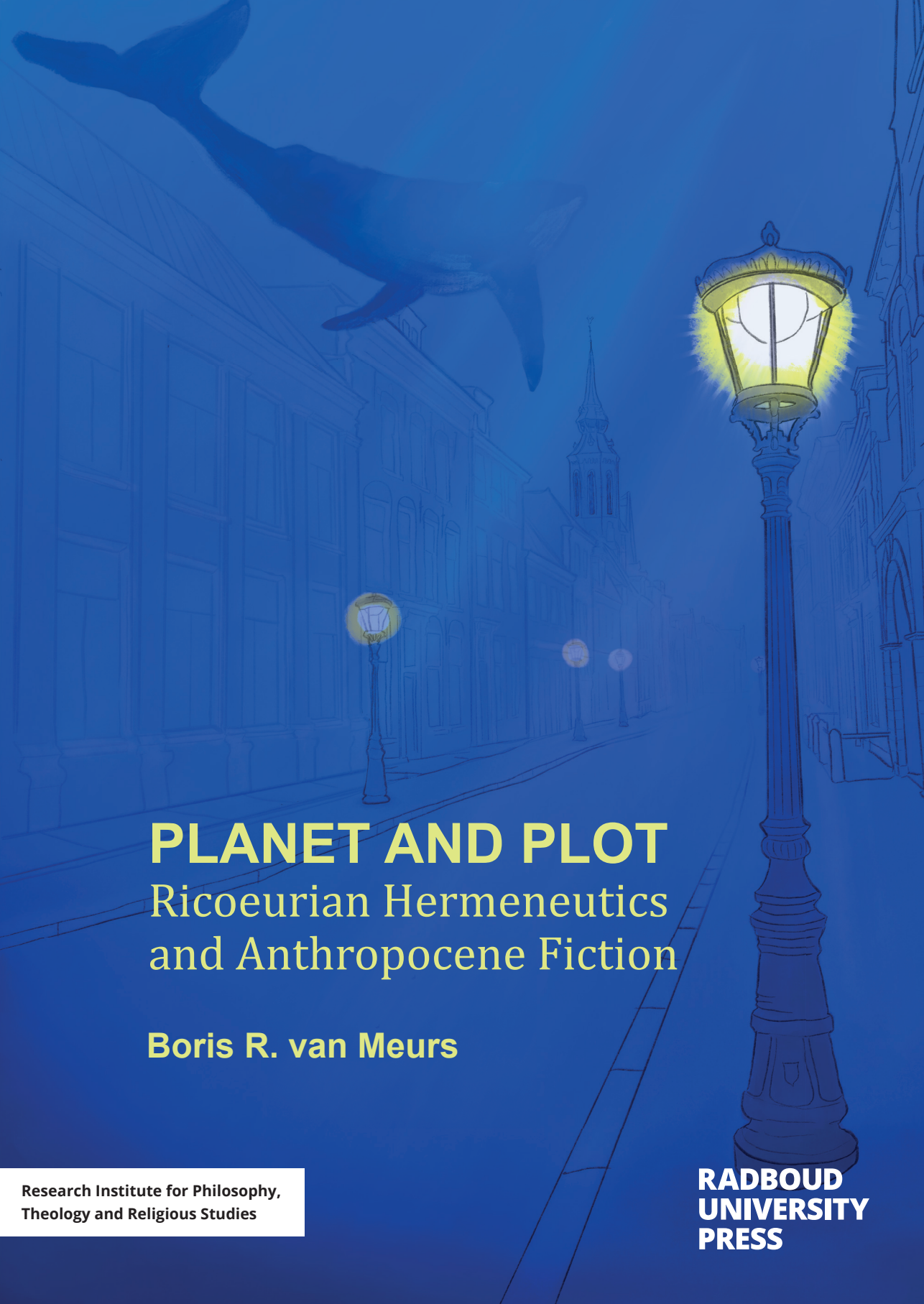


PLANET AND PLOT

Ricoeurian Hermeneutics and Anthropocene Fiction

Boris R. van Meurs

Research Institute for Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Planet and Plot

Ricoeurian Hermeneutics and Anthropocene Fiction

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From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.
- Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*.

[E]ach cubic metre of air, each square foot of soil, is stamped indelibly with our crude imprint, our X.
- Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Given that this dissertation makes ample use of sources that were not published originally in English and given the importance of language and translation in hermeneutic philosophy, some preliminary remarks concerning the use of translated literature and other stylistic choices are in place.

- When I have quoted a translated source, such as the English editions of Ricoeur's work, I have provided a version of the quote in the original language in a footnote;
- Every first time when I have quoted a translated source in a chapter, I have cited both the original and the translated version in full. For every subsequent reference, the page numbers of the original language version are placed between square brackets at the end of the quotation in the footnote;
- In some fields of study, linguistic convention has one refer "consistently [...] to a generic writer of one sex and a generic reader of the other."[1] In this dissertation, I have followed this convention and referred to the generic author as 'she' and the reader as 'he'; the same applies to other 'active' and 'passive' nouns that require gendered language.

[1] Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (Penguin Books, 2015), 28n.

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PREFACE

One of the most pressing issues of today is the immense, negative impact humans have on the Earth system as a whole. Anthropogenic climate change, pollution of the environment, and the disruption of ecosystems threaten the future of our and other species, increase vulnerability of many humans already living in poverty, and leave traces far into the future of the planet. Gathered under the term Anthropocene, such changes signal the influence of now geological proportions that humans have over the entire planetary system.

The Anthropocene, as a geoscientific concept, signals the increasing importance in contemporary debates of what has become known as the 'planetary.' The planetary refers to the geoscientific perspective on Earth as a complex system with a multi-billion history in which humans are relative latecomers. I argue that the emergence of the planetary framework raises questions about the relation of humans to the world and to Earth, because the geosciences reveal new aspects about what it means to be human today – now that humanity has become a 'geological force' – that are hard to integrate in human self-understanding. For example, while the frame of the planetary is requisite to understand the depth of contemporary human influence on the Earth system, it also marginalizes human existence. The planet's immense temporal and spatial scales are at odds with those relevant to meaningful human action. Besides, the planetary framework implies a particular ontology that eludes everyday sense-making. It foregrounds flows of energy and matter over any localized agents, making it difficult to connect planetary thinking to everyday actions that require an identifiable, responsible agent. Moreover, the planet takes humans out of the centre of attention, as it describes Earth as a complex system that will exist even beyond human extinction. In everyday life, these demands of planetary thought are often experienced as discordances, as an uneasy feeling that the way in which one finds meaning in life and the world is haunted by the planet on which they unfold.

In this dissertation, I will zoom in on how these discordances are explored in the new literary category called 'climate fiction,' or 'Anthropocene fiction,' which refers to novels that address the anthropogenic impact on the Earth's (climate) system. Literature, in general, provides a chance to witness how historical events and societal changes are integrated into what one may call everyday understanding, while Anthropocene fictions allow one to particularly

study the challenges of giving meaning to the planetary perspective on humanity. Such contemporary literary productions on the Anthropocene and climate change sketch a wide array of ways in which humans inhabit these discordances and tensions. The planet is often presented as a disrupting force that cuts short the ways in which protagonists interpret the context in which they act. Floods destroy the hopes and dreams of characters, narrators suddenly abandon storylines when they zoom out to adopt a planetary perspective on their narratives, or novels end by imagining human extinction in the far future.

Although creative and diverse, such discordant fictions raise the question whether literature can still positively change the way in which their readers relate to the world. They often end by stressing the difficulties of relating to meaningfully to the planetary framework at all. What are readers to make of such novels that present the planet as a force that interrupts the stories they tell about themselves as agents in a meaningful world? If the planet is mostly discordant to the modes of interpretation that readers use to make sense of the world, how can the planet still inform their relation to the world?

This dissertation departs from such instances of planetary discordance in novels to raise the question how readers find meaning and reinterpret their world in light of these problems and tensions that adhere to the concept of the planetary. To respond to these challenges to interpretation, I will take a hermeneutic approach to this issue. In this dissertation, I will work with and innovate the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, which provides rich resources for thinking through the relation of humans to physical time. Ricoeur is one of the most influential figures in continental hermeneutics of the past century, and his work on literature and narrative is still useful in thinking through the way in which humans relate to a world that is never completely their own. While Ricoeur has seldomly addressed ecological issues, I will claim that his literary philosophy can be reread to shed a light on the relation between humans and the planet.

Following Ricoeur's work on literature, I will claim that discordance is included in the construction of meaning in literature and narration, and that, hence, planetary discordance can be included within the hermeneutic project. In what follows, I will argue that Ricoeur's hermeneutics helps to make sense of and provide meaning to the many discordances between lived experience and the planetary scale, especially as they emerge in literature, while I also work with contemporary literary debates on the Anthropocene to deepen and expand

Ricoeur's framework. As such, I hope to deepen the hermeneutic approach to the planet and the ecological crisis, while I also attempt to build a bridge between literary theory and contemporary philosophical hermeneutics.

To this end, I will update several of Ricoeur's key concepts by staging dialogues between his hermeneutics and contemporary literary theory of Anthropocene fiction, stressing the place and value of discordance in Ricoeur's work, while developing innovative approaches to some of its core themes. In each chapter, I will proceed by discussing a prominent, 'discordant' element of geoscientific planetary thinking and then invoke a hermeneutic core concept that appears to be put under pressure by this discordance. I will then innovatively approach Ricoeur's work to reply to the challenges of the planetary, with the aim to show how a revised understanding of hermeneutic core concepts can in fact incorporate planetary discordance within a theory of interpretation. My aim, therefore, is to show that the discordances of the planetary can deepen hermeneutics. For each chapter, I have chosen one literary work to illustrate and further explore the tensions of that chapter. The aspects of planetary discordance that I will bring into discussion are *verticality, asymmetry, materiality,* and *multiscalarity.* On the side of Ricoeur's theory, I will invoke the concepts of *world, belonging, trace,* and *reception* to explore these planetary terms, with the aim to rethink, deepen, and innovate Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

After an introduction that further explores the notions of the planetary, Anthropocene fiction, ecohermeneutics, and the contemporary reception of Ricoeur, I will proceed with a first chapter that discusses 'verticality.' I will explain that the geoscientific perspective on the planet clashes with the hermeneutic approach of human existence as situated within a 'world' of meaning, especially in as far as this world is conceived of as a 'horizon'. In a quite literal sense, the view of Earth from space as a planet among planets is a view without horizons, as it is no longer bound to the Earth's surface. While phenomenological hermeneutics has resisted this decentred, scientific gaze on Earth, I raise the question whether a hermeneutics without horizons might be possible, that is, if there is a hermeneutics that somehow incorporates the planetary 'gaze from nowhere' to rethink its often anthropocentric conception of world. My argument will be that Ricoeur's concept of world can indeed be developed in this direction. While there are 'anthropocentric' concepts of world in *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur also maintains that world *includes* rather than *precludes* discordant experiences of

the limits of human experience, including a sense of wonder at the indifference of physical time to human existence.

The second chapter formulates a hermeneutic response to the planet's *asymmetrical* relation vis-à-vis human life. Here, asymmetry means two things. The planet *predates* human life, i.e., it refers to a being that is fundamentally independent of humans: it therefore belongs to the planet to be *withdrawn* from consciousness, as it will exist before and after any consciousness is there to which it can become present. Yet asymmetry also refers to the connection between the planet and humans: it means that humans *belong* to the planet for the material conditions of their life form, while the planet could do without humans. I will introduce and discuss the work by speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux, who criticized (continental) philosophy for allegedly thinking being as a correlate of consciousness or language, which, in his view, renders philosophy unable to understand how science can make claims about the planetary history of Earth, which predates both consciousness and language. In my terms, I will read Meillassoux as a theorist of planetary discordance in as far as the planet is always also *withdrawn* from human consciousness. I will argue, however, that hermeneutics can escape criticisms of correlationism, and hence make room for a relation to the planet, if one reinterprets its key concept of *belonging*. Usually, belonging is understood as the debt of consciousness to tradition in its relation to the world and to being. However, I will there argue that Ricoeur's work enables us to think belonging in a wider sense as belonging to the planet that sustains human life.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the planet's *materiality*, which here refers to the non-anthropocentrism of the Earth System sciences that conceive of the planet as a conjunction of forces, energies, and matter. Materiality gains traction in the work of cultural critic Claire Colebrook, who has argued that any concept of the 'human' in the Anthropocene is merely a *product* of these underlying forces and never a stable point of origin: according to Colebrook, this means that the planetary requires us to move beyond the figure of the human to return our gaze to the complex network of relations and forces from which it emerges. In this chapter, I will compare Colebrook's criticism of humanism and theories of human universality with that of Ricoeur, who, in *Time and Narrative*, develops an open-ended concept of (universal) humanity, based on ideal forms of communication and dialogue. Taking up Colebrook, I will argue that Ricoeur's concept of humanity does not yet reckon explicitly with

the enmeshment of humanity with the physical planet. However, I will then also claim that this potential shortcoming can be countered by rereading Ricoeur's concepts, and by placing emphasis on his notion of the trace, which, for Ricoeur, is a condition for 'humanity' while it also embeds humans in the natural world with its nonhuman physical time.

In a concluding chapter, I will discuss the problem of multiscalarity in planetary thinking in relation to interpretation. Phenomena such as climate change are, for example, not directly reducible to actions of individuals but emerge from the decisions of collectives in relation to factors such as infrastructure and history. In this chapter, I will discuss the 'scale critique' as formulated by Tim Clark in his *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* which maintains that the many, conflicting scales of the planet confronts literary critique because a text can no longer have a stable meaning. Clark is pessimistic about what this means for literary critique, but I take up the challenge to see if a hermeneutics can be developed that replies to these many conflicting meanings in Anthropocene fictions. Using the work of Adeline Johns-Putra and mobilizing Ricoeur's reception theory, I will claim that hermeneutics is indeed able to integrate these destabilized meanings in new forms of what I will call 'fragile' interpretation. The hermeneutic concept I will invoke here is therefore that of 'reception.' The result of such fragile reading is not to gain mastery over texts but rather to perceive how any established interpretation is immediately open to destabilization by planetary factors on other scales. I will claim that hermeneutics can articulate a theory in which these fragile meanings are seen as openings to the planet, which remains a sort of 'other' to humans even if humans belong to it.

In the conclusion, I will connect the above meditations under the heading of the concept of 'fragility'. Fragility is a typically Ricoeurian concept, stressing the interplay between human finitude and vulnerability on the one hand, and the call for responsible action that helps those that are fragile on the other hand. In the conclusion I expand this concept in the direction of the kind of fragility exposed through the study of the planetary, which highlights a type of fragility that ultimately cannot be overcome through responsible actions – a fragility closer related to contingency.

Overall, I hope that this dissertation may contribute to further discussion on the potentials of Ricoeur's hermeneutics for discussions of the planetary and its many discordances, that it may spark interest in the literary creativity of Anthropocene fictions, and that it helps build a sense of wonder at Earth's enigma's.

INTRODUCTION

PLANETARY DISCORDANCE

On the closing pages of Barbara Kingsolver's acclaimed climate change fiction novel *Flight Behaviour*, an uncanny planetary force disrupts the plot's carefully established coherence.[1] After six hundred pages that immerse the reader in the minutiae of the psychological development of the novel's main character — a young woman called Dellarobia, trapped in an oppressive social environment in rural Tennessee — a flood of Biblical proportions comes washing over everything like "an ocean, stippled and roiling in waves over submerged rock and rill."[2] Having crawled up a hill for shelter, Dellarobia watches as the water carries away all that she owns, and with it, readers may infer, the opportunity for a liberating escape to a college degree. College was to be the pinnacle of Dellarobia's *Bildung* toward which the novel had been climbing its way up until its end. Then, instead of a satisfying concordance of events into a moment of closure, discordance suddenly lashes out. A rift opens between the planetary phenomenon of climate change, here manifested as a sudden flood, and the meaningful coherence of Dellarobia's actions. It is as if, when the planetary force of climate change finally reveals itself, it mutes the narrative in which it intervenes and manifests itself as discordant to the very discourse that includes it.

Flight Behaviour's ending reflects the difficulties at the heart of this dissertation, which will use Ricoeur's hermeneutics to reflect upon the challenges of thinking about the relations of humans to the Earth as a planet, and the role of fiction in mediating these challenges. The planetary system's dispersed and emergent properties are notoriously hard to represent by narratives, as they rely on particularized and situated characters, viewpoints, times and places.[3] Moreover, narratives tend to subjugate planetary processes to the (very human) interests of narrators and audiences, given that, as scholar Hannes Bergthaller

[1] Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour* (Faber and Faber, 2013).

[2] Ibid., 593.

[3] Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), 76-8.

points out, "narrative […] is a distinctly human artifact which encodes the values of particular human communities."[4] While fiction and narrative may render the planet interesting for readers by fitting it into familiar plot structures, focused on human actions, the planet humanized as such is not the planet of physical climate change. In her novel, Kingsolver highlights these issues by deliberately sabotaging the reader's expectations about storytelling by ending so suddenly and drastically with a flood that destroys its plot. This brings to the fore the unnarratable reality of climate change within a narrative that signals the limits of narrative.

Flight Behaviour is an interesting case that illustrates well the discordances of the planetary, because, at first, it seems to fall into the trap of humanizing the planetary. It mobilizes climate change merely as a kind of plot device to set into motion the psychological development of its protagonist Dellarobia. It thereby exposes what happens if one tries to make sense of climate change using more traditional, anthropocentric registers of interpretation. Earlier in the book, Dellarobia's world is wrought open when millions of monarch butterflies settle on her farm's lands after disruptive climate change has displaced them from their regular winter habitat in Mexico, and she discovers an opportunity to grow as a person by interacting with and learning from the scientists who arrive in the wake of the butterflies to study their remarkable displacement. As the plot unfolds, Dellarobia shakes off her lethargic submission to these restraining circumstances, and she prepares to become the captain of her fate when the prospect looms for an escape by going to college. During this more traditional part of the novel, climate change figures ostensibly as a trigger to send Dellarobia on her narrative arc. The arrival of the butterflies creates a disequilibrium that sets in motion the events that will draw her outside her everyday existence toward a change for the better.

Literary theorist Timothy Clark has argued that for this reason "the insects seem to have come almost entirely to symbolize a positive turning point in one character's life, a kind of visual background music for Dellarobia's story."[5] For Clark, this is a shortcoming, because

[4] Hannes Bergthaller, "Climate Change and Unnarratability," *Metaphora*: *Journal for Literature, Theory, and Media* EV2 (2017): 7, https://metaphorajournal.univie.ac.at/climate-change/volume2_bergthaller.pdf.

[5] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 177.

it "engage[s] a reader's interest in climate change in this individualizing way," which "exemplifies some of the, possibly inevitable, pitfalls in how a novelist may negotiate a global issue opaque to immediate or empirical representation."[6] From being a dispersed planetary phenomenon, climate change is shrunken into the dimensions of a personal drama, subjugated to a familiar plot line of realizing one's potential. However, the ending of the novel, to which Clark pays scant attention, complicates this picture. There, climate change is figured as an intrusion in and disruption of narrative; it cuts short Dellarobia's story, and its presence changes from a plot device subordinated to human plans and desires to a force that destroys them.

Literary critic Adeline Johns-Putra interprets the novel from this angle, and she argues that the end's discordance deliberately "shocks the reader out of an emotional connection with Dellarobia."[7] Explicitly disagreeing with Clark, Johns-Putra foregrounds "the abruptness of the turn away from Dellarobia" as a deliberate literary challenge to "an overwhelmingly conservative and conventional set of readerly sympathies and parental ethics."[8] While readers expect the novel to bring Dellarobia's psychological development to a fulfilling close, Kingsolver takes a violent swing at their sedimented literary expectations, smashing the neatly established plot to smithereens, so that we are, in Johns-Putra's words, "dropped abruptly into the revelation of the insignificance of our place within [the biosphere]."[9] One might therefore view *Flight Behaviour* as a performative critique of the novel, one that innovatively uses literary narrative to bear witness to planetary change that cannot be cast into more traditional narrative forms, like a narrative that undoes narrative, and that calls for an interpretation that warns readers not to interpret the world according to the familiar framework of human agency and everyday meaning.

Displaying this tension, the novel highlights developments in philosophy and literary theory discussing the Anthropocene, the geological epoch of humanity, and in particular the planetary level on which the Anthropocene manifests itself as disjunctive or discordant with

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[6] Ibid., 177.

[7] Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 163; I pick up the discussion between Clark and Johns-Putra again below, cf., 214-281.

[8] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change,* 163.

[9] Ibid., 164.

everyday human experiences.[10] The geoscientific perspective on the planet as a unified, complex system that predates the existence of humanity, it is argued, can be known scientifically but is never the object of direct human sense perception, because it operates on scales of time and space that dwarf those on which human existence unfolds. As such, it is also difficult to connect the planetary frame to the world as the meaningful backdrop against which humans make sense of their actions, desires, and projects: it appears as if the planetary frame requires all of these resources to be bracketed, introducing a distance at the heart of experience. This is, in a sense, true of all scientific conceptions of the world, which abstract from lived experience. However, the issue of how to relate meaningfully to scientific abstraction is so pressing in the case of the Anthropocene and the planetary because they address an existential threat to humanity, given that ecological destabilization is already affecting and will affect more and more human lives. The Anthropocene and the planetary framework also reveal hitherto invisible aspects to being human: they are about 'us', about what it means to be human today as a geological force. The planet calls for renewed interpretations of the world and a new orientation on responsible action, but by bracketing traditional ways of making sense, the planetary also frustrates the process of interpretation at the same time.

In this dissertation, I will maintain that the planetary presents itself as a *hermeneutical* problem. Hermeneutics is a branch of philosophy that maintains that interpretation mediates the relationship between humans and being, i.e., that experience is embedded in and enabled by tradition, history, and language that help articulate the meaning of what presents

[10] The Anthropocene is the now informal name for the geological epoch in which humanity has become one of the major forces determining the future of the Earth system. The Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), charged with preparing an official ratification proposal of the Anthropocene epoch to the Geological Time Scale (GTS), handed in their proposal to the International Commission of Stratigraphy in 2024, which, however, voted it down for (undisclosed) reasons. Ecologist Erle C. Ellis, who left the AWG for what he perceived to be its rigid approach to the Anthropocene as a geological *epoch,* has recently, together with others, made the case that we should instead view the Anthropocene as an *event*; as such, it would not be included on the GTS as a certain time period but rather refer to a "material happening which takes place through time, and which takes time to emerge and unfold." Despite this controversy on the exact definition of the Anthropocene, the geological community has not debated the wide-ranging influence of humanity over the future of the planet. I will discuss my take on the concept in a subsection below. Matthew Edgeworth, et al. "The Anthropocene is more than a time interval." *Earth's Future* 12 (2024): e2024EF004831. https://doi.org/10.10292024EF004831.

itself. The planetary is of concern to hermeneutics because it interrupts a mode of interpreting the world that is embedded in an everyday context, in which actions of humans are explained in terms of intentions, background conditions, circumstances, motivations, et cetera. To explore the implications of this interruption, I will draw on and further develop the literary hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to engage with the discordance between the planetary and the world as it emerges in Anthropocene fictions such as Kingsolver's. Such fictions, I maintain, render visible and creatively explore the heart of the tensions emerging in relation to the planetary.

In particular, I will focus on how Ricoeur can help me think through the hermeneutics of *planetary discordance,* a term I will introduce to speak of the ways in which the planetary manifests itself as deeply disruptive of the everyday experience of the world. The hermeneutical problem of planetary discordance involves the difficulty of relating meaningfully to the ways in which the planet resists and then interrupts meaning-giving practices such as they exist in literary writing, and, one could argue, also in interpretative practices of the world in everyday life. How to write, read, and interpret narratives that present the planetary as an unrepresentable event? How to interpret what manifests itself as opposed to interpretation? How might readers apply novels to their worlds, if these novels bracket and weaken the very processes of interpretation involved in making sense of the world?

Ricoeur is one of the most influential hermeneutic thinkers of the twentieth century, who engaged with a wide array of sources and traditions, such as phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and structuralism, to study the ways in which language and culture shape and open human experience. Moving from a French context to the University of Chicago in the 1970s, Ricoeur has had a considerable impact on literary theory in the anglophone world, making him a relevant discussion partner for contemporary literary theory. Ricoeur's work studies the ways in which factors such as narrative, history, and memory shape the human relation to time, action, and society. For Ricoeur, humans are born into a tradition or culture, which hands them the symbolic means to explore their identities, engage in action with others, and recognize themselves as capable and responsible persons. While hardly touching upon the topic of ecology or planetary, my claim is that Ricoeur's hermeneutics can be read innovatively as a fragile hermeneutics of discordance that is able to deepen understanding of what is at stake in Anthropocene fictions, when they invoke planetary discordance to subvert and

problematize the process of literary interpretation. In particular, I will draw from Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics in his *Time and Narrative* [*Temps et récit*] trilogy, which argues that literature is an imperfect, poetical solution to certain irresolvable paradoxes of time – which, in Ricoeur scholar William C. Dowling's words, results from Ricoeur's constant aim "to push analysis to the point where there stands revealed, just beyond the limits of purely logical or rational argument, a lurking aporia or irresolvable paradox."[11]

Although Ricoeur's theoretical investigations are already several decades old, they can still contribute to debates on Anthropocene fiction by their rigorous understanding of how narrative restructures experience, refigures time, and opens new worlds for readers, while they also bridge the gap between phenomenology, literary studies, and historiography. However, contemporary debates among literary scholars also challenge Ricoeur's hermeneutics, which has not explicitly discussed either the planetary or the ecological relations of humanity to the nonhuman world.[12] This is why I will not merely perform an exegesis of *Time and Narrative* but instead provide a critical but sympathetic rereading that stresses the crucial role of discordance within its theory of literary interpretation. By reading Ricoeur as an author of discordance, I aim to innovate, challenge, and probe the possibilities inherent within his thought; what emerges is therefore not an 'extended' version of Ricoeur's theory, but, to borrow one of Ricoeur's own metaphors, I will present a different "relief" of his work, making

[11] William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to* Temps et récit (Notre Dame University Press, 2011), x; Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 1* (Seuil, 1983); Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 2: La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Seuil, 1984); Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3: Le temps raconté* (Seuil, 1985); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[12] In a review of David Utsler's *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy*, Mick Smith observes that Ricoeur "wrote nothing even remotely substantial about ecology," to which I will have to agree – Ricoeur's work only sometimes, briefly, touches on the topic, mostly to move to other things on as quickly as it can. Yet, what I aim to show in this dissertation is that many concepts within Ricoeur's work can be made to correspond to issues raised by the emerging paradigm of planetarity, especially in as far as Ricoeur has always been careful to think humans as always relating to phenomena and meaning that exceeds what they can control or exhaustively know. Mick Smith, review of *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy* by David Utsler, *Environmental Philosophy* 22, no.1 (2025): 158; David Utsler, *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy* (Lexington, 2024).

more prominent the relation to 'discordance' of several key concepts – those of 'world,' 'belonging,' 'humanity,' and 'reception.'[13]

As a result of the dialogue that I will stage between hermeneutics and contemporary literary theory, I will present Ricoeur's work as capable of formulating a *fragile hermeneutics.* While more traditional readings of Ricoeur's work would inquire whether a novel 'refigures' the world of readers by disclosing new possibilities within it, this fragile hermeneutics warns readers that the planetary remains external to *whatever* meaning they ascribe to it within the complex constellations of their values, desires, circumstances, projects, et cetera. Discordance challenges the self-evidence of the narrative form and its implied semantics of action vis-à-vis the planet, but this challenge is still articulated – although as interruption, ambiguity, et cetera – within narrative representation. As such, it is still a matter of concern to hermeneutics, it is still a part of the act of interpretation. A fragile hermeneutics of planetary discordance in literature therefore neither abolishes nor simply accepts the inevitable human need for meaning – instead, it shows how discordance emerges *through* meaningful narrative of human actions even as it raises awareness of the limits of narrative modes of understanding. The aim of this dissertation is to get a clearer sense of how this interplay between planetary discordance and fragile hermeneutics can be articulated by using Ricoeur's framework.

