Radical Animism

Reading for the End of the World

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Introduction: Reading for Life

The following pages are concerned with animism – or rather with *animisms* in the plural – with the myriad activities and agencies of entities both organic and inorganic. Non-human and non-living forces act, create, read, write and respond in ways that have often been assumed to be exclusively human. In this age of climate breakdown, the disavowal of such forces is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, as long-held scientific, philosophical and psychological paradigms are challenged by agencies beyond the human. I elaborate a radical new animism for a planet in crisis, recognizing the non-human powers that assert themselves around us, in us and through us. This is not an anthropological study; rather, this book is concerned with sketching a generalized rethinking of animism that is neither mystical nor 'primitive' and that is attentive to forms of animism that are alive even in the most scientific or modern worldviews. I am also very much concerned with the *animism of literature*: the ways in which literary writing has a strange and active 'life' that has the power to disturb, startle and transform the contexts in which it is received, the futures into which it is born. The work of Jacques Derrida, effecting as it does a sustained deconstruction of anthropocentrism, is essential to my thinking throughout.

My subtitle, 'Reading for the End of the World', should be understood in two ways. First, it can be read in an apocalyptic vein, as referring to the kind of reading that might be appropriate to this time of catastrophic climate change, a reading for the end of the world. Second, however, it can also be read in an affirmative tone. If we take the etymological sense of the word 'world' as 'the age of man' (coming from the Old Danish *wær-æld*, meaning literally 'man-age') and the word 'for' in the sense of 'in defence or support of; in favour of, on the side of', this would be a mode of reading that is *in favour of* the end of the age of man – a reading that is *for* the end of the *wær-æld*. To be clear, I am not

advocating for the extinction of the human. On the contrary, I am recognizing that the future of human life in fact depends upon the end of a world in which human beings narcissistically act as if they are separable from or independent of other living things. The end of the *wær-ældd* would be the beginning of a less destructive or pathological relationship between humans and the other forms of life with which we share this planet.

The importance of *reading* should also be stated here. While, as this book will make clear, notions of reading, writing and text are all generalizable beyond the narrow human definition – we are not the only entities reading and writing the world – it is to the act of reading that I give special emphasis. To read is both receptive and creative. To read is to open oneself to alterity, to open oneself to the possibility of transformation. Reading is, as Sarah Wood recognizes, a *force* – and one among others.[1] It turns, by necessity, to the future.

As such, it should be an essential activity for a time of crisis. How should we read the Anthropocene? How should we read texts – literary and otherwise – in the Anthropocene? How is the Anthropocene reading us? These are some of the questions around which the following pages will turn.

Other recent studies have sought to explore the ways in which literature responds to the Anthropocene and climate change. Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* provides a survey of 'climate novels', accounting for the ways in which the current ecological context 'make[s] new demands on the novel itself, forcing formal and narrative innovation'.[2] Meanwhile, Tom Bristow's *The Anthropocene Lyric* and Sam Solnick's *Poetry and the Anthropocene* both focus their attention on poetry and the ways it 'responds to the challenges of the Anthropocene epoch', as Solnick remarks.[3] These studies, that is to say, examine how literature written in the context of climate change recognizes and responds to that context. In contrast, the majority of literary texts discussed in this book predate the human recognition of the climate crisis, and so are certainly not 'about' climate change or the Anthropocene in any direct sense. Instead, the readings that I offer here show how literary texts might resonate differently in this age of environmental crisis, effectively transforming themselves and transforming the ways we read them, moving beyond authorial intention and crossing historical contexts. In an essay on Joseph Conrad's story 'Typhoon', Nicholas Royle writes of the '*futurological power*' of a text, 'its capacity to cast light on what comes later, on what ostensibly post-dates the work', so that it 'carries its own future in itself'.[4] Like a living organism, a text grows and changes over time, being constantly shaped by – and in turn shaping – its environment. This book attempts to recognize and reckon with this animistic potency of literature,

and in so doing demonstrates how an animistic worldview is neither primitive nor naïve.

