The twilight of the Anthropocene: sustaining literature

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Over the last decade the claims made for the importance of literary understanding, environmental humanities and imaginative reflection have received a (perhaps tragic) reinforcement from the inverse relation between the threats facing humans and other species, and the capacity for action. It is almost as if the prospect of calamity and unprecedented change is so intense that the practical, rational and imaginative resources we have for thinking about the future are simply and woefully inadequate. If reason, calculation, practice and day-to-day thinking have led to a tragic inability to think beyond the expediency of the present, then perhaps it is the task of literature and the humanities to address our sentimental, affective, habitual and non-cognitive comportment towards the world. Scientific knowledge and the dissemination of facts, warnings and already-incurred losses have not only made little impact on effective policy and lifestyle change; the intensity and enormity of the problem may have generated a sense of practical impossibility. Here is where one might turn to the problem of the sublime and deconstruction. Is it possible to accept the inhuman intensity of the problem of the future – its necessary capacity to outstrip calculation and imagination – without abandoning the task or problem of survival altogether? Rather than engineering Nature, the humanities or the imagination in order to ensure ‘our’ survival, one might ask whether there has been an excess of comprehension in the face of a time and history that has not been paralysing enough. That is, in the face of the failure of scientific know-how to have significant impact on the ways in which ‘we’ manage our future, perhaps it is not literary know-how, expertise and cognitive expansion (and certainly not the environmental humanities) that we ought to embrace in order to sustain ourselves. What I would suggest, perhaps counter-intuitively, is the importance of thinking in terms of a deconstructive or material sublime.

As Bruno Latour (2011) has noted, there was a time when Nature performed the role of the inconceivably infinite and therefore sublime force, against which the inconstancy of human life and history
Discourses of sustainability seemed insignificant. Now, he argues, it is human history that appears immutable – as though capitalism and the logic of the market were beyond our power – while Nature is changing rapidly. This reversal, he insists, needs to be reversed yet again in order that what appears immutable and beyond our measure returns to the domain of what can be made, and unmade; there is nothing natural, immutable or sublime about capital. Perhaps, then, we need to deconstruct sublimity. In its Romantic mode (as Latour reminds us), one could appeal to the infinite, immutable vastness of Nature’s ‘ample power / To chasten and subdue’ (to deploy Wordsworth’s language (1985: 37)). But, just as Latour led the way in the notion that Nature does not exist but is always composed, so Wordsworth also posited another presence, ‘a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused’ (Wordsworth 1936). That is to say, what is sublime is neither nature nor humanity but their impossible and unthinkable imbrication. This is what I would refer to as the material or deconstructive sublime. Before there is a Nature that is infinite, immutable, eternal and that offers ‘us’ either solace, recompense or moral grandeur, there is inscription: the coming into distinction of living beings, the orientation and inflections that eventually constitute ‘a’ Nature and a humanity.

One could not, then, simply deploy literary culture to change the way we think, as if there were a ‘we’ or mindset that could be refashioned or engineered; nor would Nature, with the Anthropocene, finally make itself felt as bound up with our history and therefore worthy of the rights and care we grant to humans. What appears as Nature is, to deploy Latour’s terminology, an effect of composition. Who or what composes Nature, Gaia or life is an effect of composition. To confront composition, inscription or materiality is not only to abandon the lure of the ‘we’ of the new managerialism of the environmental humanities and geoengineering, it is also an acceptance that sustaining literature is not something that we can choose to do or not do. What sustains itself, what is sustained, is the effect of forces of inscription that are also forces of destruction, erasure and occlusion. This may seem both abstract and irresponsible, but it is perhaps the only form of material responsibility possible. If, today, there is a ‘we’ who confronts Nature with a sense of loss it is because of an ongoing history of inscription, including all the technologies that have enabled human social assemblage, technology and literature in the narrow sense. Any ‘we’ who seeks to sustain itself does so by way of inscription. Literary sustainability is not some luxurious or privileged add-on that ‘we’ might choose to maintain, in addition to technology: everything that appears as a ‘we’, as ‘techne’, as engineering, as Nature, as past and as future is the outcome of inscriptive processes that select and erase, generating what will survive and be sustained.
In ‘Biodegradables’ Jacques Derrida (1989a) outlines a curious ‘logic’ (or counter-logic) of the relation between literature and sustainability. On the one hand, a genuinely timeless literary utterance would be biodegradable: one would write, inscribe and allow a sense to be incarnated in some material form but its meaning would be so monumental as to be assimilated into culture completely; even if all material instances of the utterance were to be destroyed, the event of meaning would have become so much a part of the culture as to no longer require the specificity of an archive. At its limit one might think of religions of the book as – supposedly – requiring the written version of the word only insofar as the full ideal of biodegradability has not been met. One needs written, remembered or stored versions of the word only because the word has not become fully interiorised or ‘ingraven on hearts’ (Milton 1953–82, ii.276). Or, as Wordsworth laments in the fifth book of The Prelude,

Oh! why hath not the Mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail? (Wordsworth 1968: 68)

Contemplating the complete erasure of the archive, Wordsworth considers literature to be timeless content that is unfortunately stamped on frail matter. Here, the matter of the text is akin to an accidental interruption that might be easily erased, and what makes literary utterance significant is (for Wordsworth) its immortality quite distinct from the book:

Oftentimes at least
Me hath such strong entrancement overcome,
When I have held a volume in my hand,
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse,
Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine! (Wordsworth 1968: 71)