In this introduction, I will present the main framework of this dissertation by situating my reading of Ricoeur in contemporary debates on the Anthropocene and literature. In a first section, I will develop the idea that the planet is a discordant concept. I will do this by first presenting Ricoeur as a thinker of discordance, then by introducing the Anthropocene in relation to discordance, and, finally, by arguing that the planet is already taken as a discordant

[13] Ricoeur writes that "it is always possible to relate the same sentence in different ways to this or that sentence considered as the cornerstone of the text," resulting in varying interpretations of text's significance as a whole – there is no fixed or set-in-stone, a priori determinable sense of any text. I take the liberty to apply this principle to Ricoeur's work itself, demonstrating how emphasis on the thematics of discordance and fragility gives rise to an altered understanding of the sense of his hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2*, with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 158-9; "Il est toujours possible de rattacher la même phrase de manière différente à telle ou telle phrase considérée comme la pierre d'angle du texte." Paul Ricœur, "L'action sensée considérée comme un texte," in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 201.

concept in the humanities. Using Dipesh Chakrabarty's understanding of the planet, I will there introduce the planet as a concept comprising the discordant dimensions of *verticality, asymmetry, materiality,* and *multiscalarity*. In a second section, I will situate Ricoeur within contemporary debates on Anthropocene fiction and environmental hermeneutics, pointing out what my contribution to these debates will be.

INCLUDED DISCORDANCE

In this dissertation, I approach the concept of planet through the lens of 'discordance.' The planetary and the Anthropocene have been read, I argue, through this lens in discussions within the humanities on the implications of these concepts. Discordance is also a term that is prominently featured in Ricoeur's work. "Included Discordance," the title of this section, actually refers to a subsection of *Time and Narrative.*[14] Ricoeur's work unfolds in discussion with the notion of discordance, and it even argues that discordance is maintained rather than overcome by narrative understanding. Narrative is never simply a "triumph of 'order'."[15] I will maintain that such 'included discordance' within literary expression and interpretation enables Ricoeurian theory to move toward questions of planetary discordance, especially as they emerge in Anthropocene fiction. In this section, I will first typify planetary discordance by relating it to Ricoeur's understanding of discordance. Then, I will present the concepts of the Anthropocene and the planetary as they have impacted discussions in the humanities, stressing their relation to discordance.

DISCORDANCE IN TIME AND NARRATIVE

The central thesis of *Time and Narrative* is that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experiences."[16] What Ricoeur says here is that time is not *immediately* 'human', i.e., only *after* narrative organization does time appear in some

[14] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 42-5 [71-6].

[15] "[L]e simple triomphe de l''ordre'." Ibid., 73 [112].

[16] "Le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l'expérience temporelle." Ibid., 3 [17].

sense as 'human,' which I think should be read as endowed with meaning. While this thesis stresses that narratives bring something to the human experience of time when they organize events by means of the structures of a plot, it also assumes that time is not in itself something 'human,' or, that discordance between non-human time and human time precedes any found concordance between these two in stories and fiction. This interplay between concordance and discordance is crucial for any understanding of *Time and Narrative.* In fact, Ricoeur invokes the concept of 'discordant concordance,' which, in turn, refers to three different tensions that his hermeneutics of literature and time addresses: discordance within the experience of time, within narrative, and between two concepts of time.

First, Ricoeur argues, there are discordances within the phenomenology of time itself between unification and dispersion.[17] On the one hand, there seems to be only *one time.* However, this 'one time' always risks being exploded into several directions. There is, for example, the distinction between past, present, and future, while time can also appear fragmented into a series of mere moments. Here, discordance refers to a disjunctive experience of time: one could think of moments in which one's life appears more in the form of a series of disconnected episodes rather than as a meaningfully structured whole across time. At such times, which also relate to crisis or trauma, time itself appears as merely fragmented, incoherent, without providing any unity or sense.

Time therefore appears marked by discordance. Ricoeur develops this intra-phenomenological discordance most explicitly in discussion with Saint Augustine's paradoxical explorations of time.[18] In Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine explains that time implies a constant tension in the soul between discordance or 'distention' [*distentio*] and concordance or 'intention' [*intentio*], which refer to the activities of the soul as its intentions.[19] According to Augustine, Ricoeur explains, there would be no time without the soul. The soul constitutes time by actively attending the present, expecting the future, and remembering the past.

[17] Ibid., 16-22 [34-41].

[18] Ibid., 5-31 [19-55].

[19] Augustine, *Confessions, Vol. 2: Books 9-13,* ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 2016); The explicit opposition between *intentio* and *distentio* emerges from Ricoeur's reading and is not phrased by Augustine in these terms. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, 18 [37].

These activities constitute a rich, 'threefold present,' namely, the present of the past as memories or traces, the present of the future as expectations, and the present of the present as what is attended to.[20] Yet, while there appears to be *one* soul gathering together through its activities these multiple dimensions of time, there is immediately also a multiplication of times. The very activities of the soul that enable time to exist divide time into three qualitatively different dimensions – past, present, future.[21] This means that time, for Augustine, always unfolds within a tension between activity and unity – intentio – and passive dispersion – distentio. In Ricoeur's words, "through engaging itself, the soul suffers distension."[22] This experience of the discordance of time appears *within* the human experience of time itself.

In a second sense, discordance is a feature of narrative rather than of time itself. Ricoeur discusses emplotment and narrative as providing a poetic solution to the phenomenological aporia's disclosed by Augustine. The dynamic between discordance and concordance is addressed, Ricoeur maintains, by the notion of emplotment, as it is developed in Aristotle's *Poetics*.[23] In Ricoeur's reading, Aristotle balances the order of the plot as a *unity* with the *dispersion* of events contained by the plot. The unity of a single narrative arises out of a series of events that simply succeed each other.[24] When these events enter a plot, however, they suddenly gain a coherence that they lacked when considered one-by-one. Discordance also enters Aristotle's analysis of the Greek tragedy. Aristotle argues that the best tragic plots are complex, which means that they involve a sudden change of fate [*περιπετεία*]. In real life, this

[20] "Perhaps it would be appropriate to say, 'There are three times: the present respecting [*praesens*] things past [*praeteritis*], the present respecting things present [*preasentibus*], and the present respecting things future [*futuris*].' These three things do somehow exist in the soul [*in anima*], and I do not perceive [*video*] them anywhere else: for the present of things past is memory [*memoria*]; the present of things present is paying attention [*contuitus*]; and the present of things future is expectation [*expectatio*]." Augustine, *Confessions*, 230-1.

[21] "What I measure [when I measure time] is the actual present impressions [*affectionem*] produced in you by passing events [*res praetereuntes*]; and which remains [*manet*] when those events have passed: not the actual present event, not those things which have passed and so let the feeling come into being." Ibid., 248-51; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 18 [37].

[22] "[L]'âme se 'distende' à mesure qu'elle se 'tend,' voilà la suprême énigme." Ibid., 22 [40-1].

[23] Aristotle, *The Poetics,* in *The Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style,* trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe and W. Rhys Robert, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1982).

[24] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 65-6 [102-3].

change would be a moment of crisis, one that disrupts the cohesiveness of the life that precedes it. Yet, in fiction, the inclusion of such drastic changes constitutes the wholeness of a work.[25] No story without complications. However, such narratively included discordance is no longer simply of the order of time as it is lived. In narrative it finds its place, but, in reality, it would destroy the agent and its sense of identity and unity. This second sense of discordance is discordance as it appears when it enters the narrative structures of the configured plot.

While the above two senses of discordance in *Time and Narrative* describe the tension between experiences of unity and dispersion, there is yet another sense of discordance running through its volumes. This deals more explicitly with *two different* concepts of time (rather than tensions within *one* concept of time). Ricoeur often discusses the conflict between a physical and a phenomenological understanding of time, insisting that that physical time is ultimately irreducible to time as it is experienced. According to Ricoeur, physical time is founded on *movement* rather than on the *activity* of the soul – clock time, for example, has been developed and defined traditionally in relation to the physical spin of the Earth and not to an inner sense of duration. This further intensifies the problems of discordance, as humans have to relate to a cosmic or physical time that is not originally meaningfully structured. It is not merely the case that the coherence of a life is disrupted by some external event causing sudden change but rather that the very structure within this coherence is articulated clashes with something that resists it – the time of 'nature'. In the second volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argues that narrative also has a function to navigate the tensions this gives rise to. He discusses Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, as a novel that displays a variety of ways of inhabiting this conflict of temporalities, that is, of different forms of life grappling to find concordance within the tension between the time of the soul and the anonymous time of calendars and clocks..

So far, I have sketched three senses of discordance in Ricoeur's work, namely, as pertaining to the tensions within the experience of time, within narrative, and between two different concepts of time. Is the kind of planetary discordance that I describe above already captured by one of these concepts? While 'discordance' is a key term in Ricoeur's *Time and*

[25] Aristotle, *The Poetics,* 1452a [38-9]; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*,

Narrative, I claim that the planetary crisis requires further explorations of the role discordance plays in interpretation, narrative, and literature.

Planetary discordance refers to the manifestation of the planetary forces as bracketing often relied-on ways of making sense of the world, including narrative. While Ricoeur discusses discordance as something that can be contained and poetically appeased by narrative, planetary discordance challenges the narrative approach itself. Planetary discordance does not indicate that the world is fragmented, nor does it present the manifestation of planetary forces as a disastrous change of luck within a coherent narrative. It is closest to the third kind of discordance, the conflict between the time of nature and the time of the soul, because it relates to the incongruity between the planetary geoscientific frame and the registers used to make sense of ourselves and our everyday experiences. However, what sets planetary discordance apart is that it more directly, self-reflexively addresses this incongruity. In other words, planetary discordance does not address experiences of fragmentation but rather the narrative and interpretative response to such experiences.

This difference can be made tangible by returning to the example of *Flight Behaviour*. On the level of the first discordances that Ricoeur describes, it could be said, for example, that Dellarobia in *Flight Behaviour* overcomes a dissatisfying, discordant sense of her life, where her potentials are not recognized by her environment. Coherence emerges when she actualizes her potential by attending university, which projects meaning to her previous struggles. Yet, the novel introduces a meta-level planetary discordance by plunging this entire story in a devastating flood, raising the question whether the planetary dimensions of climate change will ever fit the armature of a plot. Phrased otherwise, planetary discordance concerns events, disruptions, or ambiguities that challenge ways in which concordance is found across the other levels of discordance in narrative.

In sum, Ricoeur is a thinker who acknowledges the importance of discordance in the human relation to the world, and he therefore provides much to explore in the direction of planetary discordance. In this dissertation, I aim to actualize this potential. To gain a clearer grasp of the task ahead, it is important to first get a sharper sense of the relation between planetarity and discordance.

DEFINING THE ANTHROPOCENE

Planetarity is a geoscientific term that describes Earth as a unified, complex system. The planet made its way into philosophy, the humanities, and literary theory through discussions concerning the 'Anthropocene,' the much-debated geological epoch of humanity. While the Anthropocene concept has received criticism from the geoscientific community and from the humanities, I will (critically) adopt the term for this dissertation because it underscores several important insights for planetary discordance. The Anthropocene addresses the geological dimensions to problems such as climate change, it denotes the suddenness of changes to the planetary system in the past century, and it thereby marks a sense of discontinuity that requires new modes of thought – or drastic innovations of received traditions – to relate to the planetary future.

In 2000, late atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen stumbled over his words at a meeting with the International Geosphere Biosphere Programme (IGBP) in Mexico, in what has become for many the birth scene of contemporary discussions on the Anthropocene.[26] Dissatisfied when his colleagues, in presentations of their latest research, kept using the umbrella term 'Holocene', the name of the relative moderate interglacial epoch that started about 11.000 years ago, Crutzen, vice-chair of the IGBP, replied that the 'Holocene' no longer adequately described the scale of changes on Earth and that "we're in the... the... the... (searching for the right word)... the Anthropocene!"[27] The term, compounding the Greek terms *anthrōpos* (human) and *kainos* (recent), was to capture the wide-ranging influence of anthropogenic activities on the composition of the atmosphere, changes in land use, plummeting biodiversity levels, oceanic disturbances, et cetera.[28] After the meeting, Crutzen proposed the

[26] Will Steffen, "Commentary," in *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change*, ed. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin, and Paul Warde (Yale University Press, 2013), 486.

[27] The anecdote has been shared by Earth System scientist Will Steffen, who was present at the meeting. Steffen, "Commentary," 486; The Holocene is often presented as an epoch of moderate climate condition, but Jeremy Davies has convincingly argued, in his book *The Birth of the Anthropocene,* that even the Holocene knew of abrupt climatic swings in temperature, even if these were less radical than in previous geological epochs. "The Holocene was not a blank canvas upon which human societies could express themselves." Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (University of California Press, 2016), 150.

[28] In an elucidating analysis of the term, Ian Angus reminds his readers that the suffix *-cene* refers to the system introduced by nineteenth-century geologists Charles Lyell, which set layers of rock apart by

idea of the Anthropocene in an internal newsletter of the IGBP, together with Eugene Stoermer, a marine biologist who had come up with the term several decades earlier.[29] Their publication was followed, in 2001, by an IGBP pamphlet that integrated human systems with the Earth System, backing up Crutzen and Stoermer's proposal with more data, and that also included an entire chapter on the Anthropocene.[30] A year later, Crutzen published the article "Geology of Mankind" in *Nature*, which launched the interdisciplinary academic discussion

establishing the ratio between extinct and non-extinct fossil found in each of layer. The Miocene, for example, takes its name from *mios*, 'few', in the sense that it contains few recent fossils. Lyell dubbed the most recent epoch simply the Recent epoch, which geologists later changed to the Holocene – the *holos* (wholly) recent epoch. In line with this reasoning, the Anthropocene would simply indicate a period in which strata display recent anthropogenic fossils. Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (New York University Press, 2016), 231.

[29] Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene'," *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18; Crutzen and Stoermer were hardly the first to speculate about the planetary influence of human agency. Contemporary discussions often point to George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864) which argued that human interventions in nature degraded ecosystems on large scales, coming to the grim conclusion that "man is everywhere a disturbing agent" (36). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian priest and geologist Antoni Stoppani introduced the Anthropozoic era to capture the planetary scale of human influence over the Earth in his *Corso di Geologia.* In the early twentieth century, the concept of the noosphere emerged in the thought of authors such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the Russian thinker Vladimir Vernadsky, which referred to the importance of human thought as an emerging new sphere that would determine the future of the Earth in conjunction with the biosphere and Earth's other spheres. What is new, however, about the twenty-first century discussion on the Anthropocene has been the (recently voted down) attempt to formalize the term in geological terms, an endeavour that followed when geologists picked up on the ideas by Earth System scientists such as Crutzen. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature: or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (Charles Scribner, 1864); Antonio Stoppani, *Corso di Geologia*, *Vol. II*: *Geologica Stratigrafica* (G. Bernardoni e G. Brigola, 1873); Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, "The Biosphere and the Noosphere," *American Scientist* 33 (1945): 1-12.

[30] The expanded version of this pamphlet can be found here: Will Steffen et al., *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet Under Pressure* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2004); This history is recounted in detail in Ian Angus's work. Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene,* 25-107.

on the Anthropocene.[31] This debate has spread from the Earth System sciences [ESS] to geology to the humanities, and the Anthropocene has by now become something of a household concept for scholars in fields varying from marine biology to gender studies.[32]

Beyond ESS, the Anthropocene was soon picked up by geologists, who raised the question whether, indeed, the Anthropocene could be added to the Geological Time Scale (GTS) as an officially ratified epoch, of the same status as the Holocene or Pleistocene before it. For geologists, the definition of a new epoch such as the Anthropocene always involves evidence of large-scale changes to the Earth System that would be legible in the rock archive of the planet; instead of pinpointing a particular historical event as the beginning of the Anthropocene, for geologists, the question is whether they can find a clearly distinguishable Anthropocene Series of strata that can be set apart from those of the Holocene, the geological epoch that started 11.700 years ago.[33] Geologists look for a so-called Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP), an internationally recognized marker in a particular stratigraphic section at a determined site that is used to define the lower boundary of an epoch. Such "boundaries of geological time units must aim to be both clear and *synchronous* across the planet," as they will then allow geologists, globally, to discern a signal in rocks that can function as a clear boundary between Anthropocene strata and those that precede it.[34] To define the Anthropocene, geologists therefore determine a particular marker, a paradigmatic geological site where this marker is clearly visible, and agree on the approximate lower boundary of the epoch within this site.

The Anthropocene has engendered several conflicting narratives about its origins and definition, each with a particular perspective on the nature of the Anthropocene and on what constitutes the 'humanity' to which it refers. Crutzen settled on 1784, the date when James

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[31] Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23.

[32] John A. Darling and James T. Carlton, "A Framework for Understanding Marine Cosmopolitanism in the Anthropocene," *Marine Ecosystems Ecology* 5 (2018): 1-24, https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2018.00293; G. Mitchell Reyes and Kundai Chirindo, "Theorizing Race and Gender in the Anthropocene," *Women's Studies in Communication* 43 no. 4 (2020): 429-442.

[33] Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, and Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Polity, 2020), 47-51.

[34] Adeney Thomas et al., *The Anthropocene*, 50.

Watt invented the steam engine, arguing that this date coincides with the dawn of global climate change due to large-scale carbon dioxide emissions.[35] However, this proposal has harvested critique from geologists and humanities scholars alike. For geologists, this particular date is not tied to any identifiable marker in the lithosphere that appears synchronously across the globe, while, for decolonial scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Crutzen's proposal reifies the Eurocentric story of "man's break with nature" as the dawn of modernity that figures European (white) man as a place-holder for the universal *anthrōpos*.[36] It could be argued that such criticism maintains that the Anthropocene falsely proclaims a certain discordant event under the banner of well-known ideologies, i.e., it misses how concordant the Anthropocene event is with such Western narratives.

A proposal by geographers Mark Maslin and Simon Lewis to start the Anthropocene in 1610 counters the supposed apolitical status of the Anthropocene narrative. Lewis and Maslin focus on the impacts made by empires in what has been called the 'Columbian Exchange' of people and biota across the globe as a consequence of the conquest of the America's, leading to a "reorganization of life on Earth without geological precedent."[37] In terms of an accompanying stratigraphic marker, they point to a dip in global carbon dioxide levels as a result of a period of reforestation following upon the genocide of North American indigenous people in the wake of the violent 'discovery' of America.[38] By tying the Anthropocene to the longer history of imperialism, Lewis and Maslin underscore the political relations between the ecological crises and human history, as do the alternative proposals of Jason Moore's 'Capitalocene' or Parikka's 'Anthrobscene,' both of which are 'narratives' specifying

[35] Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," 23.

[36] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2019), 21.

[37] Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene", *Nature* 519 (2015): 174; the term 'Columbian Exchange' comes from the work of historian Alfred W. Crosby, who published a book with that title already in 1972, investigating the effects of the 'discovery' of the Americas on global biodiversity and ecology. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Greenwood Press, 1972).

[38] Lewis and Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," 175.

the (capitalist) systems allegedly responsible for ongoing climate change and ecological degradation.[39] Feminist critics, such as Kate Raworth, have challenged the male-dominated perspective of the geoscientists, suggesting the advent of a 'Manthropocene'.[40] In their *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, historians Bonneuil and Fressoz even introduce seven other possible narratives for the Anthropocene, such as the 'Thanatoscene' or the 'Polemocene', each pinpointing other factors that would have led to the current era of destruction of the natural world.[41]

Although these alternative accounts have done much to stimulate debate and have brought political and historical elements to the attention of geologists, most of these alternate narratives did not include serious proposals for the ratification of a geologic Anthropocene, i.e., for a GSSP that would allow to inscribe the Anthropocene on the Geological Time Scale. As Ian Angus explains in his *Facing the Anthropocene*, for geologists, the question is not what or who is responsible for the Anthropocene but rather what traces in the lithospheric archives would allow geologists to identify distinct changes to Earth's planetary composition in the lithosphere (no matter what the exact cause and who is responsible).[42]

The geological community voted on an official proposal to ratify the Anthropocene in 2024, which resulted in the Anthropocene's rejection as a formal, geological epoch, sparking heated debate about the future use of the Anthropocene idea. The Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) as part of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) was set the task to research whether the Anthropocene can be formalized as part of the Geological Time Scale.[43] The AWG opted for a mid-twentieth-century date for the onset of the Anthropocene,

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[39] Jason W. Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism", in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press, 2016), 1–14; Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[40] Kate Raworth, "Must the Anthropocene be a Manthropocene?", *The Guardian,* October 20, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/20/anthropocene-working-group-science-gender-bias.

[41] Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'événement anthropocène: La terre, l'histoire et nous* (Seuil, 2016); Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz*, The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us*, trans. by David Fernbach (Verso, 2016).

[42] Angus, Facing the Anthropocene, 236-44.

[43] Cf., http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/.

based on a so-called 'Golden Spike' in the strata of Crawford Lake, Ontario registering the consequences of nuclear testing in terms of globally synchronous increase of plutonium levels, a proposal that has recently been rejected on formal grounds. According to some of the members of the Subcommission for Quaternary Stratigraphy who voted down the proposal, the relatively recent date proposed by the AWG did not adequately capture the deeper history of human influence over the planetary system; in interviews with the press, some argued that this relatively recent date would fail to reckon with the onset of large-scale human agency further in the past, for example due to the invention of agriculture or even with the use of fire.[44]

I still propose to use the term in an unofficial way to stay with the emerged discussions between geoscience and the humanities about the interpretation of what means to be human on a planet that everywhere bears the marks of human agency. To this end, it is not decisive whether the Anthropocene has become an official part of the Geological Time Scale; its function is primarily to signal the depth of human impact on the Earth system – which the geoscientific community does not contest – and the interdisciplinary challenges that emerge from this fact. Scientists involved in the AWG have argued that the Anthropocene could still be useful to more loosely indicate the "fundamental step change" of human influence over the Earth System "as the result of a mid-twentieth-century planetary transformation" often associated with what environmental historian John McNeil called the Great Acceleration.[45] I will adopt their suggestion, as I think that the Anthropocene could then still signal a host discordances that I address in this dissertation, ranging from the emergence of geoscientific discourse on humanity, awareness of recent, drastic changes to the planetary system, and a general sense of discontinuity that asks of philosophers and humanities scholars engaging with the topic to rethink the nature of their approaches.

[44] For statements of SQS members in the press, cf. Will Sullivan, "Scientists Reject Proposal to Define the Anthropocene, a Geological Age Marked by Human Activity", *Smithsonian Magazine,* March 6, 2024, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/scientists-reject-proposal-to-define-anthropocene-180983905/

[45] Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "What should the Anthropocene mean? (Comment)", *Nature* 634 (2024): 982, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-02712-y.

THE DISCORDANT PLANET

The most important legacy of the Anthropocene discussion for this dissertation is the emergence of planet-level thinking. Using a definition of Earth system scientist Will Steffen, I will use the concept of the planetary to denote Earth as "a single, planetary-complex system, with a multitude of interacting biotic and abiotic components, evolved over 4,54 billion years and which has existed in well-defined planetary-level states with transitions between them."[46] In this dissertation I will read this geoscientific definition by building on historian and philosopher Dipesh Chakrabarty's development of the concept of the planet as characterized by vast temporal scales, non-anthropocentrism, and the entanglement of organic and inorganic forces.[47] Four particularly discordant characteristics of the planetary are deduced in this subsection that will structure this dissertation, namely, *verticality, asymmetry, materiality,* and *multiscalarity.*

Before going into these characteristics, which I will draw from the influential work of Chakrabarty, I will first sketch a brief overview of the reception of the concept of the planet in the humanities. The concept of the 'planet' finds its origins in Earth system science, which, in turn, is a child of the Space Age's interest in life on other planets, as well as of the Cold War context during which "scientists and others realized that nuclear weapons, ozone-destroying chemicals, and greenhouse gases could radically remake the world."[48] In the context of the Space Age, NASA scientist James Lovelock, in a quest to detect life on other planets, argued it would make sense to study their atmospheric composition, given that the presence of life would have left recognizable traces there – an idea that underscored the active role life played within the planetary systems as a whole.[49] In a 1972 paper, Lovelock goes a step further and proposes the well-known Gaia hypothesis, arguing that life on Earth had not only

[46] Will Steffen et al., "Stratigraphic and Earth System approaches to defining the Anthropocene," *Earth's Future* 4 (2016): 325.

[47] Chakrabarty has been writing on the philosophical and historical implications of the Anthropocene since 2008. His most important essays, along with several new ones, on the topic have been gathered in a monograph in 2021. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Planet: A Humanist Category" in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[48] Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 30.

[49] Tim Lenton, *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-2.

impacted the atmosphere but even acquired "the capacity to control the global environment to suit its needs and this capacity has persisted and is still in active use," for example through radically increasing the levels of free oxygen in the atmosphere.[50] Although the teleology in the Gaia hypothesis has been contested, the idea of the organic and inorganic influencing each other on large scales would become a common element of the geoscientific perspective on Earth. In the words of Steven M. Stanley and John A. Luczaj this means that "we cannot understand either the physical or the biological history of Earth in isolation […] because the two have been tightly intertwined: the physical environment has influenced life, and life, in turn, has influenced the physical environment."[51]

When Earth is seen as a planet, then, it is taken as a *whole* system, comprising both biotic and abiotic elements. As Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller observe, the etymology of 'planet' goes back to the Greek term *planētēs* [πλανήτης], "that which strays or wanders," suggesting a perspective "informed by principles of exchange, of connection, interaction, and synergy."[52] In this view, the planet tends towards meta-stability within certain relatively well-defined system states, such as the current cycle of glacial and interglacial periods; nevertheless, under enough stress, relatively rapid changes can occur within the system, when feedback loops that were inhibiting change are rather flipped around to spur on cascading effects pulling the system towards a new state.[53] This means that the planet is a dynamic system, that, despite periods of relative calm, never returns to true stasis; it also means that any planetary state is fragile and can change under pressure. In the Anthropocene, this perspective stresses that human influence can interfere with planetary processes and tip the planet over toward a new system state; the Anthropocene might denote such a tipping point.

There is also a military background to ESS, as has been pointed out by several historians and thinkers. For example, in his *La terre vue d'en haut,* historian Sebastian Grevsmühl

[50] James Lovelock, "Gaia as Seen Through the Atmosphere," *Atmospheric Environment* 6 (1972): 579-80.

[51] Steven M. Stanley and John A. Luczaj, *Earth System History*, 4th edition (W.H. Freeman and Company, 2015), 2.

[52] Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 151.

[53] Steffen, "Defining the Anthropocene," 336-7.

has underlined how the idea of a unified planetary system developed hand in hand with military interests during the Cold War, when geopolitical players required detailed knowledge of the Earth System, given the risks of planetary destabilization due to nuclear war or a weaponized modification of weather.[54] Likewise, Spencer Weart recounts how meteorology and understanding of the climate system were spurred on by the need of the military, which often funded geophysical research, to better understand the environments in which they were active, as well as to weaponize these environments. "A nation that understood weather might also obliterate an enemy with droughts or endless snows – a Cold War indeed!"[55] While the planetary approach of Earth brought into view the precarity of its ecological relations, it also played into the hands of a militarized knowledge aiming to control and use the 'global environment' for its own ends. As I will argue later, the planetary framework has therefore also attracted suspicion of philosophers and other humanities scholars, arguing that it is entangled with discourses of control and power.

In the wake of the Anthropocene discussion, humanities scholars started to take note of the planetary perspective on Earth, and this idea of the geoscientific planetary has often been registered as a *rupture,* as something of a new paradigm for philosophy and the humanities in three ways. Particularly influential – and controversial – has been Dipesh Chakrabarty's investigations of the planet, and his insistence that it presents radical challenges for the humanities. For Chakrabarty the Anthropocene denotes a time in which "the wall between human and natural history has been breached," which forces humans to conceive of their history on the large time scales of planetary science, involving awareness of how human species history affects planetary parameters "that have been stable for much longer than the histories of these institutions [capitalism or socialism] and have allowed human beings to become the dominant species on earth."[56] To capture this deep history, and to meditate on the methodological and philosophical challenges it poses, Chakrabarty resorts explicitly to the geoscientific perspective on the planet, which he equates explicitly to the

[54] Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl*, La terre vue d'en haut: L'invention de l'environnement global* (Seuil, 2015).

