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Deconstruction in the Anthropocene

Edited by David G. Cairns

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- ⁴¹ This time is a hybrid of *Arctic Drift's* 2011 and this reader's 2012.
- ⁴² An author-led interpretation might focus on divining Cussler's political interests based on the novel's omissions—most notably the absence of climate talks and CO2 reduction targets. This may be connected to Cussler's politics, but could also have to do with what the action novel could comfortably hold. While neither defending nor exonerating the omission, *Arctic Drift* does manage to include more of the material realities of climate change than most novels.
- ⁴³ *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the Indiana Jones franchise provide a similar reference point.
- ⁴⁴ Cussler, *Arctic Drift*, 92.

Reviews

The Inhuman Semiotics of a Disappearing Future: Climate Change and Family Feuds

Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook and J. Hillis Miller, *Theory and the Disappearing Future: On de Man, on Benjamin* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 176 pp. ISBN: 978-0415604536

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The era of climate change requires new conceptual tools with which to approach the very real and very present degradation, depletion, misuse and abuse of the environment. For Miller, Cohen and Colebrook in *Theory and the Disappearing Future* the humanistic discourse of crisis, with its formulations of hospitality, empathy and responsibility are not only insufficient, but wholly misguided, as eco-catastrophe, they argue, has nothing to do with apocalyptic, crisis, or even messianism. *Oikos* and the other need to be abandoned in favour of an inhuman asubjectivity that does not simply remove the human from an authoritative role of parental culpability, but which reveals that the metaphors of home and hospitality are little more than comforting constructs. Discourses of ecological unity, or globalising totalisation—even Derrida's fragmented *mondialisation* or auto-co-immunity (common/community auto-immunity)—are overly anthropocentric, and predicated on the illusion of a planet operating in a mutually caring symbiotic relationship with humans.¹ This is absolutely not to absolve humanity of its infamous malfeasance and accountability, but to work towards a *disanthropy* which undoes the ideology of the subject as logical cause for the earth's existence. The horror that we must face is not simply the catastrophic and

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irreversible ruin of habitable conditions on a planet, but the fact that the planet preceded us, will outlast us, and exists despite us. Rather than attempt to relate to the globe as totalised whole, the radical, fragmented dissymmetry or asymmetry between nature and humanity needs to be brought into sharp focus, and the past and the future need to be reconfigured so as to shift focus away from the human. Thus history is not, Colebrook writes, a human tale of 'the development of collective complexity from bounded individuality to self-organizing whole' (139), and the future is not a shifting point of messianic promise, with or without a messiah. The future as a point permanently to come, pacing before the human calendar, may, in terms of the human, have few steps left to take, as the catastrophic future has already collapsed into our past: the looming event of climate change has already occurred, as Cohen writes that "2011" marks itself—or will be marked from backglances to come—as the rough date when the irreversibility of extreme global warming would be publicly conceded, the sixth mass extinction event calculated, the "anthropocene era" naming itself as if from without' (128). One might say that the discourse of the present is no longer trying to proleptically figure a catastrophe yet to come, but grapples to find a rhetoric to describe, for the future, what has already passed. In a situation that should be described in a blatant past tense—*climate change has occurred*—we cling to the fatalistic projection/interruption of the future perfect, situating discourses in the distant analepsis/prolepsis of *climate change will have occurred* and therefore can be simply ignored until it is too late.

In order to have some measure of theoretical understanding of the present catastrophes Cohen, Colebrook and Miller turn to de Man, 'the monstrous de Man, the de Man who lacked all morality, responsibility and humanity' (5). They take up the de Man purged from deconstruction, abandoned as 'a dehistoricizing depoliticizing textualist, the figure in "theory" who exemplified a narrowness of linguisticism and aestheticism' (135–136), and *do not* recycle him, that is, alter him into a new, different product. Rather, they pick him up exactly *as he was discarded*—as a believer in the ahistorical, apolitical, and acontextual who was posthumously found to have written anti-Semitic articles for the collaborationist Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*. The de Man they reuse is the de Man made to embody

