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## World, Earth, Planet: A Time and Place for Nihilation in Ecocriticism

### Abstract

This essay argues that opening a space and a time for the questions of ecological, terrestrial and cosmic nihilation in ecocriticism, one that takes seriously the end of the relational notion of ‘world,’ implores us to imagine or invent alternatives for a more just living-together. While speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology in particular, have made important advances in describing the withdrawal of the real from its relations, I suggest that deconstruction affords us a more radical way to think this withholding, particularly where it intersects with the literary. Drawing from two unpublished seminars of Derrida’s, I contrast speculative realist criticism in supernatural horror, romanticism and science fiction with a notion of habituating oneself to nothing; not to the thing, but to its radical and irreversible annihilation.

### Keywords

Deconstruction, Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities, Object-Oriented Ontology, Speculative Realism

Since its inception, deconstruction has operated by reinscribing carnophallogocentric distinctions into broader contexts, distinctions including human and animal, life and death, organism and environment, but also philosophy and literature. As early as his 1968 “Différance,” Derrida suggested that the thought of nature de-naturing itself, or *physis in différance*, constituted the site for a reinterpretation of *mimēsis*, and therefore the literary, outside of its opposition to the natural. (Derrida 1982, 17) A few years later, in *Dissemination’s* “Hors livre,” the solicitation of *physis* as *mimēsis* came to

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situate a certain literary *beyond* of philosophy, an *outside* of the metaphysical Book of Nature, but also a *beyond of literature itself*. How, then, does the epoch of environmental disaster and annihilation invite us to reimagine this “beyond of literature—or *nothing?*” (Derrida 1981a, 54n31) How do matters stand for ecocriticism where and when this nothingness abysmally diffracts and reorganizes all such boundaries at increasingly incomprehensible scales? In what sense can a fabulation, imaging or phantasm of one’s own nihilation—whether ecological, terrestrial or cosmic, by definition involving the impossibility of one’s being there—be taken in a *realist* sense? What does deconstruction offer in this respect, and how might opening a place and a time for nihilation in ecocriticism constitute a strategy for climate survival?

It may be useful to briefly situate a few of these questions in the broader context of contemporary scholarship in the new realism, a loosely-defined constellation of concerns ranging from new materialism, post-continental naturalism and speculative realism, although this essay will focus specifically on the latter.<sup>1</sup> In marked contrast to what one might deem an affirmative, triumphant phase in the work of ecological mourning characteristic of so many contemporary discourses in the environmental (post)humanities, speculative realism has regularly confronted and interrogated the questions of annihilation, extinction and nothingness at stake in our current climate crisis. This can be gleaned from Ray Brassier’s work on *that which is not* (especially in what he calls ‘the anatomy of negation’ in his readings of Alain Badiou and François Laruelle—not to mention Blanchot and Levinas), Quentin Meillassoux’s accounts of the earth and universe *without us* (especially in his readings of *le rien* and *le néant* in Hegel and Heidegger—not to mention Mallarmé), Iain Hamilton Grant’s *unbedingtes*, unconditioned or unthinged *Naturphilosophie* (especially through Schelling’s rereading of Plato’s *Timaieus*, whose *khōra* was so important to Derrida), Graham Harman’s dark, non-relational, withdrawn objects (again through readings of Heidegger) and finally, their reinterpretation by Timothy Morton in terms of a *meontic*, eco-

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<sup>1</sup> The (new) materialist dimensions of deconstruction have provided the most fertile ground for inquiries into its realism. See Crockett 2018, especially the chapter “Derrida, Lacan and Object-Oriented Ontology: Philosophy of Religion at the End of the World,” Goldgaber 2020 (forthcoming at the time of writing), Kirby 2017, especially the chapter “Matter out of Place: ‘New Materialism’ in Review,” as well as my Lynes 2019b in the special issue of *Philosophy Today*, ‘New Concepts for Materialism.’ For a fascinating account of the intersections between deconstruction, ecology, materialism and nothingness, see Barad 2018. This present essay could be heard in the same key as Barad’s suggestion that “perhaps we should let the emptiness speak for itself” (Barad 2012, 4).

logical nothingness.<sup>2</sup> This latter notion has certain deconstructive resonances; in contrast to an *oukontic* nothing, absolute not- or non-being, the meontic nothing lies closer to what Heidegger questions in “What is Metaphysics?,” or as he explains it in his 1968 Le Thor seminar, ‘un-being [*Un-Seiendes*].’ The μή ὄν “is no οὐκ ὄν, no nothing, no non-being, for it is there. But it is not a being, insofar as it is *not that* which lets it be as this being that it is. The οὐκ ὄν must here be distinguished from the μή ὄν, negation distinguished from privation” (Heidegger 2003, 39). Notably for Morton, meontic nothingness also expresses the ambiguous translatability of Derrida’s infamous claim that “*there is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas d’hors-texte*]” (Derrida 1974, 158)—the (present) absence of some *thing*:

It is the very sliding between one translation and the other that reveals this strange, not-quite-present nothing... Nothing(ness) happens. Nothing(ness) can be text, there is no out-side-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 (Morton 2012, 230).

Speculative realism and its offshoot object-oriented ontology (OOO) in particular have gone a long way in redefining the scope of ecocriticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Morton’s work is the best-known in this context, drawing in insights from his earlier research on romantic and deconstructive criticism. But Morton claims that OOO constitutes a *post-deconstructive* thinking, even as it builds on Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence. The general textuality of meontic nothingness implies that there is no ‘away’ at the end of the world; “either the beyond is itself nonexistent (as in deconstruction or nihilism), or it’s some kind of real away from ‘here’” (Morton 2013a, 115). At play here is something similar to the transgression of nihilism into a certain ‘affirmation’ in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Blanchot, and Derrida. But these transgressions would have allegedly failed to detect the multitude of objects underlying the nihilist void; “Heidegger’s sonar only returns an anthropocentric beep from the universe of things. OOO is like a bathysphere that detaches from the Heideggerian U-Boat to plumb the depths at which the sparkling coral reef is found” (Morton 2013b, 48).