[55] Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 23.

[56] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Four Theses" in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 45, 40.

Earth system as I have defined it above.[57] Chakrabarty follows this geoscientific approach to lay bare the discordances that require further thought on the side of the humanities, as the humanities are now called on to "mix the limited timescale over which modern humans and humanists historians contemplate history with the inhumanly vast timescales of deep history."[58] What does this entail and to what discordances does this give rise?

Chakrabarty develops his geoscientific concept of the planetary with a nod to earlier work done by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in her turn, introduced the planet with the explicit aim to counter the then dominant framework of globalism.[59] Globalism was, for Spivak, a capitalist and imperialist mode of thought and action that worked to connect and homogenise markets, information systems, and cultures as "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere."[60] Unlike the globe, however, which is the fruit of human work, we "inhabit [the planet], on loan," writes Spivak.[61] The globe is the result of a unifying historical process arising from human agency under the banner of supposed progress and technological advance, but the planet is indifferent to anthropogenic projects or actions. It resists human control. This is why "[the planet] contains us as much as it flings us away."[62] We belong to the planet, but the planet does not belong to us![63] For Chakrabarty this means that the geoscientific planetary framework comprises effects and consequences of human actions that reverb in a system not of human making and that ultimately remains outside of the sphere of human control.[64] In short, while the planetary affects humans (and humans affect it), it is distinct from the global in having its principle *beyond* human action and politics.

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[57] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Introduction: Intimations of the Planetary," in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 3-4.

[58] Ibid., 4.

[59] Chakrabarty, "The Planet," 71; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetarity" in *Death of a Discipline* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 71-103.

[60] Ibid., 71.

[61] Ibid., 71.

[62] Ibid., 71-2.

[63] I pick up this motto in the chapter on 'asymmetry' below, see 109-151.

[64] Chakrabarty, "The Planet," 85.

Because it registers human effects on a planetary scale, the Anthropocene itself would invoke a radical sense of discordance. This is why authors such as Clive Hamilton have argued, in line with Chakrabarty's theses, that the planetary perspective of the Anthropocene does not address "continued spread of human impacts on the landscape or further modification to ecosystems" but rather "a *rupture* in the functioning of the Earth System as a whole."[65] In his work, Hamilton has argued that ecological thought has struggled to take in the *total* scale of the Anthropocene and the planetary, a scale on which human agency has only recently impacted the planet. Hamilton also calls our condition the "Anthropocene Rupture", which refers to the extreme novelty, or, in historian Zoltán Boldizsár Simon's words, the "unprecedented" of the planetary perspective that forces us to think on the level of the system as a whole to conceive of the depth of human influence.[66]

On the basis of Chakrabarty's work on the planet, several discordant characteristics can be deduced that will structure this dissertation. These are the planetary system's verticality, asymmetry, materiality, and multiscalarity. By what I call verticality, Chakrabarty means that the ESS perspective on the planet involves a view "essentially taken from the outside," looking 'down' on Earth from a great distance in space to capture it as a unified and whole system.[67] Chakrabarty cites Lovelock who comments that "the information gained from *seeing from the outside* our azure-green planet in all its global beauty has given rise to whole new of questions and answers."[68] Promoting such a 'vertical' view of the Earth also means to downplay the situated perspectives of humans *on* Earth, that is, the horizontal view from a particular standpoint on its surface, with all its implications of belonging to local regions, traditions, and histories.[69] While the geosciences obtain new information about the

[65] Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*: *The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Polity, 2017), 10.

[66] Ibid., 1-36; Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, "Why the Anthropocene has no History: Facing the Unprecedented," *Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 3 (2017): 239-245.

[67] Chakrabarty, "The Planet," 78.

[68] James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 7-8, emphasis added, quoted in: Chakrabarty, "The Planet," 78.

[69] Also compare Patrick Whitmarsh's recent work on Anthropocene fiction in relation to what he calls 'vertical science,' i.e., sciences that study the Earth from above or from below; Whitmarsh traces how such vertical approaches unearth the fragility of the planet and humanity in science and literature, giving rise to an

planet through satellite data and the comparison of the Earth's atmosphere to that of other planets, this perspective always involves a certain tension with everyday human experience in as far as this latter implies literal and metaphorical horizons.

A second discordance emerging from Chakrabarty's analysis of the planet is its *asymmetry* relative to human existence. While the earth may feel like a home to human life, "we are not the end that the planetary processes supporting life are required to serve."[70] In fact, Chakrabarty even claims that "humans are a product of contingencies in the history of life on this planet," which means that "the planet does not return our gaze in that we cannot assume any relationship of mutuality with it."[71] This means, concretely, that the planet has existed and will exist beyond the human life form. As a further consequence of this, Chakrabarty also points out that the planet is not a moral or political category that can become the subject to questions of justice or ethics. While the climate crisis clearly raises question about a just global distributions of harms and goods, i.e., "about ideal *forms* of justice, right, democracy," the planetary, on the other hand, "disclosing vast processes of unhuman dimensions, cannot be grasped by recourse to any ideal form."[72] The planet as a geophysical concept is simply mute vis-à-vis questions of justice or power, and there is "nothing in the history of the planet that can claim the status of a moral imperative."[73] Justice, as it were, runs up against the muteness of the planet.

A third discordance is the planet's materiality, which drastically decenters human agency and challenges any anthropocentric notion of human life on Earth. Chakrabarty often points out that humans are not the protagonist of planetary history, as they share the stage

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increased awareness of the possibility of human extinction. Patrick Whitmarsh, *Writing our Extinction: Anthropocene Fiction and Vertical Science* (Standford University Press, 2023).

[70] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis University Press, 2023), 6.

[71] Ibid., 6; the theme of contingency, explicitly mentioned here by Chakrabarty, will be of importance in my investigation of this discordance below, when I introduce the work of Quentin Meillassoux to push Ricoeur's hermeneutics in the direction of entertaining the existence of a planet in a future after which humans have gone extinct. See, below, "ASYMMETRY," 109-151.

[72] Chakrabarty, "The Planet," 86-7.

[73] Ibid., 87.

with bacteria, carbon molecules, forests, rocks, and all other factors impacting Earth's composition.[74] All human impacts on the planet's climate are, in fact, mediated by such factors and entities, and the trajectory of Earth would be unintelligible if one were to neglect the 'agency' and responsiveness of these other organisms and systems.[75] While the Anthropocene often also is a moral concept that accuses and singles out 'humanity' to take responsibility for what 'it' has done, it simultaneously diffuses humanity up to the point of disappearing in networks of nonhumans and geophysical feedback loops.

Finally, there is the problem of the planet's multiscalarity. The most prominent discordance of planetary thinking in Chakrabarty's work is the 'rupture' of the spatial and temporal scales on which one ought to think about human agency and influence over Earth, giving rise to qualitatively different conceptions of human agency. Planetary history commenced billions of years before that of humans, and unfolds on time scales that dwarf those of human history, such as those of the Milankovitch cycle, forming the heart-beat of the glacial-interglacial pattern that takes approximately 100.000 years.[76] These temporal scales upset the temporality of lived experience, with its daily habits, personal memories, and anticipations, as well as the historical tapestry of cultural milestones. In his recent work on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and deep time, Ted Toadvine sketches this temporal rupture as the feeling that "the ground beneath our feet is scarcely reassuring as we try to wrap our minds around the breakup and reassembly of the earth's continents, the cornucopia of long-vanished species that flourished in worlds we can scarcely reconstruct, or the billions of years

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[74] Ibid., 86.

[75] Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach describe the tension surrounding this call to decentre humanity in their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* as a "knotty ethical dilemma," one that concerns the question how are one is to "dislodge a vision of human exceptionalism that paints us as benefactors of God-given environmental harmony and yet still retain a sense of human responsibility for reversing the profound disharmony we have visited upon the planet?" Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate,* edited by Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 7, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009057868.

[76] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene Time," in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 171.

that light has travelled from distant galaxies to reach our eyes."[77] The deep temporality of the planetary system appears to wipe away the temporal horizons against which human agents navigate the world. For such reasons, Chakrabarty thinks of the planet as decentring humanity, marginalizing, as it were, human history in ways not yet encountered before; "the climate crisis is about waking up to the rude shock of the planet's otherness."[78] The shock is, too, that, given the impact humans have on the planetary system, the planetary requires a rereading of human history in the new and often alienating terms of geoscience – planetary history concerns us, but not as we have come to know ourselves.

While Chakrabarty uses the geoscientific planet to point out the many discordances between planetary thinking and globalism, his account has also received severe criticisms. Scholars working from decolonial, feminist, or Indigenous perspectives have pointed out the continuities at work behind the geosciences, which, for them, denote a continuation of Global Northern imperialism or ideology in its attempt to situate itself as a neutral and (falsely) apolitical centre from which to view things. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, for example, were early critics of Chakrabarty's thesis that the Anthropocene invokes the necessity of a new concept of humanity as a species, arguing that the Anthropocene would lure scholars into a suspicious scientific ideology that overlooks the real economic and political inequalities that fuel Anthropocene history.[79] In her *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None,* Kathryn Yusoff, from a decolonial perspective, has unearthed the relations between geological epistemology and the exploitation of black labour and bodies, unmasking the Anthropocene as "a resurrection of the impulse to reestablish humanism in all its exclusionary terms of universality."[80] These critical analyses of the Anthropocene have attempted to re-politicize the term, resisting its context of supposedly neutral scientific articulation, and pointing out how

[77] Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 51.

[78] Ibid., 67.

[79] Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69.

[80] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 18.

an understanding of the Anthropocene as a rupture masks the continuity in (colonial) histories of exploitation and empire which caused the Anthropocene and that are still at work.[81]

Although such criticisms point out the many political elements attached to climate change and the Anthropocene, I do think they run the risk of narrowing the spatial and temporal scope that the concept of the planetary implies and that involves the types of discordances that I have just sketched on the basis of Chakrabarty's concept. For example, while the relevance of a decolonial criticism of geology in the style of Yusoff is obvious, given the role such practices as mining have played in the exploitation of black bodies, it is less obvious to me if such critique is able to exhaustively discuss the concept of the planetary. This concept involves histories that stretch out into the deep, geological past, describing a complex, geophysical system in which human politics is only a recent and – despite its recent, profound influence – marginal phenomenon. In short, unless one is willing to *exhaustively* situate the geosciences within histories of power, reading the results of geoscience as nothing but an ideological smokescreen for hidden interests and domination, an analysis of the planetary can exist alongside these political readings of the Anthropocene. It simply addresses problems of a different scale and nature. I therefore agree with Chakrabarty when he writes that while "it is indisputable that the pursuit of science remains enmeshed in the politics of class, gender, race, economic regimes, and scientific institutions," this does not "make the *findings* of scientific disciplines […] arbitrary or false or merely political."[82] The planetary remains

[81] Another argument against Chakrabarty has been that he presents the opposition between planetary thinking and the everyday world too drastically. Does the planetary really require such drastic new methodologies and modes of thought? In this vein, Anna Löwenhaupt Tsing et al. argue, for example, that "in contrast [to what Chakrabarty maintains] it is possible to tell human histories human histories that reverberate at many scales, including the geological and the planetary." Likewise, Ted Toadvine claims that Chakrabarty has missed how the ambiguities and tensions of the planetary are already registered on the level of phenomenology, arguing that the (everyday) world and the planet are not radically opposed to each other. I think these arguments do not radically challenge Chakrabarty's assumptions, however. They merely indicate that the *tensions* to which the planetary gives rise are already tangible within the human world – but this is precisely the point I aim to capture with a term such as 'planetary discordance.' Anna Löwenhaupt Tsing et al., *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene*: *The New Nature* (Standford University Press, 2024), 26; Toadvine, *The Memory of the World*, 5-6.

[82] Chakrabarty, "Introduction," 14.

standing as a way of looking at the Earth that has some surplus over politics, even if the geosciences are not free from political – often suspect – implications.

In the above explorations of the planet and the discordances it harbours relative to everyday experiences of the world – verticality, asymmetry, materiality, and multiscalarity – a new challenge arises for Ricoeurian hermeneutics and its understanding of discordance. As I explained above, planetary discordance is closely related to the discordance between physical time and the time of the soul that Ricoeur already addresses. The above list of four characteristics of planetary discordance add further depth to this problem, and they invite even more suspicion about what happens when the planet is framed in terms of narrative. Whereas Ricoeur might see narrative as a poetic solution that brings physical time under the order of a concordant plot, planetary discordance arises when this impulse to establish concordance is shown to exclude certain important properties about the (human impact on) the planet that nevertheless now require attention. In short, planetary discordance raises new questions for Ricoeurian hermeneutics and invites a rereading attentive to its resources that could furnish a response to planetary discordance as it emerges in Anthropocene fictions.

RICOEURIAN HERMENEUTICS AND ANTHROPOCENE FICTION

While I have sketched planetary discordance in a general sense above, this dissertation zooms in on the way it manifests in literature and fiction, and the specific challenges it there poses for interpretation. The Anthropocene and its geoscientific perspective have entered the world of literature, and the past decades have seen a surge of publications of so-called Anthropocene fictions; likewise, literary theory has raised questions about what it means to read and write narratives in fictions that tend to decentre individuals in favour of a more planetary and material outlook. In this dissertation, I hope to build a bridge between literary theory of Anthropocene fiction and Ricoeurian hermeneutics, which, as I will claim here, can help to open Ricoeurian hermeneutics to the material and nonhuman dimensions of the planet, while Ricoeur's hermeneutics in turn offers a hermeneutic ontology that respects the first-person perspective of lived experience while also acknowledging its limits.

DISCORDANT ANTHROPOCENE FICTIONS

The term 'Anthropocene fiction' was introduced by literary scholar Adam Trexler in 2015 to refer to a growing body of novels that address anthropogenic impact on the Earth System, which are sometimes also gathered by others under the umbrella term 'climate fiction'.[83] Climate fiction has been a hotly debated term in literary theory, and it has given rise to questions such as whether one should call it a 'genre,' a 'topic,' or something else. In a hallmark paper, Adeline Johns-Putra describes climate fiction as "an important new category," rather than a genre, given that many climate fictions straddle traditional boundaries between genres, and she defines it as "fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming as we now understand it."[84] In a later publication, Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach's define climate change literature as "literature written within the context of cultural awareness of anthropogenic agency and global warming."[85]

In this dissertation, I will follow Trexler in speaking of 'Anthropocene fictions' rather than 'climate fiction.' Trexler argues that this term better captures how the geological frame of the Anthropocene moves "the emphasis from individual thoughts, beliefs, and choices to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and generations."[86] Trexler also emphasizes how the Anthropocene distributes agency beyond humans, and in a Latourian vein, he argues that Anthropocene fictions emphasize the supposed agency of nonhuman entities such as the climate system, other animals, and carbon dioxide molecules. While the term 'Anthropocene fiction' is closely related to the category of 'climate fiction,' which Trexler actually still uses as its synonym, the Anthropocene involves more large-scale anthropogenic disruptions to the planetary system besides those impacting the Earth 's climate system. One could think of the human impact on biodiversity levels or the massive influx of new synthetic materials. I will therefore use the term Anthropocene

[83] Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*.

[84] Adeline Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-Fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism," *WIREs Clim Change* 7 (2016): 267.

[85] Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, "Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), edited by Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, 8.

[86] Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions,* 23.

fiction to indicate all novels that thematically deal with the planetary scale of the Earth system in its relation to humans, including (but extending beyond) novels about anthropogenic climate change.

Many Anthropocene fictions depict the confrontation of characters with the planet in discordant ways. First, Anthropocene fictions tend to be of a dystopic nature, taking place in an undesirable version of the near future. They tend to feature a planet destroyed by the consequences of human actions. Dystopic imagery of Anthropocene fictions often involves the collapse of the Global North, the withering away or rapid corruption of the State, the forced transition to nomadic existence, and the falling away of (international) infrastructures of communication.[87] Another feature of Anthropocene fiction important for this dissertation is that many Anthropocene novels explore experimental or discordant plotting and narration. As Adeline Johns-Putra observes, many prominent Anthropocene fictions challenge "the need for meanings" as "the desire for continuity," reminding readers that "endings do not bring neatly resolved meanings, that the future need not resemble us, and that it is, indeed, unknowable."[88] Kingsolver's novel, for example, is one among many others that invoke discordance to represent the problematic relation between lived, everyday human experience and the planetary level of the Anthropocene, and that features an unresolved – not to say discordant – ending.

Other examples of discordant Anthropocene fictions are Rita Indiana's stunning *Tentacle*, which weaves its complex plot along the contours of an impossible time loop that connects two characters across several moments in history.[89] One of its characters experiences two different moments in time, separated by hundreds of years, at the very same time, in a dizzying temporal discordance that explodes linear time. Likewise, Yōko Tawada's celebrated novel *The Last Children of Tokyo* culminates in an ending that unceremoniously lets go of the threads of its plot. Its protagonist disappears rather than that he completes his destiny.[90] In

[87] Claire Colebrook has insightfully remarked that these fictions might therefore also be seen as playing out Global North's fear of becoming like its 'other', that is, like those countries in the Global South that are already facing exactly these conditions of corruption, unpredictability, and ecological precarity. Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 2.

[88] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change*, 167

[89] Rita Indiana, *Tentacle*, trans. Achy Obejas (And Other Stories Publishing, 2018).

[90] Yōko Tawada, *The Last Children of Tokyo,* trans. Margaret Mitsutani (Granta Books, 2019).

J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, a similar discordance emerges on the last pages, when evolutionary deep time sucks its main character away from the world of human action that still provided a shimmer of hope for a meaningful future.[91]

The fictions I will discuss belong to the type of what literary scholar David Sergeant calls "emergent narratives," which are speculative novels that "take on the challenge of imagining new kinds of collectivity, and radical change, though they frequently struggle to find a generic form adequate to the task."[92] Such novels are more experimental in form than what Sergeant calls "domestic" narratives, which are "shaped instead by a conservative desire to retreat to an unchanging domestic realm."[93] The more 'speculative' Anthropocene fictions tend to mix what was once seen as distinguished 'high' and 'low' brow expressions of culture. In cultural critic Mark Bould's analyses of the Anthropocene unconscious, for example, serious novels such as those of Arundathi Roy are analysed side-by-side with the pulpy film *Sharknado*.[94] As Caroline Edwards has observed, there is a "revived sensibility of the fantastic and the speculative in the contemporary period," which can help explain the prominence of planetary discordance in Anthropocene novels.[95] By engaging in speculative or weird fictionality, these novels draw out and radically confront sedimented expectations of readers about how worlds, characters, and causality among sequences of events work in narrative, either encouraging a drastic transformation of what it means to read or pushing this radical demand up to the point of rupture and unintelligibility, which is when discordance takes the place of proposed concordances. The emergence of planetary discordance in such speculative novels is one sign that Anthropocene fiction writers are attempting to extend the form of the novel to open its structures, attesting how literature is exploring its very limits considering the discordant planetary.

Although I will work closely with literary theory of Anthropocene fiction, it should be noted that my aim with this dissertation is not to make literary theoretical claims about the

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[91] J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (4th Estate, 2014).

[92] David Sergeant, *The Near Future in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Climate Retreat, and Revolution*, (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.

[93] Ibid., 1.

[94] Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (Verso, 2021).

[95] Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.

nature of Anthropocene fictions. As a philosopher, I will think through the challenges posed by Anthropocene fictions that explore planetary discordance as they are recognized in literary theory and philosophy. While my reading of these novels will be informed by literary theoretical analysis, the angle of dissertation forbids a literary study of them; instead, I will zoom in on the philosophical problems that become visible within them.

LITERARY THEORY AND RICOEURIAN HERMENEUTICS

There is a lively debate among literary scholars on Anthropocene fictions within literary theory and criticism, to which I will introduce the often-neglected hermeneutical perspective of Ricoeur. Contemporary literary debate about Anthropocene fiction critically builds on previous work done in ecocriticism. Traditionally, ecocriticism tended to prioritize a sense of the 'local' and of the environment over the planetary scale of phenomena such as climate change, as has been pointed out by scholars such as Timothy Clark.[96] A major turning point in the debate on the limited scales of ecocriticism has been Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet,* which explicitly criticized this central role of the sense of place in American ecocriticism.[97] However, Heise's book was written before the discussions on the Anthropocene spread across the humanities, and its reliance on the global as a concept to balance the local would now be seen as too anthropocentric. The globe is not yet the Earth System, the latter invoking other and vaster time scales, as well as nonhuman processes and factors that a global analysis in terms of risk would miss. After the publication of Heise's book, however, ecocritics have responded to the emergence of the planetary scale of the Anthropocene in several ways.

Critical scholars such as Tom Cohen, Timothy Clark, and Claire Colebrook whose works are sometimes collected under the heading of Critical Climate Change, have investigated how the Anthropocene confronts important assumptions of literary criticism; their of-

[96] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*.

[97] Ursula Heise*, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

ten pessimistic conclusions marginalize the role for cultural or literary analysis and underline the paradoxes and ambiguity inherent to the scalar problems of the Anthropocene.[98] Others have attempted to not just dismiss but rather sharpen the tools of critique and analysis to read Anthropocene fiction as a way to challenge held assumptions in order to generate a new ecological consciousness; in her *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel,* for example, Adeline Johns-Putra explores if and how such fictions could engender an outlook on the future that includes non-human beings and that can remain truly open, resisting the tendency to think the future along the lines of the present.[99] A more technical analysis of narrative strategies employed in Anthropocene fiction has been developed by narratologists such as Marco Caracciolo and Erin James, who, in their work, focus on the ways in which Anthropocene narratives challenge and expand the way in which readers mentally map sequences of events and worlds.[100] Their econarratology is a promising new addition to discussions of Anthropocene fiction that moves beyond a study of thematics and literary content to the means in which literature achieves its effects on readers. Finally, scholars have also taken up the task to (re)politicize our readings of Anthropocene fictions and even of the Anthropocene concept itself, and scholars such as Elizabeth DeLoughry or Mary Louise Pratt have developed nuanced postcolonial and decolonial interpretations of Anthropocene fiction that question the universality of the geoscientific outlook that undergirds planetarity.[101]

If I introduce a Ricoeurian perspective to this crowded field of debate, what can this help to achieve? There is, first, a clear gain for the field of Ricoeur studies, as this discussion on literature in the Anthropocene can help update Ricoeur's work. Scholars such as Peter Boxall have remarked that Ricoeur's theory does not seem to be on par with the materialism implied by Anthropocene thinking that has been explored by scholars such as Stacy Alaimo

[98] Cohen, Tom, and Claire Colebrook. "Critical Climate Change." Open Humanities Press. Accessed March 10, 2024. http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/series/critical-climate-change/.

[99] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Novel*.

[100] Erin James, *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (Ohio State University Press, 2022); Marco Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press, 2021).

[101] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*; Mary Louse Pratt, *Planetary Longings* (Duke University Press, 2022).

and Jane Bennett.[102] Likewise, literary scholar Pieter Vermeulen remarks that the Anthropocene itself questions how one should look at texts and writing; this should also include material 'inscriptions' of human influence within the Earth System itself, which reveal "the human capacity to promiscuously leave traces in the chemical and climatological make-up of the planet," a capacity that is shared with nonhumans too.[103] Ricoeur is associated by some with the linguistic turn in continental philosophy, which prioritized language as the object of study for philosophy, given Ricoeur's focus on language as the site of new meanings. Yet I want to show that dialogue between Ricoeur and contemporary literary theory can open up hermeneutics to the problematics of the nonhuman and the material worlds. A critical reading of Ricoeur with an eye on contemporary debates and the role of discordance therein will therefore provide the ground for much needed innovations within Ricoeurian studies and philosophy. While I do not lay claim to a new, fully-fledged literary theory of Anthropocene fiction, there is clear value to Ricoeurian hermeneutics in dealing with the interpretative problems they may give rise to.

Conversely, as I hope to show, such a critically reinterpreted Ricoeurian hermeneutics can speak to and deepen the understanding of interpretative problems related to Anthropocene fiction and planetary discordance in literary theory. Ricoeur begins with the way in which humans experience their everyday world, without, however, limiting this world to what is directly perceptible or understandable, instead pointing out the traces of otherness, discordance, and finitude within this experience, as I will emphasize again and again throughout this dissertation. His hermeneutic framework can embed Anthropocene fictions in broader discussions on ontology and interpretation. For example, as I argue in the chapter on the planet's asymmetry, a Ricoeurian hermeneutic notion such as 'belonging' that describes how humans are immersed in being before they are able to take a theoretical distance to it, can also be used to typify the way humans depend on the planet without ever being able to fully grasp or control it. Moreover, Ricoeur's rich investigations of literary theory, narratology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and ontology provide an example of how to connect many different schools of thought that, today, are still in need of each other but only rarely

[102] Peter Boxall, *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 12-3.

[103] Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020), 26.

meet constructively. A part of the work to be done in this dissertation is to show how Ricoeurian thought can be made to pick up all these strands and weave a new theory of human fragility vis-à-vis planetary discordance.

My method in engaging Ricoeur will be to develop this deepened and renewed Ricoeurian hermeneutics for planetary discordance in dialogue with thinkers of the planetary and Anthropocene fiction. This approach itself is actually quite Ricoeurian. Ricoeur has always invited voices and traditions to his work that at first seem to discredit hermeneutic philosophy – such as structuralism, nomological accounts of history, or analytic philosophy. However, instead of 'renouncing' these other traditions, Ricoeur showed how they could be included within processes of interpretation, and hence, how a dialogue with these traditions could actually deepen one's understanding of what hermeneutics is. This deepened hermeneutics was then shown by Ricoeur to be richer than the traditions it now included. In similar vein, I will discuss contemporary (literary) theories of planetarity that at first seem to oppose hermeneutics. Like Ricoeur, I will use these not to refute hermeneutics but to deepen it, taking their claims to truth seriously while incorporating them within an enriched hermeneutics that also extends beyond their limits.

RICOEUR IN CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

By engaging Ricoeur's work to study planetary discordance and to engage with contemporary literary theory, I also aim to contribute to an ongoing development within Ricoeurian studies to apply Ricoeur's hermeneutics to environmental questions. However, I claim that these discussions have tended to remain within the framework of *environmental hermeneutics*, which, due to its often ethical and action-oriented nature, often neglected the planetary as a geoscientific category that implies scales that decentre the role of human agents.

A hallmark publication in Ricoeurian environmental thought is the edited volume *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* by Forrest Clingerman, David Utsler, Martin Drenthen, and Brian Treanor, which collects a series of essays on the possibility of extending hermeneutics to the study of meaning as it emerges in the relation between humans and their environments; rather than remaining within the framework of the text understood in the limited sense as the cultural production of documents and books, this volume opened hermeneutics towards an engagement with landscapes, places, traces of

nonhumans, and other possible sites of meaning beyond the human.[104] *Interpreting Nature* is a landmark publication in the field, providing an organized effort to think through and illustrate the possibilities of an environmental hermeneutics, i.e., a hermeneutics that moves beyond the cultural domain, building upon the interpretation involved in encounters with(in) the environment, as well as the interpretative work done by pieces of nature writing such as that of Thoreau and Muir.[105] In the introduction, the editors explicitly mention Ricoeur as an important source of inspiration for environmental hermeneutics, calling attention to themes such as "narrative, identity and selfhood, the conflict of interpretations, and memory," which provide ample possibilities to be applied to questions of the environment.[106]

While I owe much to the pioneering work of this volume, my approach deviates on two points from that taken by its contributors. First, whereas environmental hermeneutics emphasizes a certain congruity between the human and the nonhuman world when it comes to meaningful expression, the planet is for me first an emblem of discordance. This means that unlike environmental hermeneutics, a planetary hermeneutics does not *apply* or *extend* already existing hermeneutical tools to the environment but challenges and rethinks the core concepts of hermeneutics. The second point is that the temporal scale of the planetary is much vaster than that of the environment, while the planetary also resists the idea of a standpoint that is connected to the concept of the environment. 'Environment' remains etymologically tied to the notion of an *environs*, that which *surrounds* a certain, situated being, and hence appears to it but also belongs to it as it is *Umwelt*. It implies and prioritizes, in a certain sense, the situated being, while the planet, as I have argued above, begins with the imagined, theoretical gaze from the outside of Earth. It claims to reach a certain holistic view on Earth, rather than an outlook on a situated, local, inhabited environment. In Clive Hamilton's words, the planetary perspective "is the Earth taken as a whole in a constant state of movement driven by interconnected cycles and forces […]. It is a single, dynamic, integrated system, and

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[104] Forrest Clingerman et al., *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (Fordham University Press, 2014).