In this respect literature is at once immortal (resisting erasure, and therefore non-biodegradable), and yet also utterly fragile (a mere casket). One might also think of the material inscription of pure truth and logic as being biodegradable: the truths of science may have required some inscription to become conscious and memorised, but once incarnated the ideal would be that logic, mathematics, geometry and formal systems would become part of universal human reason and not specific cultural documents. By contrast, literature is literature only with a certain non-biodegradability: unlike formal systems or even highly unremarkable texts that appear and then disappear, literature sustains itself beyond meaning as a mark or trace that is always in excess of, or remains above and beyond, any of the communicated and shared senses that it enables. We may like to think
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of Shakespeare and Wordsworth as part of a virtual archive – so inscribed in collective consciousness that no actual material copies need survive in order for the conception of the self in Hamlet or nature in The Prelude to be sustained. But once we give the matter some thought the notion of the biodegradable becomes an impossible limit that exposes something essentially unsustainable at the heart of literature and life. If life were to be – in its natural, sustainable and proper mode – fully biodegradable, then we might think of the living being as coming into existence and passing away without leaving a trace. Such a pure being would be so fully attuned to its ecology that it would do nothing more than contribute to the flourishing of the whole of which it is a part; it would neither pollute, nor disturb, nor scar. If that were so, then there would not only be no archive – no fossils, no interwoven ecologies, no instances of ongoing responsiveness – we might say that there would be no life, if living is defined as sustaining existence through time.

To maintain and sustain a living form requires resisting, however minimally, absolute biodegradability. One might say that to be is to pollute or to make a mark on one’s milieu (Serres 2010). A certain model of nature – a being that might live without creating a mark, scar, loss or point of inertia and immobility – is analogous to a certain model of writing and meaning. Just as it is possible to imagine an eternal and pure nature, sustaining itself through time and enduring beyond human finitude, one might also imagine a writing so lucid, true and coherent that its initial textual form might decay and yet its sense would remain. Nature would not generate anything that would scar or disturb its ongoing, self-adjusting auto-poetic life. Writing would achieve a form of shared communicative transparency that would be global, inclusive and post-ideological. What we say and write would be so fully understood and true that the material medium of conveying sense might wither away. Both of these ideals of (natural and cultural) biodegradability would be challenged by thinking the transcendental unsustainability that marks what has come to be known as life. In order for us to say that something lives, it must sustain itself through time, but in so doing such a living being must not be completely attuned to its environment; it must not only resist falling back into some supposed pure immediacy of life, but must also possess a tendency or intensity of its ‘own’ that would mark it as ‘a’ life and therefore sustained. This minimal difference that is not life as such must be temporally finite, for if it were eternal and without limit, then it would not be ‘a’ life. It is one’s physical temporal body that enables the passage through time and possibility, while incarnation also delimits possibility. The literary object is definitively both meaningful above and beyond its sustained incarnations (and continues to exist through time beyond its decaying materiality, passing into the sense of a culture), but is also tied to the singularity of a necessarily degrading matter. The literary text is therefore the extreme
or limit case of the counter-logic of biodegradability; it must at once be sustained through a distinct matter that is not coterminous with life in general, and yet must also (in order to be recognised and circulated) take part in a cultural ecology:

On the one hand, this thing is not a thing, not-as one ordinarily believes things to be—a natural thing: in fact ‘biodegradable,’ on the contrary, is generally said of an artificial product, most often an industrial product, whenever it lets itself be de-composed by microorganisms. On the other hand, the ‘biodegradable’ is hardly a thing since it remains a thing that does not remain, an essentially decomposable thing, destined to pass away, to lose its identity as a thing and to become again a non-thing ...

... Can one say, figuratively, that a ‘publication’ is bio-degradable and distinguish here the degrees of degradation, the rhythms, the laws, the aleatory factors, the detours and the disguises, the trans-mutations, the cycles of recycling? Can one transpose onto ‘culture’ the vocabulary of ‘natural waste treatment’—recycling, ecosystems, and so on—along with the whole legislative apparatus that regulates the ‘environment’ in our societies? ... According to such a ‘logic,’ whose pertinence is, I believe, considerable but limited, nothing is destroyed and thus no ‘document’ ‘biodegrades,’ even if it is, according to some criterion or other, the most degraded or the most degrading. (Derrida 1989a: 813–14)

One of the ways in which we might think about writing, inscription and literature (especially after the advent of deconstruction) is as offering a form of radically futural, and possibly sublime, promise. Such a promise would have to do with forward mobility and sustainability. According to a Derridean conception of deconstruction, in order to live the present as present—as here, now for me—one must have already marked in the present what would be repeatable into a future. The present, by way of being lived, is already haunted by a past that it retains and a future it anticipates. One might refer to all experience, in its sustainability, as ‘naturally’ sublime; to experience the world as real and present (as sustained beyond the immediate ‘now’) one anticipates its existence beyond all the perceptions that I (and others) have of its phenomenal reality. If there is a world that appears then there is necessarily an accompanying sense of that which appears; one never grasps the world itself, even if it must be presupposed as the receding and withdrawing condition of experience. The real would be such that it always exceeded any inscribing mark or determination. One might say that the very constitution of the world as sustainable, or as remaining the same through time, generates a presupposed ‘we’ and a future that could not be constrained or determined by the very humanity that it implies: this is why Derrida, discussing Edmund Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry,’ follows Husserl in arguing that the experience of the present presupposes a time and humanity beyond the present, even if that humanity cannot be reduced to any factual humanity and must
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always remain ‘to come’ (and even if that transcendental humanity always emerges from a specific inscription):

