(Write it!) Like Disaster: Precarious Futures in North American Poetry

Abstract: My article describes disaster poetry as a particular mode of engagement with a perceived, negative rupture between present and future. Understanding “disaster” in such abstract and open terms, I argue that this poetry stages a tension of continuity and discontinuity in which the poetic act itself works against the very sundering it still posits. In making this larger point, I contrast two exemplary poems, Walt Whitman’s Civil-War poem “The Dresser” (1865) and Stephen Collis’s “Future Imperfect” (2021). Addressing war and environmental destruction in their social and personal ramifications, both these poems confront a present in which the future itself is precarious or even unimaginable, and they all act in their present to bridge that conceptual gap again in various ways without denying its existence or profound relevance. As such, they provide aesthetic models for a more wide-ranging assessment of how we imagine, speak about, and respond to disaster as a temporal crisis in which the relation between present and future is in question, as they engage with corresponding tropes of fatalism, determinism, uncertainty, agency, knowledge, hope, finality, and beginnings.

Keywords: Walt Whitman; Stephen Collis; American poetry; Canadian poetry; future; beginnings; catastrophe.

Hope against Hope: Disaster as a Temporal Category

The title of my essay contains one of the least obscure allusions anyone could make to a work of modern North American poetry—and yet Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art,” published in 1976, simply provides the best linchpin for the following discussion of historical and contemporary poems that aims to show how their engagement with disaster is marked by a particular poetic mode of connecting the present and the future. “One Art” exemplifies this perspective in its shifting temporal positions: opening with the famous claim “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” the poem draws on a curious blend of past, present, and future from its beginning. The statement that “so many things seem filled with

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the intent/ to be lost that their loss is no disaster” identifies the potential for future loss as a present condition, even a property of the object itself that may well be a defining one. The art of losing, though, must necessarily be detached from the actual act of losing, resulting in the wry humor of the ensuing paradoxical instruction to “Lose something every day.” It is impossible to lose something as intentionally as this assignment suggests, and while a certain non-agency is a precondition for such loss, agency returns in how it is dealt with. As such, the art of losing can only be practiced after the fact as the art of coping with loss, a present attitude toward the past—to “Accept” something that is no longer accessible from this present moment. At the same time, this art takes practice, and the speaker’s instructions suggest an ongoing process that connects the present and future, perhaps even suggesting that the art is that of perpetually learning to cope with loss instead of having learned it once and for all: it is not the art of having lost. Keeping loss from being disastrous is not about repressing or forgetting the past, as the line “I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster” suggests, but it is about assuming and maintaining a viable attitude toward it.

This indicates what “disaster” means in this poem, and this is a meaning that will be at the heart of my poetic readings here: disaster is the loss you cannot readily cope with, an event that cannot be integrated into your continuous imagination of past, present, and future, something you can neither accept now nor ever see yourself accepting further down the road. It is something that makes the future itself precarious, in the sense that its relation to the present becomes tenuous in various ways. As such, “disaster” is a temporal event, whatever its actual manifestation might be, and it may range from the deeply personal to the geopolitical. At the same time, this disruptive force is countered by the very poetry that describes it, as it seeks to reconstruct a connection between present

1 This precarity resonates with Maurice Blanchot’s suggestion that “[t]o think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to no longer have any future in which to think it” (2). Blanchot’s fragmentary considerations in The Writing of the Disaster (1980), his rich but cryptic engagement with the Holocaust and its aftermath, begins in such distinctly temporal terms but rarely returns to them.

2 For example, there is a strong tradition of such personal disaster poetry in works that address the death of a child, ranging from Anne Bradstreet’s two poems in memory of her grandchildren who died in the 1660s to, among numerous others, the second part of Joyelle McSweeney’s Toxicon and Arachne (2020).
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and future through its textual act even while acknowledging their apparent sundering.

The poetic engagements with disaster I will explore in the following operate in a dialectic tension they never resolve, as such a resolution would either mean that the disaster really wasn’t one to begin with or that the poetic response to such disaster is so ineffective and irrelevant that it had better not been made at all. This tension is captured concisely in the last stanza of “One Art,” where the speaker most explicitly shifts the focus of the poem onto the future from the present after an initial dash that both connects this part to the preceding parts and distinguishes it from them as a further step of escalation:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

This is a future loss, not one that has already happened, and the poem is ambiguous about how certain this loss is, although the contracted form of “I shall not have lied” suggests that it is more than just a possibility. As such, it opens up a different temporal trajectory for the art of losing, as acceptance of past losses is different from the acceptance of potential and future loss, and coping with something that has already happened is very different from coping with something that may or will happen. This is about anticipating disaster, bracing for it, and this situation truly unsettles the speaker and the poem here to suggest that this will be genuine disaster and not just loss. Brett Candlish Millier aptly states that “this poem is a crisis lyric in the truest sense—‘Even losing you’ comes to mean ‘Even if I lose you’—and we know that this is not emotion recollected in tranquility, but a live, as it were, moment of awful fear, with relief only a hoped-for possibility” (126-7).

In this awful moment, the speaker loses control over what has so far been a model exercise in one of the most ordered, restrictive poetic forms, the villanelle, whose rules of repetition strongly structure how the poem progresses. While these repetitions with variation may have evoked the necessary process of practicing one’s art to master it, the repetition in the last line has the opposite effect, and it profoundly disrupts the poetic mastery and precision exhibited in all preceding lines: the speaker interrupts themselves with the interjection “(Write
“it!”), and they do not really recover their earlier poise after, repeating “like” in what seems a sloppy mistake. The parenthesis, the italics and the exclamation mark all combine to mark this as a truly exceptional moment in the poem, and they reveal the earlier confidence to be no more than a casual pose one can afford to assume about a past one has already accepted—while they also reveal the future to be the site of genuine disaster that precludes any such composure as well as the conclusiveness it had suggested earlier by the future perfect tense. At the same time, this disruptive moment is written, so that it is part of the coping strategy as much as it is the disaster itself: in writing it, in spelling it out, the speaker both creates the disaster and enables its engagement.

This is the paradox of the disaster poetry I will address in the following: it can only position itself toward disaster by constructing it as such, and at the same time it cannot allow it to be so disastrous as to preclude any positioning toward it. In general terms, I will argue that these poems frame their engagement with disaster in terms of a particular temporality that can be described mainly as a tension between present and future, regardless of how central they purport the past to be. These poems, in their different ways and perhaps even regardless of their particular concerns, suggest that imagining and thinking about disaster is mainly a way of thinking about the future in and from the present, and especially of how both mutually depend on and influence each other beyond the linearity that is often imposed on their relation. After all, in “One Art” it is the imagination of the future that causes the speaker’s shock in the present, so that the actual disaster has not even happened yet to cause its disastrous effects already now.