[105] Forrest Clingerman et al., "Introduction: Environmental Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Nature; The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics,* ed. Forrest Clingerman et al. (Fordham University Press, 2014), 3-4.

[106] Ibid., 12.

not a collection of ecosystems."[107] Phrased otherwise, the planet is not simple an aggregate of local, ecological environments but implies a certain qualitative and theoretical shift of scale. This demands new tools for the hermeneutic toolkit rather than a reusing what is already ready to hand. The planetary involves discordances that require radically rethinking its key concepts.[108]

Next to *Interpreting Nature,* which retained a focus on the environment, a more planetary approach has been investigated by hermeneutics philosophers discussing the Anthropocene, who, however, have not reflected explicitly about the *discordance* of the planetary. According to the late environmental philosopher Forrest Clingerman, for example, the Anthropocene is a hermeneutic challenge *per excellence*. The Anthropocene, Clingerman argues, does not merely refer to "the presumed objectivity of scientific assessment," but also to the

[107] Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 12.

[108] The tension between the environmental and the planetary perspective can be illustrated by referencing one of *Interpreting Nature*'s essays that invokes Ricoeur. Nathan M. Bell's essay extends the Ricoeurian notion of personal identity to that of an environmental identity involving our relations with nonhuman others. Bell takes up Ricoeurian ethical theory that, in Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another,* was presented under the slogan of "the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" [*la visée de la 'vie bonne' avec et pour autrui dans des institutions justes*] (202 [172]). Bell then argues that one could rethink these ethics by formulating an environmental articulation that does not just include attention to humans, but also to nonhuman animals, while addressing climate justice by appealing "for institutional recognition of the environmental aspects of others' lives, as well as environmental justice for other cultures" (143). What emerges, then, is an environmentally grounded notion of personal identity and ethics, one that considers how human lives are entangled with the lives of nonhuman animals and the forces of nature. Nevertheless, while convincingly argued, such an extension only makes sense when one remains within the time scales related to human action and politics. What happens when one invokes the deep time of the planet? Does it make sense, for example, to speak of 'institutional recognition' when considering human agency from a geological perspective on time, where millions of years are reckoned with? The oldest institutions have existed for several thousand years, while the planet requires one to look back in time and into the future much further than that. The turn to the planetary appears to put such pressure on hermeneutic thought that one cannot simply apply or extend it but need to rethink it. Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Seuil, 1990), italics removed; Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992), italics removed; Nathan M. Bell, "Environmental Hermeneutics with and for Others: Ricoeur's Ethics and the Ecological Self" in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field Environmental Hermeneutics*, ed. by Forrest Clingerman et al. (Fordham University Press, 2014), 141-60.

"reflexive emergence of *meaning* and *value* created by the intersubjective engagement between humanity and the material world."[109] Clingerman argues that because "being human occurs through the interpretation of the world," one should view the Anthropocene as "a massive conceptual reorientation of our sense of the meaning of the Earth and what humanity is."[110] This point has recently been repeated by David Utsler in his *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy.*[111] Utsler dedicates a chapter of this book to the study of the imagination, arguing that "the world to come will be a world that was imagined," and that "the pressing importance of environmental discourse lies in this fact."[112] Although he does not mention concrete works of Anthropocene fiction, imaginative interpretation of the present and future is seen as a pathway to environmentally just actions. Both Utsler and Clingerman, however, assume that a hermeneutics of the planetary could culminate in a 'reorientation' (Clingerman) or just action (Utsler), still prioritizing the smaller time scales of meaningful human action and politics. What is missing in this is a reflection on the way the planetary disrupts this human world, through its large time scales, anthropocentric approach of the Earth, and the problems of multiscalarity, resulting in the kind of disorientation addressed by discordant Anthropocene fictions.

The approach closest to the one that I will explore is found in *Pour une philosophie de l'anthropocène*, where Alexander Federau maintains that the planetary crisis calls for hermeneutics precisely because of the switch from the local or regional to the geoscientific planetary perspective, which itself relies on several forms of mediation requiring interpretation.[113] For example, Federau points out that one cannot experience the planetary directly because "the planetary experience is a mediated act; its characteristics are not directly perceivable, but are a form of knowledge, that which makes of the Earth a representation inscribes itself

[109] Forrest Clingerman, "Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene," *Worldviews* 20 (2016): 229, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685357-02003002,

[110] Ibid., 229.

[111] David Utsler, *Paul Ricoeur.*

[112] Ibid., 75.

[113] Alexander Federau, *Pour une philosophie de l'anthropocène* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2017).

into the essence of a cosmology."[114] As I have stressed above, the planetary is not directly perceivable but accessed through mediation through (scientific) knowledge.[115] Federau thinks that Ricoeur's theory of narrative could help us think through such mediated "geo-historicity" – a form of history that reads planetary history starting from the traces and marks of humanity left in Earth's lithosphere, such as the plutonium spikes after the first nuclear tests.[116] "Narrative structures allows us to simultaneously interpret geological traces left by humans and appropriate the temporality of the Anthropocene."[117]

What Federau still misses, however, is the importance of *literary* works in exploring the conundrums of planetary time. Philosophers tend to neglect the important developments in literary studies of Anthropocene fiction, while second, they do not engage with concrete works of fiction. This omits a crucial element of Ricoeurian thought, which, as in *Time and Narrative,* often engaged with concrete novels to develop his philosophical theories, such as the works of Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, or Virginia Woolf.[118] Moreover, it also misses incorporating recently surging interest in Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics in literary studies. A recent special issue of *Poetics Today* on *Time and Narrative* saw its editors praising Ricoeur for his ability to include both traditional structuralist approaches to text and contemporary, applied narratological studies, while they explicitly mention the value of a philosopher who includes readings of individual works.[119] The article by Marco Caracciolo in this special issue

[114] "L'expérience planétaire est un acte médiatisé; ses caractéristiques ne sont pas directement perceptibles, mais sont un savoir, ce qui fait de la Terre une représentation inscrite elle-même sur le fond d'une cosmologie." Ibid., 370, my translation.

[115] Ibid., 371-2.

[116] Ibid., 383.

[117] "La structure narrative permet à la fois d'interpréter les traces géologiques laissées par les hommes, et de s'approprier la temporalité de l'Anthropocène." Ibid., 383, my translation.

[118] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 2,* 100-153 [150-226].

[119] Raphaël Baroni and Adrien Paschoud, "Introduction: *Time and Narrative*, the Missing Link Between the 'Narrative Turn' and Postclassical Narratology?" *Poetics Today* 42, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 333–5, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9026117.

even explores the usefulness of Ricoeur's reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* for the Anthropocene.[120] Therefore, the time seems ripe to bridge the gap between the field of literary theory and environmental Ricoeurian studies, to which a philosophical reading of Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* may contribute.

Taking all of the above together, my main research problem is how literary hermeneutics may develop an analysis of and form a reply to planetary discordance in Anthropocene fiction, given that this discordance presents itself as incompatible with narrative modes of understanding, even if planetary discordance surfaces through narrative. I will claim that an updated Ricoeurian literary hermeneutics replies to such problems. This revision of Ricoeur's work results in what I will call a fragile hermeneutics, which is a hermeneutics that claims that interpretation that does not provide more coherent, refigured understandings of the world, but instead heightens awareness of how the world of is always finite, contingent, and at risk of disappearing when facing the Anthropocene.

Readers of discordant Anthropocene fictions thus discover certain limits humans run into when facing the planet and its multibillion-year history. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I hope to illustrate why this humility is not merely a negative experience of human finitude but also a positive experience, one that deepens the sense of belonging to a planet that remains, in the end, an other to humanity.

[120] Marco Caracciollo, "Emplotment Beyond the Human Scale: On Deep Time and Narrative Nonlinearity," *Poetics Today* 42, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 341–5, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9026131.

VERTICALITY

PLANET AND WORLD IN LITERARY HERMENEUTICS

In literary hermeneutics, it is common to speak of the 'world of the text,' where 'world' does not merely refer to the 'empty,' extended space in which the narrative unfolds.[1] Here, world does not refer to some kind of spatial container that contains objects. The world of the text instead indicates what Ted Toadvine describes as "the total horizon of meaning, value, and possibility within which our lives unfold."[2] It is that into which we are thrown and in which we act. World is hence not a concrete phenomenon, not something that appears itself, but rather an implied context which allows anything at all to appear as meaningful, as having a certain value, or as relating to certain possibilities of action. Literature would present readers with possible worlds, as a wider background of implied values, circumstances, symbols, et cetera, that is always projected behind the events that form the foreground of the narrative. While there is ample talk of world-building in fiction and its importance for changing the worlds of readers, Anthropocene fiction urges one to consider another matter. Is there not just a world of text – but a *planet* of the text as well? What place would literary hermeneutics grant to the physical, complex system that sustains the worlds of the characters that inhabit the fictional universe of the novel?

Ricoeur's hermeneutics offer a fruitful point of departure to approach the question of the relation between the planet and the world of a text. Its approach of the 'world' of the text, I will argue, leaves room for the discordances of the planetary. To make this claim, however, and also to lay the theoretical groundwork of this dissertation, I will pursue this line of thought by taking a detour through Ricoeur's general theory of the imagination and literature. Ricoeur's theory of the world of the text becomes clearer if it is related to other essential Ricoeurian notions, such as those of semantic innovation, the mimetic circle, and the conflict

[1] See, for example: Paul Ricœur, "De l'interprétation," in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 17 ; Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2,* trans. Kathleen Blamey, with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 6.

[2] Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 208.

of different temporalities. By taking this approach, this chapter will be slightly different than the ones that follow. It will not present a single thinker or theory as a partner of dialogue of Ricoeur's work. Instead, it will explain and sketch the main components of Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics and connect these to the question whether there is room for the 'planet' in what Ricoeur calls the world of literature.

In Anthropocene fiction, the planet often enters the world of literature through discordance – the planet is included within narrative but as its interruption or disruption. In Irene Solà's *When I Sing, Mountains Dance*, for example, a young farmer is struck by lightning, and in the wake of this event, the novel lends its voice to a host of characters, such as the widow of the farmer, their children, but also ghosts, clouds, and even deer living in the mountains.[3] Across this polyphony of narrative voices, the lines of a coherent plot begin to emerge, until, in a chapter called "Crunch," the perspective shifts from the inhabitants of the rugged landscape to that of the mountains themselves.[4] The reader is asked, quite literally, to now *gaze down* on the knots of the plot that connect the multitude of perspectives below on Earth. Alongside a sequence of diagrams from an oblique aerial view of the mountain range, which illustrate its formation across time, an anonymous narrator adopts the mountain's voice, sharing what this tectonic process must have been like for the mountain: "oh, to think of that woeful crunch, the impact!"[5] As the series of diagrams records how the mountain range is pushed up due to the collision of two tectonic plates, the mountain welcomes and then warns the life forms that will find a home on its back, warns them for the terrible geological upheaval waiting for them in deep time. It speaks threateningly of "a boom of blind violence [that] will thunder down, much older than I, much more infinite than I, much less merciful than I."[6] This future violent unleashing of planetary forces, the mountain warns, will efface the petty stories of human drama:

[3] Irene Solà, *Canto jo ila muntanya balla* (Editorial Anagrama, 2019), epub; Irene Solà, *When I Sing, Mountains Dance*, trans. Mara Faye Lethem (Granta, 2022).

[4] "L'Aürt." Ibid,. 89-107.

[5] "Ai, si el recordés, el cop." Ibid., 93 ["L'Aürt"].

[6] "Aleshores, retronarà el cop d'una violència cega, que és molt més vella que jo, molt més infinita que jo, menys misericordiosa que jo. I aplicarà noves forces." Ibid., 102 ["L'Aürt"].

> The movement will have begun again. The disaster. The next beginning. The nth end. And you will all die. Because nothing lasts long. And no one remembers the names of your children.[7]

This lithospheric intervention in the narrative therefore disrupts the human, everyday scale on which the other plotlines develop, introducing a discordance that threatens to obliterate the narrative concordance found. It as if this gaze from above, tracing the geological formation of the mountain under tectonic pressures, washes away the horizons and the worlds of the other stories, stories which are *situated* on this mountain, even *rooted* in it. As in *Flight Behaviour*, then, the planet emerges here not as a part of the narrative and its world, but, rather, as something that transgresses narrative *even if* it emerges within it.

In this chapter, I will unravel what happens when such a 'vertical' perspective on the planet clashes with the world of the text, or what is often described as its horizon of meaning. To do so, I will introduce the core of Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics in *Time and Narrative*, identify its shortcomings considering the discourse on planetarity, and indicate how a different reading of Ricoeur may overcome them. My main focus will be the tensions between the hermeneutical concept of 'world' as the implied context of meaning of any experience and the geoscientific 'planet' that describes the Earth as a complex, physical system, which is the frame adopted by Solà when mountains enter and disrupt the narrative of *When I Sing, Mountains Dance.* While 'world' is often described using the metaphor of a horizon, implying a situated perspective *on* Earth, 'planet' invokes the vertical perspective of Earth from space as a unified entity. Introducing Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics as a hermeneutics of the human world of action, I will raise the question whether Ricoeur's framework in *Time and Narrative* can engage with the planet which does not centre on humanity.

The answer depends on what concept of world is adopted, and I will make the case that there are two concepts of world at play in *Time and Narrative.* Critiquing the anthropocentric, cultural conception of world that sometimes surfaces in Ricoeur, I will move toward

[7] "Haurà començat el moviment, una altra vegada. El desastre. El següent principi. L'enèsim final. I vosaltres us morireu. Perquè res dura gaire estona. I el nom dels vostres fills no el recorda ningú." Ibid., 105 ["L'Aürt"].

an anthropo-acentric understanding of world that can equally be found in *Time and Narrative,* and which more explicitly includes a sense of the planetary.[8] In this latter conception, the world also includes 'discordant' elements, which do not fit in neatly in the human world of action, and which signal forces or contingencies beyond human control. Literary narrative, in turn, is of importance because it explores these discordances rather than that it 'solves' them or appeases them, and the anthropo-acentric worlds of certain Anthropocene fictions explore how humanity deals with a planet that, to quote the epigraph of this dissertation by Wallace Stevens, "is not our own, and much more, not ourselves."[9] This anthropo-acentric world can be found in Ricoeur's work by placing emphasis on his understanding of discordance and friction in narrative in light of *time*. This conflict of time has not always been foregrounded in the secondary literature, but it does allow Ricoeurian hermeneutics to engage with the problematics of Anthropocene fiction. In this analysis, the world becomes an aporetic site of 'discordant concordances' between human and nonhuman temporalities; world in this discordant sense expresses not a continuity between humans and the planet but rather attests to the fragility of human sense-making when facing planetary discordance.

In this chapter, I will first present the planet as a possible challenge to hermeneutics and its conception of world. The planet raises questions about the Earthbound nature of many of the metaphors of hermeneutics. Then, I will take a step back and explore Ricoeur's

[8] I have opted for the slightly awkward term 'anthropo-acentric' in this context to describe an approach of the planetary that considers the decentralized epistemologies of the geosciences. The geosciences invoke a multitude of different scales and interlocking processes operating within the unity of the planetary system, which itself encompasses multiple temporal and spatial scales. The human is not at the centre in this mode of analysis, but neither is any other ecosystem, feedback loop, or natural process. While the term 'ecocentric' might therefore appear as a suited candidate to oppose to anthropocentric world view, it does not yet capture this sense of the lack of any centre – it simply adopts a new point of reference, a new centre to approach the world from, now on a higher level. Ecocentrism also invokes ecosystem-thinking, comprised of networks of living beings, which are always local and never of the level of the entire planet – which is the implied framework of this dissertation.

[9] Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (Cummington Press, 1942), 13. The paradox is that while humans impact the planet on a large scale, this does not render the planet 'human' in the sense of bringing it under human control. It is rather as if a certain side to human agency emerges on the planetary level that *is* human but in a way that changes the very conception of what it means to be human.

essential concepts that relate to his notion of 'world,' such as the idea that literature is a second-order reference and the mimetic circle. Finally, I will reply to the tension between planet and world by arguing that Ricoeur's understanding of the world already includes the type of discordances represented by the planetary.

THE PLANET HAS NO HORIZON

In this section, I will first focus on the tensions between planetary thinking and hermeneutics. As a philosophy of perspectives and situatedness, hermeneutics is committed to an understanding of the Earth as something on which humans are corporeally anchored. In contrast, the planetary assumes an approach of Earth from space, a disembodied 'view' from nowhere. Before building bridges between these two understandings, I will here first emphasize the distance to be bridged.

HERMENEUTICS OF A 'MERE' PLANET

As has been argued in the introduction (cf., above, "The Discordant Planet"), the emergence of planetary science resulted in a concept of the Earth as a unified planetary system enveloping a range of complex, interacting feedback loops across its multiple levels. I now want to pick up on some of the metaphors and images of the Earth system science [ESS] paradigm, which invites to view Earth from a large distance, as from space, to conceive of it as a single, unified system. The geoscientific imaginary differs from what is current in continental philosophy in general and hermeneutics in particular. Ricoeur, for example, prefers to not speak of the 'planet' but rather of the 'earth' or the 'world.'[10] These latter terms would avoid theoretical abstraction and relate more directly to how human existence is already immersed in Earth before gaining a theoretical distance to it. For many continental philosophers, a scientific approach to Earth would efface the existential roots between humans and the Earth to reduce the planet to a mere 'object' of knowledge, situating humans as 'subjects' with a the-

[10] Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Seuil, 1990), 178; Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 150.

oretical distance to the object of their analysis. Yet does the increasing importance of planetary thinking today challenge Ricoeurian hermeneutics in its reluctance to deal with planetary science? I maintain that the planetary raises issues for the hermeneutic emphasis on situatedness and horizons, and I will make this case by underlining how the planetary frame effaces the horizon in a literal and a metaphorical sense.

The planetary framework arose in the wake of the fifties and sixties of the past century when innovative technologies allowed scientists to observe the Earth from a great distance over the course of the past century. These technologies, such as satellite imaging and advanced space crafts, provided a glimpse of Earth as a single body in space, a unified planetary system among other planets in the wider context of the universe. As scientist Hans Joachim Schnellnhuber of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research argues in a classic 1999 paper, the ESS paradigm formed a "second 'Copernican revolution' [allowing] us to look *back* on our planet to perceive one single, complex, dissipative, dynamic entity."[11] This 'revolutionary' planetary approach to Earth introduced a 'vertical' or perpendicular perspective on the entire Earth as seen from space, a gaze that captures the planet in its totality as a unified whole, and which came to paradigmatic expression in the space photography of the whole Earth following from the early NASA missions in space (although, as Buckminster Fuller once dryly remarked, the whole Earth is never visible on pictures as one can never see more than half the Earth from any given angle).[12] Such photographs appear to reify the Earth as an object toward which humans could finally take distance, rather than a condition to which they remain tethered.

As becomes immediately apparent from Schellnhuber's analysis, the gaze from the outside tends to follow the lines of a techno-scientific ideology that may incite reveries about large-scale technological manipulation of the planet – a danger often pointed out by critics

[11] Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, "'Earth System' Analysis and the Second Copernican Revolution," *Nature* 402 supplement (1999): C20, my emphasis.

[12] Buckminster Fuller made this remark in reply to a 1966 campaign led by future Whole Earth Catalog pioneer Stewart Brand, who wondered why at that age and time, NASA had not yet published pictures of the entire Earth for broader audiences. This anecdote is recounted in William Bryant, "Whole System, Whole Earth: The Convergence of Technology and Ecology in Twentieth Century American Culture" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2006), 99.

working in the context of the Anthropocene.[13] Not without a certain hubris, Schellnhuber's vertical perspective seduces him, for example, to define the ecological crisis as a "control problem," or a "geo-cybernetic task" that results in these three instrumental and technological questions:

> First, what kind of world do we have? Second, what kind of world do we want? Third, what must we do to get there?[14]

For Earth system scientists like Schellnhuber, the planetary perspective hence results in an image of the future of the Earth as a kind of engineering problem to be solved by a select group of experts at its control knobs. While such reductivism of the planet to a complex model that could in principle be manipulated might be a necessary methodological intervention for the geosciences, it easily oversteps its epistemological boundaries due to its important political and ontological consequences. Humanities scholars will be quick to point out that there is no such thing as a universal 'we' that can decide upon such matters, nor do all imagined futures serve all of humanity equally. In the quote above, politics itself appears to be anesthetized by recourse to a technocratic discourse in which humanity would smartly engineer its way toward a bright future – this is the kind of discourse that the controversial ecomodernist movement would later embrace in their visions of a technologically guided 'Good Anthropocene'.[15]

Thinkers in the hermeneutic or phenomenological tradition have often been critical of the planetary paradigm – but for reasons of its ontology rather than its politics. They argue that a geoscientific theory of the Earth considers the planet foremost in terms of knowledge: the objectified, whole Earth is the correlate of models and theories aiming to *explain* its operations, while this abstracted knowledge is only possible by dint of a more primordial relation to the Earth, one of which the theoretical attitude is only a secondary modification. Before relating to the being of Earth in theoretical terms, one first must partake *in* the Earth in

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[13] Jeremy Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch: The Ideology of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values* 24, no. 1 (2015): 9–29.

[14] Schellnhuber, "Earth System Analysis," C20.

[15] "An Ecomodernist Manifesto," Ecomodernism.org, April 2015, https://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english.

a more existential sense. In terms of the planet, for Ricoeur, this means the astronomical perspective on Earth as a planet is to be resisted or at least nuanced, as becomes clear in *Oneself as Another*. There, Ricoeur argues explicitly that we ought to think of the Earth as "something different, and something more, than a planet," namely "the mythical name of our corporeal anchoring in the world."[16] The planet therefore appears to be a derivative concept, one that assumes and alters a richer existential relation to the Earth, while this concept threatens to overwrite and lose sight of this original condition.

Such criticisms are not unique to Ricoeur, and they reflect deeper presuppositions of the hermeneutic and phenomenological school toward a scientific approach of Earth as a planet. Ricoeur's distinction between Earth and planet, for example, is directly borrowed from Heidegger's lecture on the artwork, where Heidegger brought the notion of Earth [*Erde*] into phenomenological analysis. For Heidegger, as for Ricoeur, Earth is not an object of knowledge. It is, instead, a disclosing force that brings forth beings as what they are. In poetic language, Heidegger describes Earth is the "coming forth and rising up in itself and in all things," which the Greeks called φύσις [*phusis*].[17] This dynamic sense of Earth is emphatically not the "merely astronomical idea of a planet," Heidegger asserts, which, one may gather, would fail to capture the ontological sense of Earth as something in which humans actively partake when it discloses beings as what they are.[18] Again, note the use of 'mere' in Heidegger's quote, and the 'something more' in Ricoeur's, which suggests that the planet, to them, *lacks* a particular ontological depth that the concept of Earth does set out to contain. This position is insightfully described and criticized by speculative realist Quentin Meillassoux in *After Finitude* with a jab at contemporary continental hermeneutics:

[16] "La Terre est ici plus et autre chose qu'une planète: c'est le nom mythique de notre ancrage corporel dans le monde." Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 150 [178].

[17] "Dieses Herauskommen und Aufgehen selbst und im Ganzen […]." Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes (1935/36)" in *Holzwege* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), 28; Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art (1935-6)" in *Off the Beaten Track,* trans. Julian Young, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

[18] "[…] die nur astronomische [Vorstellung] eines Planeten […]." Ibid., 28 [31].

> While science, through its rigorous mathematization of nature, uncovered a time wherein humanity could come into existence or be abolished while that time remained unaffected, philosophical time has sought to demote the time of science to the level of a 'vulgar', 'derivative', or 'standardized' form of originary correlational temporality, being-in-the-world, or the relation to a supposedly primordial historicality.[19]

In short, it could be argued that hermeneutics tends to downplay the originality and ontological depth of the vision of the planet as it emerges from the sciences.

An assumption that underlies these debates is that the proper way to understand human existence is to *situate* it *within* a context that precedes it and which it cannot overcome, while the planetary perspective would falsely assume a sort of disembodied, neutral view from an Archimedean point occupied by no one and set loose from contexts. This assumption becomes explicit in Hannah Arendt's reflections on the (planetary) perspective of Earth from space. Arendt maintains that the reduction of Earth to an objectified planet eradicates humanity's existential roots in Earth and drastically diminishes the stature of humanity itself. After all, when seen from space, human "activities will […] appear to ourselves as no more than 'overt behavior,' which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats."[20] From this hermeneutic angle, there appears to be something critically reductive about the scientific approach to the planet, which would flatten rather than broaden understanding of the human condition. The scientific, theoretical distance toward reality is framed by Arendt, Ricoeur and Heidegger as a deviation or modification of a more primordial relation of belonging that is the condition for any intentional epistemological act; the techno-scientific construction of the epistemological object of a 'planet' fails to bring to awareness

[19] "Alors que la science nous découvrait, avec la mathématisation rigoureuse de la nature, un temps capable de nous abolir ou de nous faire émerger sans en être lui-même affecté, le temps philosophique a réduit un tel temps à une forme 'dérivée', 'vulgaire', 'nivelée' d'une temporalité originairement corrélationnelle, d'un être-au-monde, ou d'un rapport à une historialité supposé originaire." Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Seuil, 2006), 170; Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency,* trans. Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2008), 123.

[20] Hannah Arendt, "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society* 18 (2007 [1963]): 54.

the prior and more profound relation of belonging that anchors humanity to the Earth. The planetary view of Earth from above is therefore to be resisted, at least in as far as this dissimulates its ontological origins.

EARTHBOUND METAPHORS

The tension between the planetary and the hermeneutic point of departure comes into better view when one considers the terrestrial metaphors that abound in hermeneutics, which underscore its attachment to an Earthbound point of view.[21] Hermeneutic metaphors tend to figure human existence as situated *on* Earth, a situation that is an elemental condition that it cannot escape. Take the concept of world, which Ricoeur defines as an external 'horizon' of experience.[22] What I want to emphasize is that the metaphor of a horizon implies an Earthbound perspective, one that is put under pressure by the paradigm of planetarity. One speaks of a horizon *from* a particular point of view *on* the Earth, as the horizon marks the limit of how far one can see from this standpoint. The horizon then provides visual cues to determine what is far and near, what is large and what is small, what requires attention and what can be ignored for now. The metaphorical meaning of a horizon as a context of meaning therefore borrows from human perception as living meaningfully on the surface of the Earth. Yet, this sense of horizontality is the first thing to go in the emergence of the geoscientific planetary perspective, and it disappears in a quite literal sense: does this signal a kind transgressive alienation from the human experience of the world, one that is forgetful of the rootedness of humans in a world, or could it be that the effacing of the horizon itself signals new meanings and different, ontological relation to the Earth?

A visual history of the planetary paradigm makes this loss of horizontality tangible and underscores the anti-hermeneutic problematics of the planet. In a history of Earth photography, Sebastian Grevsmühl has shown that the geoscientific perspective on the planet as a *whole* was prepared by the drastic abolishment of the horizon in the nineteenth century, when photographers and aeronauts Félix Nadar and Gaston Tissandier explored the visual

[21] For a more detailed outline of how I approach the 'planetary,' see, above: "The Discordant Planet," 24-35.