But toward the end of the text, the Earth takes on a more formal sense. No longer is it a question of this Earth here (the primordial here whose factuality would finally be irreducible), but of a here and a ground in general for the determination of body-objects in general. For if I reached another planet by flying, and if, Husserl then said, I could perceive the earth as a body, I would have ‘two Earths as ground-bodies.’ ‘But what does two Earths signify? Two pieces of a single Earth with one humanity.’ From then on the unity of all humanity determines the unity of the ground as such. This unity of all humanity is correlative to the unity of the world as the infinite horizon of experience, and not to the unity of this earth here. The World, which is not the factuality of this historical world here, as Husserl often recalls, is the ground of grounds, the horizon of horizons, and it is to the World that the transcendental immutability attributed to the Earth returns, since the Earth then is only its factual index. Likewise – correlatively – humanity would then only be the facto-anthropological index of subjectivity and of intersubjectivity in general, starting from which every primordial here can appear on the foundation of the Living Present, the rest and absolute maintenance of the origin in which, by which, and for which all temporality and all motion appear. (Derrida 1989b: 84; author’s italics)

Inscription marks the present as present and constitutes a ‘here and now’ that also surpasses itself, beyond human intentionality. There would be – in the very emergence of the here and now – both the constitution of a presupposed ‘we’ and the opening of that ‘we’ to ‘any subject whatever’, a humanity to come. Modes of inscription that mark the present as present cannot command or limit what might be carried over from the present to open new futures. Whatever a text or concept might mean or refer to in the present, it may always be reiterated into a future and open new horizons of possibility.

When Derrida argues for literature as the right to say anything, and for literature as a form of democracy, this (I would suggest) is because of a certain sustainability in the literary (Derrida 1992: 37). In order for something as sense to be sustained through time, it must take on a material support that would liberate content from its immediate present: inscription allows the present to be carried over into a future, in the absence of the originating intent. It is by way of this law of iterability that Derrida criticises John Searle’s notion of context as stabilising meaning: if a sign can operate in a context this is because it is repeatable and not reducible to the present (Derrida 1977). But the relations among sense, context, sustainability and biodegradability are themselves different across contexts, registers and epochs. As Bernard Stiegler (2011: 76) has argued, the Western tradition of hypomnemata does not simply allow the past to be retained into the
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future, but establishes an archive, and deploys technologies of retention that enable complex structures of sense to be sustained and developed through time. While the sense of mathematics intends a truth that would persist beyond its material inscription, and therefore aims for a maximal formalisation of inscription (where it is the impersonal operation that would be sustained over time), this is not so for the literary text. If, for example, every concrete and material instance of William Blake’s engraved works were to be destroyed, the loss would be absolute and could not be retrieved (Derrida 1984). The literary text is tied to a proper name and materiality or signature that is never reducible to the concrete individual existing in historical time. ‘Blake’ or ‘Shakespeare’ designate complex inscriptive systems and modes of reading sustained through time, where one reads the signature as the sign of a once-present experience. The same is not true for mathematics, at least in its meaning. Imagine two scenarios: if the human ‘archive’ were destroyed one could still imagine mathematics and logic being ‘discovered’ or emerging again in their current form. By contrast, no poetic event could yield William Blake (with all the specific material supports of ink, copper, paper, wax and acid). While the mathematical or logical formula relies upon a subjectivity and truth in general that would remain the same through time, literature sustains a marked difference. If a community agrees that the geometry of Euclid is true, then the theorems may circulate and survive in the absence of Euclid, and well after the destruction of Euclid’s text. A sense and ideality can be released from its origin, and even though it will require some inscription, it is not tied to a singular inscription. By contrast, literature is not only tied to the specificity of inscription, it is also undecidable as to how one might think the relation between sustainable sense and dispensable text. Perhaps nothing would be gained (in terms of meaning) if one were to discover an author’s diary, notebook, shopping list or letters; but it is possible that some future reader might transform a text that we all ‘know’ by discovering one missing word, one mis-transcribed letter. We may all agree, for example, that Blake’s ‘Little Black Boy’ is written with the sense or spirit of an ironisation of Enlightenment universalising humanism, and we might agree that Hamlet is about indecision, and Heart of Darkness is about colonialism, but the text remains and can always generate or promise other senses. Scientific sense aims to posit what would be true in the absence of any specific observer, while literary sense creates its unique and singular complexity tied to a mode of inscription that is at once material and yet never reducible to matter alone.

Perhaps no author forces us to confront the counter-logic of literary sustainability more than Blake. Rather than submit his poetry to the mass-producing printing industry, he engraved and painted every word of his prophecies, and thus allowed for the maximum preservation of his own intent, which would not be degraded by being formalised in a
general sign system. And yet in order for this sense to survive through time, his poetry eventually had to be anthologised, and ultimately digitised. Preserving and sustaining Blake required that the biodegradable matter he had deployed would give way to the ‘permanence’ of the digital archive, even if the digital archive itself has a limited materiality and is very far from being biodegradable. To digitise a literary text is at once to recognise its material singularity – that it cannot just be memorised but must be stored – while also violating that material specificity. Digitising Blake disseminates and betrays his original intentionality; inscription is both preserver and destroyer.