Notably, this is not primarily a narrative imagination of the future but a symbolic one, and it is a textual act more than a fictional design. I deliberately chose to focus on poetry here as a way of at least somewhat challenging the dominance of the narrative fictional paradigm that currently informs literary and cultural studies in general and representations of disaster in particular. Undoubtedly, the

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3 In her perceptive reading that usefully draws on various drafts of the poem, Victoria Harrison observes that the stanza is, “metrically, […] a challenge to the forces of the villanelle” as its opening word adds “an extra foot in a deliberately regular poem”; she reads this in positive terms as a “test of strength”: “The loss expressed in this stanza is the most extreme, but this, too, I can overcome, the ‘Even’ asserts, breaking out of pentameter to do so” (196). However, I would consider the later repetition of “like” a contrast to this initial assertiveness.
imagination of “future as catastrophe,” as the title of Eva Horn’s commendable study has it, occurs mainly in narrative terms, and accordingly this is what she focuses on in her broad analysis of various “fictions of the future [Zukunftsfiktionen]” (24). Yet this dominance needs to be questioned, and I want to use this opportunity to ask what other aesthetic and imaginative ways of engaging with futurity there are, poetry being only one among many. This is not to suggest that these stories don’t matter; it is to ask what matters besides stories. Consequently, I will not consider poetry as yet another narrative act but rather as a textual act that may or may not have narrative aspects—and an act that is perhaps particularly significant in that it does not impose narrative coherence on a disaster that is defined precisely by its being incoherent. In that sense, true disaster is that which resists narrativization, and poetry then offers an appropriate form of speaking about this resistance and failure.

In the following, I hope to provide a certain heuristic model for reading disaster poetry and, by extrapolation and adaptation, potentially other disaster discourses as well. I chose to outline such a model by focusing on two particularly salient examples—Walt Whitman’s Civil-War poem “The Dresser” (1865) and Stephen Collis’s “Future Imperfect” (2021)—instead of discussing a broader range, as I prefer to read these texts more closely for their rhetorical strategies instead of treating more poems more superficially. This naturally limits my approach, and it means neglecting or even ignoring numerous poems and poets that may well have taken Whitman’s and Collis’s place or served as intermediate steps in a chronology. I would name especially Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” (1938) or Allen Ginsberg’s “Plutonian Ode” (1978) as such candidates, although any number of poems I could discuss here would still leave most of them unconsidered—and I may well have written all of this in reference to 9/11 poetry alone.4 The benefit of discussing just two poems is that it is less tempting to construct any model of a tradition of disaster poetry with a beginning and a clear trajectory. My goal here, however, is to describe a loose aesthetic continuum that does not operate in a linear way, and Collis is so far from Whitman in so many ways that their poems can only be considered as equal manifestations of a larger phenomenon and not in terms of a model and an

4 My monograph *Future-Founding Poetry*, which is the larger framework that informs my thoughts on disaster poetry here, concludes with a chapter on poetic beginnings in relation to 9/11.
Furthermore, in considering these two exemplary poems, I will follow Bishop’s lead in keeping the term “disaster” deliberately open, perhaps as Langston Hughes did with his favorite concept of “the dream”—which in many ways relates to disaster as an imagination of futurity in the present. It is certainly desirable to be precise in writing about a certain kind of poetry about disaster, and there are many particulars that merit focused attention instead of overly broad generalizations. Yet even then the concept often remains ill-defined: for example, when Nicole Cooley addresses not “disaster as metaphor in poetry, but poetry that arises in direct response to a disaster” (254) in a rather uneven essay included in the interdisciplinary volume Disaster Theory, she mentions 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and Auschwitz (via Adorno) at the outset but then leaves it very much at that, using the term to suggest man-made and natural events of a certain scale and publicity without saying exactly what constitutes a disaster. Thus her use of the term is both open and specific, but I think it needs to be even less specific to be genuinely open. H. Mike Anwalt is more precise in “Writing the Disaster: Inscriptions of the Self,” where he defines disaster as “those absurd events which shatter the continuities of our experience and break the moral sense through which we understand and order our lives” (5). In my own working definition proffered here, I want to focus on the temporal aspect this hints at: disaster is what breaks the continuity between present and future in a negative way. This can obviously be any large-scale historical event such as the ones mentioned above, but it can also be a deeply personal, even private event that seems to split your life into a before and an after, a discontinuity that cannot be integrated into prior imaginations of coherence, perhaps even sundering the very notion of the self that experiences this disaster. I explicitly include the negative in this definition to set disasters apart from ruptures that may be no less intense but have a positive effect—although, tellingly, there seems to be no antonym of “disaster” to denote these as concisely.

5 This broad conception clearly bears a resemblance to Alain Badiou’s concept of “the Event” that is at the heart of his philosophy, but it is neither as abstract nor specific as that—Badiou is elusive and vague, but at the same time he may well be talking about a Maoist revolution without really talking about it, which renders his philosophical point quite dubious as a more general tool for conceptualizing radical change. Most importantly, however, he rather exclusively conceives of “the Event” it in terms of social revolutions and not on other scales and in other contexts.
“One Art” suggests a few examples of potentially disastrous losses that do not turn into disasters for the individual after all precisely because such integration has been achieved, and yet this might as well have been otherwise had the “art of losing” not been successful—as it may well be when it comes to the future loss of the addressee. We never learn if this will be loss by death, loss by breaking up, or loss by change in personality or of location, and while the details of it do not necessarily have to be all tragic, they nevertheless will be disastrous for the speaker. Thus disaster could be anything, really, and individuals might experience the same event in radically different ways. For example, if the addressee in “One Art” really died, their loss of the speaker would not be a disaster for them, simply because they would be dead. In a way, this turns “disaster” into a phenomenological category and subjectivizes the concept, but this should not be taken to mean that it is no longer a cultural or social category, as it also matters how and when an event can be turned into a disaster for others, how it can made visible and constructed as such, how it can enter discourse as a disaster and not as something else.

In fact, I explicitly want to remove disaster poetry from the tiresome and often dubious interpretive pseudo-psychological context of “trauma” in which it is often placed. This term has conceptually suffered from both overuse and imprecision in cultural studies, to the point where it has virtually lost most of its use value as it was generalized beyond practicality. The Freudian origins of the notion are problematic enough, but it becomes even more so when these questionable psychoanalytic frameworks are applied to groups, cultures, or societies. In the same vein, I am not interested in poetry as a personal psychological tool: I spoke of “coping” above and will continue to do that, but this does not refer to any individual mental processes that are associated with “healing.” I neither care about the author nor the reader in this regard, and I do not consider poetry a utilitarian art form that serves such a purpose—and I consider it an impoverishment of its aesthetics to reduce it to what is essentially a technique. Instead, I am interested in larger cultural, social, and political imaginations of disaster and the shifting attitudes toward the connection of present and future they demand.

This means reading the poem as a peculiar kind of act that is detached from any particular actor, not so much a speech act with an immediate, present connection to a speaker but a textual act whose existence and reception are disconnected from its moment of production, and which thus in itself always
evokes a broader imagination of temporality. The poems considered here address their own futurity in some way or another, like messages in a bottle sent to recipients unknown from a present that will be their past, and yet they become present again in whatever future they are read. While such co-presence certainly applies to any act of reading, these poems deliberately make it central to their aesthetics, as the continuity this existence suggests is at odds with their subject matter of precarious futures. In other words, they are all addressing a future that may well never come to be, but whenever they are read at any present moment, this present will be the future of that past. Folding these temporal levels onto each other is the core concern of this disaster poetry, and so they matter as positional acts rather than as representational ones: they do not “depict” disaster in any conventionally “realistic” way, and while they may also be interested in truth, historical accuracy, or commemoration, their primary goal is the recuperation of a connection between their present and a precarious future.

