbingered by the geopolitical present, becomes the focal point. For instance, Lorine Niedecker’s minimalist diction in “The radio talk...” (1963) is rather oddly detached from its rather dramatic imperative. As with the above examples, the poet refuses to look directly at the actions that threaten her (in this case, political maneuvering between atomic superpowers), preferring to image a few minor details of the scene in an attempt to make the reader aware of the situation and realize its absurdity. It is a poem which focuses equally on biology and on technology. It is also a poem that generates pathos through the depiction of damaged bodies on the periphery of the action. And it is a deceptively simple poem:

The radio talk this morning
was of obliterating
the world

I notice fruit flies rise
from the rind
of the recommended
melon

Like a haiku, Niedecker's poem juxtaposes two images of precarious plainness and delicacy. Their 'meaning' must be deduced by understanding the gap that opens between them, what the poem does not say. And what speaks through the literal white space and cognitive *aporia* is a vast and powerful technocracy of the Western World and the possibility that this vista will obliterate itself at any moment. The talk from the radio is news, and the subdued, impassionate tone of the speaker impersonates the monotone of newspeak, the ability of the media to deliver the most fantastic information with a detached, amoral professionalism. The rotten melon rind alludes to the capitalist imperative to buy ("recommended") as it intersects 'nuclearism' (the belief that mutually assured destruction is the best avenue toward peace between nuclear superpowers) and the apparent acceptance of this relationship. Niedecker's simple lyric creates a complex gestalt of everyday reality in a nuclearist society overshadowed by the knowledge of what could—but not necessarily must—come afterwards. And because Armageddon is readily avoidable, the poem takes as its objective the implicit argument against nuclear armament, an ever-present apprehension in the American psyche. Yet again, the shocking and most compelling details of nuclear war—the smoldering ruins, the bodies, the burned and maimed victims, the disease, even the actual fireball and blast-wave—are omitted. What the reader is left with is the mere implication of something terrible but unuttered.

Niedecker published "The radio talk" a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, an event of such frenzied negotiations that the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists never had a chance to reset its hands despite the apocryphal notion, which is now a catch-phrase of the Cold War, that the world's nuclear superpowers were at this time 'One minute to midnight.' It is here that the geopolitical sublime—the Western technocracy and its marvels of speed and science and its terrible nuclear moonchild—blooms in the *aporia* between nations as it does the white space between stanzas. This is a form of the sublime which is a construct of the global media, itself a version of the odd twentieth century sublime of everyday objects which can do extraordinary things.

By now, the crisis, which becomes synonymous with the radio talk, is a fairly familiar story: October 14, 1962, a U-2 spy plane photographed intermediate-range missile sites under construction in Cuba; the island country had already received between sixteen and thirty-two Soviet missiles; the CIA estimated the missiles would be armed and ready within a week and an estimated eighty million American lives would be within their range. An invasion force of 140,000 U.S. soldiers was assembled in Florida while, in Cuba, missile site construction continued despite

dire U.S. warnings. Fortunately for the world, then President John F. Kennedy ordered the U.S. Navy to quarantine the island. While he condemned the blockade as international piracy, Soviet President Khrushchev agreed to have the missiles removed on the privately negotiated condition that the U.S. would also remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey. In the words of then Secretary of State Dean Rusk, when “eyeball to eyeball,” the Soviets “blinked first” (McMahon 90-94). Rusk’s comment is strangely ironic in this context because, quite simply, there was no eye-to-eye contact between those most involved with destroying or saving civilization; the brink of nuclear Armageddon is actually predicated upon disparate electronic mediums—U-2 photographs, radio and TV signals, telephone and transcontinental diplomacy, as well as speeches at the U.N. and twenty-four hour, backroom ExCom meetings. But it is the radio address by Khrushchev on October 28 which is the geopolitical sublime. At this moment, Khrushchev acknowledged his acceptance of Kennedy’s terms via radio broadcast. And “the radio talk” becomes sublimity because of the power vested in it to save the world. Just like Kenneth Rexroth’s geopolitical sublimity on the brink of World War II (see “Strength through Joy), Niedecker’s listener on the brink of World War III perceives the mounting forces between the tribes of the world with the supernatural purview of electronic media.