[22] Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 1* (Seuil, 1983), 118; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 78.

perspective of the planisphere by hot air balloon. The planisphere is the perspective on Earth from a perpendicular angle through which, without any horizon or other visual cues, viewers lose a sense of depth and distance – Earth appears as if it were a map.[23] Lacking a horizon, the planispheric gaze from above was a first remove from the surface-bound situation that hermeneutics takes for granted. A famous example of the view from the planisphere is Tissandier's 1885 photograph, taken from a hot air balloon, of Saint-Louis island in Paris (fig. 1), which, given its lack of horizon or other spatial cues, gave rise to confusion about its proper orientation – it was sometimes even printed mirrored or with the wrong side up.[24]



Figure 1. Gaston Tissandier's vertical photograph of Saint-Louis Island, which formed the frontispiece of his 1886 work *La photographie en ballon*. Gaston Tissandier, *La photographie en ballon* (1886), book and woodburytype; 8 3/8 x 6 x 1/8 in. (21.3 x 15.2 x 0.3 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase, photographed from the book by Dan Ross.

[23] Sebastian Vincent Grevsmühl, *La Terre vue d'en haut: L'invention de l'environnement global* (Seuil, 2014), 97-153.

[24] "Ne connaissant ni haut, ni bas, ni droite, ni gauche, la photographie verticale bouleverse d'une façon fondamentale le 'régime représentationnel' classique. Le simple fait de perdre le sol sous les pieds conduit ainsi, à travers le regard vertical, à la perte de l'*horizon* et de tout *point de fuite,* à une transformation fondamentale de la représentation du monde." Grevsmühl, *La Terre*, 116, 118.

Over time, the perpendicular perspective would gain in prominence in the visual rep-resentation of Earth. Over the past century, Grevsmü hl shows, innovative technologies emerged for photographing the planet from a larger distance. Technologies for aerial pho-tography would be increasingly important because of their usefulness for military purposes in the two World Wars.[25]After the Second World War, the militarized Space Race would result in paradigmatic photographs such as *Earthrise* and, later, *The Blue Marble* (fig. 2) that pre-sented the whole Earth as a sphere, sealed in its own atmosphere against the backdrop of impenetrable dark space. This transition to space photography would further diminish the importance of horizons in the imagination of Earth. On *The Blue Marble,* the planet as a whole appears but the horizon disappears, meaning that only when human consciousness rises above its localized viewpoint can it perceive the Earth in its entirety. This generates the fa-mous 'overview effect,' a radical change of perspective reported by astronauts when they are able to see the whole Earth at once – as Grevsmü hl observes, this perspective "no longer con-cerns a view from above in the strict sense, because the view is no longer a view from above *on* the terrestrial surface, but rather a view *towards* the Earth."[26]

The Voyager's *Pale Blue Dot* (fig. 3) brought this horizonless imaginary to its comple-tion by presenting Earth from six billion kilometres distance as nothing but a tiny pinprick of fragile light piercing through vast darkness: the Earth appears as a mere planet among planets, as a body in empty space. The viewer's gaze swims in space without spatial cues, without up or down, without any sense of distance or proximity. These photographs could not be further removed from the landscapes of meaning in which the hermeneutic subject dwells, as long as hermeneutics remains tied up in an Earthbound language.

[25] Ibid., 135-51.

[26] "Il ne s'agit plus d'une vue d'en haut au sens strict, car le regard n'est plus dirigé d'en haut *sur* la surface terrestre, mais plutôt *vers* la Terre." Ibid., 193, my translation; For more information on the 'overview effect' see the following work: Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2014).



Figure 2. NASA's *The Blue Marble*, taken by the Apollo 17 mission in 1972 from about 29.400 kilometers from Earth. NASA, *The Blue Marble* (1972), public domain, https://www.nasa.gov/image-article/earth-full-view-from-apollo-17/.



Figure 3. NASA's Pale Blue Dot, taken by the Voyager in 1990 from about six billion kilometres from Earth. The Earth appears as a tiny dot, caught in a ray of sunlight. This version is a revisited rendition, made with the original data for the 30th anniversary of the photograph. NASA, *Palue Blue Dot Revisited* (2020), public domain, https://science.nasa.gov/photojournal/pale-blue-dot-revisited/.

To be clear, in these photographs, the horizon is not only sacrificed in a literal, visual sense. It also recedes in its ontological and metaphorical role. When Earth becomes visible as a single, unified planet, the importance of the hermeneutical relation of belonging to Earth from a particular history, viewpoint, or world is downplayed, as Alexander Federau has observed in his *Pour une philosophie de l'anthropocène.* As an example, Federau cites astronomer Carl Sagan's "explicitly anti-hermeneutic" meditations on the *Pale Blue Dot*.[27] Sagan famously wrote:

> Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar,' every 'supreme leader,' every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.[28]

What should be noticed, according to Federau, is how Sagan uses *Pale Blue Dot* to disqualify the usual ways of making sense of things, such as religions, ideologies, family relations, and even affects.[29] Planetary unity and fragility includes and hence transcends all those means of orientation and the idle conflicts and dreams to which they give rise, and, instead, a sort of universalism emerges from the horizonless imaginary of Earth seen from space that blast forth in absence of these horizons of sense-making. The planetary gaze therefore "[challenges] our posturings, our imagined self-importance."[30] It gives rise to some sense of universality grounded in the unity of the Earth, directing at some post-political realm beyond the supposed illusions of religious or political identities.

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[27] Alexander Federau, *Pour une philosophie d'Anthropocène* (Presses Universitaire de France, 2017), 377.

[28] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (Random House, 1994), 8.

[29] Federau, *Philosophie d'Anthropocène,* 137.

[30] Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 9.

In short, the planetary gaze from 'nowhere,' resisting situatedness and horizons, radically challenges the hermeneutic project. Ricoeur and other hermeneutic thinkers would of course resist this perspectiveless perspective by resorting to the more 'anchored' relation humans entertain with Earth. Moreover, they would raise the question from what position Sagan's universalism is articulated: can discourse speak from nowhere, or is this is a dissimulation rather than eradication of perspectivism? Nevertheless, there will be questions for hermeneutics in return.

If I am allowed to use hermeneutics against hermeneutics, I would like to raise the question whether these images of the planet as a whole are merely dissimulations of a more primordial sense of being on Earth, or whether they present a new '*Sache,*' to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's phrase, that is, the planet as a new subject matter. [31] Do they not reveal something about the being of Earth and the human condition that was not yet captured by the phenomenological and hermeneutic account of Earth? As I will show in the rest of this chapter, it is remarkable that Ricoeur speaks of a 'mere' planet, as if the scientific discoveries could not, in one way or another, *add* something to the lived relation to Earth. Does the planetary framework not help one traverse a theoretical distance inaccessible to the horizontal-terrestrial sense of living *on* Earth? The omittance of this thought is even more remarkable because Ricoeur has always engaged with the social sciences exactly by *incorporating* their distanced / theoretical approach *within* the hermeneutical process. Their 'methods' that aim to *explain* human action do not rule out approaches based on *understanding*, if they do not claim to render understanding obsolete. In many of the essays of *From Text to Action,* Ricoeur argues that the distance the sciences provide to lived experience becomes productive if their results are reintegrated again within this experience. [32] The problem is not so much distanciation or

[31] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 479; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (Continuum, 2004), 470.

[32] Cf., Paul Ricœur, "Expliquer et comprendre," in *Du texte à l'action: Essay's d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 181; Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 143.

scientific alienation. The problem is a dissimulation of the rootedness of science in living experience. It is unclear to me why this strategy is not adopted by Ricoeur whenever he discusses the geosciences or the notion of the planet.

The planetary gaze situates human life, in a broad sweep, in vast histories that challenge one to radically extend one's understanding of time. Is the being of Earth then truly only *reduced* or *diminished* when it is presented as a planet in a geoscientific framework, or could one say that it gains something, that something new is brought to light that demands further thought? While one may be wary of Sagan's utopian comments that operationalize an almost Archimedean point of view at the Earth to arrive at some sort of post-political world beyond regional and situated identities and traditions, it may still be the case that the planet brings something to hermeneutics that it has resisted but that now, in the Anthropocene, calls out for further reflection. I will make the case that, despite his reservations regarding the ontological depth of the astronomical view of Earth, Ricoeur can help one to think *beyond* the world *toward* the planet, that his hermeneutics is not bound to horizontal perspectives, and that even his literary hermeneutics can be opened to planetary thinking. Before establishing these conclusions, however, a further understanding of Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics is called for to develop these claims.

REFIGURING THE WORLD

In the previous section, I have argued that hermeneutics has not readily embraced the concept of the planet. Does this mean that the hermeneutic concept of world also avoids incorporating the notion of the planet? Inversely, to what degree does the world lead back to a human preoccupation with their environment, how drastically does world bring back the meaning of beings and things to human project, initiatives, et cetera? In other words, can the world bear the alterity of the planet, its discordance to human projects, or does the planet always interrupt, bracket, or disturb the world? In this section, I will explore in greater detail Ricoeur's notion of world to be able to answer these questions. Ricoeur's main impetus in discussing the concept of world is to understand the efficacy of the imagination in all its various guises. Narrative, in particular, works to redescribe or even refigure the world. Pursuing

this thought, I will here lay out Ricoeur's theory of the imagination, the mimetic circle of narrative, and finally, the importance of these ideas for his understanding of the concept of the world, which, retains a tension relative to the horizonless planetary.

SEMANTIC INNOVATION IN *TIME AND NARRATIVE*

When Ricoeur speaks of the world and the role of the imagination, what he most often has in mind is a *cultural* understanding of world, as the context of meaning of lived experiences that is furnished by the totality of symbols, narratives, the structures of social life, et cetera, that are implied as a background to everyday experience. This cultural world may of course include a sense of the scientific outlook of a particular day and age, for example in the way heliocentrism results in a vague awareness that the Earth that spins around its axis rather than that the sun orbits around the Earth (even if this shimmering awareness hardly ever overwrites the everyday perception that it is the sun that rises – not the Earth that turns), it is clear that such considerations are not at the heart of Ricoeur's theory of the role of the imagination in light of the world.[33] World involves more specifically the kind of narrative identities of individuals and communities, their symbolism and social norms, rather than the planet on which these communities dwell, which resists becoming a cultural idea or context as it refers to an ontological condition that precedes this human, cultural world and allows it to exist at all.

[33] In a relevant text on the phenomenology of spatiality, Husserl posits the thesis that phenomenologically speaking the Earth does not move – even though science has, of course, at least since Galileo argued otherwise. Husserl does not dispute the scientific evidence for the Copernican worldview, but he investigates how movement and rest can be extended from an Earthbound perspective to the mathematical approach of nature of the physical sciences. This argument shows how theoretical advancement does not always translate or transform the structures of lived experience, even if it borrows from its resources. According to Husserl, concepts as 'rest' or 'movement' are developed in relation to the phenomenology of Earth as that relative to which things appear to be moving or resting, a ground to serve as a criterion. "Auf der Erde, oder an der Erde, von ihr weg, auf sie hin findet Bewegung statt. Erde selbst in der ursprünglichen Vorstellungsgestalt bewegt sich nicht und ruht nicht, in Bezug auf sie haben Ruhe und Bewegung erst Sinn." Edmund Husserl, "Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum Phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur" in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl,* ed. Marvin Farber (Harvard University Press, 1940), 309.

When Ricoeur discusses the world, he discusses culture, and when he discusses culture, he discusses the means available to the imagination to innovate or change what is inherited by a particular culture. This is why an explanation of the notion of 'world' in his work needs to pass through the notions of imagination, innovation, and the concrete means by which literature employs the power to innovate. Ricoeur develops his theory of the imagination on the basis of a hermeneutic approach to human existence, which in Richard Kearney's words, assumes that "human being […] is always, a *being-interpreted*."[34] As interpreted, human existence unfolds meaningfully, dwelling among objects, persons, events, that make sense to it, while human experience of the world is therefore always shaped by interpretation – that is, in a sense, its condition. There is no direct experience of some 'external' world, as, instead, experience itself has a debt to the entirety of the cultural expressions to which one has been exposed, such as literature, historical documents, and "the whole treasury of symbols" that the cultural archive encompasses.[35] Over time, this cultural treasury builds a framework of assumptions about the world, which form a kind of horizon that stretches out behind each particular experience while rendering it understandable as such. Phenomenological hermeneutics therefore departs from a situation in which consciousness finds itself already entangled in a (cultural) history that forms its condition and that opens it to being; interpretation becomes a fundamental trait of human existence.[36]

For Ricoeur, interpretation is an open-ended process because the cultural treasury that furnishes the context of experience is not a univocal or unambiguous set of rules or paradigms to decode or ascribe meaning to what appears. Cultural expressions, such as works of literature, religious narratives, or conceptions of the social tend to contain multiple meanings that call for further interpretation. As Ricoeur scholar William Hall writes, for Ricoeur, phenomena give rise "to meaning in linguistic and cultural expressions that *mean* more than they *say* and, therefore, demand interpretation."[37] One result of the surplus of meaning over

[34] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Ashgate, 2004), 14.

[35] "[L]e trésor des symboles […]." Ricoeur, "On interpretation," 17 [30].

[36] I will argue below, in the chapter on planetary asymmetry, that Ricoeur risks 'narrowing' down his hermeneutic approach to belonging by not considering the ways in which humans belong to the planet before they belong to their cultural heritage or traditions. Cf., "Narrow Belonging," 120-124.

[37] William David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension between Love and Justice* (State University of New York Press, 2007), 7.

expression is that there are multiple ways of reading or decoding both the cultural archive and experience. In his famous essay "Existence and Hermeneutics," Ricoeur compares eschatological, psychoanalytical, and dialectical modes of decoding symbols, each of which pick up on different elements of the symbolic realm, while none of these forms of reading may be said to be superior to any other.[38] The task of philosophical hermeneutics is not to judge which interpretation is right but rather to develop a 'criteriology' that explores the limits within which each of the respective interpretative traditions can stake its claims.

These general tenets inform Ricoeur's reflections on the imagination. The importance of the cultural archive for meaningful experience charges the imagination with an important, innovative role to play in the relationship between humans and being. The imagination adds to and transforms the cultural treasury and thereby transforms the context of experience, in turn transforming human consciousness.

This process is described in more concrete terms in the preface to *Time and Narrative,* where Ricoeur returns to and builds on claims made in his earlier work on metaphorical language. Metaphors, Ricoeur maintains, produce a "new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution," which, he maintains, operates on the level of the whole sentence, "whose function it is to save the new pertinence of the 'odd' predication threatened by the literal incongruity of the attribution."[39] In the editor's introduction to Ricoeur's recently published lectures on the imagination, this process is explained as follows:

> [Ricoeur's] theory argues that in the metaphoric attribution 'X is Y,' the metaphor operates not as a matter of an unanticipated naming ('Y') but through the unusual predication that interrelates X and Y and so involves the entire sentence. Metaphoric predication is an act, a movement, and anticipates Ricoeur's discussion on

[38] Paul Ricœur, "Existence et herméneutique," in *Le conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (Seuil, 1969); Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," trans., Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations,* ed. Don Idhe (Athlone, 1989).

[39] "[L]a production d'une nouvelle pertinence sémantique par le moyen d'une attribution impertinente." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* ix [11].

> imagination as a work. The logical clash between X and Y as a matter of existent meaning allows a new, metaphoric meaning to emerge.[40]

Metaphors establish new meaning dynamically by proposing odd predications, and they remain 'living' in as far readers are puzzled by and have to respond to this paradoxical predication by relating differently to the thing about which something odd is predicated. Ricoeur claims that this dynamic enables readers to move from a "seeing-as" to a "being-as," which means that a different perspective allows for different ways of being in the world.[41] Ricoeur thus maintains that the metaphorical innovations of poetic language have ontological depth. They change the way in which humans *are* in the world by changing their perspective on this world. In his monograph on Ricoeur, Richard Kearney therefore stresses the ontological importance of the imagination by arguing that the "imagination can be recognized [...] as the act of responding to a demand for a new meaning, the demand of emerging realities to *be* by *being said* in new ways."[42] Entering into language, these new realities are shared among speakers, and from there on may restructure experiences of and with being. Ricoeur's hermeneutics is, therefore, a hermeneutics of *semantic innovation* that does not only look backwards, i.e., to how history and tradition impact human consciousness, but also forwards, to how language and the imagination have the capacity to break new ground.

To substantiate these claims, Ricoeur develops an original understanding of the imagination as a *linguistic* force that, by suspending 'direct' description of the world, unleashes the 'indirect' powers of language to *redescribe* to the world. This power lies dormant in the metaphorical possibilities of language. Again, in reference to metaphors and adopting Aristotle's definition of the good metaphor as relying on "an eye for resemblances,"[43] Ricoeur thinks the imagination can be exemplified by how a metaphor constitutes unexpected like-

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[40] George H. Taylor, editor's introduction to *Lectures on Imagination* by Paul Ricoeur, ed. George H. Taylor et al. (University of Chicago Press, 2024), xxix.

[41] "[L]e révélateur d'un 'être-comme' au niveau ontologique le plus radical." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, xi [13].

[42] Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 40.

[43] "τὸ γὰρ εὖ μεταφέρειν τὸ τὸ ὅμοιον θεωρεῖν ἐστιν." Aristotle, *The Poetics* in *The Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Harvard University Press, 1982), 1459a–1.

ness between terms that appear to be completely unrelated. This sudden constitution of likenesses is something of a 'shock,' as metaphorical resemblance feeds off the *unlikely* combination of words. It "consists in the coming together that suddenly abolishes the logical distance between heretofore distinct semantic fields in order to produce the semantic shock, which, in its turn, ignites the spark of meaning of the metaphor."[44] The imagination is "the sudden glimpse," Ricoeur thus argues, "of a new predicative pertinence [...] a way of constructing pertinence in impertinence."[45] It is not completely 'new' or 'free' because it returns to a field of meaning already established, yet, by connecting its terms in other ways, it shows and develops possibilities that were hitherto unheard of. The imagination operates in language, where it shakes off the descriptive, regular use of words, and establishes the innovative, unexpected properties of a language freed from the chains of direct reference to a world 'out there.'

All of this is important to understand Ricoeur's approach to narrative in *Time and Narrative.* In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur investigates the configurative powers of narrative to give shape to the human experience of time. "Time becomes human time," Ricoeur writes, "to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experiences."[46]According to William C. Dowling, Ricoeur means by this that narrative, the telling and sharing of stories, brings into play its own temporality in which "a consciousness otherwise marooned in a blind material universe discovers a mirror of its own world of human concerns."[47] Narrative

[44] "Elle consiste dans le rapprochement qui soudain abolit la distance logique entre des champs sémantiques jusque-là éloignés, pour engendrer le choc sémantique qui, à son tour, suscite l'étincelle de sens de la métaphore." Paul Ricœur, "L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 218; Paul Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," trans. Kathleen Blamey, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 173.

[45] "L'imagination est l'aperception, la vue soudaine, d'une nouvelle pertinence prédicative, à savoir une manière de construire la pertinence dans l'impertinence." Ibid. 173 [218-9].

[46] "Le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l'expérience temporelle." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 3 [17].

[47] William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to* Temps et Récit (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 86.

makes physical, material time appear meaningful, while, as discourse directed at others, it also moves the individual perception of time towards a sense of time shared with others in public life – that is, a more historical sense of time. In this way, narrative does not simply imitate life in the sense of being its copy, as instead it dynamically generates new configurations of time, alongside new meanings, and modes of being-in-the-world. If narrative can refigure the world of experience, it is because the (narrative) imagination, just like a metaphor, redescribes reality by proposing new schemata of structuring experience, i.e., furnishing new sets of presuppositions about the implied world of experience.

Ricoeur often invokes the idea of the Kantian schema to explain the innovative, sensory function of the imagination in metaphor and language. The schema, for Kant, ties together concepts with images and in this way bridges the gap between the 'empty' understanding (*Verstand*) and the 'blind' sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*); on the one hand, it makes concepts visible, while on the other it gives form to the yet formless intuition.[48] Schemata, furnished by the imagination, apply concepts to the experience, giving it structure and form. Likewise, Ricoeur believes that the imagination in a broader sense – also involving metaphor and narrative – crafts schemata to restructure experience. A narrated plot, for example, provides a schema for bringing together "goals, causes, and chance [...] within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action."[49] Novels such as *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* create a particular schema of understanding how a death in a small community reverberates across agents, using an experimental plot to bring together a range of characters, circumstances, situations, places, et cetera, whilst maintaining some explanatory force and some sense of unity can provide tools for readers to also read their own worlds and action in such a way. The plot creates a new model, a new possible ordering of experience, which opens up actual experience by "suspending [...] the descriptive value of statements" and introducing a poetic language that is able "to redescribe a reality inaccessible to direct description."[50] Ricoeur's

[48] For Kant's discussion of schemata, see: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Meiner, 1956), A137–48, B176–88; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A137-48, B176-88.

[49] "[P]ar la vertu de l'intrigue, des buts, des causes, des hasards sont rassemblés sous l'unité temporelle d'une action totale et complète." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* ix [11].

[50] "[L]a suspension la fonction référentielle directe et descriptive [...] ce pouvoir de l'énoncé métaphorique de re-décrire une réalité inaccessible à la description directe." Ibid., xi [13].

theory of the imagination is therefore two-sided: the imagination has a logical or synthetic side in as far as it creates certain rules or models for gathering together elements into a unity, whilst these still abstract schemata are also applied to refigure reality when they touch audiences that let themselves be moved by them.

In short, the approach to language as an innovative force in *Time and Narrative* builds on a Ricoeurian theory of the imagination as disclosure of new meanings. These new meanings open new ways of being because, for Ricoeur, human existence unfolds through interpretation, which in turn mobilizes a cultural and historical background from which being is engaged. If the imagination innovates this archive, it also discloses other ways of 'reading' the world, and this is why narrative can, according Ricoeur, refigure the human experience of time. While all of this shows that Ricoeur does not think of the world as a realm of meaning closed-in on itself – precisely because within the world new meaning may emerge – it may seem like the linguistic properties of the imagination and the world render it a kind of correlate of human language and thought, thereby narrowing the world down to an anthropocentric concept at odds with the planet. Further conceptualization is needed to work toward my main claim that while such anthropocentric understandings of world are present in Ricoeur, there is also a more discordant sense of the world, as an openness *toward* being that is not understood and that is not *captured* by language.

THE MIMETIC CIRCLE

A next step in this argument takes me to Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative,* which zooms in on the way in which narrative – as one mode of the productive imagination – has the capacity to transform the human experience of time. In terms of the tension between world and planet, Ricoeur's concept of narrative is both anthropocentric and beyond anthropocentrism. While it situates narrative as an intervention in what Ricoeur calls practical understanding, which in turn depends on a kind of cultural literacy to read symbols, norms, and human intentions, narrative can also explore the limits of this anthropocentric approach to the world, introducing tensions and aporia's. Before I turn to these discordant elements, it is useful to now first sketch, in detail, Ricoeur's model of narrativity in *Time and Narrative.*

One of *Time and Narrative*'s major contributions to discussions of the semantic innovations of narrativity is the idea of a *mimetic circle,* which describes the way in which literature becomes a *productive* force that reorganizes the (temporal) experiences of readers. Ricoeur argues that the configuration of narrative by means of a *plot* [*intrigue*] both borrows from the world of readers and promises to transform it; literature provides readers with semantic innovations, new ways of 'seeing as' that can result in other modes of 'being as.'

The term 'mimesis' itself refers back to a long history of philosophical debate about the status of art and poetics vis-à-vis reality; the Greek term 'mimesis' itself already has a plurality of meanings that are not rightfully captured by its usual English translation of the 'imitation' of reality because mimesis can indicate, as well, the imitation of actions, of nature, of the world of Forms but also resemblance, likeness, verisimilitude, representation.[51] Within the plurality contained within this single term, two ideal mimetic models emerge, namely, those of Plato and of Aristotle – Ricoeur agreeing with the latter.

Plato considered mimesis a mere 'copy' of reality – never quite faithful to it, and always derivative of and lesser than its original. He denounces mimetic art because it distorts the truth of what it imitates, which, does not imitate the ideal (and real) Form, but only the *appearance* of the Forms in the world – i.e., all those elements that do not pertain to the essence. In a famous phrase, Plato therefore writes that the mimesis of the arts is merely the "imitation of the apparent [φαντάσματοσ]," which is "at a far remove from reality [άληθοῦσ]."[52]

In contrast, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle situates mimesis within the practical rather than the theoretical domain, and he conceptualizes mimesis as the representation of action [μίμησις πράξεως, *mimesis praxeos*] under the constraints of the form of the plot [μῦθος, *muthos*].[53] By imposing the form of a plot on its representations, mimesis *adds* rather than *takes* something from what it represents. It provides structure to what it imitates. It does not 'realistically' copy events that already took place in reality, but it imposes order, structure,

[51] Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (Routledge, 2006), 1.

[52] Plato, *Republic*: *Books VI-X,* ed. and trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Harvard University Press, 2013), 598B [403].

[53] Aristotle, *The Poetics,* 1450a.

and also limits on what it represents, and these interventions allow for certain effects and insights that can only achieved through the mediation of the plot.

Conceiving of mimesis as a circular process, Ricoeur agrees with Aristotle that narrative represents reality through the form of the plot not to 'realistically' copy the world of action but to produce new emotions, forms, and insights, which, in return, innovate the worlds of audiences. Likewise, Ricoeur also shares Aristotle's conception of the mimetic arts, such as the Greek tragedy, as a mimesis of a particular domain of reality, i.e., the world of human action. Mimesis does so by moving through three stages, namely, those of *prefiguration, configuration,* and *refiguration*, which are also called mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$, and mimesis$_3$.

Mimesis$_1$ is the stage of prefiguration of narrative, which refers to the "prenarrative structure of ordinary experience."[54] To understand fictional actions, Ricoeur argues, one needs to be able to understand action in practical life, "its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal characters."[55] Conversely, narratives can narrate fictional actions because real world actions always already have something 'narratable' about them; they do not vanish in their actualization but give rise to meaning that remains after their performance. Mimesis$_1$ draws from these 'tellable' elements of action, which again are structured by three categories.

The first element of mimesis$_1$ is what Ricoeur calls the semantics of action [*sémantique de l'action*].[56] The semantics of action refer to the implicit, practical knowledge that allows one to identify and understand a particular action in the world, which involves both the selection of relevant features of reality *and* the know-how to connect these features in a proper manner. Dowling notes about this that "to count as an action, what would otherwise be mere physical movement must be understood within a context involving volition, motives, and goals."[57] Indeed, to identify an action, say, 'joining a protest', as something that *means more* than a mere transportation of one's body to a certain location, one needs to be able to answer the questions *why, who*, and *how,* i.e., what do the protesters hope to achieve and why,

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[54] Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time,* 8.

[55] "[…] de ses structures intelligibles, de ses ressources symboliques et de son caractère temporel." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 54 [87].

[56] Ibid., 54 [88].

[57] Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time,* 3.

how do they relate to certain institutions, what broader movements they are a part of, et cetera. Ricoeur describes this capacity as the ability to navigate the heterogeneous terms within a conceptual network [*réseau conceptuel*] to disclose a single action. This requires at least that one be able to connect terms such as agents, circumstances, objects, means, ends, et cetera to construct a unified 'story' of a particular action. Narrative, too, assumes this skill in its audiences, as it presents them with a world filled with places, events, characters, descriptions, et cetera, that constitute its 'conceptual network': to 'read' the action of the plot, one needs to be able to navigate this network and provide it with the correct order and form.

