

Introduction:
Emergency Literature, Emergency Aesthetics

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“Majesty of the absurd which bears witness to mankind’s here and now.” (Paul Celan, Meridian Speech, 175)

“I find something which binds and which, like the poem, leads to an encounter. I find something like language, abstract, yet earthly, terrestrial, something circular, which traverses both poles and returns to itself, thereby – I am happy to report – even crossing the tropics and tropes. I find [...] a meridian” (Paul Celan, 185)

I

The categorical imperative of “emergency” demands both the act of witnessing and a corresponding response to the moment of abjection or the emergency. The emergent crisis elicits, or is expected to elicit a response from us, but, what if, we are un-disposed to reply? What if the precipice is garlanded or is overlooked as the norm? This re-doubles and sharpens the claws of *emergency* because of its misrecognition or, the worst, because of the refusal to recognize, or the inability to recognize, hinting at an ethical and cognitive eclipse. The idea of Emergency Literature stems from this normative catatonia, the ethical paralysis when we are systematically disempowered or desensitized to respond to the evil staring at us. How do we approach literature from this perspective of catatonic cognition? How does literature iterate the wounds of life to restore in us the vision for a redressal?

For Jacques Derrida, who built on Paul Celan's poetology of the wound or the poetics of the abysmal, "the signature of a poem, like that of any text is a wound [...] in each poem by Celan (2005, 166), Derrida contends, there is at least one wound, his or that of another". Literature, or what we rechristen here as *Emergency literature*, posits its office to encrypt this wound, the wound of the self and the other. For Celan, the hyper-majesty of the poetic or the literary "bears witness to mankind's here and now", the crisis of the present, the emergent moment of dystopia, the wound or the impending gloom. The poem therefore traverses the pluriversal, the different zones of existential blues and precarity only to connect them as a "meridian", that bonding or "binding" leads to an "encounter" with the "chaosophy" of life – an image of literature patrolling at the edges of life.

Celan's celebrated *Meridian Speech* (1960), adopts a series of spatial figurations to define various ways through which the poem or literature fortifies literary 'encounters'. Celan's argues how the "poematic" or the literary, forges a bond between the distant and the proximate, between the known and the unknown, the self and the Other. This intervention of the poetic language that metaphorically resembles a 'meridian' "serves both as a measure of distance and a marker of connection" (Dutoit and Passanen 2005, 2).

To echo T. S. Eliot in today's context, Emergency literature, or the prophetic task of literature makes it a Tiresias text. Tiresias, the blind mythological prophet had seen the past, lives the present and could foresee the future. This vatic power of literature empowers it to foresee the nightmares of tomorrow. The month of April in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, was projected as "the cruelest month of the year", as it breeds desires of germination and spring and simultaneously combines it with its inability to sprout due to the wounds of the mythic Fisher King, who is a metaphoric figuration of our collective sin. Eliot's *Waste Land* concluded with a ray of hope and regeneration but in the prototypical *Waste Land* of the twenty first century Anthropocene, the desire for salvation has vanished, the "burial of the dead" evokes no memory, generates no despondency. War and conflictual geopolitics coexist with million deaths of the pandemic. The "sick hurry" and the "divided aim" of the current conjuncture makes this an "iron time", when "nothing can be done", and we are "APPALLED", where Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* enacts a reverse discourse, they stop "waiting for Godot". They (We today) cease to wait, lose out on any prospect, any compulsion to wait. Our compulsion today is not to see, to recognize and not to hope – an abysmal catatonia of dystopic gloom lost in the malaise of consumerist greed and blissful ignorance. But how do we bring back that erstwhile spark?, the spirit of "sweetness and light"? Can literature restore that incandescence of the self?

In his 'Che cos'è la poesia?' (What is a Poem?), Derrida provocatively argued that "You will call the poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that, of you, from you [de toi], I want to learn by heart' (Derrida 2005, 233). The very 'moment' of incision in language whereby a poetic event sets to keep

or entrust itself [...] is also its wounding, its division as the risk of effacement in a movement whose repeatability is an opening to an Other, a futural Other to whom it is yet already indebted to [...] (Derrida as quoted by Timothy Clark 1997, 69).

The poetic or the literary therefore, is a singular linguistic event, that encounters the present, witnesses the wound and generates that silent incantation. The matrix of emergency and literature perhaps emanates from this moment of encounter, of binding the different poles of life – literature is intrinsically irruptive, characterized by ellipsis and caesura – it eternally awakens us to the absurdity or the emergency, that prevails around us.