What follows is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, 'Radical Animism: Climate Change and Other Transformations', thinks through the geophysical and conceptual alterations of contemporary environmental crises, and suggests, via a reading of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), why animism has renewed potency in such a context. I discuss the planetary transformations that have earned the designation of a new era – the Anthropocene – and consider how this works to decentre the human and trouble various assumptions about agency, animality and responsibility. I elaborate three ways in which the notion of 'Anthropocene reading' might be understood, describe how language can be thought of as radically metaphorical and show how 'life' is a concept that should be generalized beyond the organically living. I go on to discuss three 'blows to human narcissism' – the Copernican, Darwinian and Freudian paradigm shifts – and suggest that climate change is the fourth blow, which, unlike the others, animistically issues from non-human agency.[5] Global warming can be explicitly linked to the inherent contradictions of capitalism that Marx identified, and I indicate how socio-economic inequality and environmental catastrophe are intertwined. I then give an account of the historical use of the word 'animism' in the works of E. B. Tylor, James Frazer and Sigmund Freud – texts which have contributed to some of the enduring associations of the term. Noting how all three writers employ a more equivocal use of the word than is often assumed, I propose a generalized rethinking of animism for life and living in the Anthropocene, as non-human, non-living forces insist they be reckoned with.

The next three chapters take as their starting points the Copernican, Darwinian and Freudian paradigm shifts and trace their heightened significance in light of climate change. Chapter 2, 'Surviving the Anthropocene: Revolutionary Rhythms', looks at the decentring and rescaling force of the Copernican revolution, and the ways in which it not only disturbs the place and prominence of humans within the universe but also undermines the reality of human sense perceptions. I elaborate an animism of rhythm, a non-human force that voices itself in (but that is not reducible to) human language. I read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), two works that particularly exhibit her attunement to the wild force of rhythm and the animism of the non-human world more generally. Both novels, I argue, can be read as post-Copernican in their decentring movements and apprehension of non-human scales, animistically breaking down conventional notions of objectivity, interiority, identity and characterization. Woolf inscribes a universe that is dynamically

animated by non-human and non-living forms of life, and that opens itself to scales of space and time both vast and minute – as was being revealed by the astronomy and quantum physics of her time. Both works also exhibit the modern preoccupation with entropic extinction – a thought that resounds today as we face the threats posed by climate change. Guided by Derrida's concept of 'survivance' or 'living on', I suggest how a generalized notion of text can be seen to oppose entropy. I go on to discuss (in relation to nuclear war) the anthropogenic mass extinction event that is currently occurring and the challenges to thinking it poses.

Chapter 3, 'Animals at the End of the World: The Evolution of Life and Language', deals with the blow to human narcissism struck by the work of Darwin: the revelation that there is no rigorous distinction between human beings and other animals, that all life is intimately related and radically interdependent, and that complexity can be produced without intentional agency. I discuss how the origin and evolution of language and organic life animate each other more than metaphorically, and, through a reading of Genesis, elaborate how human language and naming work to both assert and disrupt human identity. After illustrating the necessity of metaphor and fiction for any apprehension of non-human animals, I read Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014) and Nicholas Royle's *Quilt* (2010) – both of which are moved by encounters with non-human animals, problems of representation, the life of language and the experience of deep time. Such concerns are, as I discuss, revealing themselves to be increasingly important in the Anthropocene. I then look to the commodification and consumption of non-human animals in global capitalism, the environmental degradation this engenders and the dissimulations which make such bipartite violence possible. Finally, I turn to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872) – a work which incessantly complicates the distinction between human beings and other animals, troubling assumptions about who or what is meant for eating.

Chapter 4, 'Hatching: Psychoanalysis and the Textual Unconscious', concentrates on the blow struck to human narcissism by Freudian psychoanalysis. The revelation that there are unconscious forces at work in the mind undermines notions of human agency at individual, linguistic, social and global scales, an apprehension which is key to understanding the human responses – or lack thereof – to global warming. I examine the necessity of language, translation and literature to Freud's work, and the ways in which psychoanalysis deals with, or in, animism. To elaborate a 'textual unconscious' – both the unconscious operations of text and the textual operations of the unconscious – I read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

(1920) alongside Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600). I indicate some of the literary and theatrical debts of Freud's text, its narrativization of life and death, and the magical, animate play of language that voices itself throughout. I then turn to Clarice Lispector's 'The Egg and the Chicken' (1964), a text in which the acts of reading and writing are shown to be radically co-implicated, undermining notions of authorial intention and control. The text raises questions that are particularly resonant in light of climate change – questions about cause and effect, translation and futurity, agency and instrumentality. Returning to Freud, I illustrate how the literary debts of psychoanalysis run at a deeper level than allusions and examples, structuring the very mode of its operation, and I conclude by considering how the pathological forms of human narcissism that have shaped our history and engendered climate change might be recast in light of the arguments of this book.