While Niedecker’s “The radio talk...” has overtones of the ecological sublime and the techno-euphoric (with its rotting biology lying victim-like, sacrifice-like, or garbage-like before the monotonous drone of technology), what the poem actually asks the reader to feel is collective cultural guilt. The turning-away in this particular instance is meant to force the reader into a confrontation with her or his own apathy. The quietude of the scenario counterbalances the dark sublime possibilities of nuclear explosions. This seems to be post-Romantic nature in the balance, denuded of its power and reduced to the status of victim.

In “At the Bomb Testing Site” (1960), William Stafford creates a tableau in which the implications—the poem’s anti-militaristic and ecological sentiments—lie close to the surface, but the climactic event of the narrative (which threatens nature itself) never materializes, once again an effect of turning-away from the blast.

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

It was looking for something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

With its glazed eyes, its muteness, its lack of intelligence, its buffoonish stillness, the panting lizard is an apt metaphor for the reader, the reader's friends, family, and neighbors, the politicians, even the scientists who created the Bomb. And like the harmless, stupid creature—comprehending the blistering landscape but not its significance, sensing that “something might happen” but not knowing what—humanity also waits on the verge of the unknown. Metaphorically, the “particular road” is a juncture, a swerving of cause-and-effect. The desert renders heat, emptiness, lifelessness and yet—this is the genius irony of the poem—it is not empty or dead: the lizard is life. It will cling to life if it is able. But it will not be able, and the reader is meant to know this. In a way the poem's portraiture is incredibly empathetic toward a particularly undistinguished animal facing certain extinction. The exposition ends on the sarcastic litotes of “something might happen.”

In the developmental second stanza, the lizard gazes into a quantum paradox of time itself. The new stone-age becomes an extension of the desert which will become the landscape of human history at the open, bell-shaped end of the apocalypse. In lines 5-8, the lizard is able to see into the “consequences” of the present where, as if to confirm Einstein's prediction that World War III will be fought with “sticks and stones,” the hubris of nuclearism is projected. The very incongruity of the animal's instinctive insight points to a sense of “absurdity”—a key term which I made use of in the last chapter and which will resurface again and again in the age of the nuclear bomb.

In the denouement of the final stanza, the poem rhetorically turns again and the scope broadens to take in the even vaster landscape of America. At the same time, however, the poem reverses the expected narrative outcome: the bomb does not drop, there is no earth-shattering explosion, the confluence of forces never implodes...the lizard simply waits. The sublime, when it looms over the horizon in lines 9-12, is entirely constructed out of something only imagined. For its own part,

nature “never cared less” about the lizard or the terrible terrestrial power of the unstable isotope now harnessed by the unseen presence in the desert. Nature in the tableau is existential, perhaps even nihilistic. Humanity, as anthropomorphized through the creature’s “hands” and “elbows,” is simply a tiny component in the nuclear landscape. If “At the Bomb Testing Sight” can be read as a form of anti-romanticism, the anti-sublime is the expected output, and the poem can be read as the absence of a grand unifying design. Yet the vastness of the vision, and the unrealized but cosmic implications, links to the auspices of the sublime. Ironically, it is this very inability to envision the literal violence that marks nuclear sublimity. The speaker’s lack of either emotion alludes to a funereal ennui produced by the paradoxical cultural of nuclearism. As in all of the poems in this study, the Bomb itself is a non-corporeal entity (we may not be sure that it is even in the desert at all) and nevertheless it permeates the landscape in the form of many ideas—a harbinger of Armageddon, a critique of human agency, a mode of victimization, and as an antithesis to nature and ecology.