Rorty's private ironist extraordinaire—a morally dubious literary theorist who adds lurking political bankruptcy to literary studies—and whose reduction of life to the mechanics of the grammatical and the linguistic did not simply create an absence of political position which could be *used* by totalitarianism, but which—argue those who cast him aside—concealed a sympathy and complicity with it. This bad, abjected de Man, removed from deconstruction's family as toxic, unbiodegradable waste is found to inhabit an 'excluded domain' which appears 'to define the coming century increasingly. That is, a materiality outside the conceptual narratives left over as remainder or waste of the great legacy from 20th century thought, a force outside of any model of sovereignty' (91). And as such, it is precisely this figure and his texts that might provide the inhuman, mechanistic theories with which to chart not only the rapidly disappearing future, but the educational institutions that are dissolving with it. Thus, for Miller, de Man's displacement of the human could help us to demystify the 'fallacious assumptions... that we ought just to get finance capitalism back on track and all will be well, or that global climate change might be reversed with some carbon cap laws, or that the humanities can be returned to their former glory' (87). For Cohen 'the minimalist, viscous, unusable, mnemotechnic, prephenomenal conceit of de Manian 'materiality' might, in all common sense, offer a robust explanation and, at the same time, a site of acute resistance to the perspectival interests of the education industry to come (finance, science)' (125). One that will, however, not return the humanities to a glorious past.

Colebrook argues that against the current movement in literary criticism towards grounding and stabilising theories of affect we can argue that for de Man, affect or life are neither foundation nor linguistically constructed, but violent unreadable forces. So we can arrive at a politics, but a politics of (mis)reading which states that while we inevitably produce originary figures of the good life that precede known systems, these figures are always already contaminated by the supposedly secondary system in which they are produced and questioned. Thus, 'If theory were to offer anything to concrete political problems it would not be by leading the way towards a neurally-based, embodied or realist foundation, but by shifting the style of problems from the readability to the unreadability of affect' (144).

The volume comprises essays by Cohen, Colebrook and Miller, together with facsimile and transcript of de Man's last lecture on Benjamin. However, before we look at the essays in detail—I am concentrating on Cohen, Colebrook and Miller to the exclusion of the de Man lecture—a slight disjunction between content and rhetoric needs to be noted. Interrupting the rallying call to turn to the inhuman and asubjective is the discursive and tropological importance of the very human—even if abjected, othered and excluded—de Man. In other words, the rhetoric running through the volume seems grounded or weighted in the *body of de Man* rather than the *body of his works*; while the vocabulary of materiality, inhuman text machines, grammar and linguistics is of de Man's texts, they are primarily supported, particularly in Cohen's and Colebrook's chapters, by the treatment and ostracisation of the human, all too human Paul de Man. The discourse of inhumanity is presented through the figure of a subject whose posthumous exile from his academic community takes greater rhetorical weight than his writings. It is—perhaps—for this very reason that this volume, while an important intervention, tends to discuss the *need* to use de Man, rather than directly use him. The performative operates on the level of the constative as a result of a contradiction between the insistence on theoretical formulations of the inhuman and the argument's grounding in the very human de Man. One might counter this by saying that the performative can only be an event when there is a level of interruption; the act of creating by saying is too static and formulaic to produce an event. One might also suggest that de Man begins to operate as a form of transcendental signifier that is both turned to and away from, which supports and interrupts the argument, and thereby the text figures as a form of 'theotropic allegory' of its own—see Miller on 'theotropism' below. Nonetheless, there is a certain sense that this volume indicates the step to be taken, rather than taking the step.

Colebrook argues that the attitude of the current climate is that 'There is a reality, and it is political; it is found in work—real work, not literary work' (132). In a prevailing capitalist discourse of infinite progression and exponential growth, textual operations of deconstruction or *désœuvrement* (unworking) are viewed as decadent, corrupt sophisms on the wrong side of an ideological war waged on the basis of prefixes: working good, unworking bad. Construction