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<sup>2</sup> The arguments in this essay are adapted from my current book project *Dearth: The Nature of the Thing*, which examines deconstruction’s proximities and distances to speculative realism, and all the figures just mentioned, in much more detail.

In other words, “the OOO universe is to be discovered ‘beneath’ nihilism, as if the deep water in which modern thought swims turned out to be hiding a gigantic, sparkling coral reef of things” (Morton 2013b, 47). Below nihilism would lie the nothingness flowing out in front of the coral reef of objects, the spacetime emerging from the rift between the ecological, relational, phenomenal mesh and withdrawn, singular, noumenal, uncanny strange strangers. However, because of their excessive spatiotemporal distribution, ‘hyperobjects’ like global warming allow us to grasp this rift between the real and sensual in a gesture that makes any totalizing notion of ‘world’ obsolete. Environmentalism, Morton writes, ought now distance itself from its preoccupation with the end of the world in the interest of terrestrial coexistence; “the ultimate environmentalist argument would be to drop the concepts *Nature* and *world*, to cease identifying with them, to swear allegiance to coexistence with nonhumans without a world, without some nihilistic Noah’s Ark” (Morton 2013a, 100). We ought awaken “from the dream that the world is about to end, because action on Earth (the real Earth) depends on it. The end of the world has already occurred” (Morton 2013a, 7).

I agree with Morton that ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities more broadly, must refamiliarize themselves with and learn to dwell within this nothingness in our era of global warming and mass extinction. Like Morton, I also believe that this involves interrupting and moving beyond an unquestioned appeal to a *relational* notion of ‘world.’ More than any other Speculative Realist approach, OOO’s insight that realism ought to be grounded upon how objects *withdraw* from their relations has informed its practice as literary criticism. In this sense, it lies in a certain proximity to the *interruption* of relationality, the relation *without* relation so important to Blanchot, Derrida, and Levinas. But to say it right away, it is not the notion of withdrawal that concerns me about speculative realism; rather, *it is that this withdrawal is not thought radically enough*, especially where the environmental humanities must confront the problem of nihilation in a *non-philosophical*, that is—*non-metaphysical* and *non-ontological* sense. Deconstruction, by contrast, not only offers us a different *récit* of this nihilation than that proposed by OOO, but one that dovetails in surprising ways with the other figures associated with the new realism. Like OOO, however, the post-continental naturalism of Laruelle, Catherine Malabou, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Bernard Stiegler has been deemed *post-deconstructive* in the scholarly literature.<sup>3</sup> As Ian James writes, “these thinkers embrace, in very different ways,

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<sup>3</sup> See James 2018 and 2019. For my comparative study of Derrida and Stiegler on similar questions, see Lynes 2019a. For my readings of Malabou and Nancy, see Lynes 2018a.

a dimension of material immanence or worldly existence which return them to (albeit entirely novel) kinds of realism or ontological discourse, modes of thinking that Derrida would no doubt have questioned or refused" (James 2018, 85). Referencing our co-edited collection *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy* (Fritsch *et al* 2018), James nonetheless notes that "Derrida's thinking has been very much pursued along the lines outlined in relation to the four thinkers treated here" (James 2018, 85n1).

My own sense is that the questions of the beyond, the nothing, the outside or the void fit strangely with that of 'immanence' James sees at work in the naturalism of these four thinkers. As Derrida explains regarding his philosophical relationship to Deleuze, "I resist [...] this 'immanentism,' unless that is I have misunderstood what he meant by 'immanence'" (Derrida 1999, 76). More precisely, this resistance to immanence is where I situate what I take to be what is most *real* in deconstruction; the nihilating nothingness of spacetime. In *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects*, Peter Gratton similarly argues that Derrida was not a 'correlationist,' but rather sought a realism of *time*; "after all, is not the fact of the future, denied as *real now* in so much writing on time, the ultimate non-correlation—not *experienced* and therefore not able to be correlated to a thinking subject, but nevertheless *real*?" (Gratton 2014, 10). For me, however, this non-correlational time concerns not only the future but an immemorial past that has never been present. Or rather, as Derrida puts it in *Advances*, the promise of the future issues from a time of incalculable expenditure, irreversible loss of energy, consummation and incineration, a gift without *givenness-to*, *not yet* "the time of Kant, nor that of Husserl, nor that of Heidegger. The temporalization of this promise would be even more 'ancient'" (Derrida 2017, 22-23). This prechronological time would be "just as foreign to the egological horizon that structures a phenomenology of time (Husserl) as it would to the order or existential horizon of temporal ecstasies (Heidegger)"<sup>4</sup> (Derrida 2017, 32).

This essay therefore proposes a realist account of spatiotemporal nihilation in deconstruction, sketching out where this account complicates speculative realist literary criticism in romanticism, supernatural horror and science fiction, and asking what these complications might offer ecocriticism today. This will involve rethinking the relations between *world and earth*—indeed *phenomenon and thing-in-itself* in relation to a more deeply withdrawn *Other thing*: the *planet* to whose nihilation the literary may allow us to habituate ourselves. We might thereby enlist how Laruelle, in *En Dernière*

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<sup>4</sup> For my other readings of this text, see Lynes 2017 and 2018b.