One particularly useful way of conceptualizing this imaginative temporal work is offered by Ernst Bloch’s Marxist philosophy of hope, which is one of the most wide-ranging explorations of how present and future relate to each other (notably going against the grain of an orthodox Marxian teleology). This work is particularly relevant to my understanding of disaster poetry because it understands both present and future as co-determining forces that do not exist in a linear hierarchy of dependence but basically continually make each other. Disaster poetry, as I understand it, can be seen as an aesthetic contribution to Bloch’s philosophical “ontology of the Not-Yet” (13), a creative act against the end of futurity Bloch envisions: “Where nothing more can be done or is possible, life stands still” (224). Acting in the present with a view to the future is what hope means to Bloch: contrary to the common usage of the term, this hope is no passive wishful thinking, but the “work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong” (3). This hope is an action that deliberately thinks present and future together and recognizes that the future is not something that is simply to come but rather something that is subject to agency now without being entirely subjected to it. Thus it can and must be described in ethical terms: “The thought of the future places the categorical ‘ought to’ of any prescription or pragmatic program in an unknown—literally utopian—interval between determination and indeterminacy, the known and the unknown, imagination and the radical alterity of the unimaginable” (Bono, Dean, and Ziarek 3). Bloch retrieves the future from
a state of complete uncertainty that would disconnect it from the present, but at the same time he ensures that it is not fully determined either, as this would have the same effect of making any present act irrelevant. For Bloch, the “Possible is partially conditioned material, and it is possible only as such” (226); if it were fully conditioned or not conditioned at all, it would no longer be possible. As Elizabeth Grosz has it, “to know the future is to deny it as future” (6), and not to know it at all denies it as future just as much. The temporal notion of disaster I outlined earlier could be described precisely in those terms: disaster is when this balance between determinism and uncertainty tips toward one extreme and detaches the future from the present.

Yet it is also important to note that this philosophy of hope is not as linear and hierarchical as it may seem here, and it is not only about how the present may affect the future. It is just as much about how the future affects the present, about what he calls, in jargon typical of German-language philosophy, “das Zukunfthalige der Jetzt-Aktualität” (346), or that which “contains the future in the Now-topicality” (297). The present contains the future to a certain extent, as it has “zukunfttragende Bestimmtheit” (271) or “future-laden definiteness” (235). The trivial connotation of hope as naïve optimism actually denies this connection, as its wishful thinking is a symptom of a situation where present and future no longer co-constitute each other, where the future suggests no meaningful present action and where the present offers no agency to affect the future. Such hope is the sign of a disaster, a mere remnant of an effective mode of engaging present and future together, or really testament to the failure of this mode. In a way, this hope relates to the future how nostalgia relates to the past, as both are mainly locked in their present and cannot (and perhaps do not want to) establish a usable connection to what they fantasize about. This is not to say that such fantasies could not have their uses, and they may even be invoked in the service of Blochian hope, but they are not viable ends in themselves when it comes to imagining an interrelation between present and future. This hope involves a genuine “directing act of a cognitive kind” (12; “Richtungsakt kognitiver Art,” 10), and the poems I will consider in the following can be considered precisely as such, as textual acts that are directed toward the future but are also directing the future like a movie director might, neither determining the action but also not leaving it entirely uncertain. As such, these are hopeful poems in one

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6 In his consideration of “disaster poetics,” Eric Eisner describes related poetic acts of
sense even if they are hopeless in another, as they confront the disaster of uncertainty and determinism by attempting to reconnect present and future again.

Walt Whitman, “The Dresser”

It is tempting to tie such temporal disasters to “historical ruptures,” as the notion of such radical change on a sufficiently large scale matches this concept quite readily and often invokes a similar semantics of a “before” and “after.” My first example does just that as it responds to the US-American Civil War: Walt Whitman’s poem “The Dresser,” first published in 1865 in his collection Drum-Taps and subsequently renamed as “The Wound-Dresser” and incorporated into later editions of Leaves of Grass. The parallel between abstract temporal disasters and concrete historical ruptures is so important that it must be addressed, but it should not be taken to mean that this concept of disaster may only apply to these events and their aesthetic response. In fact, the aesthetic response should rather caution us against too eagerly declaring any real disaster to be a historical rupture: for example, much of the early poetry on 9/11 does exactly that, and it often expresses a sense of discontinuity and uncertainty, but what seemed like a rupture at the time arguably turned out to be an event that was quite continuous with what preceded and what followed it. This suggests that the concept of the “historical ruptures,” like that of “disaster,” is both subjective and prone to change, and contemporary responses may differ from later assessments—both in the sense that what may seem like a paradigm shift at one time may seem like none at a later point, or what passes quite unnoticed at one time is described as momentous later. I am not pointing this out to distinguish “real” from “apparent” disasters but to draw attention to the contingency of such ascriptions and their dependence on shifting cultural, political, or ideological frameworks—which further emphasizes my point that the category of the temporal disaster should not be tied too closely to that of major historical events.

hope in his reading of works by Mark Levine and Lynn Hejinian through the lens of Keats, using his poetry as a model for “potential for acting with a care for the future within a horizon of radical unpredictability” (157).

7 Eric Conrad proffers compelling evidence that “that Whitman may have imagined fully integrating his Civil War verse within Leaves of Grass as early as 1865” (209).

8 Dunja Mohr and Sylvia Mayer aptly call 9/11 a “catalyst” in their assessment of its cultural effects in 2010, suggesting both exceptionality but also continuity.
In Whitman’s case, though, the two still match, and while Whitman’s poetry certainly was not necessary for the construction of the Civil War as a watershed moment in U.S.-American history, it did its part in contributing to such an imagination, and it is a reminder that poetry is one of the discursive sites where disasters are made, where they are constructed as such.9 Whitman’s response is as historically immediate as it gets, as Drum-Taps was printed in the last days of the Civil War in early April of 1865, undergoing severe revisions even at the typesetting stage.10 As such, it is a unique collection of war poetry that, in a way, engages with its subject as it happens, and its resulting unevenness is one of its most remarkable features: Ted Genoways argues that “it is the ultimate, poignant reflection of the war, embodying in its very arrangements the wounds and scars of April 1865” (116). The collection includes celebratory, belligerent poems such as “Drum-Taps” that fantasize about the “manly life in the camp,” as well as chilling counterpoints such as “Come Up From the Fields, Father,” in which parents learn of the death of their only son in battle, and in which there is no healing, just inconsolable despair in the face of this irretrievable loss, and only a future of unchanging grief.11 In this diversity, “The Dresser” is especially important, and while it “appears that the arrangement of the poems in Drum-Taps was not of Whitman’s own choosing” (Genoways 100), he would later place that particular poem “at the center of every version of ‘Drum-Taps,’” making it “the thematic center towards which the sequence moves” (Gutman 191). (Furthermore, he moved the Drum-Taps cluster itself “to the center of the volume” (Sychterz 12) in the 1871 edition of Leaves of Grass, emphasizing the centrality of the poem even more.) One reason for this significant position is that “The Dresser” is the poem that most directly engages with the temporal disaster of the Civil War, and that it is the most evident “directing act” that points toward a future from a present that, in other poems, seemed myopic with regard to the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

9 Arguably, the man-made mining disaster in Gauley Bridge, Virginia would probably not be remembered as such beyond a local context if Muriel Rukeyser had not written The Book of the Dead about it.

