

Ecology without the Present

Timothy Morton

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

The Oxford Literary Review 34.2 (2012): 229–238

Edinburgh University Press

DOI: 10.3366/olr.2012.0043

© The Oxford Literary Review

www.eupjournals.com/olr

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.’¹

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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'.⁵

At the very moment at which nothingness was making its way via Buddhism through Hegel into the thinking that resulted in Heidegger's *Destruktion*, 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.⁶ *Anthropocene* then is an ironic term. Perhaps *Ananthropocene* would have been more like it, or *Anthropocene*.

In the Spielberg movie of *Empire of the Sun*, the boy Jim remarks that the Hiroshima explosion was ‘Like God taking a photograph.’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 *the last god* if he had been able to include nonhumans in his view.⁸ Heidegger simply was unable to ascertain how this last god would manifest in the very core of technological enframing.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 Anthropocene — who bring about the end of the world. I am calling these gigantic nonhumans *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 givenness (*hypokeimenon, energeia, substantia, subjectum, subject, object*).¹⁰

Like God taking a photograph: the nonhuman sees us, in the white light of its fireball, hotter than the sun. *Like God*: this is not an endorsement of a scholastic *causa sui* inhabiting a beyond, but a reminder that we are dealing with a physical entity. Yet this is a *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 *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 *doom*.

What is *doom*? Conventionally, *doom* is a decree or an ordinance: a directive.¹¹ *Doom* is also judgment, law, the faculty of judging, the final judgment that happens after the end of the world.¹² Yet *doom* is also what we *deem*, opinion, discernment.¹³ *Doom* can mean fate, destiny, and in a stronger sense, death.¹⁴ Finally *doom* means justice, or even judge, one who dispenses justice.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.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.¹⁷ 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).¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 positings 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 accident, 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.²² 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'.²³ 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

presence.²⁴ ‘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 futurity 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ Cinders, ash, the trace of *there is no outside-text*, the shadow of a holocaust.²⁸

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, *prosōpon*) collapses. Without presence, habitual, optically given coordinates of meaningfulness dissolve: ‘What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.’²⁹ 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

- ¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 158.
- ² Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2003), 45–60.
- ³ Cyril O' Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994), 147; Iain Thomson, 'Heidegger's Aesthetics', in Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition)*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>, consulted 7 October 2011.
- ⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), 75–7.
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171 (63).
- ⁶ Herman Melville, 'Bartleby the Scrivener', in *Melville's Short Novels*, edited by Dan McCall (New York, Norton, 2001).
- ⁷ Steven Spielberg, dir., *Empire of the Sun* (Warner Bros., 1987).
- ⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), 283–93. See also Joan Stambaugh, *The Finitude of Being* (Albany, SUNY University Press, 1992), 139–44. Robert Oppenheimer's line is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda (New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1944). The term 'shatterer' rather than 'destroyer' first appeared in 'The Eternal Apprentice', *Time* (8 November 1948), available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,853367-8,00.html>, consulted 10 September 2011.
- ⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', *Basic Writings: From Being and Time to The Task of Thinking*, edited by David Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 307–41.
- ¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), 35, 105.
- ¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'doom', n.1. <http://www.oed.com>, consulted 16 October 2011.
- ¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'doom', n.2, 3b, 5, 6, 7. <http://www.oed.com>, consulted 16 October 2011.
- ¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'doom', n.3a. <http://www.oed.com>, consulted 16 October 2011.
- ¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'doom', n.4a, b. <http://www.oed.com>, consulted 16 October 2011.

- ¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'doom', n.8, 10. <http://www.oed.com>, consulted 16 October 2011.
- ¹⁶ There is a very good summary in Leonard Lawlor, 'Jacques Derrida', in Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/derrida/>, consulted 4 August 2012.
- ¹⁷ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), 355–7, 371–7.
- ¹⁸ David Archer, 'How Long Will Global Warming Last?' <http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2005/03/how-long-will-global-warming-last/>, accessed 12 December 2011; *The Long Thaw: How Humans Are Changing the Next 100 000 Years of Earth's Climate* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008).
- ¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1996), 66.
- ²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, translated by Joan Riviere, revised and edited by James Strachey, introduction by Peter Gay (New York, Norton 1989), 24.
- ²¹ Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2011), 335, 448. See also Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne, re.press, 2008).
- ²² Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago, Open Court, 2005), 52–3.
- ²³ Percy Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London, W.W. Norton, 2002), 509–35 (535).
- ²⁴ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007), 29–78.
- ²⁵ Steven A. Book, William L. Spangler, and Laura A. Swartz, 'Effects of Lifetime Ingestion of ⁹⁰Sr in Beagle Dogs', *Radiation Research* 90 (1982), 244–51.
- ²⁶ Nanako Kurihara, 'The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance', Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996 (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1996).
- 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).
- ²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses* (Paris, Editions de Seuil, 1981), 48.