*humanité: La Nouvelle science écologique*, bridges science and literary fiction towards environmentalist ends with his notion of ‘eco-fiction’: “a new ecological science parallel to science-fiction” (Laruelle 2015, 11). Like Morton, Laruelle deems the notion of ‘world’ a philosophical vestige, too bound up with terrestrial, one might say ‘correlational’ rootedness. But eco-fiction passes beyond Heidegger’s distinction between being and beings—from an OOO standpoint the withdrawn real and sensual, relational appearance, tool and broken tool—to dissolve the antinomy between ecology and philosophy, indexing the earth upon the universe while bracketing the ‘world’ and ‘life’ of philosophy. Ecology thereby engages a certain ‘collapsus’ in the speculative mirroring of earth and world, ordering the ecological finitude of life on earth not upon the world but upon the open and infinite universe. Such is “the good measure of any possible ecology that would present itself, thus redressed, as future or eco-fiction” (Laruelle 2015, 28). To extend ecology from the earth to the universe while passing beyond the question of the world “is a manner of rendering it fictional, not speculative, but quite the contrary to de-specularize it or to undo it from its mirror, to unburden it from its labors of identification, to conquer a ‘stunted [*surbaissée*]’ universality of which philosophy would no longer be the paradigm and mistress” (Laruelle 2015, 29-30). Where ecology shatters the speculative mirroring of earth and world, strange stranger and mesh, being and beings is where I will attempt to locate the site of the ‘beyond of literature—or *nothing*.’

I begin in §I with a brief description of correlationism and its role in SR literary criticism, contrasting this with a few of Derrida’s unpublished reflections on nothingness and the thing, and explore where these discourses intersect with questions of world, earth, and planet. In §§II-III, I put these deconstructive insights into practice by engaging speculative realist criticism in romanticism and science fiction, particularly where literary narratives of apocalypse and death confront the finitude of language. Drawing from recent deconstructive work in ecological poetics, I conclude in §IV by showing how making a place and time for nihilation in ecocriticism, one that takes seriously the end or withdrawal of the world and its specular mirroring in the earth, implores us to imagine or invent alternatives for a more just living-together.

### **§I: Correlationism and the Other Thing**

Whether discussing romanticism, science fiction or supernatural horror, speculative realism’s account of the *withdrawal* of the real from its relations has paradoxically provoked strategies to illustrate more *realistic* responses

to our environmental catastrophe. In two recent monographs devoted to SR literary criticism, Evan Gottlieb's *Romantic Realities: Speculative Realism and British Romanticism* and Brian Willems' *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*, both authors claim that SR challenges anthropocentrism by taking non-human things seriously, a task deemed all the more urgent when the material dimensions of our ecological catastrophe exceed the purview of language and human knowledge. As Willems puts it, "the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene is seen not only to force relatively dark objects into our awareness, but demands new strategies to ensure their continued visibility" (Willems 2017, 197). Science fiction in particular, he suggests, is especially well-positioned to strategically represent the unrepresentable dark objects at its heart, by way of disruptions of vision and losses of language, but also symbiosis; speculative realist ecocriticism "is a strategy for imagining different futures when all seems hopeless. However, the form this imagining takes is often through the most frightening destruction of everything humanity holds dear. As it should" (Willems 2017, 5).

I agree with SR criticism that our ecological catastrophe forces a dark, withdrawn *thing* into our awareness, but somewhat otherwise than Willems imagines it, in that this *thing* can only be thought in and as its very annihilation. This is akin to a question that preoccupies Derrida in the third year of his still-unpublished 1994-5 seminar *Le Témoignage* (*Testimony* or *Witnessing*), the fourth installment in the 10-year *Questions de responsabilité* series of seminars. Here, Derrida recalls the stakes of a seminar almost 20 years earlier entitled *La Chose* (*The Thing*), beginning in 1975 and given over three years, on the interplay between literature and 'the thing' in Maurice Blanchot's *récits*, Heidegger's work on art and dwelling, and Francis Ponge's object-poetics.<sup>5</sup> In *Le Témoignage*, Derrida repeatedly asks 'comment s'habituer à rien?', which can mean something like 'how to get used to nothing' or more clumsily 'how to habituate oneself to nothing.' As he elaborates,

Even if '*après moi le déluge*,' even if at my death is the end of the world, and it's the end of the world, the nothing [*le rien*], one still had to either deny this or bear witness in spite of nothingness [*le néant*] indeed bear witness to nothingness. My death there will have been, the end of what is world for me there will be, end of the earth and of humanity there will be, after the exhaustion of the sun, etc. and yet, against this or even because of this, from this absolute despair, I hope to still bear witness.

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<sup>5</sup> See Marder 2009 for a different, extremely worthwhile reading of this seminar in relation to a 'post-deconstructive realism.'