What literary inscription generates is untimely repetition, or the power for voice to open to an unintended and unsaid future. Literature has a material and singular sustainability that is suspended; its ongoing existence through time allows for the release of contrary senses. A text may always be re-read, reframed, and reiterated without being anchored definitively in an intentionality or originating context. The literary would then present explicitly a potentiality for mobility and futurity that haunts all presence. To read a text as literary is to think of it as maximally sustainable, as what might always be reiterated beyond any of the present bounds of sense. A text would also be – as literary – hyper-promissory: we might ‘know’ (historically) that it makes no sense to read *Twelfth Night* as queer or transgendered (if the concept of queerness had no meaning in the original context), but the play allows for new performances that – say – most Americans would not grant to other texts such as the Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution, and that most Christians would not grant to the Bible. To read a text in a literary mode is to recognise a material sustainability that is destructive of any constituted sense; to repress or resist the literary is to posit a sense that sustains itself through time, beyond inscription. To read in a counter-literary manner would be to insist on the truth or sense of a text such as the Bible, the US Constitution, or Magna Carta, regardless of the language or rhetoric of its incarnation. To read in a literary mode is to focus on materiality rather than what Paul de Man referred to as ‘phenomenalisation’: one regards the inscription as the sign of something other than itself, as though it might be swept away to reveal something that would appear as its full sense (de Man 1996: 111).

In this respect, one mode of promissory deconstruction might be captured by Avital Ronell’s conception of the telephone book: precisely in its detachment from a single commanding order, and its absence of address to any isolated individual, it is the most open of texts, enabling all forms of connection and solicitation (Ronell 1989: 5). The telephone book is not *Hamlet* and therefore seems to be meaningless, random and void of sense, and yet this very emptiness also typifies a certain ‘literary quality’, liberated as the book is from any specified message. A telephone
book is counter-literary (anonymous and random), but also hyper-literary – capable of addressing anyone, and capable of generating a call and message that appears as if destined for me. This open and futural dimension of a text offering almost anything while saying nothing might be a way of thinking about inscription as such. Too direct an address and/or delivery exhausts the message immediately; pure communication would be direct and intuitive. But if a text does not have a prescribed origin or destination, then it demands to be read. Even if, when one reads, the text appears to be speaking to me and me alone, this is only because the text was inscribed, set apart and rendered sustainable such that it might (later) arrive and offer itself to be read. A text that speaks requires (as Bernard Stiegler has argued) mystagogy: a belief that the sign is the mark of an authority whose spirit might be retrieved (Stiegler 2010: 26–38). All texts, especially when they seem to be prescient or timely, come from the future: if they call to me, offering sense, seeming to be rich with voice, then this is only because their immediacy seems to promise more than the absolutely punctual. Such a mode of thinking texts as futural would be sublime in at least two registers: it might intimate a sense of something far more deeply interfused of which the text is a broken-off fragment and which might always be unearthed. The text, in the manner of a nature whose law transcends our finite grasp, might offer a time beyond our grasp. To read a text in a promissory manner would allow us – after Derrida – to say wonderfully elevating things, such as ‘literature is democracy’. The text, because it sustains itself beyond the immediacy of voice, can always open to other voices.

The first mode of sublimity would lie in the text’s capacity – whatever the present – to open an infinite. It is because texts must submit to systems of inscription that are not those of the self-present immediacy of the living voice of the author that they can be re-read, beyond any already given intention or experience. Another, second, mode of sublimity would insist less upon an intimated openness and expansiveness of the text, and more upon a materiality that would be resistant to our anthropocentric imaginings. (This would be Paul de Man’s material sublime (Warminski 2001).)

We could think of materiality (after Derrida) as that which is iterable: to submit to a system of traces is to tear sense from itself, and open it to a future not its own. In this case matter is what enables a certain taking on of form – such as Blake’s words being engraved, with voice articulating itself through ink, paper, copper, wax and acid. The voice is not just incarnated in matter; the form of matter generates a style of repeatability. Blake’s engraved words can be anthologised, memorised, translated, coupled with other texts (biography, history, medical theses, prison manuals, maps). The matter of inscription always exceeds its present, and even the absolutely singular text – the engraved pages of Blake residing in the New York Public Library – takes its form from a system of differences that allows
the text in its isolation to be more than itself. Blake engraved every word of his work, but he still used the formal system of English (despite his many invented words). In order for the matter he worked upon to be formed and make sense, he drew upon another materiality, the instituted system of differences of the English language and the phonetic alphabet. We might say (following Deleuze and Guattari) that rather than think of matter that takes on and enables a surviving form, there are formed matters – with forms being the way in which matter becomes a substance, and with matter being the way a form can come into being:

He used the term *matter* for the plane of consistency or Body without Organs, in other words, the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified, or destratified body and all its flows: subatomic and submolecular particles, pure intensities, prevital and prephysical free singularities. He used the term *content* for formed matters, which would now have to be considered from two points of view: substance, insofar as these matters are ‘chosen,’ and form, insofar as they are chosen in a certain order (substance and form of content). He used the term *expression* for functional structures, which would also have to be considered from two points of view: the organization of their own specific form, and substances insofar as they form compounds (form and content of expression). A stratum always has a dimension of the expressible or of expression serving as the basis for a relative invariance; for example, nucleic sequences are inseparable from a relatively invariant expression by means of which they determine the compounds, organs, and functions of the organism. To express is always to sing the glory of God. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 43, authors’ italics)

There is a substance of form and a substance of content, and a form of expression and a form of content: what one says is enabled by certain forms that can be articulated in matters, while matter gives that formed content the possibility of being repeated in other matters. Matter would be mobile and would be given *as matter* only by way of differentiating itself, and would allow difference and articulation to appear only by way of its material distribution. The sublimity would lie in the capacity for the forms inscribed in matter to be released from the matter in which the form first appeared, *and* for the matter through which form appeared to be de-formed. This is how Derrida reads both Joyce and Husserl, aware that literature in its Joycean mode aims for maximal inclusion of all the forces of the material *word*, inscribing all the potentialities of the sign in a single book, while phenomenology would aim to intuit a sense beyond all the singular incarnations that would be present for any subject whatever.

