

Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. 280. £29.95. ISBN 9780674434578.

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson observes that, classically understood, ‘Apocalypse includes both catastrophe and fulfilment, the end of the world and the inauguration of the reign of Christ on earth, Utopia and the extinction of the human race all at once.’ As Anahid Nersessian notes in the provocative opening of her monograph, *Utopia, Limited*, one could make the case that, emerging from a moment of political crises, revolutionary transformations, and – as many have argued – the industrial dawn of “the Anthropocene,” such an intensified connection between destruction and regeneration is precisely what defines the literature of the Romantic century.

‘That is not the argument of this book,’ however (2). Instead, Nersessian gleans from Romantic practices of composition an ethic and aesthetic of ‘adjustment,’ which would enable ‘human beings to accommodate themselves to the world by minimizing the demands they place upon it’ (3). In contrast to conventional ‘unlimited’ utopias of perfect fulfilment, this limited utopianism of ‘doing-with-less’ reconfigures loss ‘as an ontologically positive entity integral to the material makeup of the world’ and to the possibility of a better one (3, 5). Taking her cue from Blake’s conception of ‘the bounding line,’ Nersessian outlines a Romanticism of loss-bound abbreviation – or what she calls ‘Rcsm,’ reimagining the abbreviation used by Northrop Frye in his notebooks on Romantic aesthetics and utopian philosophy as their ascetic synthesis.

As Nersessian acknowledges with her second chapter on Wordsworth and phenomenology, adjusting to the limitations of the present world is essentially a form of realism. Indeed, Rcsm is defined by ‘secular realism,’ which refuses apocalyptic transcendence for ‘an entanglement with ordinariness’ that nevertheless, through aesthetic experiences and poetic making, can recuperate something ‘slightly greater’ within the world-as-it-is (60-1). Yet as well as such utopian banality, Nersessian also addresses a less ordinary Romantic literature in what is the highlight of the book, her discussion of free love and Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*. Moving beyond a crass sexual calculus, Shelley evokes utopian love as an ‘eroticized dispossession,’ articulating ‘an idiom of renunciatory attachment’ in the poem’s protracted metrical form and self-estranged similes (82). Though this likening of loss to love renders limited utopia ‘eerily similar’ to the famine that strikes the revolt, this is precisely Shelley’s – and Nersessian’s – point: ‘a truly utopian definition of equality must be predicated upon the universalization of scarce resources’ (106-7). As a realist project, limited utopia does not promise a paradise of plenitude, but rather a radical redistribution of deprivation.

Regrettably, the following chapter on ‘bad taste’ and colonialism in Irish Romanticism is the weakest part of Nersessian’s book. While her discussion of the two forms of bad taste that operate under empire – ameliorative liberal sentimentalism and disruptive anticolonial bathos – is quite engaging, the broader argument about Romantic utopianism ironically becomes rather scarce. Though this extraneousness is ‘intended to perform a transhistorical and transgeneric pastiche’ (110), reproducing the very bad taste being discussed, it seems to point to a more general difficulty of accounting for excess within a limited Rcsm, and of reconciling Rcsm with the Romanticism it omits – such as the uncompromising nativism of Irish anticolonial literature. Indeed, Nersessian’s transhistorical discussion of Irish agrarian precarity reduces it to a consequence of ‘ecological imperialism,’ ignoring the fraught historical debate about the Great Famine’s status as a ‘colonial genocide’ and its appropriation as a nationalist myth (111, 177).

However, the final two chapters address a deeper tension in Nersessian's account of limited utopia: what distinguishes renunciatory realism from bourgeois liberalism, and adjustment to limitation from Malthusian austerity? Through a fascinating discussion of free indirect discourse in Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*, Nersessian distinguishes between Rasmussen's limited utopia of universal subsistence and capitalism's 'pseudo-utopia' of unequal limitation, 'where the poor are invited to starve and the rich to exhaust the earth' and where adjustment is always a 'cruel' conformity to market regulation (177-8). While John Clare's 'politicized localism' is one counterpoint of limited utopian practice (199), Nersessian ends with another in Keats' "Ode to Psyche," which 'does not triumph over loss so much as rethink plenitude as a condition that participates in extinction's irreparability' (201).

Nersessian is hardly alone in her attention to forms of limitation, adjustment, and minimal impact in Romantic literature. Recent studies of Romanticism have likewise emphasised its models of 'recessive action' (Anne-Lise François) and 'dispossessed' subjectivity (Jacques Khalip), and her recuperation of form participates in the ongoing theoretical debate about anti-formalist critique. *Utopia, Limited* will be of enormous interest to scholars of Romanticism, ecology and literary form for a long time to come. It is a provocative book, brilliantly if sometimes unevenly argued, and it offers a powerful articulation not only of how to make a better world with less of it, but also of what the formalist study of Romantic literature can achieve.

Christopher Geary
University of Toronto