It's of this nothing, this being nothing, this thing of the nothing (*res*) that I would like to speak in asking "comment s'habituer à rien." What of this nothing, of this *res* of this thing or cause when one must habituate oneself not to it, to the thing, but to its radical annulment, to its annihilation without return?<sup>6</sup>

To me, this question of habituating oneself to the annihilation without return of the thing ought to figure at the heart of any realist account of extinction. But Derrida's work is often critiqued by SR as remaining confined, or inextricably *correlated*, to the linguistic or textual. Although Brassier, Grant, Harman, and Meillassoux—the four thinkers who held the first conference on Speculative Realism at Goldsmiths College in 2007—varied immensely in their commitments, influences and projects, all agreed on a certain rejection of '*correlationism*,' of which deconstruction would simply be one of the more recent examples. Correlationism is the idea that, especially since Kant, philosophy has only been concerned with the *correlation* between thinking and being, subject and object, the mind and the real, and unable to step outside of this correlation to the real itself. However, another definition of correlationism can be traced to the pre-Socratics, as Heidegger notes in *Identity and Difference*. "One of Parmenides' fragments reads: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι. 'For the same perceiving (thinking) as well as being.' [...] thinking and Being belong together in the Same and by virtue of this Same" (Heidegger 1969, 27). As he adds in *What is Called Thinking?*, this saying is the basic metaphysical position of all Western-European thinking, only matched in its greatness by Kant. "The conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are at the same time conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A 158, B 197). The 'at the same time' is Kant's interpretation of τὸ αὐτὸ, 'the same'" (Heidegger 1968, 243). Hegel then "transposes and transmutes Kant's principle into the Absolute, when he says that 'Being is Thinking' (Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*)" (Heidegger 1968, 243).

The correlationisms of contemporary continental philosophy are deemed direct descendants of these formulations, best exemplified in Heidegger's succinct claim that "for the Greeks, things appear. For Kant, things appear to me" (Heidegger 2003, 36). As is well known, Kant distinguishes between *phenomena* or things as they appear *for us*, and *noumena*, or *things in themselves*. All of his successors would have allegedly followed him in claiming,

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Questions de Responsabilité IV: Le Témoignage*, session 2, page 22. Box 118, folder 13. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January-May, 2018.



in their own ways, that we can never *know* the thing-in-itself outside of its givenness to us. But what if the very distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-us, itself remained *intra-philosophical*? What if the thing-in-itself's withdrawal from its relations as SR understands it merely constituted a surface effect of a deeper, more radical withdrawal? Derrida presciently asks a similar question in *The Thing*, concerning not only the thing-in-itself, *la Chose même* (the same Thing) of the philosophical tradition, but the Other thing, *la chose Autre* underlying all philosophical discourses regarding the thing.

Which does not mean that it is simply something other [*autre chose*] than the philosophical thing, beside or outside of it, but perhaps simply what philosophy thinks without thinking it, without being able or wanting to think it, as philosophy, but remains the Thing of the philosophical thing, the secret or crypt of the thing-in-itself [*la chose même*] of the philosopher.<sup>7</sup>

Above all, this is not to simply propose the Other thing as a new and improved transcendental signified. Derrida cautions against a similar appeal to 'matter' in *Positions*, where materiality risks being reinvested with the logocentric senses of "thing, reality, presence in general, sensible presence, for example, substantial plenitude, content, referent, etc." (Derrida 1981b, 64). The Other thing is likewise not an ultimate referent "according to the classical logic implied by the value of referent, [...] an 'objective reality' absolutely 'anterior' to any work of the mark, the semantic content of a form of presence which guarantees the movement of the text from the outside" (Derrida 1981b, 65). However, avoiding a naïve relation to meaning, the referent, sense or the signified is not to suppress these elements altogether; "what we need is to determine *otherwise*, according to a differential system, the *effects* of ideality, of signification, of meaning and of reference" (Derrida 1981b, 66). Such *effects* of reference, I suggest, are where the *Other thing* overflowing the metaphysical opposition between the same Thing or the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-us can be engaged in relation to *literature*. As he explains in his 1978 seminar *Du Droit à la littérature*, Kantian critique could never have concerned itself with anything like literature; it concerned science, philosophy, metaphysics, and aesthetic judgement.<sup>8</sup> However, and for essential

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Chose III*, session 1, page 3. Box 13, folder 11-17. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January-May, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> The seminar's title can mean both *From Law to Literature* and *Of the Right to Literature*. In *Parages*, Derrida claims that *La Chose*, *Du Droit à la littérature*, as well as the

reasons, one cannot simply extend transcendental questioning to the literary object. If the Kantian question regarding the conditions of science could rely on the latter's very exigencies and methods in its inquiry, the same assurance is refused to the literary question. If there even is such a thing as literature, "it would have a wholly singular, indeed unique relation to reality, fiction, truth, and especially to language, a relation that can in no case be that of science to reality, to fiction and language."<sup>9</sup>

As Harman recalls, the interrogation of correlationism by the four initial proponents of SR entailed a *weirder* model of reality than realists ever assumed possible. As such, "it is no accident that the only shared intellectual hero among the original members of the group was the horror and science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft" (Harman 2012b, 184). For Harman, Lovecraft's writing ought to be elevated to the same stage as Hölderlin's poetry for continental philosophy. If Kant's philosophy posits a *gap* between appearances and things-in-themselves, Lovecraft's skill is to find new gaps in the world; "no other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them" (Harman 2012a, 3). No other writer, he adds, "gives us monsters and cities so difficult to describe that he can only hint at their anomalies. Not even Poe gives us such hesitant narrators, wavering so uncertainly as to whether their coming words can do justice to the unspeakable reality they confront" (Harman 2012a, 9-10). But this failure of language to describe the thing-in-itself is precisely why Harman reads Lovecraft as a realist writer. Realism does not mean that we are able to state correct propositions about the real world;

no reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort. Reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it. Lovecraft is aware of this difficulty to an exemplary degree, and through his assistance we may be able to learn about how to say something without saying it... When it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do (Harman 2012a, 51).

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unpublished 2/3 of *Donner le temps* and a seminar on Maurice Blanchot's *Thomas l'obscur* ought to be read as a single work. "The project that I still have to postpone was at first to recast and order one day in a single work all the notes of these seminars" (Derrida 2011b, 5).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Du Droit à la littérature*, session 1, page 5. Box 14, folder 13-18. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January-May, 2018.

