Ecology without the Present

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I learned a new word today. Atom bomb. It was like a white light in the sky. Like God taking a photograph. Empire of the Sun (movie)

The fact of the Anthropocene makes it impossible even for the most recalcitrant metaphysician of presence to get a grip on ecological reality. Yet the Anthropocene is only potent because it magnifies a fundamental feature of reality for human inspection. This feature is the nonexistence of the present as such, the reason why the metaphysics of presence is doomed to fail. In arguing for this I shall be making a number of ontological points that some normative forms of Derridean thinking might resist. Yet I hope that the reader will find that my conclusions are, if not within this normative framework, still thinkable within a certain deconstruction.

[I]l n’y a pas de hors-texte. Without doubt this is the single most potent and memorable thing that Derrida ever wrote. But what on Earth does it mean? Detractors of deconstruction are too hasty to assert that it means that everything is made of language. If ever there were a system that viewed everything as language, it would be structuralism. If deconstruction does anything at all, it is to show how structuralism, like any logocentric system, is unable to account for certain phenomena that it must include–exclude without ever being able to assimilate them. Happily Gayatri Spivak’s translation hesitates at this precise sentence, and gives us two translations, an act of doubling that itself refutes in advance that idea that everything is made of language. In

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the uncanny déjà-vu Spivak sets up, something appears—disappears, is included—excluded: something is discovered to have fallen out of logocentrism. The first translation is, ‘There is nothing outside of the text.’ The second translation, which I find preferable, is this: ‘There is no outside-text.’

In the following, I shall be taking the liberty of reading the *il n’y a pas* as something like a comment on Levinas’ *il y a*—the environmentality of the *there is*. In other words, I shall assume that the *there* or the *there is not* opens the problem of what constitutes existence as environmentality—as a *there* that cannot be specified as a particular ‘existent’ in Levinas’ language. What is being thought here is the notion of *nothing* or of *nothingness*.

To claim that outside the text there is *absolutely nothing* is to assert that *everything indeed is text*. Yet this very statement is self-refuting, because it already relies on an ontology that posits an absolute nothing—an oukontic nothing that one could think as ‘not even nothing’. We are, in that case, already outside the text, insofar as we are asserting something about reality. Derrida, a painstaking reader of Heidegger, would surely have understood how there is at least one other ontological possibility in the ‘nothing’, namely, a meontic nothing, the (presence of the) absence of something. It is the very sliding between one translation and the other that reveals this strange, not-quite-present nothing, like the curtain of a theater which, when raised, reveals another curtain of exactly the same shade of grey. *Nothing(ness)* happens.

*Nothing(ness)* can be text, there is no outside-text, in other words, the text is unable to talk about at least one entity that it must include—exclude in order to be coherent. As a result, nothing in the text is fully present. The nothingness in (and as) the text, departs from full presence. Derrida’s assertion *il n’y a pas de hors-texte* is a radar signal reflected from the tip of an iceberg of a *weird realism* that denies to (real) things their ontic givenness. Even within the (still onto-theological) realm of Heidegger, this flicker on the radar screen is a trace of the nonhuman: a human being is merely the radio operator who receives the echo, who attunes herself to it. The echo of what? Of nothing(ness). What nothingness? The shadow of a thing—a physical entity whose parameters we shall shortly define. But in terms of recognisably written texts, what is included—excluded by the text is
an inscribable surface, linguistic conventions, ink, paper, wood pulp, trees, saws, paper mills, society, forests... Thus a text is what ‘hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the laws of its composition and the rules of its game’.

At the very moment at which nothingness was making its way via Buddhism through Hegel into the thinking that resulted in Heidegger’s *Destrucktion*, a thin layer of carbon was being deposited in Earth’s crust. This carbon layer, the result of the industrial processes of modernity, can now be found in Arctic ice sheets and deep lakes. One can’t say that this was the beginning of the Anthropocene. One can only say that in light of this event, which is just coming to light for humans, the Anthropocene was and is and shall be. The text ‘Anthropocene’ is retroactively posited, a radar signal from a weird event, an event at which human and geological temporalities intersected one another. Was it the end of history, or the beginning? It was certainly the beginning of the end of the world, not as a decisive apocalypse or closure, but as the opening of a far more uncanny historicity, in which humans realise we are living on after the end of the world, that is, of a coherent text: *Nature, world, lifeworld, Weltanschauung, world-picture*, and their concomitant media objects such as *Gesamtkunstwerk, rendering, simulation, Romanticism; even system, biosphere, ecosystem, environment*. These coherent texts must always include–exclude some entity (or more) in order to maintain coherence. The ecological thought, a thought that I claim is now in varied ways occurring to everyone on this planet, just is the deconstruction of this coherence.