Since equivocality always evidences a certain depth of development and concealment of a past, and when one wishes to assume and interiorize
the memory of a culture in a kind of recollection (Erinnerung) in the Hegelian sense, one has, facing this equivocity, the choice of two endeavors. One would resemble that of James Joyce: to repeat and take responsibility for all equivocation itself, utilizing a language that could equalize the greatest possible synchrony with the greatest potential for buried, accumulated, and interwoven intentions within each linguistic atom, each vocable, each word, each simple proposition, in all worldly cultures and their most ingenious forms (mythology, religion, sciences, arts, literature, politics, philosophy, and so forth) ...

The other endeavor is Husserl’s: to reduce or impoverish empirical language methodically to the point where its univocal and translatable elements are actually transparent, in order to reach back and grasp again at its pure source a historicity or traditionality that no de facto historical totality will yield of itself. (Derrida 1977: 102–3)

Just as Kant’s sublime seems to be as much about a Nature that surpasses all attempts to describe it as it is about an immateriality of thought that can anticipate an infinite beyond given nature, so Derridean inscription at once promises a future released from inscription – a ‘justice to come’ – only because inscription will allow the word of justice to be repeated beyond any of its current senses. However, this conception of inscription and materiality cuts both ways. The inscribed word may be read as a fragment cut off from a future of reading that one cannot contain; one may read in order to discern the spirit of the origin, but one might also imagine the same text existing in the future. Insofar as it is inscribed, the word is necessarily capable of being cut from its origin. The supposed ‘origin’ that we read in any text is already cut apart from itself. It may or may not open to future readings; it may promise openings to new sense, but it may also persist into a future without readers (without humans, without a people).

This double-sidedness of inscription allows us to consider another sublime or another sustainability: not a sustainability of sense but a non-biodegradable mark. Yes, one can read Blake or Shakespeare through a framing milieu of postcolonialism, or open the text to any number of scales – the history of race, sex, objects, bodies – but one might also refuse to grant the text such futural mobility. Here, we might think of the two modes of sublime as discussed by Paul de Man: a natural, and then a technical or poetic sublime (de Man 1996: 70; Newmark 2012: 95; Warminski 2013: 47–9). The former appears as if nature were so overwhelming as to signal the limits of present inscription, thereby allowing the power to inscribe to reach beyond itself, as if it might think beyond its inscriptive present. But there is also a technical and non-recuperative sublime, where the power lies in inscription’s erasure of itself, using some matters to displace others. As de Man describes it (following Neil Hertz’s reading of Longinus) the rhetorician creates some figures so powerful
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— so illuminating — that they bathe the scene with light and conceal rhetoric and figuration. The example in Longinus is Demosthenes, who hails the vanquished in the style that might be appropriate for a funeral oration, and it is the style that then covers over what is being addressed. The marks and styles operate to produce a tone of victory despite defeat and are sublime because they erase their own working. What is sublime is not the content that exceeds inscription but inscription’s configuration and displacement of its own matters: ‘Surrounded by brilliance, the lesser light (the artifice) disappears from sight. But what is it that disappears? Not the particular figure, of course, but “the fact that it is a figure” — its figurativeness, so to speak’ (Hertz 1985: 17). One could describe this manoeuvre, as Neil Hertz does, as a light so blinding that it drowns out all lesser lights. But in doing so — describing figuration through the figure of light (that is itself inscribed materially) — a figure stands in for and explains all other figures. One could say that what occurs is a certain violence where marking erases its own operations by producing technical figures that appear as something ‘like’ light, a milieu or medium of seeing, a mobilisation or illumination. Here I would like to think about de Man’s material sublime which is the immobilisation of all these events of displacement and figuration, where all one has is matter and matters ‘side by side’.

What if one were not to think of matter as the incarnation of a form that could be repeated in other matters? What if inscription were to occur once and for all, and be nothing more than the formed matter that it simply is? A text might operate less by intimation — less like a nature whose depths exceeded any single vision, and less like a living organic matter that always harboured the seeds of becoming and futurity — and more by way of theft. By theft I refer both to the severing of a future — this is inscribed and not something else — and also to theft as a form of trickery or ‘brigandry’ where a figure stands in for and commands figuration. What if cutting, truncating and eliding were ways of ensuring that a text would not be examined too closely? It is only by disabling the theoretical gaze that one could read the text as if it harboured a sense and future. One might say that to read a text — any text — as necessarily promising new futures and unimagined horizons relies on deflecting and erasing the text’s scars. To read and find sense is to exclude and edit, with elisions ranging from typographical errors to minor, peripheral or nonsensical marks. It is to see the ink not as ink. One might not find Shakespeare too readable, and one might not have a timeless Shakespeare, if one were to spend too much time on ‘his nose was sharp as a pen and a babbled of green fields’ (Henry V, ii.3). Rather than see literature that allows one to say anything, one might see literature as that which — in having being inscribed — gives us only matters to be read.

This opens two senses of sustainability and promise: a text is sustained into the future and promises infinite futures if its matter is such that it
releases other material iterations. But a text is also sustained in a certain non-biodegradability; a text is this inscription, and no other, and may promise a future that is not what we want it to be.