10 See Genoways for more on the production history of Drum-Taps.

11 Jeff Sychterz argues that the arrangement of poems in the 1871 edition of Drum-Taps establishes the precedent of the “disillusionment narrative” that is usually ascribed to poetry about the First World War, as we witness the “poetic voice shifting from idealistic nationalism to realistic horror” (10).
In his 1882 memoir *Specimen Days*, Whitman would later describe the disastrous implications of the Civil War in such temporal terms of crisis, for example claiming that there was a “united wish of all the nations of the world that her [the USA’s] union should be broken, her future cut off” (782), or identifying the battle of Bull Run in July 1861 as “one of the three or four of those crises we had then and afterward, during the fluctuations of four years, when human eyes appear’d at least just as likely to see the last breath of the Union as to see it continue” (735). At the same time, he acknowledges an epistemological discrepancy between the event and its historical recording, arguing that “[f]uture years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the official surface-courteousness of the Generals, not the few great battles) of the Seces—sion war; and it is best they should not—the real war will never get in the books” (802). Whitman does not bemoan this, though, as he seeks to imaginatively restore the union of the USA and knows that this may only happen if its internal war is actually forgotten instead of remembered—or, rather, that such restoration depends on just the right quality and quantity of forgetting and remembering. Katherine Kinney’s astute observation that in Whitman’s “war prose it is dangerous to forget and dangerous to remember” (“Making Capital” 177) may well also be applied to his war poetry. This makes mourning—a way of relating to the past in the present so that one may move on into the future—a highly political issue within the national framework, and “Whitman hoped to facilitate a collaborative process of mourning which would create what was, in essence, a community of ‘readerly’ mourners united in spite of geographical, political, or ideological distances”.

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12 In the preface to the 1872 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman actually takes quite a radical stance toward this issue, arguing that “in the peaceful, strong, exciting, fresh occasions of to-day, and of the future, that strange, sad war is hurrying even now to be forgotten. The camp, the drill, the lines of sentries, the prisons, the hospitals,—(ah! the hospitals!)—all have passed away—all seem now like a dream. A new race, a young and lusty generation, already sweeps in with oceanic currents, obliterating the war, and all its scars, its mounded graves, and all its reminiscences of hatred, conflict, death. So let it be obliterated. I say the life of the present and the future makes undeniable demands upon us each and all, south, north, east, west” (). Ernest Renan famously claimed in his 1882 lecture “What is a Nation?” that “[f]orgetting, and, I would even say, historical error are an essential factor in the creation of a nation” (50), and Whitman understood that principle well.
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Thus the future of the U.S. remains precarious at this point, and it must be carefully cultivated in the present lest it be “cut off” after all.

“The Dresser” can be seen as one of Whitman’s earliest and most prominent acts of such cultivation. The poem blends various temporal levels to simultaneously acknowledge the disastrous nature of the Civil War and overcome it. It does so by using a simple but highly effective trick, a feat of the imagination that responds to the uncertainty of its present moment by pretending that it has already passed. Published at a time when the Civil War was just over but very much a present event, the poem treats it as a historical event and assumes a future perspective in which young people need to be informed about it by an old eyewitness:

An old man bending, I come, among new faces,
Years looking backward, resuming, in answer to children,
*Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me;*
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass’d heroes, (was one side so brave? the other was equally brave;)
Now be witness again—paint the mightiest armies of earth;
Of those armies so rapid, so wondrous, what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements, or sieges tremendous, what deepest remains? (ll.1-9)

In this opening section, the speaker introduces himself as a the tenuous connection between the past and the present, invited to reconstruct it through a tale of times long gone. In the historical context of publication, such a present must have seemed like a fantastic future, and envisioning it as such is part of Whitman’s art of losing, so to speak: he treats the disaster as an event that did not disrupt the continuity of present and future but rather as an event that, in the future, will seem so disconnected from the present that it needs to be deliberately evoked in a historical mode. In other words, the speaker imagines a future in

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13 This complicates Peter J. Bellis’s otherwise convincing point that only the poems in the *Sequel to Drum-Taps* “turn outward from the poet’s consciousness into the physical space of the nation and away from wartime into the future” (6), and that only these are the poems “in which the violence of the war is internalized and converted into memory or song” (7). In fact, “The Dresser” not only very much enacts this “movement from wartime into the future” (8) but also makes it its core theme.
which the Civil War is all but forgotten, or at least when it has been transformed into a mythical event that is hardly more than the source for exciting, romanticized tales. The speaker does not dismiss this talk of “sieges tremendous” even though he marks it as overly dramatic, sensational, and ahistorical through the contrast of his own memories; perhaps he accepts it as a positive sign that the war has been incorporated into a continuous imagination of past, present, and future by way of such rhetorical transformation.

This does seem like Whitman “providing the illusion of formal redemption and the sense of historical continuity” (Lybeer 31), but it is actually not that simple. The poem is not a version of Carl Sandburg’s “Grass” (1918) that imagines right at the end of World War 1 a future in which the grass has grown over “Ypres and Verdun” so that the places might not be recognized as battlefields even a decade later. To be sure, “The Dresser” does affirm that a young generation has no more than a narrative and historical relation to this event, and that the event did not prevent the young generation from existing and thriving. At the same time it evokes the things these young people cannot and must not know about the war, its disastrous nature they cannot fathom, and which it simply does not have for them. The war cannot be narrativized for those who did not witness it first-hand—a common trope in war literature. Thus these are private memories, and they are not directed at the “maidens and young men I love” but occur “in silence, in dream’s projections, / While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on” (ll. 17-18). This continuity is essential to the poem’s temporal and political agenda, but it refuses to foster it by simply denying the disruptive threat to this stability or by celebrating the human capacity to move on from anything. Instead, the speaker both gladly accepts and mourns how quickly even such momentous events lose their presence: “So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand” (l. 19). The Civil War both remains a disaster and ceases to be one here.

I called these thoughts “memories,” but this is inaccurate, in a way—or at least they are the rare kind of memories that literally make the past present again. In one of many conflations of temporal levels, the speaker is invited to “[n]ow be witness again” (l. 6), which suggests that he is about to witness again in the present what he has already witnessed in the past, not just reminiscing but really experiencing it once more in that “now.” He simultaneously enters “the doors” (l. 20) of memory and of the hospital where he has tended to wounded soldiers during the war; the two are even directly connected in a later parenthetical
apostrophe: “(open, doors of time! open, hospital doors!)” (l. 36). As soon as the speaker steps through both, the poem distinctly remains in the present tense throughout as he describes not what he has seen but what he is seeing. The past is the present now, and as personal as this is, it is not entirely private, as the experience is still shared with and communicated to someone who is not a member of the group that asked for such tales: the reader.