More importantly for the moment, the formulation that Stafford evokes is actually the eco-sublime, the premise that large scale ecological disaster can be a form of sublimity. The latter twentieth century has seen many computer-generated, pop-entertainment visions of this particular dread. Hollywood big-budget vehicles such as *Deep Impact*, a story massive meteor strike on Earth, or the Discovery Channel’s television documentary *Supervolcano* about the potentially volcanic reservoir of magma beneath Yellowstone National Park, bring to the screen the extreme light and violence of grand dangerous nature. The eco-sublime can also be evoked by human-made causes on the best-seller list and at the box-office. Stephen King’s *The Stand*, it could be argued, is a vision of the eco-sublime based on the potential horrors of bioengineering. *The Terminator*, the science fiction thriller which launched the future governor of California’s Hollywood career, is based on a form of the eco-sublime as is the movie’s latter day cyber-world counterpart, *The Matrix*, both of which imagine a nuclear wasteland overrun by murderous machines as the future-anterior⁷ space humanity is doomed to occupy. These visions, as trite and entertaining as they are, actually respond to a deep, serious, familiar dread of our own best inventions and harbinger a paradigm reversal of sorts: as science brings into view the terrifying possibilities of space rocks and self-aware computer networks, the culture seems to have reinvented the sublime of nature into a sublime of *nature-under-threat*. No longer an augury of divine wisdom, the natural vista is conceived of as a waiting victim, with the caveat that the fall of nature’s pristine holy space also heralds the fall of humanity. Eco-critics such as Christopher Hitt

and Jonathan Bordo⁸ build on Jean-Frances Lyotard's sublime theorizing (*The Post Modern Condition*) and posit a culture overwhelmed by techno-hegemony. Hitt's own definition revolves around the notion that the sublime was always an ecological concern (607) which has now moved into a perilous union with the powers of technology, a condition which humanity is all too aware of:

[I]f the 'postmodern sublime' is the condition of being overwhelmed by the threatening and bewildering effects of technology, then ecological catastrophe (as the result of technology) becomes a new source of the sublime. That is, the sublime in this case is evoked not by natural objects but by their devastation. Human beings still experience a humbling sense of fear and awe before nature, but in this case—in contradistinction to conventional accounts of the sublime—the threat is their own making. And worse, the danger is all too real. (Hitt 619)

Bordo, who concerns himself with the increasing Panoptic Gaze of an increasingly ironic society (overwhelmed by the very devices it creates while the majority of its citizens are incapable of comprehending the actual technology) argues that the creation of the eco-sublime “received its first significant articulation with the releasing of atomic energy in the building of the atomic bomb”(174). Stafford then, if Bordo is to be believed, sets the tableau of “At the Bomb Testing Site” squarely at the birth of the eco-sublime. It is here that the latest dread and epistemic uncertainty is reified through the image of a simple wild creature about to be atomized by forces it cannot predict or comprehend. Stafford's is a miniaturized, specific detail out of the eco-sublime but it clear that the impending disaster for the painted lizard is a disaster for nature as a whole because life—all life, large and small—is on the verge of the same death-blow; the lizard is simply the most innocuous of models, and here again the poet wishes to generate empathy for the creatures at the periphery as well as dread for what its fate means for the rest of creation.

The empathetic space of the periphery need not be small, particularly during the age of space exploration and global nuclear menace. Published seven years after the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc (and the generally accepted end of the Cold War), Robert Morgan's “Atomic Age” (1998) is also an example of the eco-sublime and, like “At the Bomb Testing Site,” linked to the vast nuclear infrastructure solely because of its title. In the case of each poem the title does the important work of informing the meaning of the text. The arms race of the 1970s and 1980s is (un)officially over. The nuclear arsenals are being dismantled, albeit slowly. And,

pre-9/11, American culture knows peace. Yet here, in the midst of capitalistic dominance and (relative) harmony, the focalizing lens turns toward an eco-sublime of quietude, of defeat. Rather than imaging the events, aspects, accoutrements or geopolitics of nuclearism (which is still active if quietly), the details of the poem focus on one single, important natural object affected by the “Age”:

In yards and medians on interstates,
on grounds and factories and hospitals
in Atlanta, Charlotte, Greenville, Nashville,
are patches of Green River soil. For each
boxwood and sparkling pine, every dogwood
and maple from a nursery here goes with
its ball of mountain dirt to the new bed.
Every rhododendron must keep its roots
In Blue Ridge loam. And while the loam
is scattered in clots of gunpowder black
all over the South, the topsoil in these
mountain coves gets thinner, pocked as sponges,
fissioned to the suburbs, cities, greasy
savings of centuries of leaf rot, forest mold
nursed by summit fogs and isolation,
sold to decorate the cities of the plain.