good, deconstruction bad. Poiesis good, negative poiesis bad. Literary criticism returns to new foundationalisms, and reading becomes a deadened engagement with facts that produces no response. At the basis of the current insistence on overt and 'productive' political content is the idea that 'man is a properly, naturally and morally political animal—a being whose nature it is to live in common and to find himself only through a good form of dynamic and historical (growing/progressive) development and realization' (138). When speculation is grounded on the future failure of funds rather than their growth, and financial bodies exist as parasites on the active and politically productive (human) body, the institution and the human tend to be seen as debased. But rather than seeing the human 'as having been deflected from his [sic] proper ecological affinities by alienating systems of corporatism... we might—after de Man—see the supposedly accidental corporate deviation as structural to the very possibility of something like a body' (142). In other words, if we read as de Man demonstrated, we understand the figure of the normative, 'natural' human to be 'a pacifying lure of propriety and origin that was enabled by, and continues to enable, what might better be referred to as inhuman' (142). The inhuman in de Man's texts is linked to the mechanical and grammatical systems of language and linguistic forces that enable us to create the very figure of the human. Thus our understanding of the 'humanness' of the human—speech, political engagement, self-reflective consciousness—is predicated not only on the inhuman, but created by and through an implacable text machine which makes identity itself unreadable. That is, it is the 'inhuman' that defines us as human; not by differential comparison, but through composition. From this we can then establish that the figure of the 'auto-poetic whole' is created by a concealed, unreadable 'nature': "Nature" is that which recedes, which we can read as having been there—unreadable—in order to yield the readable figure or lure' (143).

We are thus indebted to nature, and marked, not just by gratitude to it, but by theft from it. As Colebrook succinctly puts it, 'there is no capitalism: no intrusion of inhuman exchange into an otherwise human and ethically proper world. Or, there is only capitalism: only substitution, dissimulation and theft' (24). In conceding this rampant borrowing and deferred or reneged payment we are also forced to realise

that there is no proper trajectory of natural life, and no organic whole. Thus, against the new movement in literary criticism towards theories of affect understood as solid and originary we can argue that for de Man, affect or life are neither foundation nor linguistically constructed, but violent, unreadable forces. And so, by employing the apolitical de Man we arrive at a politics, but a politics of (mis)reading which says that while we inevitably produce originary figures of the good life that precede known systems, these figures are always already contaminated by the supposedly secondary system in which they are produced and questioned.

For Cohen, who dwells strongly on Derrida's erasure of de Man from the deconstructive will, eco-catastrophe arrives not as a crisis which can be accessed by Derrida's theories, but as a point of reference outside the machine of anthropism. If the Levinasian other was formulated as a response to the atrocities of the second world war, in order to respond to the events of the 21st century we need a theory of *asubjectivisation*, as climate change needs not to be anthropomorphised through a theory of human hospitality to the planet, but addressed as the inhuman, wholly other. And thus, for Cohen, the suicidal tendency in de Man's texts, their concentration on the non-anthropomorphic textuality that precedes life, and their depiction of the real as 'a "semiotic" or unbounded textism in advance of "life" on all levels' (104) is potentially far more productive in addressing climate change. In Cohen's harsh formulation, Derrida's mimed hospitality to the other can be juxtaposed against de Man's genuine asubjective ahospitality, and used to show that 'there is a strange moral force to de Man's auto-dismantlings, his disappearance into inarticulation which has been left unattended. It makes Derridean ethics, turned back toward an ethics of the other (being), a bit dissembling, even unethical — at all events, rhetorically strategic' (105). And hence de Man's texts, and the history of de Man himself, *perhaps* might offer a way of theorising a future by

breaking with the anthropic or biocentric circuit, the same model as that of a faux sustainability of a faux 'eco' system, often telecratically managed as 'public space' today. And (...) [they do so] by dispossessing the metaphors of the home, by an 'irreversibility' that exceeds the hermeneutic relapse as cognitive reflex (and effacement), by positioning the inhuman in advance of the enphantoming of a 'human' that had never existed as a definitional — that is, reversing

the cultural extension toward otherness, toward the 'otherness of the other,' in various sub-categories, that defined the supposedly ethical preoccupations of the 1990s. (123)

In the face of 'consumed futures, zombied presents' (128) Cohen argues not to 'save' de Man, but to 'suggest that those who will have to invent an unrecognizable model in the next horizons that practices an asubjectal mode, will find a resource in a 20th century anomaly' (128), that is, by creating a non-organicist, inhuman semiotics from the excluded, toxic figure of de Man.