The twinned questions of a loss of language and a loss of world in our ecological crisis indicate the precise point where literature and philosophy, criticism and ontology, become blurred. A realist account of extinction, I've suggested, necessitates an interrogation of the *Other thing* beyond this gap between appearance and a still-metaphysical appeal to 'reality,' the referent or the transcendental signified. Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet* provides an immensely helpful topological schema to illustrate this through images of world, earth, and planet. The central motif of horror, he writes, is a limit to our understanding, a world that is increasingly unthinkable, "a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction" (Thacker 2011, 1). What he calls *the horror of philosophy* is thus where philosophy reveals its own limitations, "moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility—the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language" (Thacker 2011, 2). This non-philosophical language is where one might situate the literary *other thing* outside the thing-for-us and the thing-in-itself. Thacker accordingly distinguishes between the world in which we live, the *world-for-us* or simply the *World*, and the *world-in-itself* or the *Earth*. But there is something in the world-in-itself that constitutes a horizon for thought, beyond the bounds of intelligibility, haunted by the specters of extinction and climate change. Thacker refers to this as the *Planet*, the world *without* us exceeding the correlationist reversal through which the world-in-itself becomes thought as a world-for-us.

The world-in-itself may co-exist with the world-for-us—indeed the human being is defined by its impressive capacity for not recognizing this distinction. By contrast the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us; the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world. To say that the world-without-us is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in terms of the world-for-us. To say that the world-without-us is neutral with respect to the human, is to attempt to put things in terms of the world-in-itself. The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific (Thacker 2011, 5-6).

Supernatural horror and science fiction constitute artistic and literary attempts to confront the world-without-us, the planet that recedes behind *both* the subjective 'world' *and* the objective 'earth'; "what is important in the concept of the Planet is that it remains a negative concept, simply that which remains 'after' the human. The Planet can thus be described as impersonal and anonymous" (Thacker 2011, 7).

## §II: Romanticism and Death in the Earth

Readers of French theory may catch this *'impersonal and anonymous'* as a nod to Blanchot, whose *récits*, critical and theoretical works lie at the heart of Derrida's notion of the Thing. Our first comparative reading of deconstructive and SR literary criticism will thus engage Blanchot alongside British Romanticism. The poet William Wordsworth's relevance for ecocriticism has been contested by many, notably by Timothy Clark, remarking the poet's tendency to refer to nature as a mere psychic resource for human purposes. Gottlieb seems to agree that Wordsworth is at best ambivalent regarding anthropocentrism and correlationism, less concerned with displacing a human-centered perspective than seeking 'what is really important to men.' However, Gottlieb reads his poetry as anticipating the OOO notion that no intentional or sensual profile of a thing will ever exhaust its full reality. "Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree" for example, begins by describing precisely such absences. The yew-tree is described as 'lonely,' 'far from all human dwelling,' "here/No sparkling rivulet spread the verdant herb;/ What if these barren boughs the bee not loves?" While deconstructive criticism allegedly emphasizes Wordsworth's failure to establish and maintain more harmonious relations between the human and nature, Gottlieb reads this as "evidence of the world's resistance to being fully exhausted by human (or other) agency" (Gottlieb 2016, 27). If the world's natural powers are indeed deemed significant primarily insofar as they feed the human mind, "the agency attributed here to things in themselves is remarkable, *they* approach and communicate with humans, whose primary role is to be open and receptive to them" (Gottlieb 2016, 27).

This tendency to correlate things to their meaningfulness for human beings increases in Wordsworth's later poems, where the human cannot but transform the earth-in-itself into a world-for-us. Wordsworth's so-called "Lucy Poems," however, are said to constitute an exception to this growing correlationism. Gottlieb reads these poems as commenting on the elusive nature of reality, displaying an anxiety towards whether language can adequately signify what it aims at. Wordsworth mourns the untimely passing of Lucy in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," but in a sense that complicates the relations between subject and object, human and nature. "A slumber did my spirit seal; I had no human fears: She seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years. / No motion has she now, no force; She neither hears nor sees; Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees." On Gottlieb's interpretation, Lucy is not dead in the conventional human-centered sense, nor does she find herself in any afterlife;

she has simply ceased to be what she once was; “being in the grave extinguishes only one’s human consciousness, not one’s earthly existence” (Gottlieb 2016, 44). Lucy thereby endures in the nonhuman time of the earth’s diurnal course, becoming purely object-like, indeed immortal. Gottlieb thus reads an equivalent of Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ in Wordsworth’s happy mourning for Lucy’s death and subsequent rebirth in the earth; the poet “seems to celebrate Lucy’s absorption or encryption into a planetary crust that simultaneously removes her from human access and delivers her to a more-than-human state of earthly suspension” (Gottlieb 2016, 45). This reflects what Morton calls the ultimately melancholic aspects of dark ecology, “undermin[ing] the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature. It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe” (Gottlieb 2016, 45).

However, Lucy’s death and rebirth in the earth can also be read as approximating Blanchot’s frequent illustrations of double death. As he puts it in *The Space of Literature*, death itself is split between

one which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks—and there is its double, which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to *me* by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself (Blanchot 1982, 103).

On the one hand, Lucy has died the possible, personal death that is bound to life, the world *for us*, but not the death that is impossible to die, the impersonal, anonymous death without any relation or correlation to her or anything else, death *without us*, death in the planetary crust. One might therefore wonder if Wordsworth’s own ambivalence regarding anthropocentrism doesn’t perpetually risk converting Lucy’s death in the earth, in the world *in itself*, into a death in the world *for us*. Furthermore, if OOO is itself structured by this eternal philosophical reversal of the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-us, attested to by Harman’s claim that “there is no room for ‘nothingness’ in ontology” (Harman 2002, 11), we might also ask where the speculative realist reading of Romanticism leaves us regarding the limits of this philosophical reversal: the impersonal and horrific subtraction of the human—indeed the extinction of every organic correlation—from the planet.