The speaker directly addresses them in curiously spatial terms: “(while for you up there, / Whoever you are, follow me without noise, and be of strong heart)” (ll. 20-21). There are other parentheses in the poem, but this is perhaps the most significant, as it is central to the temporal work of the poem. It is so important because it establishes a flexible but reliable connection to the speaker’s future, using a poetic technique that Whitman has also used to the same effect in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”14 (first published in 1856 as “Sun-Down Poem”): he addresses the reader using the deictic pronoun “you” that is both very open and very concrete, as it must always have a precise referent but at the same time can denote any such referent. Whitman further heightens this deictic address by making reference to the material qualities of the medium readers are necessarily engaging with as they read, which also explains the spatial terms I mentioned above: “you up there” not only addresses some vague imaginary reader, “[w]hoever you are,” but really the reader reading right now, looking down on whatever medium they use.15 Again, Whitman has already employed this stratagem of using the material medium for deictic purposes before, most notably in “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand” (first published in 1860 as “Calamus”) and, with a twist, in “So Long!” (1860). Unlike these other two poems with their explicit references to books, the deictic address in “The Dresser” even still works when the poem is read in a digital format.

Of course, it is a convention of poetry that it might address any “you” in various forms and for various purposes (see “One Art” again), but Whitman’s

14 I discuss Whitman’s deictic method in the poem in “Walt Whitman’s Politics of Nature and the Poetic Performance of the Future in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.””

15 Robert Leigh Davis expands the significance of this material reference even further by connecting it to the introduction of the speaker as an “old man bending” (l. 1), and he argues that “the posture reminds us that the nurse’s physical position relative to the wounded patient is exactly mimetic of the writer’s or reader’s physical position relative to the written text—bending over and looking at an exposed, upturned, horizontal surface” (136).
deictic use of it is unique in one particular regard, especially when combined with the materiality of the medium. Ed Folsom describes this uniqueness by saying that “[…] Whitman makes his reader the subject of his poems: the striking realization we have in reading much of *Leaves of Grass* is that *we*, at the moment of reading the poem, are what the poem has worked to call into presence” (15).

The deictic address serves a *temporal* function, as it creates an immediacy that connects the reader’s present—any present—to that of the speaker and the poem. It constructs the reader’s present as the future of the poem while at the same time folding two present moments on top of each other. This is the most effective way of constructing the temporal continuity that is threatened by the disastrous event: the poem must necessarily be seen as a textual act from the past that is *directly connected* to any future in which it is read. This could be called Whitman’s poetics of self-fulfilling prophecy, and it is his most effective way of balancing the future between the negative extremes of uncertainty and determinism. At the same time, the poem is never merely historical: combined with the consistent use of the present tense, it does not recall but *reproduces* experiences and mediates them for the reader to witness in their present moment.

These experiences are graphic and gruesome, and they stand in stark contrast to the romanticized notions of war that the younger generation expected to hear. They also stand in stark contrast to the futurity this generation represents, as they speak of futures destroyed, of amputation, infection, and death, and of young men who will neither live to ask anyone for historical tales nor tell them themselves. The speaker leaves no doubt that this war was a disaster, that it really did disrupt the temporal continuity between present and future for those involved, not only those who died but also those who survived and had to go on living and coping with the event. The speaker himself attests to this disastrous quality, as in some ways he has not been able to move on beyond this present moment of the war: he cannot integrate it into a historical perspective and enconce it safely in the past, but it is as present for him as it was then, as if this present allowed for no future beyond it. That there is a future after that present is both painful and comforting to him; on the one hand, he cherishes the foolish young people who are blessed to know nothing about the war, but on the other hand he must remain faithful to the memory of the soldiers who suffered. In a way, he must let them be forgotten, but he will not forget them, and so the future presents a dilemma for him that he cannot and will not resolve.

In the end, the speaker seems to return to his actual present when he says
he “recall[s] the experience sweet and sad” (l. 60), but the poem does not entirely turn away from the past and toward the future. It never makes a gesture of moving on from disaster, of coping with it, of making it less disastrous. Instead, the speaker draws on the past once more to assert in the last line: “Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips” (l. 62). This trace remains, and it does so in the present tense; this is not only a metaphorical memory but a persistent presence. Thus the poem commemorates without historicizing in the sense of making the past the past. As such, it risks falling into a kind of nostalgia or getting lost among a past that is ever-present and allows for no imagination of a future beyond it. Yet the speaker avoids this disastrous option after all by making the connection between past and present a very personal one that may well be lost once he is gone, as “the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on” (l. 18) into its own future. One may thus say about “The Dresser” what Cristanne Miller argues about *Drum-Taps* in general: that is “more reflective than restorative in its tone and complicates, even while it participates in, national nostalgic erasures of memory and narratives of progress” (172). The poem speaks of genuine disaster and its effects on one individual and others in the same situation, of the inability to move on beyond that event, but at the same time the poem itself is able to imagine the future that the speaker cannot see. Katherine Kinney identifies “his testimony” as an “act of healing” (“Modern War” 9), but actually only the poetic act and not his speech act is a hopeful one in the Blochian sense.

**Stephen Collis, “Future Imperfect”**

“The Dresser” overcomes the disastrous rupture between present and future by imagining a future in which this rupture has been overcome: it dresses a fresh wound by imagining that it has already healed, passing off first aid as full recovery. If this sounds like circular logic, it is, but precisely this folding of temporal levels works as a poetic act to reconnect present and future again and retrieve them from uncertainty or determinism. This could be described as a “present perfect mode” of writing about the future, a way of imagining a present in which a process that has actually barely begun—or is indeed begun by the poem—has been completed. This is markedly different from writing about a future in which this process will have been completed, and this important nuance takes us to the temporal mode of the second poem under consideration here, Stephen Collis’s “Future Imperfect,” whose title already suggests its concern and
struggle with the future perfect. This is surely the rarest of future forms in English, and its unique blend of futurity, finality, and process makes it a highly versatile and ambiguous tool of engaging with disaster in language. It is instructive to consider the difference it would have made if Whitman had used the future perfect instead of the present perfect in “The Dresser”: for one thing, this poem would be closer to Sandburg’s “Grass” in imagining a future in which the Civil War will have been coped with. Yet Whitman imagines not just a future but a future present so that he can connect two present moments and find a balance between continuity and discontinuity. Imagining a future detached from his present would have emphasized Whitman’s own disastrous historical moment too much, and his fantasy of healing would have been just that, a fantasy; folding his own present onto a future present in which this process of forgetting has already been completed at least to a certain extent, however, makes the poem a beginning of the very process it describes as complete. The poem imagines that the wound has been dressed and not that it will have been dressed because it itself seeks to be the beginning of this dressing and at the same time is skeptical of the finality and certainty of the latter.