In a strange doubling, another déjà-vu, another moment in the Anthropocene stands out. In 1945 the Gadget tested at Trinity New Mexico and the atomic bombs Little Boy and Fat Man begin to deposit a thin layer of radioactive materials in Earth’s crust. A second inscription event, the marker of something that has already happened that is now appearing, for humans. A good translation of Anthropocene is *There is no outside-human text*. Yet for this very reason, the nonhuman has made decisive contact with the human. The nonhuman has been discovered always already to have been inhabiting social, psychic and philosophical space. To use a current metaphor, the human is always already *occupied* by nonhumans. There they are, camping on the smooth lawns of our coherence, posing to us with threatening gentleness something like Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer
not to.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Anthropocene} then is an ironic term. Perhaps \textit{Ananthropocene} would have been more like it, or \textit{Anthropocene}.

In the Spielberg movie of \textit{Empire of the Sun}, the boy Jim remarks that the Hiroshima explosion was ‘Like God taking a photograph.’\textsuperscript{7} The very pinnacle of modernity, encapsulated in Robert Oppenheimer’s ‘I am become death, shatterer of worlds’, is the arrival of what Heidegger would have called \textit{the last god} if he had been able to include nonhumans in his view.\textsuperscript{8} Heidegger simply was unable to ascertain how this last god would manifest in the very core of technological enframing.\textsuperscript{9} The poison is indeed the saving power, or not. For it is gigantic nonhuman beings — radioactive materials, global warming, the very script of the layers in Earth’s crust that opens the \textit{Anthropocene} — who bring about the end of the world. I am calling these gigantic nonhumans \textit{hyperobjects}, objects that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. Hyperobjects bring about the beginning of history, ‘the other beginning’, as Heidegger puts it, outside of the texts that have reduced beings to ontic giveness (\textit{hypokeimenon, energeia, substantia, subjectum, subject, object}).\textsuperscript{10}

Like God taking a photograph: the nonhuman sees us, in the white light of its fireball, hotter than the sun. \textit{Like God}: this is not an endorsement of a scholastic \textit{causa sui} inhabiting a beyond, but a reminder that we are dealing with a physical entity. Yet this is a \textit{weird} physical entity, with all the fateful force of that term. But to what are we listening when we attune to the hyperobject? Is this uncertainty not precisely \textit{what} we are hearing? Isn’t it the case that the affect delivered to us in the rain, the weird cyclone, the oil slick, is something uncanny? If it has a name perhaps it is weirdness, or creepiness. Perhaps the most telling term is the word \textit{doom}.

\textbf{What is doom?} Conventionally, \textit{doom} is a decree or an ordinance: a directive.\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Doom} is also judgment, law, the faculty of judging, the final judgment that happens after the end of the world.\textsuperscript{12} Yet \textit{doom} is also what we \textit{deem}, opinion, discernment.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Doom} can mean fate, destiny, and in a stronger sense, death.\textsuperscript{14} Finally \textit{doom} means justice, or even judge, one who dispenses justice.\textsuperscript{15} Justice is a figure that Derrida calls synonymous with deconstruction in that it is irreducibly futural: perfect justice can never be achieved now — there is always a remainder to come.\textsuperscript{16} A good judge doesn’t just mechanically dole out judgments, but paradoxically enforces and suspends the law at the same time.
Doesn’t this rich range of meanings suggest something about the hyperobject? The hyperobject is indeed the bringer of fate, destiny, death. This destiny comes from beyond the (human) world, and pronounces or decrees the end of the world. This decree marks a decisive pivot in Earth history in which humans discern the nonhuman and thus reckon the fate of Earth with a greater justice. Or, just to go hog wild Heidegger style for a moment: doom comes from doom and dooms doom; this doom marks a decisive moment in which humans doom the nonhuman and thus doom the doom of Earth with greater doom.