We can illustrate such an account otherwise through the last two chapters of Blanchot’s first novel *Thomas the Obscure*, on which Derrida gave a seminar alongside *The Thing* and *Of the Right to Literature*. Unlike Words-

worth's happy mourning for Lucy, Thomas, after the character Anne's death, undertakes an impossible confounding of his own death with death itself, but thereby finds himself excluded from being, allowing the void of annihilation to see him. As with Wordsworth, objects and things approach and interpellate him, but not in a sense in which one could comfortably speak of their agency.

A world is within my grasp, I call it world, just as, dead, I would call the earth nothingness. I call it world also because there is no other possible world for me. I believe, as when one advances towards an object, that I bring it closer, but it is it that comprehends me. It is it that, invisible and outside of being, perceives me and holds me in being. It itself, unjustifiable chimera if I were not there, I discern it not in the vision I have of it, but in the vision and the knowledge it has of me. I am seen (Blanchot 2005, 311-312).

There is no other possible world for Thomas than this impersonal world-without-him; the earth would constitute the merely privative nothing of the world-in-itself in relation to his personal death, that of the world-for-him. Thomas is, however, caught sight of by something that escapes the specular mirror play of world and earth, the philosophical *for us* and the *for itself*. Being contemplated by the void allows Thomas to undertake a creation against the act of creation itself, to populate the void with singular entities incapable of reproduction, beings created out of absences; dragonflies *without* elytra, trees *without* fruit, flowers *without* flowers, birds *without* heads. For Derrida, all these beings' lacks are germs for the future-to-come; the toads *without* eyes "crawled on the ground seeking to open their eyes capable of sight for the future alone" (Blanchot 2005, 316). It is only in the absence of any wholly relational world that this romantic space of spring-time resurrection, indeed de-extinction, can come about. Or rather, any strategic delay or deferral of planetary nihilation must somehow be thought in its relation *without* relation to the imaginary space of eco-fiction. As Blanchot defines this space in "Two Versions of the Imaginary,"

When there is nothing, the image finds in this nothing its necessary condition, but there it disappears. The image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world; it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed; it tends toward the intimacy of what still subsists in the void. This is its truth. But this truth exceeds it. What makes it possible is the limit where it ceases. Hence its critical aspect, the dramatic ambiguity it introduces and the brilliant lie for which it is reproached. It is surely a splendid power, Pascal says, which makes of eternity a nothing and of nothingness an eternity (Blanchot 1982, 253).

### §III. Eco-Science-Fiction: Loss of Language, Loss of World

I mentioned above that SR literary theory examines an interplay between the withdrawal of a world in our age of environmental catastrophe and the consequent loss of a language that can adequately express this situation. For Brian Willems, speculative realism and science fiction come together in their attempts to imagine or invent alternative responses to this crisis, to ensure the continued visibility of the relatively dark objects forced upon our awareness by the Anthropocene disaster. Willems' key conceptual tool for explaining this disruption of sight is what he calls the 'Zug effect,' a trope in science fiction referring to nonsense within sense, impossibility within possibility, and whose purpose is to paradoxically represent non-correlationist worlds. The Zug effect gets its title from Damon Knight's 1964 novel *Beyond the Barrier*, where the character Naismith (himself a Zug) observes a series of 'dark objects' through a shimmering disk called the Barrier control network, seemingly opening onto another room; some of these dark objects are human, some machinic or robotic, as well as boxes, sarcophagi and vases. Willems cites the following passage to illustrate: "Is this an actual entrance-way into that room,' Naismith asked, fumbling for words, 'or a—a view-screen?' Prell looked at him curiously, 'what's the difference?' Naismith realized, in confusion, that there was no difference, in the question as he had asked it: the two phrases... were almost identical" (in Willems 2017, 15). These dark objects for Willems are "paradoxically, signifiers of unknowability, and thus are a moment of unknowability within knowability" (Willems 2017, 16). The Zug effect thus engages two things: "a kind of vision that sees relatively dark objects and a way to imagine worlds in which such objects exist. The Zug effect is irrational, weird and unanticipated; but it is also reality because it draws its power from the withdrawn nature of objects, their dark side" (Willems 2017, 37). As such, science fiction corresponds to what Harman might call a dark object realism, doubled between withdrawal and connection, absence and presence, difference and similarity, separation and gathering.

This interplay of gathering and distancing is at the heart of Derrida's readings in *The Thing*, often articulating the viewpoints of Heidegger (who emphasizes appropriation, authenticity, gathering, jointure, the ownmost, the proper and proximity) and Blanchot (who emphasizes distance, expropriation, interruption and withdrawal). Taking the example of the bridge from Heidegger's "Being Dwelling Thinking," Derrida explains that

Heidegger insists on the bridge as gathering, on the thing insofar as it grants, gathers, continues, turns according to the *ring*, while Blanchot insists on the interruption, the discontinuity, the discretion that the bridge signifies, the gap between the shores, the precarious fragility of the symbolic, the symbolic not only as precarious but insofar as it comes to dissimulate the Other, the Other as other shore, insofar as it gathers into the Same what remains Other (unknown, unrepresentable, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