A more indicative title might be “Green River Soil” or “Blue Ridge Loam” or “Cities of the Plain” or the like—but Morgan’s actual title deflects the meaning entirely away from geographical or regional concerns and places meaning in the much broader context of the geopolitical. As with most atomic poetry, the *mise-en-scène* is those things affected by the nuclear age, not the actual devices or detonations; the “Atomic Age” is an extreme example of this focalization. In this instance, the title of the poem does exactly what a well-wrought title should do: it informs the purpose of the text—the actual protest is ecological and specific, but the cause is the scientific age of the nuclear bomb when nature is so denuded of power that its most powerful signified, the mountain, is reduced to lawn-care. The poem is a perfect example of an artistic rendering of an epoch dominated by human industry. Morgan’s poem actually announces the death of the Romantic ideal; we live in the age where human activity is the geologically new driving force of the planet; a new age, what the polemical climate physicist Dr. James Hansen designates as “the

Anthropocene,” in which human actions have become the main driver of global environmental change.

In a personal email message from Professor Morgan, in response to my email questions about interpretation and inspiration in the poem, he wrote:

When I was growing up in the late 1940s and 1950s everyone was talking about the new Atomic Age, referring not only to the bomb but to the promise of nuclear energy, nuclear powered ships, cars, you name it. It was a vision of a clean and glorious and rich future. That was the age of expansion and new wealth in the South, around the cities where the shrubs from the mountain nurseries were sold. The topsoil of the mountain fields was “fissioning” out to the cities, suggesting the diffusion of the mountain rural culture also to the cities. I hope an ecological consciousness as well as a historical sense informs what I have written both in poetry and in prose. The mountains now have been changed further by overdevelopment of resorts, retirement communities, industry, pollution.

What Morgan reacts to is the subsumed power of science to alter human behavior and, since humanity is now the inheritor of the Earth, the overt power to alter even the traditional inspiration of grand nature. What was once sublime is now rendered mute in the atomic age.

Overall, nuclear literature reifies individual helplessness in the face of global technocracy. It does not matter if the ruling state is democratic, capitalistic and built during the open age of information—the situation in all the poems in this paper—, what matters is that the individual is faced with the inexorable force of nations. Technology is the nearest metonymy.

Notes

1. I am thinking of the scenarios frequently found in the popular culture of the 1970s through to the present day. *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute (novel 1957; movie 1959), *A Boy and His Dog* (Harlan Ellison short story 1969; movie 1975), the *Mad Max* and *Terminator* franchises, come to mind immediately, of course, but the genre can also be seen in everything from music videos to TV miniseries to graphic novels, and a great many non-nuclear narratives of apocalypse (for instance, the science fiction *Independence Day* or Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* where extraterrestrial monsters with death-rays destroy entire cities in a matter of moments) have appropriated the topos of a decimated landscape and corpses heaped in smoldering piles. The CBS Paramount TV series *Jericho* is the latest nuclear narrative, with the predictable scenarios and plotlines. These types of narratives, it would seem, are being replaced by the less successful genre of the eco-disaster film—*The Happening*, by M. Night Shyamalan, for instance—which reflect a new formulation of geopolitics also based upon paranoia about humanity's disruption of the natural order.