To concretize, one may cite the ready references of the horrendous and the bizarre, namely, the Shoah – one of the biggest emergencies witnessed by mankind in early twentieth century, a dystopic wound whose barbarity prompted Adorno to argue that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. One may argue though that it would be a crime Not to poetize after the holocaust, because the devastating horror of Auschwitz can only be gauged to a certain extent through our literary sensibilities, through the meridian power of literature which connects the wound with the heal, death with hope by making us first of all aware about the extent of the barbarity committed there. Emergencies therefore, demand first of all a hermeneutics of the emergent, and literature can provide that critical cognition.

For Giorgio Agamben, it is impossible to witness completely what happened in the concentration camps and “the lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection” (Agamben, 2002, quoting Primo Levi in *The Witness* chapter, 17). Auschwitz metaphorizes this abjection, the incomprehensible crisis of humanity and given the current abjection of the “humanimal” due the planetary crisis of the Anthropocene, our existential emergency constitutes the “semantics of the everyday” or the “inscriptions of the invisible” (Derrida 2005, 2). Literature here acts as a dooms day Cassandra striking at our drooping sensibility, the poet acts as the “pathographer”, locates the malaise within and outside and provides the premonitions of the macabre, of corpses piled upon one another, in heaps during the pandemic, wild fires engulfing the flora and other wild animals, dried up lands, killing people through starvation and malnutrition – A Wasteland that rejoices this death and destruction and never calls for “shanti” or salvation, never pines for “What the Thunder Says”. This abject surrender to death and destruction, this complicity with the forces of doom that plunders the planet Earth, our common home, maximizes the “remnants of Auschwitz”. What does literature do in such moments of invited decadence and self-inflicted annihilation? How does it shore up new grounds of “incantation” for survival? How does it help us witnessing this descent into the necropolitical and the “pyro-political”? Our carbon footprints and the devouring greed for consumption led to the current crisis induced by the “Capitalocene”, eliciting the need to deflate the all too human cogito – the sovereign human hegemony over other creatures leading to

the colonization of the planetary life-world by human agents. The crisis inspired Donna Haraway to sloganize – in the Anthropocene, “make kins, not babies”. We have forgotten to connect, to forge bonds, like the literary meridian, we need therefore as Haraway rightly argued, “tentacular thinking” or “conviviality” and this “convivialist manifesto” can redefine a new “species history” as theorized by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, in which conventional models of history [i.e. human history] is to be replaced by planetary history or “species history” that situates human beings as one of the species among many others and therefore this exclusive privilege to script history only through the human eye must come to an end. Tomorrow’s fiction or *emergency novels* will be *planetary novels*, or *pathographic novels*, fictively narrating the emergency of pandemics and global warming, or of human violence. The poetry of the future will enact a deliberate strategy of semantic errancy, to generate a reverse grammar of hermeneutics, replacing heroic templates of human valour and plunder as depicted in our epics with new models of *weak epics*, a new geo-poetics of conviviality or “Earth Democracy”.

Any Literature on the Nazi camps as done by poets like Paul Celan or authors like Primo Levi encrypts the semantic hermeneutic errancy, or spectral errancy of words. “The aporia of Auschwitz” for Agamben “is, indeed the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension” (Agamben 2002, 12). Literature enacts this witnessing of the “Remnants of Auschwitz”. Literature or a poem can bear witness and “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language” (Agamben 2002, 66.) The aporias of the Capitalocene, similarly enact an aporia of historical knowledge, we are unable to decipher the devastation unless we resort to poetic shocks or a new literary catharsis of emergency poetics that reawakens humanity about the impending gloom, substantiating what Santiago Zabala claims, perhaps “only the Arts can save us” in this momentous hour when we stand on the precipice.

II

One strange paradox of contemporary life is that, despite the numerous political, economic, and environmental catastrophes confronting the planet, capitalist subjects are nevertheless encouraged to carry on with “business as usual” – to continue working, socializing, and consuming as they always have. Rising sea levels, the Covid-19 pandemic, diminishing access to fresh water, wildfires that can be seen from space, the threat of nuclear escalation in Ukraine, economic Darwinism, and global food insecurity are all existential threats to democracy or life on planet Earth, but the sheer magnitude of these crises is not enough to produce the kind of radical interventions that are necessary. As Santiago Zabala (2019) observes, “[a]lthough the media – traditional, online, and social – are full of ‘events’ and ‘emergencies,’ the dominant impressions of citizens in industrialized countries [...] is that nothing

new happens: reality is fixed, stable, and secured” (4-5). The aesthetic frames through which “the world is grasped as picture” (Heidegger as cited in Zabala 2019, 16) produce an “absence of emergency” that forecloses any consideration of Being by presenting the world as static, predictable, and calculable.