But what if it is the disaster itself that is in the future? Whitman’s conflation of temporal levels, his unique art of losing and beginning, works well when trying to think beyond a disastrous event in the past that rendered and continues to render the future precarious, but what if the disaster was the precarious future itself? How do you begin then when beginning itself is precarious? This is the very different temporal situation Stephen Collis engages with in “Future Imperfect,” a poem that “considers the epochal shift ushered in with climate change, as it wrestles with the question of whether or not we are past the point of no return” (Yamaguchi). It speaks of a confrontation with both uncertainty and determinism at the same time, a dialectic Eva Horn identifies in slightly different terms at the heart of the contemporary Western apocalyptic imagination (cf. 17): a radically unknowable, threatening future blends with the certainty that this future is unavoidable. This is also a dialectic of human agency:

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16 This should not be taken to suggest that the Western imagination of disaster, and especially the imagination of apocalypse and its aftermath, was radically different in Whitman’s historical moment than it is in the twenty-first century. John Hay’s fine study Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature (2017) convincingly uses “instances of such fantasies to establish the complex plurality of national narratives American antebellum writers adopted to historicize their own moment in time” (4).
on the one hand, humans have brought this future about through their actions, but on the other hand there is nothing to be done about it now.\(^\text{17}\)

“Future Imperfect” struggles with these dialectic issues, and the first stanza shows the speaker inquiring into the radical uncertainty of the future while at the same time positing its determined quality:

So what will happen between this unusually rainless November and an unspecified but nearing future when it will have warmed however many degrees Celsius above this present stretching global mean / asking for a friend (3)

Simply put, something will happen, but it is not clear what this “something” will be. The poem could be described as a struggle with extrapolation, a futile and limited attempt to deduce a future state from present data. This already indicates what makes the poem a disaster poem, and one may well rephrase the definition of disaster I gave above by saying that it is any event that precludes extrapolation. One might also say that the speaker can extrapolate form but not content, as he knows what the future holds in abstract terms but cannot know it in any concrete way:

I feel tense give me a / tense such as actions that will be completed before some other event in the future / plot a line A (present) – B (future) / and place the future perfect somewhere between those points / but who knows what ontological status B has now is the problem (3)

This simple line between present and future has become unplottable as the future is marked by radical uncertainty, its ontological status not simply that which is to come or that which is ahead but perhaps something that is entirely fictional at this point. Returning to Bloch, we could say that the hopeful “people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong” (3) no longer have anything to throw themselves into and belong to; their hope is made impossible because one of its necessary defining terms has become fundamentally unstable and unavailable. The pun on “tense” expresses this crisis

\(^{17}\) This resonates with how Simon Estok defines his important concept of ecophobia: “Fear of a loss of agency and the loss of predictability are what form the core of ecophobia […]” (40).
concisely: the speaker feels unease in the face of this combined uncertainty and determinism, the worst of both future worlds combined, and he is looking for a way to express and perhaps even remedy this crisis in language. “Give me a / tense,” he asks, a tense that resists the finality of the future perfect, and also one that does not provide the perfect way of expressing the future but another way of suggesting how the continuity between present and future has been broken along with the human agency that relies on it:

If we don't know where we are going how will we know when we've gone too far / #capitalism / to make our future perfect there must be a deadline we work toward / now to then / the breach coming between we choose I choose you I choose all of you let's do this now and then (3)

This still sounds like there is hope in a Blochian sense, like there could be a way to affect the future in the present, and yet the reference to capitalism suggests that the promise of a perfect future has always been fraudulent, that its premise of perpetual growth, progress, and expansion relies on infinite futurity that isn't actually available, and that we have already gone too far in our belief that we would always have somewhere else to go.

In a way, the choices invoked here are no longer are available to the speaker, and there is nothing to work toward, no “now to then” or “now and then,” because the real “breach” has already occurred. This present situation is already disastrous but also anticipates disaster: the future has become unimaginable except for an imagination of impending doom. The epigraph to the entire volume states that “The disaster is here, it is just not evenly distributed,” and so it is, in a way, also still there, still ahead, still to come. It is an ongoing disaster in a certain sense, and as such not one that could be coped with in any historical sense: it precludes the finality of the future perfect in that it will never be completed, and it precludes an imagination like Whitman’s in which one might hope for a time in which the disaster has stopped being one while still being commemorated as such. Instead, the speaker is trapped in the continuous discontinuity of this disastrous present:

Say / we will always have been living in the future like this / say /
we will have always been pondering the course of history unfolding /
say / our descendants will have always been thinking / what were
The speaker imagines a future generation like Whitman, but they will not be happily oblivious to what has preceded them. “What were they thinking” suggests that they will be very critical of our carelessness—“In the future / everyone will have their fifteen minutes of blame” (8)—but also that they are sufficiently disconnected from such thinking to wonder about it. Here, the poem assumes a temporal perspective of connecting its present to a future by imagining our descendants imagining us imagining them, and yet this connection is not enough to create real continuity. If anything, it speaks of our incapacity or unwillingness to imagine future generations in any meaningful way that would provide us with a moral imperative in the present.18

Instead, the continuity that is actually envisioned is not governed by the well-being of future humans at all:

The future is imperfect and tense / the deadlines will pass and still
some will be dreaming states of continuity / I want to state some
continuity / look at the climate and say / “my grammar did this to me”
/ my grammar and / my economy (3)

These are the dreams of unlimited fossil fuels, of unchanged lifestyles of consumerism, of technological innovation just in the nick of time. These dreams are the problem, not the solution, and so they offer no viable way of overcoming the disastrous rupture between present and future at all. Instead, they gloss over the fact that there is a rupture, ideologically covering up a wound that only festers more underneath. “I want to state some continuity” relates to this, as it is not an attempt to rebuild a connection between present and future but rather an attempt at historical justification, at saying how we all got to this present from the past. Furthermore, by wanting to blame climate change on grammar and the economy, the speaker puts himself in a comfortable passive position, acted upon rather than acting, relieved of personal responsibility—although this speaks of desire rather than an actual excuse.

18 For example, Hans Jonas proffered exactly this in The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age: “In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will” (11).
Looking for ways in which to situate himself in time, the speaker tries three different models in the following stanzas, each giving a different option:

Something occurs or appears in the present. We think / it lay in our future / waiting for us / now it is here. Sprung out at us. A moment later / it has passed / moved on and disappears behind us / is in the past now. This now. Fixed. Unfixed. What’s the hurry? Craning our necks. History. The grass grown over battlefields. Receding.

Or / we are mobile. Walkers. Moving forward through time / toward these future objects or events / which we then arrive at / pass / leave behind. Call it progress. Moss doesn’t grow on a rolling stone. We / in a hurry / tick tock. Move along. Nothing to see here. What’s next / what’s next my friend? Have you cut the grass yet / it’s spring and must be long?