2. See "A Tale of Two Cities," which calls Hiroshima "an arsenal city" and shows blasted drilling and lathing equipment (?) in Nagasaki as proof of Japanese "shadow factories"; also see "The Atom Strikes" whose narration claims that "for over a hundred years the city of Hiroshima had garrisoned some of the Japanese empire's finest troops. The city had never been subjected to actual bombing but had been warned repeatedly." Footage of Japanese tanks, formations of marching soldiers, and battleships being launched are shown (without attribution or verification that they were actually filmed in Hiroshima) as the narrator speaks about Hiroshima's "army headquarters, barracks, ordnance and quartermaster depots, factories, mills, and shipyards." The film ends with a Jesuit priest, Father John A. Siemes (who would later reemerge as a true-life witness to the bombing in John Hershey's journalistic novel *Hiroshima*) reading from a prepared statement about the acceptability of such weapons and the lack of Japanese resentment after the attack. Both newsreels were produced in 1945. (*Atomic Testing*. DVD #1: "The Atomic Age: A New Beginning." St. Clair Entertainment Group, 2007.) At about the same time (August 20, 1945), Peter Hale reports, LIFE magazine ran a spread on the atomic bombings which blunted the effects of the bomb through both visual and prose rhetoric.

3. The inspiration for "Plutonium Ode" was, in fact, an actual protest. Ginsberg, fellow poet and lover Peter Orlovsky, and others blocked a train carrying nuclear fissile waste from the Rockwell Corporation's Nuclear Facility in Colorado. See Gery, 59-60.

4. This refers to a passage from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. From *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns* by Robert Jungk:

People were transfixed with fright at the power of the explosion. Oppenheimer was clinging to one of the uprights in the control room. A passage from the Bhagavad-Gita, the sacred epic of the Hindu, flashed into his mind.

If the radiance of the thousand suns
were burst into the sky,
that would be like
the splendor of the Mighty Ones—

Oppenheimer's statement is a version of the religious sublime which reifies Ira Chernus' theory that atomic bombs are the modern equivalent of deities. And, following this philosophy, Spire's visionary moment is an anti-ecstatic mysticism.

5. An aspect of "nuclearism," the individual feels helpless in the face of nuclear power.

6. "The Horse" was first published in *Poetry*, June 1963.

7. This is a term used by Richard Klein, taken from French philosophy, to describe the act of rhetorically 'looking back' from the imagined vantage point somewhere in the later future on an earlier future event, one which has no happened in reality but which can still be imagined—such as nuclear war.

8. This is a term used by Richard Klein, taken from French philosophy, to describe the act of rhetorically 'looking back' from the imagined vantage point somewhere in the later future on an earlier future event, one which has no happened in reality but which can still be imagined—such as nuclear war.

Works Cited

Bordo, Jonathan. "Ecological Peril, Modern Technology and the Postmodern Sublime." *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*. Philippa Berry & Andrew Wernick, eds. Routledge: New York, 1992. 165-178.

Bradley, John, ed. *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*. Coffee House P, Minneapolis, 1995.

Ginsberg, Allen. "Plutonium Ode." 245-249.

Hahn, Kimiko. "The Bath: August 6, 1945." 11-13.

Levine, Philip. "The Horse." 17-18.

Niedecker, Lorine. "The radio talk..." 72.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. "Creation." 3-4.

Spires, Elizabeth. "Sunday Afternoon at Fulham Palace." 290-292.

Stafford, William. "At the Bomb Testing Site." 73.

Ferguson, Francis. "The Nuclear Sublime." *Diacritics*, 14.2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), 4-10.

Hitt, Christopher. "Toward an Ecological Sublime." *New Literary History*. 30.3 (1999), 603-623.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Post-Modern Condition*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. U of Minnesota P., Minneapolis, 1999.

McMahon, Robert. *The Cold War*. Oxford UP: Oxford, 2008.

Morgan, Robert. "Atomic Age." *The Kenyon Review*. New Series, 20.1 (Winter 1998), 83.

— Personal email. February 21, 2009.

RUSSELL BRICKEY is the Coordinator of the Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He has a BA in English from the University of Oregon, an MFA in poetry and a PhD in Literature from Purdue University.