Each political and ethical decision is made on the inside of a hyperobject, caught in the resonance of the zones that spell doom. It is the end of the world, because it is the end of ontic givenness, which includes presence. For a world to be coherent, there must be a *hither* and a *yonder*, a *now* and a *then*. Nuclear materials like other hyperobjects are so massively distributed in time and space that they end the idea that time is a neutral container that is outside the physical universe. This idea is discovered always already to have depended upon a stable (human) vantage point. The synthetic judgment a priori that Kant argues grounds the condition for the possibility for human apprehension of objects is just one of a plenum of such events. The bomb emits its own spacetime, like radiation, just as Earth emits spacetime in relativity theory (and indeed this laptop, my fingers, this cup of coffee). The bomb occupies the human. Plutonium 239 decays for twenty four thousand years. In twenty-four thousand years, the following will be true: (1) No one will be meaningfully related to me in particular; (2) The slightest thing I do now will have grave consequences. At this scale there is no me, no human even, worth talking about — yet what I do ‘now’ affects what happens ‘then’. Even more so, global warming is also disturbingly futural. I call its three main time scales the horrifying, the terrifying and the petrifying. There is a *horrifying* time scale of five hundred years (75% of global warming effects still happening); a *terrifying* one of thirty thousand years (25% still happening); and a *petrifying* one of one hundred thousand years (7% still happening). Likewise geological time, emerging for humans since the advent of modernity, is an abyss whose reality becomes increasingly uncanny, not less, the more scientific instruments are able to probe it. Knowledge ceases to be demystification, if it ever was.
Now evaporates into a sickening relative motion of traffic between past and future. Perhaps it is better so say that now evaporates into nowness: something is still happening, but it is impossible in advance to draw a thin, rigid boundary around it. The past simply is appearance. The thin layer of carbon, the thin layer of radioactive materials, are the appearance of the past in the Arctic ice, in deep lakes, in Earth’s crust. My face is a map of everything that happened to it. This coffee cup is a record of the traumas undergone by a lump of clay as it was molded and fired and glazed. Form is appearance: form is the past. The form of an object is not present, but is rather an archaeological record. There is no matter per se, since the lump of clay is also a form that has been traumatised in unique ways by extraction, parceling, shipping. Matter is matter-for, not some ontically given substrate, some hypokeimenon that underlies things. Radioactive materials and global warming—hyperobjects—simply compel us to see this.

Likewise, myself just is a record of what has happened to ‘me’. As Freud argues, ego just is the text of abandoned object cathexes. Why can Freud say this? Because objects are already that: the record of trauma. At this ontological level, there is not so much difference between me and a coffee cup, or between me and Earth’s crust. Earth is geotrauma, a palimpsest of necessarily violent inscription events. The beginning of myself, of a cup, of a crustal layer, is impossible to specify, since cup and me and so on just are retroactive posings of traumatic events. The ecological thought is a weird return to Aristotle, the Aristotle who refuted the idea that time could be a succession of now-points, the Aristotle who elevated formal causation above others (telos, function, matter). This is an Aristotle without telos, and without presence.