Cohen's dismantling of the *oikos* is not restricted to the conceptual, but targets a very specific theoretical family — that of deconstruction. Precisely who is in this family is left unclear, although Cohen goes to some length to describe shared traits. The head of the household — Derrida — is described by Cohen in an earlier article as having 'artefacted' a 'late' period which could 'enter into the main arteries of humanistic traditions (...) in order (...) to counter the entrapping clichés of him as anti humanist "post-structuralist" (he saw what happened to de Man)'.² In Cohen's chapter in *Theory and the Disappearing Future* the image of an aging academic jealously defending his project against contaminating inclusions is taken even further, and Derrida's work on ethics, hospitality and politics is represented as an aggressive purging of the hazardous and ideologically compromised de Man from the legacy of deconstruction. While Derrida's later texts *are* marked by a certain autoimmune drive to delimit and defend deconstruction, and deconstruction needs, *to an extent*, to be differentiated from what we might call a biographical or historical 'Derrida Studies' — Cohen quite aptly uses the term '*Derrideanism*' (98) — within Cohen's chapter and a number of his preceding articles is a sense of a personal vendetta against deconstruction's 'family scene'. Not only does Derrida become a dark figure who, unable to absorb the destructive figure of de Man, 'delete[s] de Man from the genealogy of "deconstruction"', (92), the 'rightful inheritors' of Derrida's texts become sycophantic mourners whose loss of a father figure has occluded their critical acumen:

Derrida's death spawned an ensemble of able and often admirable critical scion given over to talking about 'ethics,' about 'religion,' to exegetical commentary, to recuperation and stitching back, to almost outbiddings of mourning and friendship shaded into a quiet stupor

of orthodox and policing networks, to writing for one another, to its auto-immune phase. One might look less for feral names than viral symptoms, as if this were not a factor of personalities quite, but a collective viral, flitting here and there, particularly with those who confuse contact with Derrida with his text (a somewhat different 'Derrida'). Of these symptoms, beware when an essay finds itself reminiscing about 'Jacques,' locating his origin in Husserl, naturalizing the text, pleading ethics and 'negative theology,' loving hospitality, or (should one stop?) invoking Cixious as a celebrity substitute. (156 note 14)

There is a risk that Cohen's domestic squabble—which is in danger of appearing based on disagreements about placements at the dinner table rather than the legacy itself—will detract from an important and serious point: that archiving and calcifying Derrida's texts will hamper their ability to engage with climate change. While, Cohen argues, Derrida is to be condemned for failing to sufficiently address global warming, his inheritors are to be decried even more, as they have failed to reposition or reread deconstruction in relation to very real and very catastrophic environmental situations:

it was too much to expect of those seeing themselves as managing this capital [Derrida's legacy] to turn toward the one zone absent in Derrida, that Derrida did not show how to do. It would imply a very different conception of legacy and capitalization if a next step of 'deconstruction' were willing to dissolve the premise to recast or supplement it, rather than be exegetically invested in a proper name. That is, the biomorphic and geomorphic anarchivism which no Levinasian trope can be applied to, which entered high media presence more or less just following Derrida's death. (104)

For Cohen the question of whether one can chastise an author for what he *didn't* write is ostensibly misguided; the failure of Derrida and the wider field of deconstruction to engage with climate change is not an oversight, or simply an involvement in different field of engagement, but a willfully blind refusal to mark global suicide. Thus, one might say that for Cohen Derrida's *did not* in relation to climate change becomes a more ideologically loaded *would not*, and a gaping political

and ethical hole in his work. While Cohen does not directly make the comparison, there is the sense that Derrida's crime of environmental non-engagement is weighed against de Man's crime of collaborative, anti-Semitic engagement, and the former found to be the graver of the two. This is not to imply that any of the papers in *Theory and the Disappearing Future* condone de Man's war-time actions, but that, for Cohen at least, the de Man affair can be used to provide a stark contrast to Derrida's supposed position of dangerous and costly anthropocentrism.

The refusal to position climate change as no more than one possible topic in a varied field of potential engagements is an important one, and the acknowledgment that intellectual resources need to be focussed on this must be made. However, the level of aggression directed towards Derrida and 'friends' distracts and detracts from Cohen's essay. A certain delimitation of the boundaries of deconstruction did become important to Derrida towards the end of his career, and there are undeniable autoimmune problems with a deconstruction that begins to patrol its borders, and posit a clear head of the table. But this does not warrant Cohen's descriptions of a resentful (103) Derrida 'obsess[ed] over the survival of his corpus' (97).