However, he adds in “Pas,” Blanchot’s thought expresses a certain annulment of this opposition between gathering and expropriation, availability and inaccessibility—not according to any *ring* or circle, but rather through the ex-appropriating figure of a non-dialectical *pas*, rendered as ‘pace/nots’ in English translation, both the step of transgression and its negation. As he cites “Two Versions of the Imaginary,” “*Pas* is the Thing, *la Chose*. ‘distancing is here at the heart of the thing’” (Derrida 2011b, 17). This distancing, itself withdrawing from the object-oriented reversal between the real world-in-itself and the sensual world-for-us, stands in an immensely complex relationship to language. As he explains in *The Thing*,

The thing being nothing, nothing singular, determinable, nothing one could encounter as such, it has no place outside of language, outside effects of nomination since The Thing is like the name, nominality par excellence. It only takes place in language, it that has no name, no proper name: it is name and language but as it is not called [*elle ne s’appelle pas*] and has no name (capable of having them all), it is a sort of language without name and a sort of name without language. And yet if there is something that one generally places outside of language, as the referent itself, it is indeed the thing.

One must thus reconsider everything on the basis of this situation where the outside of language par excellence appears immanent to language and constitutive of language and where, inversely, language is constituted in itself by this strange outside.<sup>11</sup>

This situation constitutes the horror of philosophy that cannot but be expressed in a non-philosophical language, one within which the Other thing, the planet, or the world-without-us strangely takes place as its nilation. In light of our reflections on the simultaneous loss of a world and of a language capable of representing this loss, Willems’ reading of Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* is instructive. Following an unspecified

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Chose II*, session 3, page 7. Box 13, folder 11-17. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January-May, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Chose I*, session 2, page 5. Box 13, folder 1-3. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January-May, 2018.



catastrophe, a boy and his father follow a road south. The father was born before this cataclysm and the boy after, a difference manifested in their use of language. The father's language, which he is seemingly the last person alive to speak, references a world that has been lost, a world it still tries in vain to make live-on. It utilizes specific technical vocabularies to signify the natural and artificial things they come across in terms of their use-value, not unlike Heidegger's notion of world as referential contexture, or how the objectification of words through language contributes to the calculating enframing of nature in view of its availability for the standing reserve. These objects, however, are now no longer known; the boy's language thereby references the loss of this world, the end of this usefulness, a certain habituation to nothing as the thing's radical annihilation; "the ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be," as Willems cites McCarthy (Willems 2017, 43). If the father's language remains one of light and speech, the white mythology of the metaphysics of presence, the boy's is one of darkness and silence, one that interprets things not in terms of their bygone use-value for a world that no longer exists, but at times in terms of their current value for survival. A boat, for example, is seen as a potential storage chest of food and supplies rather than a device for a Sunday sailing trip; "if nothing else the boy is not a part of the father's world of the names of things, however, it is more accurate to say that the boy is not a part of the world at all. The boy is not a part of the world because the world has ended" (Willems 2017, 41).

The world of *The Road* thereby attests to a more radical linguistic withdrawal that Willems helpfully maps onto Thacker's distinctions between the world-for-us, the world-in-itself and the world-without-us. The world-for-us is the world represented by the father's language, the world that has now disappeared; the boy converts objects resistant to his understanding, those of the world-in-itself, into those of a world-for-us by focusing on their survival value. But if the absence of a world paradoxically makes the world available to the boy, what takes place when even this availability can no longer be assured? In *The Road*, the world *without* us "is found in the notion of things that exist in excess of the human use of them. The end of the world is found in this excess" (Willems 2017, 43). In the loss of the use-filled language of the father, what is unknown in the thing—its shadowy, withdrawn nature—also *remains unknown* for the boy, "not-of-this-world, and thus more closely related to things in the world rather than the context that makes sense of those things" (Willems 2017, 2). What this analysis suggests is that simply remarking objects' excess over or falling away from their lin-

guistic, practical or technological use-value, their givenness to merely indirect metaphorization or paraphrasing (a common trope of object-oriented literary criticism), is not enough to express the thing's withdrawal from the philosophical categories of phenomenon and noumenon. Above all, this oscillation between the for-us and the in-itself is inadequate to illustrate the thing's ambiguous, uncanny relation to literary language, not only that of science fiction or supernatural horror, but to the institution of *mimesis as nature's originary denaturing*: the beyond of literature *or nothing*.

#### §IV. There is no Earth

Cary Wolfe has published what I take to be some of the most important work in the environmental posthumanities and animal studies, and his contribution to the *Eco-Deconstruction* collection, "Wallace Stevens' Birds, or, Derrida and Ecological Poetics" allows us to tie together many these threads in concluding.<sup>12</sup> For both Stevens and Derrida, he writes,

'the question is indeed that of the world,' as Derrida puts it, but for both, 'the world is gone' ... in the sense that the very thing that makes the world available to us—the performative for Derrida, the *factum* of the poem for Stevens...—is also the very thing that makes the world 'as such' (in Heidegger's sense) *unavailable* to us (Wolfe 2018, 334).