What of the future? The past is appearance. Essence is the future. I use the term essence not to denote some real underlying appearances, like the boring cupcake under the sprinkles of accidence, the default ontology that we have been operating with since Aristotle. We have already dispensed with this notion, since appearance is not a superficial coating, but the very form of a thing, the text of its abandoned object cathexes. Appearance is not only appearance-for some other entity—a camera, a frog, a scholar. Without anyone to observe it, the radioactive layer in Earth’s crust is there. That’s the whole point: its detection must be belated. Time just is an emission of objects, as basic Einstein tells us, and so for the same reasons is space.
What then is essence? Essence is the arrivant, the never-present to-come of a thing. An infinitely exploded view of an object, under all possible lighting conditions and for all sentient beings, is not that object. Merleau-Ponty’s argument that this constitutes a thing is just a fantasy. When I turn over the cup, the cup now has another underside. The very familiar narrative in which Husserl’s insight about the letterbox becomes Derrida’s reworking of protension and retension, via Heidegger’s deconstruction of being into futural Dasein, becomes freshly uncanny. Because what the new weird realisms such as object-oriented ontology (OOO) do is to return to the now somewhat neglected jazz standards of Husserl and Heidegger and rework them within a post-Derridean thinking. To say ‘post-Derridean’ here means to do philosophy within Derrida’s continuation of the Heideggerian project of deconstructing the metaphysics of presence. The implicit truth of there is no outside-text is now more true than it was when it could be associated with anti-realism in a facile sense. There is a gigantic coral reef of discrete, unique, irreducible objects (OOO’s term for any entity whatsoever—a blade of grass, a meteor, a block of staples) that lies beneath the Heideggerian U-boat, at a hitherto unplumbed ontological depth. Just when we thought it was safe never to get back into the ontological water.

There is no present. There are only past and future—or rather, a plenum of entities emitting different pasts and futures, that coincide like ships passing in the night or trains that move relative to one another (Einstein’s favorite analogy); and the rift between past and future, appearance and essence. This rift is the nothing that is outside the text: a happening that the text must include–exclude in order to be itself. The meaning of a poem is its future: it will have been read five minutes from now, next week, and more than this, its meaning is futurity, or as Shelley puts it, ‘the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present’. The past of the poem, its letters, its paper, its ink, its authors, its readers, its readings, is the appearance of the poem, the poem’s form. A poem, a hyperobject, is a message in a bottle from the future. An augury, a writing in entrails or in the sky, without a stable or consistent system of meaning to underwrite it.

Ecological awareness is without the present. The ‘As I write...’ trope of ecomimesis is without admitting it an elegy to this totally lost
‘As I write these words, snow is gently falling outside my hut at the edge of the forest’ is an inverted acknowledgement of the towering realities of the Anthropocene. The calls for a restoration of a balance that never existed on Earth—Earth being the name for a text of geotrauma—are desperate attempts to put the genie back in the bottle. The perverse triumphalism that rubbernecks the sadistic victory of Gaia over lifeforms deemed improper—the viral human—is a futile attempt to master the irreducible uncanny futurality of things: all things—a Styrofoam cup that lasts for five hundred years, a dog dosed with strontium 90 encased in a block of concrete for forty years, the shadow of a human impressed on a Hiroshima wall.

A more genuine acknowledgement of what is happening—the opening for humans of the rift between essence and appearance, the vanishing of the present and of presence—is the work of Butoh, the Japanese ‘dance of darkness’ that was invented in the wake of Hiroshima. In Butoh, the human body no longer floats as if weightless in abstract space, but is pressed down from all sides by a horrible gravity, the spacetime emitted by a gigantic object, preventing the human from achieving escape velocity. The waves of other beings distort the human face into sickening masks of itself—faces that are already heavily made up to appear mask-like. The body is powdered with ash as if from the fallout of an atomic bomb. Cinders, ash, the trace of there is no outside-text, the shadow of a holocaust.

What is happening to reality in the Anthropocene is that it is becoming more vivid and unreal. Without a world, without Nature, nonhumans crowd into human space, leering like faces in a James Ensor painting or the faces of Butoh dancers. The difference between a face and a mask (Greek, \(pros\o podía\)) collapses. Without presence, habitual, ontically given coordinates of meaningfulness dissolve: ‘What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.’ This irreducible unreality is a symptom of reality as such, with which the weird realisms (speculative realism, object-oriented ontology) are beginning to cope, as emergent features of the uncanny intersection of geotrauma and human history. Covered in ash the human dances, caught in a horrible physicality: physicality without a beyond, without an outside, without presence.
Notes
4 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), 75–7.
7 Steven Spielberg, dir., *Empire of the Sun* (Warner Bros., 1987).


27 Sondra Fraleigh, Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2010), 61.

28 Derrida wrote about cinders constantly. Examples are too numerous, but see Jacques Derrida, Cinders, translated by Ned Lukacher (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2001).