The second element of mimesis$_1$ is the symbolic nature of actions, which describes how actions are always embedded in cultural and social contexts and norms.[58] This renders actions 'readable' (and thus writeable) in a certain way. Actions rely on what I above called the symbolic or cultural treasury: they are 'decoded' based on a set of assumptions that is inherited from belonging to a particular culture or tradition. Ricoeur goes as far as to write that "[i]f, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms."[59] Agents rely on a 'context of description' that actives a particular meaning of what they are doing. For example, waving one's hand is an arbitrary sign that could be mean anything from calling a cab or greeting a friend; its meaning depends on the invoked symbolic context. Dowling gives the example of seeing a brand-new Rolls-Royce in the neighbour's drive way and directly perceiving this expensive car as "something meant as a sign of wealth or status, and only incidentally [as] a mechanical device for transporting its owner from point A to point B."[60] Likewise, action is not merely physical intervention in the world but builds on symbolic mediations that provide it with meaning, i.e., it is 'read' to a certain degree. Ricoeur even goes as far as to call actions 'quasi-texts' based on their symbolical mediations, meaning that one always has to read an action like one reads the meaning of symbols.[61]

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[58] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 57-9 [91-4].

[59] "Si, en effet, l'action peut être racontée, c'est qu'elle est déjà articulée dans des signes, des règles, des normes." Ibid., 57 [91].

[60] Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time,* 3.

[61] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 58 [93].

Finally, actions have their temporality that is not merely that of the physical, measurable time of the clock or calendar, and which means that mimesis can draw from more than a simple, linear time when narrating action.[62] In reference to Heidegger, Ricoeur characterizes the time of action as *Innerzeitigkeit*, a temporality at play when one is actively involved with beings, engaging with the world on the basis of intentions and actions rather than through a distanced, theoretical attitude.[63] The time of action emerges from meaningful interaction with other beings, such as using a telephone to call one's peers to organize a protest at a suited moment, rather than by calculating or measuring empty intervals of clock time. While action does not abolish clock time, when acting, one consults clocks and calendars only in relation to the project to be realized – is it the right time to do this or that? The empty stretches of physical time are therefore transformed into the meaningful time of a living present dealing with things and beings in the world. This living, meaningful time is also the time of narrative, where linear, physical time enters only in light of the development of the narrated action and its characters. Based on this conception of time, as well as on the semantics and symbolism of action I just discussed, narrative can transform actions into configured works of art, which is a process that actualizes in the next step of mimesis$_2$.

Whereas mimesis$_1$ describes the *preconditions* within practical understanding upon which narrative potentially builds, mimesis$_2$ is the creation of an actual narrative. Ricoeur calls this its *configuration*: the potential elements of mimesis$_1$ are used to create an actual narrative, such as a novel or a narrative historical inquiry.[64] Such narratives select and actualize what was merely potential in the pre-understanding of mimesis$_1$, while they also provide a particular structure and form on events and actions. Importantly, as a stage in the mimetic circle that is distinct from 'real world' practical understanding, narrative mimesis is never merely a *copy* of action. Ricoeur writes that "by serving as a turning point [mimesis$_2$]

[62] Ibid., 59-64 [95-101].

[63] On within-time-ness (*Innerzeitigkeit*), see: Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Max Niemeyer, 2006), 411-420; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 464-472.

[64] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 64-70 [101-9].

opens up the world of the plot and institutes [...] the literariness of the work of literature."[65] By 'literariness,' Ricoeur means those qualities pertaining to work that allow audiences to immediately know that the configured narrative is not a direct imitation but rather a representation of the world of action. It provides a new order, that of the plot, to the conceptual network, and forms a particular work, which frees itself from the direct reference to reality.

What happens when the world is presented through the lens of a (fictional) narrative? Ricoeur first remarks that the configurative act of mimesis$_2$ dynamically brings together a multitude of events with the single whole of the narrative [*histoire*] that they are a part of. This interplay between whole and part is essential to any narrative, as it represents actions in the form of a plot [*intrigue*], which, in turns, mediates between *events* considered as *single instances* and a *story* considered as a whole.[66] A plot draws a story *from* a range of events, which transposes these separate incidents *into* a narrative unity. There is something circular about this, because events only become events once they have been taken up into the configuration of a story – there are no 'raw' events *before* the act of emplotment. This also means that "[a]n event must be more than just a singular occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot."[67] What counts as event is determined by its actual impact on the plot as a whole, as when the death of the farmer in *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* sets in motion an entire range of consequences. This means, inversely, that the configured plot must not merely serially list events – which would fail to become events in that case – but also configure them into a story; there is a dynamic between part and whole.

A second effect of mimesis$_2$ is that it brings together a multitude of heterogeneous factors into *one* composition.[68] This is also called its discordant concordance, and it is perhaps Ricoeur's most original contribution to understand the way in which narrative provide order [*intentio*] *without* ignoring or effacing disorder [*distentio*].[69] A plot does not just juxtapose events in time, it also brings together a large network of terms and concepts which

[65] "[P]ar sa fonction de coupure, elle ouvre le monde de la composition poétique et institute, [...] la littérarité de l'œuvre littéraire." Ibid., 53 [86].

[66] Ibid., 64 [101].

[67] "[U]ne événement doit être plus qu'une occurrence singulière. Il reçoit sa définition de sa contribution au développement de l'intrigue," Ibid., 65 [102].

[68] Ibid., 65 [102].

[69] Ibid., 66 [103].

might not seem to have much to do with each other. It involves motivations, descriptions, actions, events, agents, even conflict, reversals, and catastrophe. Such terms emerged already in mimesis$_1$ as the elements of the symbolic network used to identify action. In mimesis$_2$ these terms acquire a particular *order* when they are taken up in this or that narrative and discussed successively. The paradigmatic (or virtual) order of the conceptual network now obtains a succession, it becomes syntagmatic.[70] Because of this, a plot unifies discordant properties like good fortune and tragedy, birth and death, hope and despair, which are opposites that would normally exclude each other but that can be placed side to side in a story. *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* even brings together the perspective of a widow with that of mushrooms, putting pressure on the network by lending its voice to the indifferent mountains on which the entire plot takes place. The plot is discordantly concordant; it brings together elements that are discordant to one another under the aegis of a single whole.

A third result is that in the configuration, two different time orders are implied. On the one hand, narrative retains a sense of linear physical time in the succession of its episodes.[71] In what narratologists call the *suzjet,* the actually articulated discourse, narrative takes time to unfold, presenting one event after another, just as physical time moves from instant to instant. On the other hand, narrative is never mere chronology. If a reader follows the story, he is willing to accept the seeming contingencies inherent in each episode in the anticipation of a conclusion that ties all these distinct factors together into a whole. This is why one may remain patient if Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry for The Future* takes one from the midst of a deadly heat wave in India to a bureau in the moderate climate of Zürich several pages later, crowded with characters one has not yet met before. [72] Such leaps are allowed in narrative because it remains guided by the reader's expectation that the unfolding plot ties together the distinct places and characters into a meaningful whole.[73] The followability of a story across such heterogeneous time orders, Ricoeur thinks, allows one to glimpse the contours of a poetic solution to the tension between several temporalities – it

[70] Ibid., 66 [102].

[71] Ibid., 66-7 [103-5].

[72] Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (Orbit, 2020).

[73] According to Ricoeur, readers play a pivotal role in completing the work. I return to this idea below, see: "Discordance in Ricoeur's Reception Theory," 218-240.

shows that the disparate, episodic, linear dimensions of narrative can coexist with the sense of unity achieved at the end of emplotment.

While mimesis$_2$ describes the structure of concrete narratives, such as novels or other stories, mimesis$_3$ is concerned with how these narrative *refigure* the reality of audiences.[74] Refiguration therefore "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader."[75] With this claim, Ricoeur moves away from the structuralist dogma that the text is a closed whole, and he even argues that "it is the reader who completes the work inasmuch as [...] the written work is a sketch for reading."[76] In other words, literary texts are *virtually* proposed worlds until they are *actualized* in a concrete act of reading. The act of reading is necessary to complete the mimetic circle, and mimesis$_3$ refers to how readers adopt the configuration of mimesis$_2$ to return to mimesis$_1$, applying the proposed structures to their own practical understanding of reality. This movement relies on features of narrative that already prepare the return from the text to the world.

First, narrative impacts the real world not by addressing it directly but by taking the detour of metaphorical language. As discussed, Ricoeur views literature and poetic language in general as forms of suspended reference, which means that "[p]oetic texts, too, speak *of* the world, even though they may not do so in a descriptive fashion."[77] Instead of descriptions of actually existing beings, they rely on "a more radical power of reference to those aspects of our being-in-the-world that cannot be talked about directly."[78] By abolishing literal description, fictional worlds can in fact become more than mere shadowy imitations of reality, and spark new meanings that allow one to see and be differently. In reference to François Dagognet, Ricoeur speaks of the *iconic augmentation* of mimesis.[79] While narratives may at first glance appear to create 'illusions' and move away from the way things really are because

[74] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 70 [109].

[75] "[L]'intersection du monde du texte avec le monde du lecteur." Ibid., 79 [120].

[76] "C'est enfin le lecteur qui achève l'œuvre dans la mesure où […] l'œuvre écrite est une esquisse pour la lecture." Ibid., 77 [117].

[77] "[L]es textes poétiques eux aussi parlent *du* monde, bien qu'ils ne le fassent pas de façon descriptive." Ibid., 80 [121].

[78] "[U]n pouvoir plus radical de référence à des aspects de notre être-au-monde qui ne peuvent être dits de manière directe." Ibid., 80 [121].

[79] François Dagognet, *Écriture et iconographe* (Vrins, 1973); Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 80 [121].

they bring their own rules of composition and simplify reality, such simplifications, in fact, allow them to *augment* one's understanding of what is depicted.[80]

A first transition from the post-textual realm to the pre-textual realm is formed by so called *schematization* and by *tradition*, which govern the expectations a reader has when he opens a new work of fiction.[81] Each book is embedded in a tradition of reading and writing that embed it in a network of expectation already activated before a reader even opens it. One could think of such matters as a genres or styles, which impose schemata for how to synthesize the elements of a work into a meaningful whole. This is the schematization side of literature. Such traditions are, however, historically fluid and they can be updated or innovated by each new work that upsets certain rules within such a schema. This is why readers approach the experimental novels by Beckett or Robbe-Grillet with an expectation of fragmentation and open-endedness that is not activated when one opens a work by Dickens. Mimesis$_3$ refers to the possibilities of each single work to change reality by updating such schemata, sorting real effects by furnishing a revised literary understanding on the side of the reader.

A second refiguration of the world of the reader through narrative intervention works by connecting the structural aspects of the pre-understanding of action in hitherto unexpected manners, precisely because narrative provides an answer to *how* one can connect the heterogeneous elements of the conceptual network. "The narrative work is an invitation to see our praxis as it is ordered by this or that plot articulated in our literature."[82] Narratives also intervene in the symbolic realm that is a precondition of action by re-interpreting existing symbols or furnishing new ones, as I outlined in the previous subsection. A satire, for example, can directly attack the hypocrisy bourgeois sustainability and the empty language

[80] Ricoeur discusses Dagognet's thesis in more detail in his recently published *Lectures on Imagination,* based on lectured Ricoeur gave in English at the University of Chicago in 1975, ten years prior to the publication of *Time and Narrative*. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Imagination,* ed. George H. Taylor et al. (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 250-60.

[81] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 68-70 [105-9].

[82] "L'œuvre narrative est une invitation à *voir* notre praxis *comme…* elle est ordonnée par telle ou telle intrigue articulée dans note littérature." Ibid., 83 [124].

that surrounds it, and, as such, criticize and alter particular social norms. Ultimately, mimesis$_3$ is also where the experience of time is refigured by the interweaving of the resources of fiction and history.

Ricoeur suggests that history and fiction (as mimetic practices) establish a 'third time' together, in between the soul and the cosmos, by borrowing from one another, using "the cardinal feature of narrative time, namely, its ability to combine in variable proportions the chronological component of the episode and the achronological component of the configuration."[83] When narrated, an empty stretch of time is suddenly filled with meaning and order, and the bland, levelled landscape of indistinguishable instants of clock time is transformed into a relief of meaning, granting all moments a different stature and shape depending on their contribution to the entire action. As such, narrative intervenes in the symbolic, temporal, and social preunderstanding of readers, which does not only change how they view literature but also the schemata they use to understand both action and time in the world.

What does all this do to the sense of the world? The mimetic circle situates literature firmly within the world of action, which, as I have explained above, is taken by Ricoeur to be mostly structured according to a kind of cultural literacy pertaining to the semantics of action and to a sense of time closely knit together with human concern. Yet, again, this world is not some monolithic superstructure as narrative can intervene and open it up, even investigating the discordances at play within it – such as the different conceptions of time and the heterogeneity of the semantic network. Having sketched all of this, a further inquiry into Ricoeur's sense of world will help to show how the anthropocentric elements within it are balanced by an anthropo-acentric sense of world as a discordant openness to being.

WORLD AND PLANET

My claim will be that there is a Ricoeurian anthropo-acentric concept of world that leaves room for the planet. By anthropo-acentric concept, I mean that this concept of world is not primarily constituted by means of structures inherent to human projects, intentions, et

[83] "[Le] trait cardinal du temps narratif, à savoir son aptitude à combiner en proportions variables la composante chronologique de l'épisode et la composante non chronologique de la configuration." Ibid., 225 [313].

cetera. In this section, I work toward this concept in three steps. First, I further develop the Ricoeurian concept of world in his literary hermeneutics, which is implied by but not thoroughly fleshed out in the account of the mimetic circle above. Second, I will cast a critical glance on Ricoeur's sense of world, to argue that it could lead to an anthropocentric understanding. Ricoeur assumes, for example, that geological time can be distinguished from the time of human action, placing it outside of the perimeters of world: yet, in the Anthropocene, human action has extended into geological time, pulling it into the world yet also upsetting its theoretical foundations. Finally, by stressing the importance of discordance, I will argue that Ricoeur's sense of world can also be read in an anthropo-acentric manner, much more attuned to the problems of planetary, using his criticisms of Heidegger and his argument that literature inhabits and renders meaningful discordances and ruptures within the world.

LITERATURE AND WORLD

Let me begin by acknowledging that my aim to develop a Ricoeurian concept of an anthropo-acentric world is not helped by Ricoeur's tendency to stress the unique human nature of the world. In language that now sends the alarm bells of environmental humanities scholars ringing, Ricoeur writes that literature helps "to interpolate among the predicates of our situation all those meanings that, from a simple environment (*Umwelt*), make a world (*Welt*)."[84] Here, Ricoeur opposes the (human) world to the allegedly 'simple environment', a claim that appears both anthropocentric and derogatory of the nonhuman environment. Worse, he also claims that "only man *has a world*," which does little to assuage the concerns that Ricoeur is simply an anthropocentric thinker.[85] It is hence necessary to understand clearer what exactly is meant by 'world' in Ricoeur's work.

The 'world' enters *Time and Narrative* as a solution to the problem of the reference of fictional language, which already surfaced above in the last stage of the mimetic circle. How can fiction with its blatant distance to reality still refer to the reality of readers, and even "resignif[y] the world in its temporal dimension […] to remake action following the poem's

[84] "Comprendre ces textes [poétiques], c'est interpoler parmi les prédicats de notre situation toutes les significations qui, d'un simple environnement (*Umwelt*), font un monde (*Welt*)." Ibid., 80 [121].

[85] "[J]e soutiendrai sans paradoxe que seul l'homme a un monde et non pas seulement une situation." Ricoeur, "Model of the Text," 149 [188].

invitation?"[86] For Ricoeur, the answer is that fiction does not just have *sense* but also makes a *reference* to possible worlds, which allows the mimetic circle to move from the stage of configuration to refiguration.[87] Sense indicates "the ideal object that [a] proposition intends," which "is purely immanent in discourse."[88] In literature, sense is the ideal and innovative meaning constructed through the metaphorical use of language I explored above. It is to be found nowhere else than 'in' the work itself, arising through its structured configuration. French structuralism, emerging in the sixties of the past century, as in works of the early Roland Barthes or A.J. Greimas, limited their approach of literature to a study of sense as immanent to discourse, isolated from any reference to real world entities or historical contexts.[89] For Ricoeur, however, such positions fail to take seriously the impact of literature on reality, while they also depart from a narrow understanding of language as a closed structure that ignores its referential power.[90] In contrast to 'sense', 'reference' indicates discourse as it "intends things, applies itself to reality, expresses the world."[91] Reference does not remain

[86] "[L]e faire narrative re-signifie le monde dans sa dimension temporelle, dans la mesure où raconter, réciter, c'est refaire l'action selon l'invite du poème." Ibid., 81 [122].

[87] Ricoeur borrows this distinction from Frege, who used it to explain how two different expressions can refer to the same external object, while they can still have different cognitive values for the speakers. Frege notes, famously, how the terms 'morning star' and 'evening star' both refer to the same object, namely, to the planet Venus, while something new is still learned on the level of sense when one states that the morning star is the same as the evening star. Gottlob Frege, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892): 25-40; Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review* 57, no. 3 (1948): 209-30.

[88] "Son sens, c'est l'objet idéal qu'elle [la proposition] vise; ce sens est purement immanent au discours." Paul Ricœur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 113; Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," trans. John B. Thompson, in *From Text to Action*: *Essays in Hermeneutics, 2,* with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 85.

[89] Cf. A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode* (Larousse, 1966); Roland Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications* 8 (1966): 1-27.

[90] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 79 [118-9].

[91] "[L]e discours vise les choses, s'applique à la réalité, exprime le monde." Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Function," 85 [113].

immanent within discourse but indicates that moment in which "language is oriented beyond itself."[92] This means that

> [t]he complete event [of language] is not only that someone speaks and addresses himself to an interlocutor, it is also the speaker's ambition to bring a new *experience* to language and share it with someone else.[93]

If narrative can refigure the world, it must do more than construct ideal meanings within the text. It must at least have some a referential structure because it makes a "claim to reach an extralinguistic reality, […] to say something true," as Ricoeur writes elsewhere.[94] Now, if it cannot address some external reality directly, fiction might still be able to indirectly refer to the *world* implied by real experiences. Ricoeur thus attempts to solve the problem of mimetic reference by introducing the idea of the world to which literature would allude.

What is this world? In phenomenology, world should not be understood as empty, three-dimensional space that 'contains' extended, material objects. Instead, world is the total context of meaning implied by appearing phenomena, i.e., it is that *within which* they appear as meaningful. Ricoeur also calls the world a horizon of potentiality, which exists external to what Ricoeur calls a 'situation,' referring to an embodied, situated, particular perspective *in* the world. This horizon is

> external in the sense that the intended thing stands in potential relationships to everything else within the horizon of a total world, which itself never figures as the object of discourse.[95]

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[92] "[L]e langage est orienté au-delà de lui-même." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 78 [118].

[93] "L'événement complet, c'est non seulement que quelqu'un prenne la parole et s'adresse à un interlocuteur, c'est aussi qu'il ambitionne de porter au langage et de partager avec autrui une *expérience* nouvelle." Ibid.*,* 78 [118].

[94] "[S]a prétention à atteindre un réel extra-linguistique, donc de sa prétention à dire vrai." Ricoeur, "On Interprétation," 10 [23].

[95] "[Un horizon externe], en ce sens que la chose visée entretient des rapports potentiels avec tout autre chose sous l'horizon d'un monde total, lequel ne figure jamais comme objet de discours." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 78 [118].

Ricoeur here draws from Husserl's early phenomenology that argues that there is a dynamic between the external and internal horizon of experience.[96] For Husserl, each experience only partly reveals the intended object, e.g., because one only sees a particular side of the object from one's position. By 'internal' horizon, Husserl means that the experience of the object *implies* that other viewpoints on this same object are possible, i.e., that the object in fact has *multiple sides,* which would become visible if one were to move around the object. This internal horizon of the object immediately implies an external horizon of the world in which this object exists, i.e., as I move around the object to unveil its other sides, I assume that the object remains stable within the larger spatio-temporal whole of a world.[97] In Ricoeur's hermeneutic adaptation of this concept, world is not merely a spatio-temporal background to experience but also the cultural backdrop that allows one to articulate the meaning of what is perceived, which Husserl later described as the 'lifeworld' [*Lebenswelt*].[98] If my colleague complains about losing her lecture notes on the way to class, her comments make sense to me because I immediately situate them in the context of this university and my previous conversations with her on her teaching obligations – she does not have to specify this as it forms the immediate context for her experience; we share this world of the university and each related experience presupposes this common, external horizon. For Ricoeur, world also contains all those symbolic mediations that I discussed under the heading of mimesis$_1$, the prenarrative understanding, and which make action (or other phenomena) 'readable' to us.

What does it mean that literature references the world? Ricoeur's claim first has a negative side to it: fiction cannot *directly* reference reality as it appears in concrete situations. In concrete situations, speakers in a living dialogue can still refer *ostensively* to what they are

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[96] Edmund Husserl, "Die Horizontstruktur der Welterfahrung und der Erfahrung von Realm in der Welt" in *Die Lebenswelt: Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution: Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916-1937),* ed. Rochus Sowa (Springer, 2008), 67-145.

[97] Carleton B. Christensen, "The World" in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology,* ed. Sebatian Luft and Soren Overgaard (Routledge, 2012), 211-22.

[98] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy,* trans. David Carr (Northwestern University Press, 1970), 123-35, Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie,* edited by Elisabeth Ströker (Meiner 2012), 133-46.

speaking about. Their words may sometimes even refer to reality directly "by a gesture, by a pointing a finger" to indicate 'what is meant'.[99] This possibility is, of course, closed off for readers of literary fiction, who find themselves separated from authors through the distance introduced by the textual nature of narrative discourse. While the text does not refer to 'situations' in which speakers find themselves, it does refer to what Ricoeur calls a 'world.' In an essay in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur writes that by abolishing the "first-order reference" of actual situations, fiction is able to form "a second-order reference", moving beyond the situation to the ontological dimension of the world.[100] By 'ontological dimension' Ricoeur means that the world is not a mere set of social rules or assumptions but actually opens and closes ways in which human existence can *be.* The world is the context if "possible modes of being, as symbolic dimensions of our being-in-the-world."[101] When one speaks, for example, of the 'world' of the Greeks, one does not mean the concrete experience of all humans living in that particular time and place. Instead, world here refers to the entirety of symbolic and social resources available to those living in ancient Greek culture, while these resources are used and applied by the speakers in their relation to their existence as citizens of the polis, as hoplites or symposiasts. World is therefore an ontological (and cultural) referent, addressing the way in which being is understood and brought to language, but which is not itself a concrete phenomenon or a situation.

In narrative fiction, what is shared are therefore not real situations but possible experiences, or, in the terms of the mimetic circle, new configurations of action. While these fictions do not communicate experiences that actually took place, they do make a reference to the extralinguistic realm by positing new worlds, i.e., new possible contexts of meaning to 'read' experience. Fiction, Ricoeur writes in *From Text to Action*, "has the power […] to remake real praxis to the extent that the text intentionally aims at a horizon of a new reality that we

[99] "[P]ar un geste du doigt." Ricoeur, "Model of the Text," 148 [188].

[100] Ricoeur, "Hermeneutic Function," 85 [114].

[101] "[…] des modes possibles d'être, comme des dimensions symboliques de notre être-au-monde." Ricoeur, "Model of the Text," 149 [188-9].

may call a world."[102] Importantly, for Ricoeur, this also means that the world is not a static given that has universal content or form, as if all humans would live in the same world. When one expresses experiences in dialogue, or when one read fictional experiences in narrative, one is confronted with *new* proposed worlds, which may contain presuppositions or relations that did not feature in the world of one's own experiences. In fact, instead of retrieving an authorial intention *behind* the text, Ricoeur maintains that what is at stake in narrative is the world it proposes "in front of itself" as the implied meaningful totality that forms the horizon of the narrated actions.[103] Interpreting narratives is to interpret their "proposing of a world that I might inhabit and into which I might project my ownmost powers."[104] World, therefore, is crucial to the mimetic circle because it is both what is communicated and referenced by the text (as a possible world), while it is also that which is refigured through the act of reading.

WORLD AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Considering the importance of world in the light of the current project, the question has become inevitable whether 'world' is able to include reference to the planetary – or whether it leaves the planet out. Is the planetary part of the world as an 'external' horizon of situations, something that is always presupposed without being made explicit? Or is the world, as the condition of meaningful appearance of phenomena within situations, always at odds with the planet? Ricoeur's anthropocentric comment, cited above, that "only man *has a world*," raises suspicion that world is indeed an anthropocentric concept.[105] The question remains, therefore, if the planet as a physical, complex system can be taken into account – or is left by the wayside – when the *Umwelt* of a situation is transformed into a *Welt*. My argument here is that world remains (too) anthropocentric as long as Ricoeur separates human meaningful

[102] "La fiction a ce pouvoir de 'refaire' [...] la réalité praxique, dans la mesure où le texte vise intentionnellement un horizon de réalité nouvelle que nous avons pu appeler un monde." Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," 10 [23].

[103] "[U]n monde en quelque sorte en avant de lui-même." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 81 [122].

[104] "[L]a proposition d'un monde que je pourrais habiter et dans lequel je pourrais projeter mes pouvoirs les plus propres." Ibid., 81 [122].

[105] "[J]e soutiendrai sans paradoxe que seul l'homme a un monde et non pas seulement une situation," Ricoeur, "Model of the Text," 149 [188].

action from 'mere' physical occurrence, as the context of the Anthropocene puts pressure on this distinction.

World is closely related to practical understanding in Ricoeur's work, which means that world is also related to Ricoeur's semantics of action. These semantics of action, however, may risk narrowing down the concept of world to an anthropocentric, cultural conception of world, one that excludes its potentially broader outlines. Such a displacement is developed along the well-known anthropocentric lines that argue that only humans have a history, as only human act in such a way that behind the physical consequences of an action resides an 'inside' of intentions, symbolisms, and cultural contexts. Human actions do not simply take place, they *mean* something, as Ricoeur argues in the context of the mimetic circle.

By adopting this position, Ricoeur travels a trail blazed by authors such R.G. Collingwood, who strictly separated action from mere occurrence. For Collingwood, natural events were distinct from the world of human action, because they would be merely external, lacking underlying intentions, meanings, or motivations. "The events of nature are mere events, not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist [or the historian] endeavours to trace."[106] If the world of practical understanding is conceptualized along these lines, it becomes apparent that it will exclude nature and the planetary system as beyond the world – lacking a symbolic meaning or intention by themselves.

This becomes apparent in comments Ricoeur makes throughout his oeuvre that separate the sphere of human agency from nature and also, explicitly, from geology. For example, in an essay in *From Text to Action,* Ricoeur adopts Weber's separation of meaningful action from mere events such as "a flood or an illness" which would lack any sense in themselves.[107] From this view, such natural events do not 'intend' anything, they merely happen and therefore lack the interpretative depth that Ricoeur ascribes to action. Actions always have a symbolic dimension that renders them 'readable,' while they also imply norms of evaluation,

[106] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History,* ed. T.M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1976), 212.

[107] "[U]ne inondation ou une maladie." Paul Ricœur, "Hegel et Husserl sur l'intersubjectivité" in *Du texte à l'action: essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 297; Paul Ricoeur, "Hegel and Husserl on Intersubjectivity," trans. Kathleen Blamey, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2* (Northwestern University Press: 2007), 241.

which could not be attributed to such events as floods or illnesses. This also leads Ricoeur to renounce the idea that geological time would be commensurable with that of action in the world. In *Time and Narrative 3*, he maintains that geology as a science simply does not connect with the practical understanding of action. He explicitly states that "[i]t is finally the concepts of action and narrative that cannot be transferred from the human sphere to the sphere of nature."[108] The planet never becomes an integrated element of the *res gestae*, the world of human affairs. By invoking a distinction between action and event (or mere incident), Ricoeur therefore pushes the planet beyond the perimeters of the human world.