To illustrate this unavailability, Wolfe cites Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being"; "The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought, rises / In the bronze décor. // A gold-feathered bird / Sings in the palm, without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song." The bird here, like Shelley's skylark, Keats' nightingale and Poe's raven, "brings news from another, unearthly realm, infusing the poet's own song with something not exactly known but not exactly understood" (Wolfe 2018, 317). Stevens' reference to a foreign song without human meaning or feeling displays a logic that Derrida would call 'heterogeneous' to idealism. Especially in his later poetry, Stevens concerns himself with things as they are, with a real object, thing or fact attested to by the poem itself, and not the 'epistemological' correlations between thinking and being, mind and world, phenomenon and noumenon. If Stevens writes that "The world must be measured by eye," both the eye and the 'I' of the first person singular, the *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* refer

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<sup>12</sup> This chapter was recently republished as "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" in Wolfe 2020, 84-118.

to an “eye without lid, mind without any dream— / These are of minstrels without any minstrelsy, / Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale / Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird / Of stone, that never changes.” For Wolfe, the eye needs a lid to introduce an impersonal spacing into the personal ‘I,’ one that

holds the sound of one’s own voice at a distance of a before and an after—‘It was when I said’—that divides the ‘I’ (as in Emerson’s ‘transparent eye-ball’—‘I am nothing, I see all’) from itself. And it is in that space of ‘between’—‘between that disgust and this,’ as Stevens puts it in ‘The Man on the Dump’—that the ‘mind’ can have its ‘dream,’ that imagination can enact its ‘purifying change’ (Wolfe 2018, 320).

To recall the passage from Blanchot’s *Thomas the Obscure*, Thomas’ being seen by something escaping the representational play of earth and world, or the epistemological correlations of noumenon and phenomenon, allows him to make a world surge forth so that all species might live-on a little longer, a dream of change enacted from the ‘between’ of the imagination, ‘a new knowledge of reality,’ as Stevens puts it in “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself.” But this dream can only come about when the world has gone away, subtracting itself from the reciprocal interplay of its proximity and distance. The new knowledge of reality for Wolfe therefore arises from an exposure to the ‘outside,’ albeit an exposure that consists in ‘blinking.’ The contingency of the blink of the eye and the factual necessity of the outside allow for the event of the thing to come about in its singularity. But what interests me most in this situation is what Derrida in *The Thing* calls the singularity of *nothing*;

the thing is a singularity, the singularity of nothing. It is something that is nothing. It is neither a concept, nor an essence, nor an existence. [...] And yet there is The thing, what we call The thing, which we sometimes adorn with a capital letter and that fascinates, indeed terrorizes us as this singularity of nothing, at once familiar, very near and mysterious, anonymous, abysmal, maddening, obscene, seductive, *unheim-lich*.<sup>13</sup>

What does it mean for this interplay between necessity and contingency—incidentally so important to Meillassoux—to bring about the thing as the singularity of nothing, and how does this nothingness relate to the matters of earth and world? Wolfe draws from Derrida’s *The Beast and*

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Chose I*, session 2, page 4. Box 13, folder 1-3. Jacques Derrida papers. MS-C001. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed January–May, 2018.

*the Sovereign*, echoing the drama of Heidegger and Blanchot in *The Thing* almost thirty years earlier (namely the former's bridge and the latter's infinitely distanced shores, the poet Paul Celan now playing as Blanchot's understudy with the line '*die Welt ist fort*'). On the one hand, humans and other animals incontestably share the same world; one could call this the objective earth, including the sea and sky, where all terrestrial beings dwell. On the other, they incontestably do not; one simply has to picture the world-for-us where the human has elevated itself onto a separate ontological and ethical plane over and above the rest of the living, the trillions of lives it actively or passively commits to extinction, not to mention the inorganic and abiotic environment whose degradation is inextricable from these losses. But more radically, Derrida claims that no living being in fact shares the same world; "the difference between one world and another will remain always *unbridgeable*. Between my world... and any other world there is first the space and time of an infinite difference, an interruption that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, *a bridge... There is no world, there are only islands*" (Derrida 2011a, 30-31 emphasis modified). For Wolfe, this in fact constitutes the most radically ecological claim of Derrida's theses on world. "This fact—that 'the world is gone,' and not just for nonhuman life but also for humans, thus linking human and nonhuman life in their shared finitude (indeed, in the finitude of their finitude)—is precisely where ethics and ecological responsibility begin" (Wolfe 2018, 325). To push this even further, might this *unbridgeable* distancing of the island shores, when *there is no world*, bring one to also risk saying that *there is no earth*, that terrestrial coexistence must be envisioned and sought from a dearth of ground that is *nowhere*, if nowhere *else*?

Like the SR readings of romanticism and science fiction we encountered above, the withdrawal or end of the world implores us to imagine or invent alternatives for a more just living together. For a deconstructive ecocriticism, however, for which what is most real is the nothingness of spacetime, this withdrawal is that of a world-without-us whose extinction in a sense has always already happened. It is the withholding of a planet to whose nihilation—even after the exhaustion of the sun, as Derrida remarks—one is nonetheless implored to bear witness by habituating oneself to nothing. Here, Derrida's questions are not far removed from the conclusion of Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*. As he draws from the solar catastrophe described by Jean-François Lyotard in *Postmodern Fables* and *The Inhuman*, "everything's dead already if this infinite reserve from which you now draw energy to defer answers, if in short thought as quest, dies out with the sun.' Every-

*thing is dead already*" (Brassier 2007, 223). These words should be heard all the more intensely when the threat of the sun's extinguishment pales in comparison to its one time preventable, yet now irreversible intensifying warming. Nonetheless, similar implications for the literary remain; for Lyotard, "fabulation calls for a kind of spatiotemporal and material emptiness, in which linguistic energy is not invested in the direct constraints of its exploitation as making, knowing and know-how" (Lyotard 1999, 94-95). This aneconomic investiture of energy in the imagination, beyond any production or use-value, instead allows us to open, or rather *leave* a place and time for nihilation in ecocriticism. From nowhere and nowhen, we encounter the imaginary as the supplement of the real, we solicit nature *as* the literary itself in view of a hopefully, but in no way necessarily, more survivable future. It may be from this impossible standpoint, at any rate, that an ecostrategy for living-on ought be negotiated, and that the path of ecocriticism toward climate justice might be reimagined.

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