This “absence of emergency” does not mean that catastrophes no longer happen, but that the catastrophic consequences of neoliberalism, colonialism, and nationalism are not regarded as an ongoing emergency that necessitates a political response. Crises like mass shootings, natural disasters, and economic recessions are typically presented as singular events, disconnected from gun control policy, global warming, or neoliberalism. For Zabala, framing these incidents as aberrations or moments of dysfunction within an otherwise working system produces the “lack of a sense of emergency” that fosters political complacency and a false sense of certainty. As a result, when an event like a terrorist attack or a mass shooting does surface against the “absence of emergency” to produce a moment of temporary uncertainty, it only strengthens sovereign control. This state of affairs is frequently marked by a refusal to acknowledge the scope, severity, or existence of numerous threats to democracy and life on planet earth. One of the most striking aspects of contemporary political discourse in the United States and Europe is how quickly conversations about the best way to prevent mass shootings, global warming, and Covid-19 have become debates about the extent to which these emergencies are actually hoaxes manufactured by the government or the media.

The rhetoric of denial is frequently accompanied by a tendency to distance ourselves from emergencies by locating them “elsewhere.” During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the New York Times began featuring brightly colored, interactive data maps that broke down vaccination and transmission rates in the United States by country, state, and county. By flattening the pandemic into something that could be measured and broken down by region, these hyperlocalized maps had the effect of lending objectivity and stasis to an uncertain, fluctuating situation. Instead of inviting readers to reflect on the kinds of radical intervention that would be necessary to respond to the pandemic as a global emergency, these maps offered a kind of “weather report” that recharacterized the pandemic as a series of regional “waves” or constellation of distinct outbreaks. This recharacterization of a global emergency as a series of localized crises lent itself to a fragmented and often contradictory responses in different places and at different levels of the government, producing an uneven patchwork of mask mandates, vaccination campaigns, subsidized at-home testing, and lockdowns that ultimately failed to stop the virus from spreading. In her contribution for to this issue, Ruby Niemann (2022, 27) describes the idea that disasters are discrete events contained within the borders of the nation-state as “so obsolete as to be almost quaint.” She argues that, in our contemporary world:

There is no longer a crisis that restricts itself to one location or one community of survivors and victims. Smoke from the 2020 Australian bushfires circles the globe, destabilising weather patterns and causing respiratory distress. Survivors of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal are linked to factory workers in West Virginia through [...] Dow Chemical (Wenzel 2019 207). The global liquidity of international trade, multinational corporations, and uncontrollable, often-invisible chemical and biological threats create ‘elastic maps of risk and complicity’ that ‘chart distance and proximity in terms of the multinational corporation, rather than the nation-state’ [...] Within and across national borders, the often-migratory and invisible new indexes of chemical and biological risk (underwritten by carbon capitalism) create new intimacies and alienations.

Taken together, the efforts to deny and localize emergency illustrate the scope of humanity’s collective psychic investment in the status quo. The logical, ethical, and aesthetic frames that mediate the subject’s experience of the world offer a false sense of security that forecloses the experience of Being, producing an “absence of emergency.”

For Heidegger, aesthetics plays a special part in this process because offers measurements of “objective” beauty that conceal the “invisibleness,” “unpresentability,” and “ungraspability” of Being. There is perhaps no better example than Instagram, which offers a sterile, homogenized aesthetic experience that flattens and assimilates the vagaries of human existence. On Instagram, Heidegger’s “lack of emergency” is evident: images of climate catastrophe, police brutality, and forced migration are interspersed with boilerplate Instagram models, celebrity gossip, family photographs, recipes, misinformation, and memes. The fact that all content is presented within the same aesthetic frame makes it difficult to distinguish verified information from rumors, conspiracy theories, and misinformation, which lends credibility to global warming skeptics, anti-vaccine influencers, and white nationalists who use the platform to spread and normalize their views. Within this aesthetic frame, everything is quantifiable and reducible to data. The ability to endlessly scroll and refresh a newsfeed ensures users rarely pause to dwell or reflect on the flattened, mediated world they encounter. This lack of reflection fosters political complacency that renders us incapable of responding to the challenges of the current moment, which is why Zabala maintains something “extraordinary” and “unimaginable” must shock us *into* emergency.

Art, for Zabala, is an “event of Being” that rejects the hollow aesthetics of our contemporary moment to foster “emergency consciousness” and embrace possibilities for political intervention and critique. He argues that art can “shake us out of our tendency to ignore the ‘social paradoxes’ generated by the political, financial, and technological frames that contain us” and that “the lack of a sense of emergency [...] demands a new artistic shock” (2009, 5). For Zabala, art operates outside and against the cultural politics that produce aesthetics: “agents that seek to disrupt the framing powers are the weak, the

remnants of Being, that is, every person and idea forced to the margins” (5). Unlike aesthetics, which conceals the precarity, dynamism, and openness of Being beneath an oversimplified image of the world that strips it of its uncertainty, art is unsettling and produces anxiety. It involves alterations that “produce disruptions that require interpretation, response, and intervention instead of contemplation” (23). Zabala describes the willingness to remain receptive to such disturbances as a “militant hermeneutics” that involves remaining radically open to the world, striving for dialogue, and seeking interpretations, reactions, and interventions instead of compromises with the status quo. Art can overcome political neutralization and the lack of emergency to offer a means of salvation, but only insofar as the practice of interpretation is unending, indeterminate, and open to revision. The interpreter is led by the work of art, as a dynamic, changing entity constantly involved in the co-creation of meaning and new understanding. Art shocks us into emergency by overturning the world in an “event of understanding” that compels us to reconsider our standing in the world.

