

## “Portentous, unexampled, unexplain’d”: Poetry and Philosophy in the Age of Unknowing

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This paper is drawn from my second book-length project, *The Calamity Form*. *The Calamity Form* explores literary reactions to a set of global ecological disasters, including the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the Laki ash cloud of 1783, the “Year without a Summer” of 1816, and the emergence of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s. It argues for the centrality of nescience, or unknowing, to the formation of modes of collective consciousness, specifically the kinds of consciousness manifested by literary and philosophical varieties of realism. This small piece of the manuscript begins to define nescience in relation both to the history of modern philosophy (from the eighteenth century onward) and the history of literary theory (from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century). It is built around Philip Sidney’s account of the counter-affirmational properties of poetry, an account which I set obliquely against the more empiricist claims of exemplarity. Through readings of William Wordsworth’s poem “Nutting,” Thomas Reid’s inquiry into the difference between conceiving and perceiving, and a handful of entries from Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journal*, I ask how the poetic figure might give shape to *empty* or *failed* processes of exemplification. My central claim is that the limits of the example reveal the origins of an alternative ethics grounded in ignorance and detached from the normative predicates of knowledge, information, certainty, and science. This claim is, in turn, offered as a corrective to dominant modes of contemporary ecocriticism, in particular as it addresses the historical past.