Yet the Anthropocene destabilizes this distinction as it includes the geological and the planetary within the sphere of what humans can and have impacted through their actions: it is no longer a backdrop to action, as human action extends toward the planet in more than arbitrary manners. In the words of Earth system scientist Will Steffan, "humanity itself has become a global geophysical force, equal to some of the 'great forces of Nature."[109] This shift in perspective has two consequences. First, what was seen as a mere background to human action now turns out to be intimately related to human action. Floods and illness, to return to Ricoeur's example, no longer can be seen to arise from some mute 'natural' realm beyond human agency, but they bear the marks of human action. Climate disasters are intricately connected to energy policies, while the COVID pandemic revealed how a virus became entangled with politics, infrastructures, and questions of social justice. The future of the planet itself has become entangled with human politics, which means that 'behind' such entities as the climate system, one now finds implied a range of human actions, choices, politics, et cetera, upsetting Ricoeur's and Collingwood's distinction between action and event.

Second, the extension of human action to the planetary level also changes the meaning of human agency. The effects it causes on the level of planetary processes are never directly related to intentions, plans, or strategies but only indirectly so – certain risks for the climate system are excepted by energy policies of the Global North, for example, but they are not the

[108] "Ce sont finalement les concepts d'action et de récit qui sont non transférables de la sphère humaine à la sphère de la nature." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 91 [136].

[109] Steffen et al., "The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship," *AMBIO* 40 (2011): 741.

intended result that motivates such policies. Human action can therefore no longer be adequately described by what Ricoeur called the practical understanding, because phenomena like climate change transcend the symbolic, normative, temporal resources invoked when reading actions on the scales more attuned to individual, human everyday experience. As Chakrabarty argues, "to encounter the planet in thought is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet remains profoundly indifferent to that existence."[110] Chakrabarty asserts therefore that the planetary requires one to adopt a 'standpoint' that decentres human existence, which itself becomes a mere part of a complex system that existed billions of years before the human life form evolved.

If the separation between the human world and planet, or action and event were as absolute as Ricoeur makes it appear, the mimetic circle could only refigure the human world of action in utter blindness of its pressing material impacts on a planetary scale. Such a closed-off mimetic circle would turn humans into the "suicidal sleepwalkers" that Derrida mentions in another context, who march "blind and deaf *alongside the unheard-of*."[111] The drastic consequences of human agency, calling for a renewed understanding of this very agency, urge one to take into account the unheard-of. This demands more than a refiguration of world. It demands a shattering of its conceptual limits to now include what tends to be excluded from it. Emerging from a horizonless visual paradigm, the planet does not broaden the horizon of the world but abolishes it. In Anthropocene fiction, when planetary discordance comes into play, it is as if what is outside of the world is now brought inside of it; the world refigured is therefore no longer the world enriched, and, instead, within the world, the absence of world materializes in the form of the question mark of the planetary.

WORLD BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

While Ricoeur's anthropocentric approach of world is contoured by his delineation of action from event, I will end this chapter by moving past these contours to highlight another current of thought, much more sympathetic to an anthropo-acentric notion of world. This current is

[110] Chakrabarty, "The Planet: A Humanist Category," in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 70.

[111] Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 21.

that of Ricoeur's analysis of the nexus between time and narrativity. One of the central problems that Ricoeur engages with is that of the tension between the time of the cosmos and that of the soul, i.e., between time as a *physical* phenomenon and as a lived *experience*. The mimetic circle mediates this conflict by drawing on both conceptions of time, without, however, reducing one temporality to the other. The narrative form allows one to glimpse, within the configuration of a single whole, a constellation of two kinds of time that exclude each other in experience. If the world is refigured through narrative, this therefore means that a discordant, physical time is retained within the world that does not depend on human intentions and that is indifferent to the semantic field captured by practical understanding (or mimesis$_1$). The world is not the *appropriation* of this physical time – a term that describes the 'horizonless,' planetary sense of time as well – but rather an articulation of available resources to inhabit this strange time, all attempts of humans to live through the tension between a time constituted by the human and a time that finds it origins beyond the human.

Ricoeur's analysis of temporality is the major line of thought running through *Time and Narrative*. The idea of the mimetic circle aims to conceptualize how poetic interventions, such as narrative, respond to the incapability of the philosophy and phenomenology of *time* to escape paradoxes that could not be solved by thought alone. At the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur even states that "the hypothesis that has oriented this work from its very beginning" is the one that holds that "temporality cannot be spoken of in the direct discourse of phenomenology, but rather requires the mediation of the indirect discourse of narration."[112] This means that, for Ricoeur, philosophy or phenomenology alone, as an attempt toward a transparent, autonomous *logos* of time cannot retrace temporality to a constitutive intentionality that would render itself transparent for a process of retrieval for thought. Instead, a poetic language takes over from the very point where philosophical thought meets its exhaustion, and it is in narratives, particularly in fictional narratives, that the haunting problems of the philosophy of time are investigated and made sense of. The

[112] "Ce dont je veux éprouver la teneur et les limites, c'est l'hypothèse qui dès le départ a orienté notre travail, à savoir que la temporalité ne se laisse pas dire dans le discours direct d'une phénoménologie, mais requiert la médiation du discours indirect de la narration." Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3: Le temps raconté* (Seuil, 1985), 349; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 241.

world unfolded and refigured through mimesis, then, is not simply a world in which being has been exhaustively grasped in terms of human concepts and time.

The key discordance for philosophy to which narrative responds, in Ricoeur's work, is that between a physical time outside of us and an experienced time within us, or, in other terms, between the time of the cosmos and the time of the soul. In lengthy explorations of the philosophies of time of Aristotle and Saint Augustine, Ricoeur argues that Aristotle's *Physics* grounds time in the external movements of nature, while Augustine defends the thesis that time would be nothing without the (human) soul in which it unfolds and in which it is perceived.[113]

The discordance between these two conceptions of time becomes troubling because they both borrow as much from the other as they refute.[114] Physical time implies the soul because it is developed in relation to an *observed* movement, even if it considers time to be something of the external world. On the other hand, psychological analysis of temporality will always struggle to exhaustively claim that external movement is nothing but perception.[115] The poetic act of telling a story intervenes in this conflict for, as William C. Dowling remarks, narrative transforms "cosmic time into a time of human preoccupation or concern."[116] Narrativity thus proceeds from a time that is *not yet* human, which it attempts to

[113] Ricoeur discusses Augustine's philosophy of time in *Time and Narrative 1,* 5-31 [19-55], while Aristotle is discussed in *Time and Narrative 3*, 12-23 [19-37].

[114] "[L]a composition *narrative*, prise dans tout son extension, constitue une riposte au caractère *aporétique* de la *spéculation* sur le temps." In the English translation: "[N]arrative composition, taken in its broadest sense, constitutes a riposte to the aporetic character of speculation on time." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 11 [17].

[115] Ricoeur criticizes Aristotle for conceiving of the 'now' as an 'instant' that both has to divide *and* unify time, but that it cannot do this both at the same time as the 'now' as division requires a *static* understanding of time while as a unification of time it moves toward a *dynamic* conception of temporality. To count time, movement needs to be considered like a static line, and the instant then becomes analogous to a dimensionless point that serves as a limit to transform this line into countable elements. However, Aristotle also tries to argue that the instant unifies time because it refers to a continuous movement of substances that remain the same throughout their changes. Ricoeur maintains that this second role of the instant requires a dynamic understanding of the 'now', which ultimately cannot be captured by the spatial abstractions that Aristotle invokes to render time the countable dimension of movement. Ibid., 20-1 [31-33].

[116] Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time,* 101.

'humanize' – this term should not be understood in terms of mastery or subjugation but rather as the rendering meaningful of the physical realm for humans.

For Ricoeur, this makes narrative a form of *concordant discordance* in which two conflicting forms of time merge into the single whole of a recounted story, without, however, merging or giving way to a higher order time that would overcome their tension. The main discordance between the time of the soul and that of the external world lies in the respective theories of the status of the *present*. In Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle, he emphasizes how the present is merely a 'pointlike' instant that divides external movements into countable units of time. In book IV of the *Physics,* Aristotle defines time as the countable element of the movements of nature, such as those of the heavenly bodies. Time is the number ("the calculable measure") of movement according to the before-and-after, i.e., time arises when a continuous movement is divided into a series of parts, with each part being defined as the interval between two instants, themselves without any dimension, that form its limits. [117] In Aristotle's words, the "determination [of a countable unit of time] consists in distinguishing between the initial limit and the final one, and seeing that what lies between them is distinct from both; [...] for that which is determined either way by a 'now' seems to be what we mean by time."[118] This means that for Aristotle, time depends fully on the analysis of movements external to the soul, which are divided into parts by a 'counting' consciousness. The present is nothing but a point-like instant that functions as a limit to enable this counting by translating the continuity of the movement to countable intervals.

To provide a counter-position, as I have explained in the introduction, Ricoeur presents Saint Augustine's phenomenology of the *Confessions* as a phenomenology of the time of the soul, which features the 'present' as a *lived* moment that is qualitatively distinct from the past and the future. To recall, in contrast to Aristotle, Augustine argues that time is constituted by the soul rather than by external movements. In Ricoeur's analysis, Augustine's argument hinges on the thesis that the soul *extends* itself (*distentio*) towards past and future

[117] "ἀριθμὸς κινήσεως." Aristotle, *The Physics: Books 1-4*, trans. Philip W. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford (Harvard University Press, 1957), 219b1–3 [387].

[118] "ὀρίζομεν δὲ τῷ ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο ὑπολαβεῖν αὐτὰ καὶ μεταξύ τι αὐτῶν ἕτερον· ὅταν γὰρ ἕτερα τὰ ἄκρα τοῦ μέσου νοήσωμεν καὶ δύο εἴπῃ ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ νῦν—τὸ μὲν πρότερον τὸ δ' ὕστερον—τότε καὶ τοῦτό φαμεν εἶναι χρόνον· τὸ γὰρ ὁριζόμενον τῷ νῦν χρόνος εἶναι δοκεῖ· καὶ ὑποκείσθω." Ibid., 219a21–30 [387].

through the intentional acts (*intentio*) of memorizing and expecting.[119] By introducing time as a form of *intentio* of the soul, that provides a certain notion of unity, Augustine does not primarily reply to the puzzles of the measurement of physical time but rather to the conditions of possibility for measurement. All measurement concerns a passing of time, moving from the future, through the present, to the past. Yet, the past is no longer, the present is fleeting, and the future is not yet – they can only *be* if they are present, Augustine argues, and they can only be present by being *presented*, that is, by becoming the noetic correlates of the intentions of a soul. As a consequence, there is a "threefold present": the present of the past in memory, of the present in attention, and the future in expectation. [120] In this philosophy, the present thus becomes a lived moment, distinct from past and future, in which the soul's activities constitute the existence of time.

These two theories are paradigmatic for Ricoeur in the sense that they prefigure the conflict between later theories of temporality, from scientific theories of time measurement to Husserl's phenomenology. The present is either conceived as an embodied present (relative to an experiencing consciousness) *or* as 'mere' instant (of an autonomous time). For Aristotle – and for the sciences, Ricoeur would claim, including the geosciences – the 'instant' is simply "a break in the continuity of movement," which "can be made anywhere."[121] Any part of a movement whatsoever can be taken to be the present one, and Aristotle's hypostasis of movement as the origin of temporality prohibit a sudden recourse to consciousness and its living experience of the now as a moment distinguished from others. In fact, for Aristotle, the words 'future' and 'past' lose their points of reference:

> Following Aristotle, I can say that event A precedes event B and that event B follows event A, but I cannot for all this affirm that event A is past and event B future.[122]

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[119] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 16-22 [34-41].

[120] "[…] triple présent." Ibid., 12 [34].

[121] "[U]ne coupure opérée par l'esprit dans la continuité du mouvement […]. Or cette coupure peut être quelconque: *n'importe quel* instant est également digne d'être le présent." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 19 [30].

[122] "Ainsi, je puis dire: l'événement A précède l'événement B et l'événement B succède à l'événement A, mais je ne peux pas pour autant affirmer que l'événement A est passé et l'événement B future." Ibid., 19 [30].

Aristotle's theory allows one to chronologically order events (I went to the protest before I was arrested) but this does not clarify *when* these events took place relative to speaker's present. It is precisely this deictic dimension that takes the foreground in Augustine's theory of the present, which Ricoeur explicates using Benveniste's idea that the present is reflexively designated by a speaker performing a language act. Indeed, for Augustine, "the future and past exist only in relation to a present, that is, to an instant indicated by the utterance designating it."[123] Without consciousness, tied to the present and unmoored from past and future, *no* instant could be said to be the current one, and, inversely, designating a moment as the present is also immediately posing the non-being of past and future relative to this present. Here, Augustine disagrees completely with Aristotle, and Ricoeur calls this conflict of cosmos (Aristotle) and soul (Augustine) "the great aporia of the problem of time" to which narratives provide a poetic solution.[124] It is therefore crucial to underscore that *Time and Narrative* does not claim that time is ultimately *only* human or that narrative can *make* time exhaustively human: narrative responds to a situation in which a time presents itself that finds it origins *beyond* what is human, i.e., in the physical world, without, however, being the sole temporality available.

Importantly, this commitment of a dual sense of time is at odds with Ricoeur's anthropocentric conception of world, that so determinedly placed geology outside of the perimeters of human action. In fact, the discordance between physical time and phenomenological time allows one to frame the issue of planetarity in the Anthropocene in clear terms. The Anthropocene names an epoch in which planetary time, physical in nature, has intruded the soul and its understanding of the present moment through which it is living. The living sense of the present is marked by an awareness of moving through the large-scale disruption of the physical movements of the planet. Inversely, the Anthropocene names an epoch in which the soul stretches out toward physical time, turning this into something more than a mere measure of movement. Geoscience acquires political, historical, aesthetic depth, it comes to move the soul rather than restricting itself to measuring movements of the Earth.

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[123] "Il n'y a de futur et de passé que par rapport à un présent, c'est-à-dire à un instant qualifié par l'énonciation qui le désigne." Ibid., 19 [30].

[124] "[L] la plus grande aporie du problème du temps." Ibid., 19 [31].

That these are not mere speculations on my side becomes clearer in Ricoeur's discussion with Heidegger in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, that have the aim to defend an autonomous, independent time of nature, irreducible to the existential structures of Dasein.[125] Ricoeur argues that Heidegger problematically aims to reduce external, physical time to that of an allegedly more primordial existential temporality of Dasein. For Heidegger, physical conceptions of time, like Aristotle's, are ultimately nothing more than a modifications of *and* deviations from the fundamental structures of Dasein, those of Care [*Sorge*], that would precede and enable time to appear.[126] In Heidegger's view, the autonomy of physical time forms an illusion that follows upon a "leveling off" [*Nivellierung*] of the Care structure and its temporality.[127] As Ricoeur argues, Heidegger therefore sees physical time as the result of a "reversal" that reifies time's ultimate rootedness in Care now as a property of things themselves or the world itself, while he charges phenomenology with the task to undo this reversal, tracing back step-by-step how the existential Care structure became levelled-off, grounding physics in the time of Dasein once more.[128]

However, Ricoeur refuses to follow Heidegger in this process of recovering. He maintains that Heidegger fails to explain why the move toward physical time is a 'leveling off' of a more authentic time rather than "the separating out of an autonomous concept of time – cosmic time."[129] Is there merely a decrease in depth of temporality as one moves from Care toward time as it measured, or is there an increase in richness as well? As follows from Ricoeur's statement that the time of cosmos and the soul are irreducible to each other, he holds that physical time is not simply a 'derived' form of a primordial phenomenological time, because it is built on its own principles, i.e., those of nature and of movement, which are ultimately irreducible to something like Care. As Ricoeur writes: "Having something to do with

[125] Ibid., 60-97 [90-140].

[126] Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* §81, 472-80 [420-8].

[127] Ibid., §81, 476 [422].

[128] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 84 [125].

[129] "[L]e dégagement d'un concept *autonome* de temps – le temps cosmique." Ibid., 88 [131].

movement and something to do with Care seem to me to constitute two irreconcilable determinations in principle."[130] For Ricoeur, the physical time of movement, which is built on the idea of the anonymous instant rather than the lived present, cannot be brought back to phenomenology, it is "its other which it cannot generate."[131] Physical time – which is the time of the planetary – is fundamentally *not centred on* and *not constituted by* human intentionality.

The separation of physical time and the time of the soul could result and deepen the rift between planet and world, if one were to argue that the world only exists at the phenomenological pole of time. This is not what is supported by Ricoeur's texts, however. In a series of crucial remarks following Ricoeur's discussion with Heidegger, Ricoeur observes that it is the *tension* and *conflict* between the two temporalities that generates a particular range of experiences – not void of meaning – that cannot be done justice to if the two times are merely treated as opposites. These experiences emerge precisely to the degree that there is both *concordance* and *discordance* between the time of physics and of the soul:

> We can thus swing from one feeling to the other: from the consolation that we may experience in discovering a kinship between the feeling of Being-thrown-into-world and the spectacle of the heavens where time shows itself, to the desolation that unceasingly reemerges from the contrast between the fragility of life and the power of time, which is more destructive than anything else.[132]

Physical time is not simply of the order of the meaningless, something that simply 'is' without any sense or depth – as Ricoeur suggested by separating action from event. Its friction with lived time *is* meaningful, resulting in affections ranging from consolation to desolation, lived concordance to lived discordance. This friction can, however, only be seen if the

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[130] "*Être quelque chose du mouvement et être quelque chose du Souci me paraissent constituer deux déterminations inconciliables dans leur principe.*" Ibid., 89 [133].

[131] "[S]on *autre* qu'elle ne peut engendrer." Ibid., 92 [138].

[132] "Nous pouvons ainsi osciller d'un sentiment à l'autre: de la *consolation,* que nous pouvons éprouver à découvrir une *parenté* entre le sentiment d'être jeté au monde et le spectacle du ciel où le temps se montre, à la *désolation,* qui sans cesse renaît du *contraste* entre la fragilité de la vie et la puissance du temps qui plutôt détruit." Ibid., 93 [140].

world is not exhaustively tied to human phenomenology, or, if it is acknowledged that world provides an opening toward a time that anthropo-acentric and that it envelops the conflicts to which this gives rise. World then extends, as it were, beyond its own limits, because it invites a physical time within itself that never ceases to undermine it. World is this invitation to destruction but also the range of possible answers to it – from active resistance to the numerous ways of living through inevitable impermanence.

Narrative, Ricoeur will point out, is an indispensable means of giving meaning to this conflict without, however, ever resolving it. The world of the text is not a humanized world that has completely integrated the physical planet to an instrument to be employed at human whim, without any 'alterity' or 'otherness' relative to the sense ascribed to it by human projects and needs. The world of the text is the site of discordance between physical and phenomenological time, bringing their differences together within the whole of a narrative. Ricoeur therefore maintains that literature experiments with different ways of juxtaposing these temporalities, which results in a "fictive experience of time," defined as "the temporal aspect of [the] virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text."[133] This being-in-the-world proposed by the text is nothing other than an exploration of how humans 'inhabit' (rather than overcome) the tension between these two forms of time, this "fundamental experience of discordant concordance."[134] Fictional worlds *propose* worlds in which the cosmos and the soul, that is, the present and the instant enter in a particular relation that structures its plots, world, and also the experiences of its characters.

In his reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, Ricoeur points out how Virginia Woolf incorporates physical clock time only to explore "the relation that the various protagonists

[133] "Ce que nous appelons ici expérience fictive du temps est seulement l'aspect temporel d'une expérience virtuelle de l'être au monde proposée par le texte." Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 2: La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Seuil, 1984), 151; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 2,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 100.

[134] "[L]'expérience fondamentale de concordance discordance." Ibid., 101 [152].

establish with these marks of time."[135] These relations vary from Septimus's suicide in response to the oppressive 'monumental time' that connects clock time to authority and power to Clarissa's resolute confrontation of monumental time on the basis of her strong "love for life."[136] Neither of these particular relations exhausts the novel's experience of time, which is instead formed by the "underground network" [*réseau soutterain*] that arises between all of them and in all their incongruencies and tensions are contained within the single thing that a narrative is.[137] As such, narrative does not *resolve* the aporia of time but provides and explores world in which these aporia are 'inhabited' and responded to in a multitude of ways. It introduces different figures of discordant concordance between physical time and the lived time of humans. Consequentially, the world of the text is the site in which these discordances are allowed to unfold, not their overcoming, nor their reduction to a time that would ever be one that belongs fully to the soul.

In short, Ricoeur's meditations on time result in a view of world that is at odds with attempts to limit the world to what is accessible to practical understanding. The world is not about what humans do– it is about what they do *in light of* a temporality – of the cosmos, or, in my terms, of the planet – that remains indifferent to what they do. The world cannot, therefore, be cleanly distinguished from the planet, even if the planet remains other to world – it is included as other within the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The explorations above began with the question what happens when the planet manifests itself in the world of the text. Through a discussion of the resistance of hermeneutics to the planetary perspective as lacking a 'horizon' of meaning in a literal and figural sense, I moved to Ricoeur's theory of mimesis as an innovation of the world. I argued that Ricoeur's focus on the innovative aspects of language show that world is not some closed-off realm of meaning but a highly dynamic concept able to craft new meaning. By further focusing on the implied

[135] "[L]'important n'est pas ce rappel de l'heure, sonnant en même temps pour tous, mais le *rapport* que les divers protagonistes établissent avec ces marques du temps." Ibid., 105 [158].

[136] "[A]mour de la vie." Ibid. 110 [165].

[137] Ibid., 112 [167].

concept of world, I have argued that world, nevertheless, mostly refers, for Ricoeur, to an anthropocentric cultural backdrop to human understanding and action. Still, the thematic of time in Ricoeur's work undermines this anthropocentric, strict separation between action and event, world and planet. Ricoeur thinks of time in terms of a conflict between the time of nature and the time of the soul, while narrative poetically mediates this insurmountable conflict by providing figures and plots that sketch ways of inhabiting their tension. As such, the world of the text, I concluded, is indeed open to disruption of an anthropocentric sense of worldliness: world is itself the site where the conflict between world and nature, or world and planet, can acquire meaning. The worlds of narratives are not merely mirrors reflecting a bounded field of meaningful agency but may also be windows granting a view of a planetary time that never irreducibly becomes a time of human concern or Care.

Finally, let me return to Solà's *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* to make the above more concrete. A classic, literary approach to this novel would interpret the role of the mountain from the perspective of the different characters, highlighting how the rugged landscape provides meaning to the social structures in which they dwell, or how the beauty of the mountains inspires or moves these characters. Following my reading of Ricoeur, another picture emerges. Rather than becoming a part of the meaningful temporality of the characters, these mountains signal the discordance of a time that can do without humans – even if they are the material condition upon which the story is built.

Before the mountain prophesies the disastrous future that I outlined in the introduction to this chapter – the future that effaces even the names of children not yet born – it speaks in a futile attempt to not have to speak. It says:

> Don't come looking for me. Blind as I am. […] Deaf, from my ear-shattering birth. You have no need for my voice nor for my perspective. Leave me be.[138]

Indeed, the tectonic history of mountains, their vertical view, their planetary time is contrary to what this story needs. So alien is this time of the mountains, inhuman, that it cannot but

[138] "A mi no em busqueu. Cega com soc. […]. Sorda, de tan eixordador com va ser néixer. No n'heu de fer res, de la meva veu ni de la meva perspectiva. Deixeu-me tranquil·la." Solà, *When I Sing*, 89 ["L'Aürt"].

disrupt the needs, desires, motivations that are the lines tying together all those other narratives of *When I Sing, Mountains Dance*. These mountains should not speak, for the story's sake. They should be the silence that guarantees that the other voices can tell their stories: are they not the immutable backdrop, against which the movements of these other stories can become visible – their stage, their canvas? When the stage joins the play, everything becomes entangled.

Yet, while they should be silent, these mountains speak. And they need to speak. They need to speak about how their speech is not needed. They have perhaps always spoken about this in their silence. After all, their silent, anonymous time – their cosmic time, their planetary time – has always already burdened and enlightened the others that made their homes in their valleys; it made them grow old, it made them pass away, it reduced their graves to rubble. These others – widows, children, ghosts, mushrooms, deer – built their worlds as ragged shelters to inhabit the time of the mountains, that merely moves and merely passes. These ragged shelters on the edge between consolation and desolation, they remain poised between becoming a part of the mountains and breaking under the strain of their inhospitable conditions.

In any case, the mountains cannot be left alone, just like the planet cannot be left alone. The planet's time seeps into these shelters, these worlds, engraving the mineral histories of stone in the bones of the inhabitants. The mountains are the planet that is the end of the world within the world. The mountains make the world a response – bristling with meaning, emotions, thoughts – that is, a shelter, but the world is a shelter built in response to its own end. World is not the opposite of planet: the situated perspectives unfolding within the world of the text are opened toward and answer to, imperfectly, a physical or planetary temporality that ultimately always bears the marks of discordance.

ASYMMETRY

BELONGING TO A PLANET

In the ending of Ned Beauman's Anthropocene novel *Venomous Lumpsucker*, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction, the mind of the protagonist, Karin Resaint, is uploaded into a hyper-sophisticated artificial intelligence that offers her the option to witness the extinction of the human species in the distance future.[1] The AI gives her a brief preview of what this would entail:

> [T]he Holocene extinction [of nonhuman life forms] will continue to accelerate. By the year 2200, about eighty-five percent of the species that were thriving as recently as the Late Pleistocene will be gone. […] Eventually the human race will reach its terminus. And afterwards the scars it left will fade. Biodiversity will rebound.[2]

Resaint is allowed to be a spectator of a deep future history (the AI dryly remarks that this entire process will take twelve million years), and while the discourse ends before she picks her choice, the novel has already confronted its readers with a planet void of human life; beyond the human world and its politics, the planet is what remains.

The planet is what remains: by imagining a future without humans, Anthropocene fictions like *Venomous Lumpsucker* entertain the idea of the planet's asymmetry vis-à-vis human thought. Because it continues to *be* even after human thought has gone extinct, this asymmetric planet does not depend on humans, while, on the other hand, humans are materially fully dependent on the conditions of habitability that the planet provides them with, such as the availability of oxygen, water, and the various feedback loops that keep the Earth system between certain perimeters that allow their life form to flourish. One could say that humans belong to and depend on the planet, but that the planet does not depend on humans.

[1] Ned Beauman, *Venomous Lumpsucker* (Soho, 2023), 326.

[2] Beauman, *Venomous Lumpsucker*, 326-7.

In Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, "the planet does not return our gaze in that we cannot assume any relationship of mutuality with it."[3] How should one grasp this asymmetry between the planet and humans? Are there resources within Ricoeur's hermeneutics that allow one to think the relation of humans to a planet that will outlive them?

I claim that Ricoeur's notion of *belonging* [*appartenance*] can be invoked to deal with the planet in its asymmetry. Belonging, too, departs from a deep asymmetry of humans to being. It indicates that humans are always already *part of* being that precedes them, that there already is being before reflection, theory, or other forms of mediation or distancing. Just like the planet is asymmetrical in its independence of human existence, belonging marks a relation to being as independent of any human acts of consciousness. Despite these family resemblances, what is required is that belonging is reread beyond its close connection to the cultural domain in which it usually figures. For, usually, in hermeneutics, belonging refers to the inevitable immersion of human existence in a preceding culture, history, or language. However, Anthropocene fictions addressing (possible) human extinction raise the question whether of the idea belonging to a culture does not narrow down belonging too radically to the sphere of human productions. Can belonging be extended *beyond* the hermeneutic sense of belonging to a human heritage, to include a sense of planetary belonging to Earth as something that precedes, exceeds, but also enables human existence? And can Ricoeur's literary hermeneutics help one understand what it means to read fictions that address the asymmetry between humanity and the planet to which it belongs?

To engage with the limits and possibilities of 'belonging', this chapter will take a step back and set up a dialogue between Ricoeurian hermeneutics and the work of Quentin Meillassoux.[4] Meillassoux's philosophy is often taken as exemplary of the speculative realist movement, which aims to think being as *withdrawn* from human consciousness, i.e., as something that is not 'for us' – as a representation, an object of thought, a linguistic effect – but rather something 'in itself' – independent from the way in which its presents itself to humans or other conscious beings. I will use Meillassoux's criticisms to read Ricoeur's work in order

[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet*, *Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis University Press, 2023), 6.