III

The authors in this special issue have taken up the task of Zabala’s militant hermeneutics by turning to myriad contexts of emergency on a global, if not planetary scale. Stefanie Kemmerer’s essay “Facing the Emergency DownDog – On the Political Appropriation of Yoga” offers an incisive critique of global dissemination of Yoga and its ‘aspirational’ power dynamics. Focusing on India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s appropriation of Yoga for a nationalist cause, Kemmerer shows how the images featuring Modi helps conceal the real emergencies: The COVID pandemic and the lack of health care infrastructure in India, especially for the poor and the needy.

In her insightful essay “Risk Culture, Spectres of Multinational Destruction, and Processes of Emergency in *Tokyo Ueno Station*,” Ruby Niemann reads Yu Miri’s (2014) novel *Tokyo Ueno Station* as an example of “crisis literature,” which calls attention to the ongoing catastrophes of late-stage capitalism through the experiences of its most disposable subjects. Observing that contemporary risk society is haunted by the specter of past, present, and future emergencies, Niemann describes how Miri’s novel operates in different temporal and scalar registers to highlight how the catastrophes of global capitalism are not discrete, geographically bounded events, but, rather, an ongoing, global process of ruination.

In his article “The Climate Emergency and Global South Fiction: Critiquing the Absence of Emergency in the Anthropocene through Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé*,” Tarik Monowar examines the fiction of Rita Indiana to argue that the lack of emergency around the current climate crisis is a “socially constructed malady” produced by contemporary Western environmental paradigms (4). As Manowar persuasively argues, novels like Indiana’s *La mucama de Omicunlé* (translated in English as *Tentacle*) illustrate how the aesthetics

of Global South literature call these paradigms into question by centering the voices and perspectives of those most impacted by the destructive relationship between colonialism and environmental catastrophe.

Shipra Gorai in her paper on Dalit-Feminist author Kalyani Thakur Charal's novella *Andhar Bil O Kichu Manus* ("Andhar Lake and Some People"; 2019) posits the category of Dalit literature as an embodiment of aesthetics in an emergency time, a unique non-canonical counter-aesthetic ploy to resist the trauma of subjugation and structural silencing, described by Kalyani as "nirbakization". Gorai rightly argues that "for the genre of 'emergency literature', there would be a methodological flaw if we focus on various global crises and yet ignore everyday existential struggles in liminality" as witnessed by the Dalits or the lower castes of India or anywhere else in the world. Her paper therefore, conflates "emergency literature" with the struggles of a Dalit who has to live within an emergency condition of humiliation and coercive discrimination throughout her/his life.

Sindhura Dutta, in her essay, locates the genre of eco-dystopian literature that calls our attention to the dangers of global water crises showing a trend of posthumanization of water, leading to "capitalocentric disparity and colonization of our ecosystem in the name of progress, an idea chiefly formed by Global North". Her project is to show how nonhuman agency such as water reacts with the human on the basis of how we treat it in the Capitalocene. Premising on her fictional and non-fictional archives, containing water-dystopic texts like *The Burning World (Ballarad)*, *The Water Knife (Bacigalupi)*, *The Poisoned City (Anna Clark)*, Dutta narrates the ensuing dangers of environmental emergencies that could occur anywhere during the Capitalocene. Her objective here, is to "read Capitalocene's slow violence and technological divide around water", affecting the marginalized communities and changing the "ontological meaning of water".

Taken together, all these essays in this new issue of *Kairos*, attempt to enact an evental rupture, or that aesthetic ellipses to generate critical questions about the impending crisis of the Capitalocene. Disrupting conventional boundaries of literary genre distinction, this special issue of *Kairos* tried to inaugurate this new trans-disciplinary genre of *emergency literature* which responds to the complex reality of "fossil capital" or "carbon capitalism", provoking new awareness of *convivialist* living and "tentacular thinking". Emergency Literature does not act merely as the Domsday Cassandra, offering fearful revelations of the descending gloom, but perhaps also fashions a new phenomenology of aesthetic shock – a radical *epoche*, to conscript a new beginning of reversal. The new ecological slogan of "Fridays for future", inspires new Emergency literary strivings for future.

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