Here, we might think of the Anthropocene. When the concept was first formed it seemed to promise so much for the humanities, as a mode of inscription beyond the hand, beyond intentionality, and beyond the containment of inscription in human scales. On one understanding of the sublime, one might think that this natural object – an inscription that intimates a movement of history that is not of our own hand and that we cannot erase – as both a conditional promise and a violent cut. If ‘we’ can read certain traces as the marks of what we will have been, then we might say that we are opened to a power of tracing beyond humans, who are no longer the sole authors of sense. A history and a future has been written, and this passive voice might open something like the Derridean ‘perhaps’. No trace or mark is in command of itself; nor can any inscription or context determine in advance what other marks it might enable. This rogue power of inscription opens another de Manian counter-promise. One might – as I would suggest we ought to do – tie the history of sense (from Euclidean geometry to modern techno-science) to a collateral inscription from which ‘we’ cannot be detached. Inscription is non-biodegradable: the very techno-science and liberal humanist archive that allows us to read the Anthropocene is also bound up with what the Anthropocene promises: there may well be no future, and there can certainly be no future for the private reading subject whose power has been generated from an earth that now is indelibly inscribed. The radical promise of the Anthropocene – that it might open inscription beyond intentionality and the hand, and that its sublimity might not be that of human thought recuperating itself through the finitude of inscription – has not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the Anthropocene has operated as something like the technical or rhetorical sublime that allows a figure to be so blindingly illuminative as to erase all other figurations. It has become an inscription of hyper-phenomenal proportions that has cut off reading. The geological layer is frequently not read as trace, inscription or indelible mark but appears as an imperative, telling us who we are and what we must do.

To anticipate what follows, one might think of all the ways in which utter defeat and loss (in the Anthropocene epoch) have been presented as sublimely human and futural. The current predicament of climate change is – for Naomi Klein and for less ethically motivated corporations – an opportunity for a new future (Klein 2014). The new genre of cli-fi repeatedly presents a wasted planet and defeated humanity as precisely the milieu and backdrop for an elevated sense of human sublimity (where the sublime renders a ruined present into an imagined glorious defeat). Both Chris Nolan’s Interstellar (2014) and Neill Blomkamp’s Elysium (2013) begin
with a world defeated by anthropogenic climate change, and with a humanity vanquished by climate-opportunist corporations. The substitutions, tricks and thefts of Anthropocene inscription that occur with the short-circuiting of reading are not only evidenced in corporate dreams of geoengineering and other declared states of emergency that allow the geological scale to trum and blind all other inscriptions, but also resonate in many responses of the humanities that will have their day in the sun now that the Anthropocene draws us back to the common fate of a humanity to come.

Just as contemporary cinema is increasingly figuring planetary catastrophe in military terms, and then shifting attention from what is being destroyed (nature, earth, life) towards an act of heroic sacrifice, so the Anthropocene has reinvigorated theory, allowing yet one more scale or register that permits inscription in its literary sense to survive into its own future. Apostrophes or truncations that manufacture the grandeur of those vanquished – eliding the negativity of loss – are the condition for a broader rhetorical industry of blindness. If there are science-fiction narratives that present a benevolent (defeated) humanity ultimately triumphing over those who plundered and destroyed the planet (or who seized the spoils after planetary destruction), then such fantasies occur amidst presentations of ‘our’ supposedly doomed future as, nevertheless, calling upon ‘us’ to become sustainable. From geoengineering, to claims regarding the politically revolutionary opportunities enabled by climate change, calls that ask us to act now rely on a refusal of reading, and rely on seeing the geological register of the Anthropocene as immediately political.

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (after Nietzsche) argued, the way in which memory becomes moral, or the way in which ‘desire’ generates a human promissory animal – sustaining one’s commitments into the future (by owing, paying, valuing, being able to say ‘I’) – is by inscription: ‘The prime function incumbent upon the socius, has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 48). It is not relations that are relayed by inscription, but inscription that generates relations. One might think that there is a huge distance separating the literary/textual emphasis of deconstruction – particularly in its de Manian mode – from the vital realism of Deleuze and Guattari, but I would suggest that de Man’s materialism should prompt us to think otherwise. What de Man refers to as ‘phenomenalisation,’ or seeing inscription as bearing a relation to a prior ground of which it is the sign, might be compared to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the despotism of the signifier, or the notion that inscription is the expression of a preceding whole that it mediates (even if that whole is ever receding). Against this, they argue for a general inscription from which relations...
and territories are generated such that it is the mark that makes the territory:

The territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory. Functions in a territory are not primary; they presuppose a territory-producing expressiveness. In this sense, the territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization. Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative. The marking of a territory is dimensional, but it is not a meter, it is a rhythm. It retains the most general characteristic of rhythm, which is to be inscribed on a different plane than that of its actions. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 315)

If we think of Deleuze and Guattari as materialists, theirs is not a vital materialism such that life can be posited as the ground from which signification emerges, for life itself is effected from ‘rhythm’ or the generation of distances. Matter is generated from manners. What is – ontology – emerges from relations, with relations being extrinsic; the relations that a being will enter into depend on encounters, and are not intrinsic to the being in question. A being is nothing more than its ongoing and dynamic encounters, even if there are tendencies not exhausted in those encounters or relations. Theirs is not a world at a distance from what is perceived, but a world that is all the perceptions that generate spaces and times. Deleuze and Guattari’s commitment to the exteriority of relations precludes any term or matter from being the origin from which relations emerge; rather, it is inscription or the marking out of distances that generates matters. What they say about the book, then, is part of a more general claim about rhythm from which terms or matters are generated:

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3)

Here, we can draw upon Warminski’s account of de Man and the sublime. What we know and see as matter, as the things of this world (including light bulbs, paint, television screens, projectors, rays of sun) can always be presented as a figure for the ways in which matter comes to appear; ‘a’ matter comes to stand for matterality in general. The dispersed plane of inscription is explained from one of its effects: we might think of the light of the sun as that which allows matter to appear as matter, but what occurs in this substitution is not just the use of one material...
object to explain material relations and appearance, but a concealment of all the other ‘matters’ (paint, screen, ink) by which this figure of the sun is separated and presented. According to Warminski:

For when the relation between the sublime and figure is revealed to be not like the relation between the greater light and the lesser light – not like the relation between phusis and phusis, and not even like the relation between phusis and techne – but rather like the relation between paint and paint, then it becomes legible that the relation between the sublime and figure is a relation between figure and figure, i.e., techne and techne. (Warminski 2014)

One might say that rather than a nature that unfolds from itself and that can be figured by techne, with the sublime signalling the irreducible gap between nature and figure, there are just gaps and distances that enable appearance, if appearance is understood as the appearance of something other than the play of matters. Warminski then concludes with a claim for reading over phenomenalisation: what we have – what appears – are matters, but the ordering of some matters as standing for or, appearing to be, figures of other matters (with some figures explaining other figures, and some figures appearing as so bright as to be invisible) occurs in an event of reading which, ‘ideally’, might appear as an eye that would only see what is present at hand, and not recuperate matters as substitutions of lost spirit.

The notion of a natural sublime – a power in nature that is so overwhelming as to threaten dismemberment but that can be recuperated by representing nature’s power as unsurpassable – occurs by means of a series of technical and material events. One of the ways the Anthropocene has been figured is as a natural sublime, an inscription of a time and power of figuration beyond the human that can, nevertheless, be recuperated by the very event of humans reading their own finitude. This recuperation can take many forms and registers.

First, one might argue that the inscription of the Anthropocene gives the lie to the modern enclosure of the knowable within the human given; now there are perceptible signs of what occurs beyond perception and synthesis. However, in this new literalism – declared variously in terms of new materialisms, new vitalisms, or material and vital turns – what is cut out or erased (biodegraded) is something like techne. Matter is given as that from which inscription emerges, but this conception of a pre-inscriptive materiality may yield two modes, or two promissory gestures. One might – as I will hope to do – think of materiality as that which promises in a mode that is not only threatening, but also metaleptic: the present harbours a potential to be sustained into the future in a manner that is at odds with the apparent present it supposedly extends. What is now being read phenomenally as the Anthropocene – as a record of a
past that promises an inhuman future – seems to open both a sense of matter as a sign of that which calls for, generates and confirms human agency and as an indication of an agency-without-agency that persists or is sustained in indelible inscription.

Why are some matters privileged as the sign or appearance that allows us to read all other matters; how have we stopped reading by seeing some traces as ways of closing down counter-inscriptions? Against a matter that can be read as offering a narrative of human sustainability, one might think of matter as radically counter to any forms of biodegradability: matter (regardless of how we might discern its human promises) sustains itself beyond all our thoughts of a world that would be in accord with our imaginings. I would therefore – after de Man – challenge the epistemology that has accompanied the Anthropocene – the notion that some traces or stratifications close down questions simply by presenting themselves as that which can be known. Does the Anthropocene really give the lie to the multiple tracings of the world? Does it really demand that we think of humans as a single species, and as a species who must act now and in concert? Rather than offering itself as a knowledge that trumps all speculation and confirms what we ought to do to sustain ourselves (where the Anthropocene would be the sign that offers the frame for reading all other signs), the Anthropocene might cause us to think of inscription as a materiality that is unreadable. Whereas some conceptions of the Anthropocene regard the geological register as an inscription that eliminates all previous vagaries regarding the sense of the earth and therefore erases the need to read, one might say that such definitive knowledge is only possible by way of concealing all the interpretive manoeuvres that allow one stratum to become the privileged frame for all others.

Second, one might say that the very notion of epistemology is enabled by a figure of the play of lights: in traditional Platonic and Enlightenment conceptions of knowledge, rather than be captivated by the shadows cast by light, one should turn the soul around to the condition of the visible. (Here, one might ask about the conditions for the materiality of such a scene: who paints the tableau of privileged and lesser lights, and who displays the scene of proper seeing?) This is a question asked by theorists as diverse as Luce Irigaray and Bernard Stiegler: how is the frame through which the world appears as already fully readable inscribed and sustained? The archive is not only a body of texts to be read, but can appear as an archive only by way of an established scene and frame of questioning. Stiegler (2013) refers to an ‘arche-cinema’ that is also a mystagogy, a belief that there is a sense to be read and sustained and to which one submits. Irigaray (1985) famously regards this positing of a matter to be read by a subject as the very structure of sexual sameness: there is a world that has been set apart from me and that can be grasped and known by way...
of its appearance to me. De Man talks about the defacement that occurs with the production of an ongoing and readable sign and, writing through Rousseau, argues that, ‘Behind the stability and the decorum of private law lurk the “brigands” and the “pirates” … whose acts shape the realities of politics between nations, the most difficult adjustment being the necessity of considering these mixed standards as entirely honorable’ (de Man 1976: 665). The common space of the law does not follow seamlessly from ‘nature’; nature is effected as that which generated the law only after the inscription of the law.