Or maybe time is like space and we are located / now / in relation to various thens and whens / arrayed all about in a temporal landscape. Field or prairie / it’s all relative. But / if we walk for twenty-four hours / in any direction / go ahead, you choose / we will always arrive tomorrow / never yesterday. This is the problem. I’m not actually sure where the exit is. Or how long the grass has grown. (4)

This part evokes section six of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” in which a child asks the speaker “What is the grass?” and he responds with five different possibilities, all introduced by the same anaphoric “or” that is used here (cf. Poetry and Prose 31). These three stanzas extend the metaphor of the grass and invest it with temporal significance: first it symbolizes a linear progress of past, present, and future in which grass, like in Sandburg’s poem, will grow over the battlefields while time acts upon humans; then it symbolizes positive growth in which humans act in time; and finally it symbolizes epistemological uncertainty, an object inaccessible to humans as they are lost at the vast temporal sea but are forced to proceed into an uncertain future nevertheless. This last option is the one that seems most applicable to the speaker, and it corresponds most to his temporal disorientation: “I’m not actually sure where the exit is” suggests that he can no longer espouse any linear imagination that could connect present and future in a meaningful way. This radical uncertainty also stands in stark contrast to the confidence with which the speaker in “Song of Myself” positioned himself
in this regard, based on his belief in eternal transformation and reconfiguration
where every death only leads to new life:

My foothold is tenoned and mortised in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time. (Poetry and Prose 46)

The speaker of “Future Imperfect,” however, has nothing to laugh about, and
Whitman’s nineteenth-century belief in temporal plenitude has given way in the
twenty-first century to pure horror at its scarcity:

Mostly I look quickly at the latest reports / through the cracks
between my fingers / out the corner of my eye / look away quickly /
calculate years to collapse. (5)

He later reaffirms that the lack of time in the present is directly connected to its
lack in the future, with the added twist that not making time to deal with these
issues now will prevent their solution later on:

   I have no time for this. Then there will be no time
   for this at some point in the future. (6)

In this situation, the only imagination of futurity at the speaker’s disposal is an
extrapolation of ruin: the present disaster is such that it precludes any version of
the future that is not already disastrous.

The poem goes on to intensify this temporal rift even further by turning to
logic next, suggesting that the temporal rupture of continuity is such that it is
even a rupture of causality, sundering even the most abstract ways of connecting
propositions and drawing conclusions from them. The syllogistic fallacy “A –
grass dies / B – human beings die / C – human beings are grass” (5) introduces
this most basic way of arriving at true statements about the world, and the
speaker ponders the rift between present and future in those terms, as if clinging
to the last abstract means of deduction available to him. He hopes it might be a
way out of this situation of combined uncertainty and determinism:

   I want change I want not this pathway but
   that presently unknown one we know too much and too little I am
But nothing can be inferred in this disastrous world. Whatever $p$s and $q$s we may posit in our abstractions—such as “$p$ is a restabilized climate and $q$ is runaway warming (7)—the conventional rules of connecting them no longer seem to apply, and this disastrous temporality disturbs the logic of “if / then” (10) itself:

The possible is simply what either is or will be true. If it will be that $p$ will never be the case then $p / right now / will never be the case.

…………………………
It will always uninterruptedly be so / it will always be that it will be that $p / possibly so? True now or in some possible futures. I like / possible / futures.

Suppose $p$ to be true in some possible future only / and $q$ in some other possible future only. We will then have both $p$ and $q$ in their two futures / but neither now nor in any possible future do we have $p$ either accompanied by or followed by $q$. (6-7)

“I think this is logic” (7), he says, but logic isn’t enough to firmly reattach the future to the present, as there are simply too many variables and reality does not follow a syllogistic structure. Like the speaker in “One Art,” he fears a coming disaster, a future certainty, and this is also “a crisis lyric” that presents “a live, as it were, moment of awful fear, with relief only a hoped-for possibility” (Millier 126-27). He likes possible futures but fears there might not be any:

A time series in which there are alternate possible immediate futures but only one ultimate future is what I fear. Or long for / I don’t know. This is logic. I am an animal fretting. I think / gore is what we wend toward. (7)

This fear of a disastrous future is the fear of a disaster that has already begun, and this temporality opens up a crucial dialectic:

This is the logic of futurity. What will always be / already is. Here is our hope. Or our despair. Logic doesn’t tell us which.

………………………………
Such and such an event ($m$) had been in the future / now it has begun
The despair is that of an unchangeable, determined future that is no longer affected by any present action; the hope is that of there being a future at all, of continuity despite this disaster. For better or worse, the here and now is inextricably tied to this future in a long beginning, and what is begun will terminate in such a way that no humans will be there to mark its ending:

There’s some doubt as to whether we will ever be able to say / remember climate change?

Eventually all speech will have come to an end. No one will say so.
No one will when. Remember when the end of the world was happening? (8-9)

This is the clearest difference to Whitman’s poem: his speaker could historicize disaster as he had already moved beyond it into the future, just like Bishop’s speaker could be smug about the art of losing as long as it only related to having lost things. Collis’s speaker, however, confronts a disaster that is both begun but endless, something that will never be historicized as far as he can tell. This is a disaster that seems to preclude making beginnings and acting in the present in a future-oriented way, acting in the sense of Blochian hope: its finality is such that it destroys futurity itself as a space of possibility. In this situation, the poem might still hope to be an object of commemoration, not a commemorative act like Whitman’s poem but really a remnant of a time before the disaster, a written document when speech has ended—and yet “the end of the world” exposes even this frailest of connections as a fantasy, as there won’t be anyone there to read it.

Yet this is where the poem timidly but poignantly resists the finality it has extrapolated so far, as it gives in neither to the commemorative impulse nor to its posthuman vision. It refuses to fatalistically accept the disastrous future that is surely ahead as it stubbornly hopes against hope, not because the speaker wouldn’t really believe in his pessimistic projections but because he acts despite them, and he acts in and with the poem. He does so by addressing a you, and like Whitman he uses deixis to connect one present moment to another. The conditions of doing so are a radically different, though. Whitman had no reason not to trust in his deixis to always find readers it could refer to and incorporate in the poem as addressees; to him, not having readers was at best a commercial but not an existential issue. Collis, however, faces a posthuman future where reading
itself will have ceased, and in this situation positing and addressing a you becomes a small but significant act of resisting this finality. The speaker leads up to this deictic address with a comment on the future perfect tense:

So many false theories break down as soon as we remember that there is such a tense as the future perfect.

So tense. So perfect. So

imperfect / from the Latin imperfectus / “unfinished” / the future perfect relates to an action that will be completed at a time relative to another timed event

when I see you I see you already tomorrow too / can I

say p will be a path we will have continued along naming no whens and no Wednesdays just the furthest reach of animal love

I am always seeing you imperfectly / so fucking beautifully imperfectly

/ as we are whole

because we are unfinished / terminally so (9)

To be sure, one may well read this you as a concrete but nameless addressee in a love poem, suggesting that the speaker finds solace in the presence of a loved and loving person, and perhaps in a retreat into the realm of the personal that promises fragile and temporary shelter from the global disaster outside. Yet the more compelling and convincing reading, I venture, is that of readerly address and the deictic use of the you, which establishes a temporal connection from the speaker’s present to the reader’s present and thus in the poetic acts of writing and reading reestablishes a link between a present and future that the disaster has begun to sunder. This is conveyed most concisely in the line “when I see you I see you already tomorrow too,” which is not quite the uncanny conflation of two presents we see in Whitman’s question in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: “Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?” (Poetry and Prose 312). Collis’s speaker is less bold, and he does not create a strong transtemporal community of perception like Whitman’s, but he nevertheless identifies in the reader and in their moment of reading a future
moment from his present perspective, as the poem must necessarily be read after its having been written. The most trivial quality of the medium of text here becomes a way of throwing oneself actively into what is becoming and affirming that one belongs to this becoming, an poetic act of Blochian hope.

