



Aion

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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i.

Αἰών. This word is first found in Homer's *Iliad*. There it expresses the span of a human life, not in terms of its chronological duration but rather of its being and having been lived. When Sarpedon's *psuche*, breath, would take flight in the fatal thrust of a spear, only then might his *aion* also dissipate.¹ In the Homeric Aion, up to the point of the individual soul's death, time proves to be recursive upon itself, intensive, inhabited, in its place. Time as *chronos* is volatile, fleeing without a trace, but in the Aion time becomes thickened, layered, embodied, enduring. In the centuries after the *Iliad*, the Aion underwent a broadening of its scale and so meaning as it came to signify a generation, an age, a vast amount of time and even eternity. In our historical age the Aion has emerged anew in the naming of the four geological eons, vast spans of geogenic and biogenic time in which the emergence of our own living kind upon the face of the earth can be recognized and situated.

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ii.

The Atlantic horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) is, it turns out, the stuff that not only dreams are made of but we humans also. Crawling ashore to mate and deposit their eggs on a full moon in mid-spring, this species appears from one vantage to be engaged in a timeless drama of death and renewal both heartening and

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¹ Homer's *Iliad*, 16.453-55: "αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ δὴ τὸν γε λίπη ψυχὴ τε καὶ αἰὼν πέμπειν μιν θάνατόν τε φέρειν καὶ νήδυμον ὕπνονεῖς ὃ κε δὴ Λυκίης εὐρείης δῆμον ἵκωνται" ["but when his soul [*psuche*] and life [*aion*] have left him, then send thou Death and sweet Sleep to bear him away"]. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer II*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 198-99.

reassuring to the human onlooker.² With such a scene surely in mind, Aristotle argued that although individuals of living kinds die, the living kinds themselves prove eternal.³ Through the constancy of species identity, particularly in the case of *Homo sapiens*, the dynamism of time can be claimed to emerge in its earthly environs with decorum and composure. Even if one must suffer the indignities attendant upon being a creature who is born and dies, these would be situated within and oriented by one's belonging to a living kind that in turn exists without end.



Figure 1. *Horseshoe Crabs Spawning.* Photograph by author.

But these thoughts move in other directions entirely when one considers how a host of creatures putting on a show 500 millions years deep, these awkward (at least to us), ten-eyed arthropods with copper-based blood from another time altogether, are also our own progenitors, or more precisely, the more or less direct descendants of them. The strangeness of these kin to us is unsettling, scandalous, even monstrous, as they remind us that we humans are born not only from out of our mother's womb, but also the wombs, both human and more-

² For a meditation upon the annual spawning rite of Horseshoe Crabs fitting this register of temporality, see: Tom Horton, "Horseshoe Crabs and their Ancient, Annual Rite of Spring in Delaware Bay now Face an Uncertain Future," *Audubon* May-June (1996): 76–81.

³ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 130-31, 731b(33)-732a(2).

than-human, both viviparous and oviparous, of our forebears. And one should not forget those generations even more distantly related to us, emerging through meiosis and mitosis. Against the horizon of the geological eon, we find lodged in our very flesh an archaic past of a more-than-human lineage promising an anarchic future of a more-than-human paternity. While one might still view the destructive force of a tsunami from afar, or contemplate the terrifying mass of an overhanging cliff from a reassuring vantage, the evolutionary dynamism of the biogenic Aion is unavoidably with us in our every breath and in every beating of our, it turns out, more-than-human heart. As a result, the vastness of the Aion proves not only sublimely unimaginable or irresistible in a manner that Emmanuel Kant might have conceived.⁴ The Aion's vastness is also uncanny, specifically in that notion of the abjectly uncanny described by Julia Kristeva.⁵

iii.

The uncanny breadth of the Aion, first envisioned in James Hutton's notion of "deep time,"⁶ has only been recognized and named by Western thinkers in the last three centuries. The earth has aged four and a half billion years in the passing of a few hundred years of human history, and we are still catching up to the dizzying change in perspective. When Thomas Jefferson first saw mastodon skulls unearthed in American environs he theorized that the creatures to whom they belonged must still be roaming the earth further out on the continent.⁷ Only slowly did it dawn on his generation and those following that the earth was much older than Western culture had heretofore imagined and that many of the living kinds once populating the planet no longer existed. With these thoughts came another unsettling one—that living kinds finding their homes upon the face of the earth even here and now could cease to exist, could become extinct. Finally, the most unsettling insight of all, at least to monotheistic Europe, was added by Darwin: that all these living kinds—both extinct and existent—are our kin, whether immediate or distant.

Currently we recognize that 99% of the living kinds that have ever arisen upon the face of the earth are now extinct,⁸ and that every one of these—from anaerobic bacteria to lepidodendron, from trilobites to gorgonopsia—can claim a tie of genetic kinship to us. But knowing these facts and making sense of them is not the same thing at all, and the latter task is one that justly occupies the emerging field of the eco-humanities. Not only is the enumeration of the number of earthly orbits around the sun involved in defining the length of a particular age being called for. Against the horizon of the Aion, particularly as it is formulated in the four geological eons, modes of being in time emerge that heretofore were unthinkable. A renewed sensitivity to time and its fruits is now incumbent upon us.

⁴ Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §28, 261.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-32.

⁶ See Stephen Baxter, *Ages in Chaos: James Hutton and the Discovery of Deep Time* (Forge Books, 2004).

⁷ See Mark V. Barrow, *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18-36.

⁸ Steve Parker, *Extinction: Not the End of the World*. (London: Natural History Museum, 2013), 4.

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