Before asking questions about the legitimacy of this or that law, and before negotiating how ‘we’ might respond to threats to ‘our’ sustainability, ‘we’ need to think about the genesis of the ‘we’ or of the ways in which what de Man refers to as ‘phenomenalisation’ emerges: what allows the world to appear as the sign of some available knowledge that would, in turn, enable a domain of expertise and managerialism? A similar question was asked by Foucault (1970: xix) in The Order of Things regarding the ‘table’ or plane across which the knowledge of objects is distributed. Foucault argues that one might think about language’s own ‘shining’ or the way in which inside and outside, visible and articulable, are differentiated to produce a structure of knowledge. To think about the ‘shining of language’ as that which precedes the plane or distribution of knowledge suggests that perhaps one might think of language as akin to a light that distributes the sensible and intelligible (Foucault 1970: 369). Or perhaps we might think of light as akin to a metaphor that enables distinctions between visible and hidden. When de Man writes about the sublime he shifts attention from a nature whose might can only be grasped by way of the play of figures, to a play of figures that generates a privileged figure – such as light – that appears as the natural medium of all appearing. If one questions the ways in which geological stratification has come to appear as the tracing that discloses the logic of all other tracings, then we arrive at two possibilities: either ‘we’ accept that we become truly aware of the structure of ‘man’ and his relation to the world (finally) with the illuminating appearance of geological framing, or we might read the scene of the Anthropocene. Reading, here, is not the seamless passage from inscription to knowledge, but the confrontation with inscription ‘as such’, even if the ‘as such’ is already a recuperation of inscription’s distance and difficulty.

In a quite distinct way, then, the twilight of the Anthropocene – or the appearance of the destructive structure of appearance – prompts the question of the distribution of the sensible, or how it is that some lights appear as signs of what is to be done. What has enabled what has come to be known as the Anthropocene is a recuperation, constantly, of inscription. It is as though the play of lights, matters, distances and figures were there to yield the truth of the world. What has been occluded is the technical and rhetorical series of ruses and substitutions that allows one
play of figures to establish itself as the figure of all appearing. There must
have been, or will have been, a relation among matters in order for a light
to appear as the source that enables figuration to be seen.

As humanity begins to witness its possible end and orients itself towards
an inscription beyond its own hand, it might begin to see the journey of
enlightenment and of turning the soul away from captivation by shadows
as enabled by a material support that becomes visible only in its disap-
pearing. Far from being the ground towards which all knowledge ought
finally to tend, one might think of the light of reason as the trope that
occluded all other figurations. Very crudely, if practices of reflection,
critique, and technology in the narrow sense, rely on a harnessing of
matters from elsewhere, such dependence and secondariness can only
be known in the moment of its loss. The industries and institutions of
critique (including universities, the bourgeois public sphere, media,
publishing, dissemination and the habits of private reading) have been
possible only because of a history of energy extraction: enlightenment
requires a prior history of resource seizure, beginning (at least) with the
Athenian polity’s dependence upon slave labour. Today, when those energy
resources and practices of seizure appear to be no longer sustainable, we
arrive at the illumination of the Anthropocene: the grand project of industry,
reason and progress with all its metaphors, figures and lights is bound
inextricably to unsustainability.

And yet – finally – it is by addressing loss, or by apostrophising this
loss, that a certain technical sleight of hand generates one final sublimity.
These rhetorical manoeuvres might range from cinematic cli-fi epics,
such as Chris Nolan’s *Interstellar*, to the current condition of what I will
refer to as theory refuge. At the moment of the impending loss of life the
triumph of definitive knowledge appears. The Anthropocene as an
epistemological ruse has generated all forms of knowledge managerialism
and priesthood. In the meantime, cultural production increasingly focuses
on the literal end of man to stage one final call to arms. In both cases
one departs from a defeated terrain, and yet it is the very capacity to
mourn or apostrophise loss that transfers power to the event of losing
(where losing is ambiguously poised between the sense of something that
has been lost, and the loss itself as the appearance of the truth of all
appearing). The ‘end of the world’ functions as our way of finally knowing
the truth of our own destructive history, while dramatisations of the ‘end
of the world’ draw heavily upon figures of good versus evil, and a final
affirmation of heroic triumph. If the Anthropocene is ‘our’ twilight, then
this is both because the sense of life appears only in the moment of the
loss of the light of life, and because a privilege accorded to one stratum
of inscription dims all other lights.

As what thinks of itself as the species begins to sense that it is in a
stage of twilight and begins to consider its own end within time, we might
begin to ask what forms of viewing, visibility and illumination have enabled
species-reflection. That is, one might think of the Anthropocene in the mode of what de Man referred to as ‘phenomenalisation’, as a sign that offers – finally – true knowledge of the world as it is, and – in turn – explains the emergence of all other forms of inscription. (In this respect the geological scale of the Anthropocene would frame the emergence of life, cognition, humanity and its self-reflective triumph). Alternatively, and preferably, one might read the Anthropocene: there would be no direct passage from inscription to knowledge, nor to a humanity that would be the revealed ground or ‘we’ to whom the signs of the earth would be addressed.

Notes

1 Literature is democracy for Derrida because the literary text is manifestly tied to the singularity of its inscription. We can paraphrase, translate and summarise William Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Zadie Smith’s White Teeth, but the text remains with a material resistance that does not mark mathematical or logical texts, which (ideally) have a truth regardless of the language or text used to convey their sense. Literature can say anything because its textuality is not bound or constrained by intentionality or context. Because the text itself – and not meaning, intention or truth – is what survives, literature can always be re-read, can be opened in other contexts and can deploy a plurality of voices not attributed to the author’s intentionality. See Culler (2008).

2 To the extent that you have become what you are, namely, in part, an automatic answering machine, it becomes necessary for questions to be asked on the order of: Who answers the call of the telephone, the call of duty, or accounts for the taxes it appears to impose? Its reception determines its Geschick, its destinal arrangement, affirming that a call has taken place. But it is precisely at the moment of connection, prior to any proper signification or articulation of content, that one wonders, Who’s there?

References


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