This is amplified further by the assertion that the speaker sees us “so f…ing beautifully imperfectly” and that “we are unfinished/terminally so”: the you addressed here will always have a very open and very concrete reference due to its deictic nature, and so the connection to future moments of reading and future readers will always continue to do its work. This openness defies the finality of individual lives, and it is offered in defiance to the global predicament the speaker fears, a stubborn, personal resistance against the disaster and the temporality it imposes on us all. In being imperfect in the sense of unfinished, the reader addressed as you is a counterpoint to the future perfect of completed action, their perpetual openness offering a future imperfect in which beginnings and futures are still imaginable, where acts of hope can still be made—at the same time knowing full well that there will be “one ultimate future” without readers, without even the possibility of reading, in which such hopeful resistance will have ceased to matter.

Perhaps this knowledge of disastrous finality, the certainty of a determined future, makes the poetic act of defiant hope even more meaningful. At the same time, the poem knows about the futility of its hope, and that a poetic act may never achieve what it must nevertheless aspire to. The speaker is trying to achieve what Whitman has done in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and, to a lesser extent, also in “The Dresser: a poem that is not timeless but will always be timely:

Here I am trying to find my way to p where p is a poem that will always be the case. (11)

But while Whitman confidently built these poetic bridges between two present moments because he could believe that they would always have a hold in the future, Collis can only project and extrapolate, trying to find his way to a point that Whitman, never famous for his modesty, simply declared to have already reached. The poem is unsure of its own hopeful work, as it seeks to counter a disaster that has already begun, is still ongoing, and furthermore is endless as far as humans are concerned. It seeks to “render this future,” to make it, to begin something, to create a connection to a future again in the present, but it can only
be an attempt that is defined by its uncertainty more than by its confidence and trust in its own form.

This is how I would interpret the idiosyncratic use of slashes in the poem. On the one hand, they might serve the function that Charles Olson suggests in “Projective Verse” as a typographic tool the contemporary poet might use when “he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma—which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line” (“Projective Verse”). This temporal function is also at play in Collis’s poem, as the resulting hesitant movement corresponds to its engagement with uncertainty. On the other hand, I venture that they even more indicate self-reflexivity: forward slashes usually signal line breaks when quoting a poem, but here they are already part of the poem itself, so that it seems broken on a fundamental formal level. The simplest definition of (Western) poetry is that it is a text with line breaks that are not only determined by its medium,19 and “Future Imperfect” complicates this basic poetic convention by having both line breaks and the graphic markers that denote them, introducing an element of uncertainty into its formal design. Simply speaking, the poem undermines itself as a poem by incorporating its own metapoetic symbolic discourse, and its self-reflexivity makes it self-conscious, nervous about itself, probing, unsure. Unable to assume Whitman’s overly bold, arrogant voice in these disastrous times, the poem instead becomes searching and cautious about its own poetic nature and power. Whitman thought his poem could dress the wounds of the Civil War (or at least pretended he thought so); Collis isn’t sure if poetry really does anything in an ending world. Yet he is still trying to use its defective means to “render this future,”

or alternative routes into branching futures / by poem or other
method / but only one way back from any point into the past we
must accept

19 Terry Eagleton states in How to Read a Poem that “a poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end” (25), but even this is overcomplicating it. Susanne Wehde’s Typographische Kultur (2000) considers how “typographic dispositifs” (125) determine how we recognize and read texts, and she uses poetry as a prominent example of a form we identify visually first before any semantic aspect enters the picture, quite literally.
we must accept it if we are looking for options / velocity and
direction / new temporalities to compose

yet we must accept there is no omnitemporality / only poems / must we? ()

In a poem that began in futility and spoke of the impossibility of extrapolation,
this timid venture must count as a return to hope, as the speaker can at least
envision looking for options in a world that, in the beginning of the poem,
seemed to preclude their very possibility. This retrieves some futurity beyond the
extremes of uncertainty and determinism while still leaving them intact as a
threatening, continually disastrous presence. There still is no future perfect in
which climate change will have been, where humanity will have overcome it, but
within this framework there are still vectors into different futures after all, as the
speaker recognizes the ontological and cognitive difference between hindsight
and anticipation. These new temporalities within the future limit of ‘humans will
have existed’ must be composed, they must be made, and they may be made in
poetic acts such as this one that both acknowledges and resists the finality that
we have imposed on us with our disaster.

Here, the poem is what Muriel Rukeyser in The Life of Poetry called a
“reaching that makes a meeting-place” (40), an act that may extend into the
future and connect two presents. Poetry, Rukeyser writes, “is an art that lives in
time […]. The work that a poem does is a transfer of human energy, and I think
human energy may be defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in
existing conditions” (LoP xi). This capacity is that of Blochian hope. Especially in
its deictic moments, “Future Imperfect” reaches and makes a meeting-place, not
designing and imagining any grand futures but groping, quite blindly compared
to Whitman, for the small but significant connection to a future reader that
proves not all hope is lost. Perhaps the most important aspect of this deictic act is
that, in the lines quoted above, the speaker’s I and the reader’s you fuse into a we,
as if their conflated presents had enabled them to imagine a common future, and
as if to insist that the connection has already been made. The last line quoted above
is crucial here: in first stating and then questioning that “we must accept there is
no omnitemporality / only poems / must we?” the speaker asserts his poetic
defiance, his hope against hope. The question at the end, to my mind, does not
suggest that poetry is omnitemporal after all; Collis’s poem no longer allows for
such romantic visions of poetic grandeur. There may be no omnitemporality in the theological meaning of the term as God’s “way of being eternal in the sense of being temporally everlasting” (DeWeese 239), and there are no timeless poems “that will always be the case,” but there is poetic transtemporality as the next best thing, Rukeyser’s reaching between what is the case now and what will be the case then, which at least allows for vectors into the future, even if not into eternity.

In conclusion, even “Future Imperfect” in its highly pessimistic premises exemplifies something that can be construed as a defining feature of disaster poetry: a stubborn refusal to let a disaster be so disastrous that it would even preclude a poetic response, however dire and fatalistic this response might then be. This refusal is not about the trivial therapeutic notions of “making sense” of or “moving on” after disaster but about the much more complex process of making ways of moving on, of creating and imagining modes of acting in a future-oriented way again at all—and some of these modes are poetic. Collis’s poem includes the vision of a future in which speech, and by extension also text and language itself, will have ceased to matter, and yet it refuses to be silenced now by this future silence, refuses to accept the determinism of the present by the future. Thus both “The Dresser” and “Future Imperfect,” as poetic acts of Blochian hope, express what “One Art” suggests: the only true disaster will be losing you, not in the sense of losing one particular person but of losing the most basic way of relating to an other in time and creating a transtemporal meeting-place, losing the possibility to address someone whose present will not be our own but is still connected to ours—losing our capacity to imagine a future without ourselves, to imagine ourselves historically, to think beyond our present moment. The only true disaster will be the one that makes it impossible to write it.
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