Miller's chapter focuses less overtly on ecological disaster, but emphasises undecidability and the 'theotropic'. Linking the de Man lecture contained in the volume to the ambiguity of the archive, Miller notes how an archive fever of genesis, development and unity is affecting those who try to archive the planet; to preserve it, unchanged, for humanity. But this drive to conserve is ill-fated, as the archive is a place of undecidability: differing drafts retained in an archive undo any illusion of univocity that the final, published text might contain, without offering any sense of firm foundation. This undecidability can be seen in the drafts of de Man's 'Allegories of Reading (*Profession de foi*)', which went through a number of versions and titles, one of which was 'Theotropic Allegories'. 'Theotropic' is an engagement with God, a deferral of God, and a substitution for God: a mediated, tropological turning towards and away from. A 'Theotropic Allegory' is a narrative concealing a reference to God, and exhibiting a conceptual and temporal connexion/interruption between sign and referent. However, *theotropism* can be also understood as a more general term for drift between sign and reference. Referentiality is a (quasi)transcendent act,

since it operates by the transcendence of the signifier to signified. However, this transcendence and intimate link is interrupted by the replacement of the signified with another signifier, and referentiality is therefore tropic. Referentiality is *theotropic* in that language is based on a transcendental signifier, which for de Man can only be God: 'the only conceivable name for transcendental signification that would no longer be itself a sign, the only word that would have a truly proper meaning, is "god"' (de Man 2012 134, quoted by Miller 68–69). But, as God is, for de Man, a '(fallacious) coinage' (de Man 2012 134, quoted by Miller 69), the transcendental signifier at the heart of referentiality is a trope itself. Thus *theotropism* indicates that the tropological deviation of the sign from its referent is a mirroring of the tropological divergence of the transcendental signifier itself.

Why did de Man abandon this term? Miller suggests that he did so as he recognised it misread Rousseau's text, overemphasising the link between being and God (72). More importantly, however, what interests Miller is unreadability or undecidability in the term *theotropism*: 'It is impossible to decide whether what de Man says by way of the word "theotropic" is theistic or not theistic. Does he really mean it or does he assert it only ironically when he says "the only word that would have a truly proper meaning is 'god'"?' (72). Given that irony is mentioned by Miller in some detail in his essay, it is interesting to note that these 1973 notes prefigure the formulation of irony in de Man's 1976/77 'The Concept of Irony'. The unreadability of the term *theotropic*, which leads Miller to ask if it is ironic or not, conceals de Man's movement towards a definition of irony as the trope of tropes. If God is a trope, then *theotropism* is the trope of tropes — irony. Irony is 'the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes'³ — the permanent, anacoluthic interruption of the narrative system. While 'theotropism' as a trope of tropes was abandoned by de Man, irony was not.

In 'The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure' Bronislaw Szerszynski argues for an ironic ecology that posits an awareness of our interconnectedness.⁴ While Szerszynski argues too strongly for a human/nature interrelation, moving beyond his argument to a structural irony that operates beyond the subject, whose excessiveness might enable an approach to scale effects and whose inhuman technicality would link both de Man and Derrida, might provide the theoretical approach that Cohen, Colebrook and Miller

seek. Language, as ironic, *verspricht (sich)*: it promises and it mis-speaks, and thus in its undecidability produces a real, unpredictable event. While its implications may still present a certain subject-centred orientation on the mark, its parabolic step and paratactic (dis)order allow for a thinking of effects and implications beyond the immediate or apparent. The inaplacable, inhuman text machine is ironic, and what is at stake in irony 'is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the very readability of texts, the possibility of deciding on a meaning or on a multiple set of meanings or on a controlled polysemy of meanings'.⁵ Irony is, therefore, not simply a turn within language from direct or literal meaning that reinforces its existence, but a double turn that moves away from any presumption of a knowable single meaning or 'authentic' language. Irony is inhuman, fundamentally fragmented, unreadable. While its philosophical implications — Schlegel's use of Fichte's self-positing, for example — may link it to the human, its radical excess refuses to be contained by the parameters of the subject. If de Man is to be used in the formulation of an inhuman rhetoric for a disappearing future, then irony must play a part.

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Notes

- ¹ See Miller's 'How To (Un)Globe the Earth in Four Easy Lessons', *SubStance* 41.1 (2012), 15–29 on this.
- ² Tom Cohen, 'The Geomorphic Fold: Apocalyptic, Changing Climes and "Late" Deconstruction', *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010), 78.
- ³ Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony' *Aesthetic Ideology*, edited by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 179.
- ⁴ Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure', *Environmental Politics* 16.2 (2007), 348.
- ⁵ De Man, 'Irony', 167.