[4] Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Seuil, 2006); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2008).

to develop a 'wide' reading of belonging, which is not just a 'narrow' belonging to culture but to being in a broader sense.[5] This wider notion will allow me to read the planetary discordance of novels such as *Venomous Lumpsucker* as diagnosing the relation between humans and the planet in its asymmetry.

'BELONGING' AS A HERMENEUTIC CONCEPT

To begin, I will introduce the concept of 'belonging' in Ricoeur's theory and point out some of its shortcomings. If Ricoeur's concept of belonging needs to be reinterpreted in light of the planetary, this is because in its generally accepted version, it does not yet extend beyond the realm of culture, and Ricoeur's work has sometimes even been shared under the heading of the 'linguistic turn' that prioritizes the role language plays in the relation to reality.[6] In fact,

[5] The potentials of 'belonging' for a Ricoeurian planetary hermeneutics are not often picked up on. To give one example, the term 'belonging' misses from the index of *Interpreting Nature*, and only in one paper is belonging discussed in passing as possibly describing the relation between humans and 'nature'. An extension to the planet is missing in this authoritative volume. David Utsler, "Environmental Hermeneutics and Environmental/Eco-Psychology: Explorations in Environmental Identity" in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Ecohermeneutics,* ed. Forrest Clingerman et al. (Fordham University Press, 2014), 132.

[6] In the introduction to his anthology on the topic, Richard Rorty characterizes the linguistic turn as a turn to philosophies which hold that "philosophical are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language or by understanding more about the language we presently use." In short, the linguistic turn encompasses a turn to language itself as a phenomenon worthy of philosophical study. In the decades after Rorty's pioneering anthology, the linguistic turn also came to encompass (post-)structuralist and deconstructive approaches that emphasize the inevitable linguistic mediation in the relation to being. Richard Rorty, "Introduction" in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method,* ed. Richard Rorty (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3; In an article, Ricoeur translator David Pellauer comes to a nuanced conclusion concerning Ricoeur's relation to the linguistic turn. Ricoeur does pay attention to how language relates to what it, but his method is always critical of structuralist attempts to conceive of language as a closed whole or a total system without any way out to refer to reality as non-linguistic. Taking language to the level of discourse, i.e., its operations on a level larger than the sentence, Pellauer observes that Ricoeur argues that philosophers ought to attend to the "fulness" of language. This denotes not merely the propositional use of language, as it includes all different forms of discourse, such as those current in religious or in narrative contexts. These discursive forms allow language to refer to something else, i.e., to non-linguistic being, to experiences to be shared, and language attests of rather than constitutes being. Finally, Pellauer observes how even the fulness of language

usually, for Ricoeur and those in his wake, 'belonging' should be read as an anthropocentric concept that focuses on the human belonging to the realms of culture, tradition, or art, that is, to a sphere of past *human* productions.[7] Even the natural scientific, theoretical gaze would be preceded by an immersive and engaged partaking-in these cultural manifestations – i.e., in a field of 'belonging'. This cultural understanding of belonging, however, risks reducing belonging *only* to cultural mediations, without a clear rationale of why belonging could not be extended to the planet that conditions human existence.[8] To open up the concept of belonging, I will here first outline the risk in hermeneutics to narrow down belonging.

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runs into its limits when it concerns philosophical discourse that requires a further reflection on humanity's capacity to speak and understand, to relate to being at all. Here, then, it becomes apparent that although Ricoeur's linguistic turn is attentive to language, it nowhere raises language to the only medium in which humanity dwells. This insight of Pellauer's guides my further reflections on Ricoeur and his concept of belonging, which I believe should be taken as relating to the struggle of hermeneutics with the ultimate inadequacy of language to 'capture' reality. David Pellauer, "Ricœur's Own Linguistic Turn," *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 5, no.1 (2014): 115-124.

[7] To give a recent example, in a paper on Ricoeur's concept of revelation, Balász M. Mezei describes 'belonging to' as a relation to a "historical-cultural context," with the clear connotation that this context consists of "the world of written and printed texts." Belonging is therefore discussed in terms that appear to exclude any sense of a more 'material' or planetary belonging, which would not be immediately culturally mediated. I will explain below that while such readings remain true to some elements in Ricoeur's text, they have often neglected the opening toward a wider sense of belonging that could also be unearthed from Ricoeur's theory. Balázs M. Mezei, "The Sovereignty of Revelation: Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Revelation," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 51, no. 3 (2022): 322.

[8] Some interpreters have attempted to extend the notion of 'belonging' in this direction, without, however, taking this idea as far as to tackle the planetary asymmetry to which this chapter responds. For example, Pierre-Olivier Monteil has argued that in Ricoeur's theory the body plays a mediating role in tying one to the Earth in a lived sense, which establishes a relation that is completely different from the distanced, scientific outlook on the planet. Monteil argues that this belonging of the body to the Earth attests of an affirmation of life itself that takes its continued survival as its own goal. While this kind of belonging attaches human life to evolutionary history, it does not yet consider that planetary belonging also means belonging to the inorganic planet, the planet that remains even if life were to be destroyed, i.e., Monteil does not extend belonging to questions of planetary asymmetry. Pierre-Olivier Monteil, "Biodiversité, Responsabilité, Réceptivité. Comment passer de la Prise de Conscience Individuelle à la Mobilisation Collective?" *Vertig*O 18, no. 2 (2018). https://doi.org/10.4000/vertigo.20657.

I will here define narrow belonging in two ways, and I will use this distinction to critically assess whether or not Ricoeur's hermeneutics thinks of belonging narrowly. First, in its moderate form, narrow belonging means that being can only be thought as mediated by a particular language, culture, or tradition. In short, being only manifests through the participatory belonging to culture in a general sense, e.g., *what is* is encountered only through the resources of a specific art, tradition, or language. Second, in its radical form, narrow belonging means that such factors play a constitutive role for being, i.e., whatever *is* can only *be* through language, history, or other cultural media. Both moderate and radical narrow belonging will run into difficulties when the question is raised how humans relate to that which precedes culture or may exist beyond it, as does *Venomous Lumpsucker* in its dramatic ending of human extinction.

HERMENEUTICS OF BELONGING

The idea of belonging hearkens back to the hermeneutic assumption that human existence cannot be reduced to the situation of a subject that finds itself over and against a world consisting of a juxtaposition of objects. Instead, humans are thrown into the world, to borrow a Heideggerian phrase, which means that human existence *partakes* in being before it may achieve a *distance* to it.[9] In general, as I will show here, this idea of belonging is used by Ricoeur to criticize attempts of the sciences to replace living experience with explanatory models. This use of the term 'belonging' owes a debt to Gadamer's hermeneutics. A second use of 'belonging' is to criticize philosophies that lay claim to absolute foundations, as Ricoeur argues that this results in total systems that no longer recognize the need for other discourses than their own.

Ricoeur most explicitly discusses 'belonging' in the essay "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" in *From Text to Action*, which elaborates the complex relation between phenomenology and hermeneutics, while criticizing an idealist understanding of phenomenology as

[9] To get a sense of what is meant by 'belonging,' one may also compare Heidegger's discussions on "thrownness" [*Geworfenheit*] in *Sein und Zeit.* Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Max Niemeyer, 2006), §38, 175-80; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), §38, 219-224.

it can be found in particular works of Husserl.[10] According to Ricoeur, Husserl would claim in these works that consciousness ultimately *constitutes* both itself and the meaning of its experiences, while phenomenology is charged with the task to reach the level of reflexivity required to become aware of these founding acts. In this 'idealist' version of phenomenology, consciousness would therefore both be foundational of itself and the world *and* able to acquire reflexive awareness of its foundational principles. Balász M. Mezei summarizes this idealist phenomenology as making the claim that "an empirical subject, as I am here and now, is able to function at the transcendental level, i.e., at the level of inclusive validity for all possible and factual subjects."[11] In contrast to this all-encompassing reach of phenomenology, Ricoeur argues that hermeneutics commences with the thought of human finitude that bars direct access to such origins. Finitude means that there are certain limits to the human condition that cannot be overcome, which also means that humans are not able to see through the structures of their condition directly. In Mezei's words, "phenomenology is the expression of the principle of *immediacy*; hermeneutics, however, is the expression of the principle of *mediation*."[12] While phenomenology claims direct access to principles through the method of reduction, hermeneutics is forced to take endless detours due to the limits of human finitude.

Finitude, Ricoeur hastens to add, is only a negative term for the positive condition of belonging. Belonging "designates the unsurpassable condition of any enterprise of justification and foundation, namely, that it is always preceded by a relation that supports it."[13] By

[10] Ricoeur points to the *Nachwort* of the 1930 edition of the *Ideas* as an example of this idealist phase in Husserl. According to Ricoeur, Husserl would there ultimately defend the foundational role that transcendental subjectivity (which is to be set apart from psychological subjectivity), and its intuition play in the constitution of what appears. Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," trans. John B. Thompson, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 25–53; Paul Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique: En venant de Husserl," in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 39–75.

[11] Mezei, "The Sovereignty of Revelation," 321.

[12] Ibid., 319.

[13] "[Ce concept] désigne directement la condition indépassable de toute entreprise de justification et de fondation, à savoir qu'elle est depuis toujours précédée par une relation qui la porte." Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 29 [44-5].

invoking belonging, Ricoeur argues that for the hermeneut the epistemological relation on which phenomenology tends to rely, which for him is in its core still the relation of a subject to an object, is never prior to the field of belonging from which understanding departs.[14] Before one is able to cognize about being, one is already thrown into being. There is always already a world that existed before one was born, a world rich in symbols, stories, and customs, while one is born into a web of social relations, a particular time and place, and a language. Ricoeur therefore writes that "we suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation which has already begun and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it."[15] Belonging refers to all these facets that are already there before one can pursue the path of reflection, raising questions whether the ground from which consciousness departs can itself be objectified, or whether our relation to any such 'first ground' does not rather take the form of participation *in* a prior relation which can never fully be objectified.

Ricoeur defines belonging as a "condition […] whereby he who questions shares in the very thing about which he questions."[16] For example, historians cannot renounce the fact that before they are scientists they are historical beings themselves, living through the fruits and consequences of the field of past actions that they investigate, which even form the context

[14] Remarkably, Mezei claims that Ricoeur fails to consider that Husserl's 'idealism' sets out to recover the transcendental conditions of what appears as following from a non-psychological, anonymous, constitutive subjectivity; however, this is exactly the kind of reductionism in Husserl that Ricoeur targets when he brings belonging into play. For Ricoeur, the problem is that this still departs from a subject/object dichotomy founded on epistemological terms rather than on those of the lifeworld. Mezei, "The Sovereignty of Revelation," 322; Ricoeur writes the following: "[c]'est à cette conceptualité que ressortit l'exigence de chercher ce qui fait l'unité de sens de l'objet et celle de fonder cette unité dans une subjectivité constituante." Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 30 [45].

[15] "Nous survenons, en quelque sorte, au beau milieu d'une conversation qui est déjà commencé et dans laquelle nous essayons de nous orienter afin de pouvoir à notre tour y apporter notre contribution." Ibid., 33 [48-9].

[16] "Pour [l'herméneutique], la question de fondation dernière continue d'appartenir à la même sphère de la pensée objectivante, aussi longtemps que l'idéal de scientificité n'est pas interrogé comme tel." Ibid., 30 [45].

of their questions to history. Hermeneutic consciousness unfolds its interpretations, understanding, and explication of the world from *within* the world that already existed before it finds itself thrown into it – Ricoeur therefore also equates belonging to Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' or Husserl's *Lebenswelt*.[17] In this sense, belonging is a strong reminder that consciousness is always in the middle of what is, never at the beginning or the end, which obstructs it from subjugating being entirely to its understanding or to principles that it could find within itself.

To further clarify the meaning of belonging in Ricoeur, it should be noted that the concept is not originally his. Ricoeur draws heavily from Hans-Georg Gadamer's understanding of belonging [*Zugehörigkeit*]. In fact, whenever Ricoeur discusses 'belonging', it is almost always in reference to Gadamer's opus magnum *Truth and Method* [*Wahrheit und Methode*], where the term plays a crucial role in establishing a philosophical hermeneutics in contradistinction to the 'methodical' understanding applied in the humanities [*Geisteswissenschaften*] that would fail to address the kind of truth that is at stake in human experiences of art, history, or language.[18] Gadamer asserts that the methodical approach to the humanities, which gained force in the nineteenth century in the works of authors such as Wilhelm Dilthey that aimed to rise the humanities to the status of science, risks reducing art, history, and language in general to theoretical distancing, alienating the researcher from a more primordial, immersed relation that precedes this abstraction.[19] The hermeneutic experience would instead refer back to experience in which such abstraction or distance is not yet experienced, as one actively partakes in art, tradition, or language *before* these can become objectified and distanced.

In his famous essay "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," Gadamer gives some concrete examples of what belonging means in the realms of art and history, where,

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[17] Ibid., 30, 43 [46, 61].

[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1960); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (Continuum, 2004); Ricoeur confesses his indebtedness to Gadamer explicitly at several moments in *From Text to Action*. To give one example, cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics", 30.

[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 213-234 [205-229].

again, belonging is played out against distanced, 'merely' theoretical relations in these disciplines that would cover over the priority of belonging.[20] In the world of art, Gadamer argues, for example, one should be wary of reducing the aesthetic experience to the judgment of a subject who finds herself vis-à-vis the art work considered as an object. Gadamer argues that the "alienation" [*Verfremdung*] inherent in the relation of judgment is to be balanced by the prior experience of an "immediate claim" [*unmittelbaren Anspruch*] of what "grasps us" [*ergreift*] in art, before one can even come to cognize or evaluate the art work.[21] This immediate claim involves that "a work of art has seized us, [so that] it no longer grants us the freedom to push it away from us once again to accept or reject it on our own terms."[22] Before one can theorize or judge the work of art, one first has to be immersed in the aesthetic experience.[23] Likewise, in history, Gadamer pleads that one should not approach the past as a series of causally related facts, as if the historian comes to history from some objective, neutral point of view outside of the flow of time. This methodological approach of the past risks losing sight of "our actual encounter with historical tradition" that remains true to one's exposure to and immersion in the consequences of the past.[24] "[T]here can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future."[25] For Gadamer, then, belonging is the counter-position of theoretical distanciation, and it returns the theoretical gaze to the existential sphere

[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems" in *Wahrheit und Methode: Ergänzungen, Register,* vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Werke.* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1993), 219-232; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings,* ed. Richard E. Palmer, trans. David E. Linge (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 72-89.

[21] Gadamer, "Universality," 79 [220].

[22] "Ist es nicht in Wahrheit so, daß das, was uns als Kunstwerk ergriffen hat, uns gar nicht mehr die Freiheit lässt es noch einmal von uns wegzuschieben und von uns aus anzunehmen oder zu verwerfen?" Ibid., 78-9 [220].

[23] In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer addresses this relationship to art explicitly as a relation of belonging. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 87 [106].

[24] "[U]nsere wahrhafte Erfahrung, […] die Begegnung mit der geschichtlichen Überlieferung […]." Gadamer, "Universality," 80 [222].

[25] "Wohl aber scheint es mir kein Zweifel, daß sich der große Vergangenheitshorizont, aus dem heraus unsere Kultur und unsere Gegenwart leben, bei allem als wirksam erweist, was wir in die Zukunft hinein wollen, hoffen oder fürchten." Ibid., 82 [224].

of being-seized-by or being-involved-in that mark a fundamental passivity of openness that precedes the activity of abstraction and knowing.

More than Gadamer, however, Ricoeur argues that the methodical moment of explanation is not diametrically opposed to understanding.[26] Phrased otherwise, belonging finds its counterpart in distanciation.[27] Against Gadamer, who thought of method mostly in terms of alienation [*Verfremdung*], Ricoeur states, for example, that in the case of history, facts or law-based explanations can fill in the gaps in a meaningful narrative about the past that one would not be able to follow otherwise.[28] For Ricoeur, the threat is not theoretical distanciation in itself but rather the totalisation of the epistemological attitude, which cuts off its ties to the living encounter from which it departs. Explanation and methodological distanciation can hence actually deepen one's understanding, if they are not taken in a total fashion, i.e., as long if they do not mistake reality with the theoretical constructions developed in science.

Ricoeur's appreciation of distance within belonging also helps to avoid a dangerous misinterpretation of the term. 'Belonging' may invoke the idea of a destiny for each culture, a lost origin at which one – if one were to return – would finally be at home; this notion could in turn invoke nationalistic reveries of how a certain people naturally *belong* to a certain place or language, which could easily spark a racist and exclusionary logic. This is emphatically not the sense of belonging spoken of in hermeneutics. For Ricoeur, belonging merely indicates that one does not approach the world *without* any presuppositions or *without* a perspective, situated within a particular linguistic and historical community. Belonging does not refer to something one can return to; it is not a position in space or time that could be marked out as one's 'proper' territory, but it rather refers to the way in which the past still informs the present, opening one's gaze toward the future.

However, as I go on to argue, there are problems with the above explanation of belonging. What should strike one's attention is that Ricoeur tends to discuss belonging in terms of the realm of human productions. There is a certain risk in hermeneutics to *narrow*

[26] Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Northwestern University Press, 2007); Paul Ricœur, "Expliquer et comprendre," in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986).

[27] Ibid., 125-8 [161-3].

[28] Ibid., 138-42 [176-83].

down the concept of belonging to the sphere of human culture, which, in extreme examples, can result in an exclusion of other forms of belonging, such as to the planet.

NARROW BELONGING

So far, I have explained that in Ricoeurian hermeneutics the concept belonging is mostly invoked to criticize the risk of reducing what is to whatever can be rendered into the results of a methodologically or scientifically guided enterprise of knowledge production, which would dissimulate an active, engaged sense of partaking-in to such matters as culture, tradition, art, or language. A particular risk becomes visible, namely, that belonging is *narrowed down* to the realm of the 'cultural,' by which I here mean the totality of inherited human productions and expressions, which precludes a wider sense of belonging to the planet. This wider sense is called for by novels such as *Venomous Lumpsucker* that bring the literary imagination in touch with a planet that exists independently of human life. My strategy in this subsection is to critically assess Ricoeur's hermeneutics, highlighting those aspects that render it vulnerable to a narrowing down of belonging. This critical angle, however, is used only to then present a deepened reading of his hermeneutics, which avoids these risks. In short, if this subsection has something of an accusation, it is only to invite a fresh look at hermeneutics from the angle of the problems of the planetary.

By a narrowing down of the relation of belonging, I understand two things. First, there is what I call a moderate narrowing of belonging, which narrows belonging down to *particular* relations such as one's specific culture, language, or tradition. In this understanding, one does not belong to, for example, language *in general* but to this or that specific language. Besides, moderately narrow belonging results in the idea that there is no 'direct' access to being because one is only opened to *what is* through the mediation of such particular relations – one's first language, social background, position in history. This moderately narrow understanding of belonging therefore argues that one belongs to such particular (and often cultural) relations *before* one belongs to being in a more general sense.

Second, there is a more radical narrowing of belonging that states, on top of this first claim, that these relations of belonging actually *constitute* being(s), which is therefore the stronger claim that being is a 'correlate' (to use Meillassoux's term, which I will discuss in

more detail below) of the human relation of belonging. What presents itself through belonging is not some external being 'in itself' but the relation of belonging itself constitutes being, which, paradoxically, would return hermeneutics to the kind of totalizing philosophies that Ricoeur aims to reject. My claim here is that there is a tendency in Ricoeurian hermeneutics to narrow down belonging, sometimes even in this latter radical sense.[29]

The risk of narrowing belonging is most apparent in Gadamer's work, although Ricoeur does inherit some of its risks by picking up the concept of belonging from Gadamer. Belonging seems to have a mixed career in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, where it describes *both* an ontological structure of human existence (existential, to use Heidegger's vocabulary) *and* the more ontic situation of belonging always to a *particular* tradition, language, culture, et cetera (existentiell), which describes the narrow sense of belonging. For example, while Gadamer stresses that belonging fundamentally belongs to the ontological structure of human existence, or what Heidegger called *Dasein*, which is thrown into the world and therefore finds itself in the midst of something that was already taking place before itself, belonging is also approached in the more narrow sense of the interpretation of a particular object of art, tradition, or language.[30] This is an example of narrow belonging because it approaches being in terms of a *particular* (ontic) medium within the realm of the cultural. Still, it is true that Gadamer tries to free belonging from the narrow frame, as in the last part of *Truth and*

[29] Interestingly, Heidegger's philosophy of belonging in his analyses of the poetry of Hölderlin is free from the kind of risks Gadamer and Ricoeur face to narrow down belonging. The account of belonging in "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" holds that one does not commence the relation of belonging toward something as 'culture' but instead one first belongs to the Earth [*Erde*]. Humans belong to Earth before they belong to their (culturally established) worlds, even if worlds cannot but attest to how they partake in the unconcealing properties of Earth. This means that culture, even poetry, always *follow upon* being that is always already 'broader' than culture, i.e., it would be alien to Heidegger to think of the cultural realm to have any constitutive function of being. This line of thought will not be pursued further within this dissertation, but it would be a fruitful future endeavour to critically assess Heidegger's philosophy of belonging, of course considering that Heidegger's own nationalistic 'narrowing'. Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung* (Albert Langen & Georg Müller, 1937); Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry" in *Elucidations of Hölderlins Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Humanity Books, 2000).

[30] For the broader, existential interpretation of belonging, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 252-4 [247-50]; However, traditionality as an existential category requires that one belongs to a specific tradition, which refers to traditionality as a fact of existence. Cf. ibid., 295 [279].

Method, which explicitly considers one's belonging to language not as a narrow confinement to a particular community of speakers but as an openness to languages other than the one's own, for example through the possibility of translation.[31]

In the case of Ricoeur, it is remarkable that "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" narrows down belonging to a stricter sense of *traditions*. This prioritizes the *mediation* of past cultural productions over other articulations of the relation of belonging. Several pages after Ricoeur's definition of belonging quoted above, he concretizes belonging as follows: "What we have called 'belonging' is nothing other than the adherence to [...] historical lived experience."[32] Ricoeur then adds that this experience is always "mediated by the transmission of written documents, works, institutions, and monuments."[33] A narrow understanding of particular relations of belonging pushes away the broader, ontological understanding of belonging. Likewise, in "Science and Ideology," Ricoeur reduces belonging to the idea that "before any critical distance, we belong to a history, to a class, to a nation, to a culture, to one or several traditions."[34] All of these examples of mediation are concrete 'existentiell' or ontic conditions to which one belongs, i.e., the concrete results of past human actions and thoughts. This forecloses the question, which Ricoeur indeed never discusses, whether one could also belong to the planet, as that which sustains but could also exist without culture.

Another example of this narrowing down is Ricoeur's understanding of tradition as an important mediation between the old and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar in his literary theory. For Ricoeur, any interpretation of a literary phenomenon is always already

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[31] Gadamer also explains why belonging to a particular culture or tradition is never fully *narrow* because it also provides the openness to all other traditions. In this sense, belonging in a wider sense, i.e., as an existential category, is already being separated from a strictly narrow sense to a particular form the mediation must take. Ibid., 444 [423].

[32] "Ce que nous avons appelé 'appartenance' n'est pas autre chose que l'adhérence à le vécu historique." Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 40 [58].

[33] "[M]édiatisé par la transmission des documents écrits, des œuvres, des institutions, des monuments qui rendent présent pour nous la passé historique." Ibid., 40 [58].

[34] "Avant toute distance critique, nous appartenons à une histoire, à une classe, à une nation, à une culture, à une ou des traditions." Paul Ricœur, "Science et idéologie" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 328; Paul Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology" in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2*, trans. John B. Thompson (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 267.

guided and pre-moulded by the expectations within one's culture of readers within this particular moment of time.[35] Ricoeur adopts Hans Robert Jauß's model of literary history, which views each major work as an answer to questions that only became visible after it had been written. Don Quixote, for example, departs from the chivalric literature of its age, to show its shortcomings through parody: only if one is able to measure the gap such a work constituted is one able to appreciate Cervantes's innovations. Likewise, the understanding of narrative involves, necessarily, a cultural or conventional element, which allows to decode the plot and meanings of the structured work. The meaning of narrative and literature is thus inevitably correlated to an historical background and to a tradition that provides the tools to engage with whatever new cultural expression is at hand: the new only becomes visible through the old.

However, from this standpoint, novels such as *Venomous Lumpsucker* would not truly bring consciousness in touch with being that is independent from it. For, although literature contains some moments of innovation and of novelty, these moments are only thought *in relation to* what was already known. One could say that any literary novelty, any glimpse evoked in narrative of a being that was not yet there *for us* as readers and that could hence hint at the planet in its asymmetry, only appears as such against the background of a tradition, that is, to what was already known. *Venomous Lumpsucker*, for example, would then only project the planetary outside without humans 'relative' to the inside of the already known, relying on familiar cultural tropes of human extinction to conjure up an image of an Earth without humans rather than, somehow, truly turn language toward a planet in which humanity has gone extinct. The core of the matter, then, is whether tradition can form a background against which new experiences may manifest, or whether it rather confines and limits experience.

In sum, the risk for hermeneutics is that in this narrowing down a slippage occurs between being and mediation. Instead of thinking being as that which mediation brings to the fore, mediation itself is now thought as the ground of being. For, if thought relies on mediations to access being, how can one still know that being *is* anything beyond the medium

[35] Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3: Le temps raconté* (Seuil, 1985), 243-64; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 173–80; I explore this model of literary history below in more detail, see "Hermeneutics of Reception: Ricoeur on Jauß," 232-235.

through which one makes it appear? In its worst guise, this would be a kind of relativism or perspectivism, and one would lack any external criteria to compare or evaluate different claims to truth. In this way, hermeneutics would end up being a mere relativist philosophy, and radically so, because mediation has taken the place of being.

By now turning to Meillassoux's speculative realism, I want to first deepen these hesitations about belonging to then present an alternative reading of Ricoeur's work. I will show that his work actually allows one to work toward a 'wide' sense of belonging that escapes the risks of narrow belonging.

MEILLASSOUX AND CORRELATIONISM

The early decades of the 21st century saw a renewed interest in philosophical realism in continental philosophy, or, in thinking the world beyond its appearance to humans. Published in 2006, *After Finitude* is Meillassoux's provocative contribution to the speculative realist 'movement,' that has impacted much of contemporary philosophy for the past two decades.[36] Despite the various tastes in speculative realism, expert in the field Arjen Kleinherenbrink observes that all speculative realist philosophy shares a dislike for what has become known as *correlationism,* or, the idea that being and thinking can only be thought of in relation to each other and not independently.[37] Correlationism is a name for philosophies that hold that one is unable to access reality *as it is* in itself, always rendering reality as something *correlative* to thinking: there is only access to reality as it is 'for us,' not as it is 'in itself'. Opposing this correlationism, speculative realists argue that it results in an anthropocentric reduction of the to what can be known or thought about it, while correlationist philosophies would be unable to explain the success of the (geo)sciences to acquire knowledge about ancestral pasts before human consciousness existed.

[36] The term 'speculative realism' stems from the name of a workshop held at Goldsmith College, University of London in 2007, which featured Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Quentin Meillassoux. Cf., Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012): 184, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23259371.

[37] Arjen Kleinherenbrink, "New Images of Thought: On Two Kinds of Speculative Realism," *Global Discourse* 11, nos. 1-2 (2021): 83–100, https://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X16031279484000.

In this section, I will first describe Meillassoux's position in detail in order to present it as a serious partner of dialogue for hermeneutics. My aim is not to uncritically follow speculative realism but to involve the problems it brings to the fore in hermeneutic philosophy. I will therefore later return to Ricoeur's notion of belonging and then deepen it considering the problems brought to light by Meillassoux's philosophy. I then want to show that Ricoeur's hermeneutics is able to incorporate the criticism of correlationism, while it is better able to trace the way in which the asymmetry of the planet becomes meaningful. It is of interest to this aim that Meillassoux explicitly mentions Ricoeur approvingly, claiming that their analyses of time and being as *not* constituted by human consciousness bear resemblances, although Ricoeur's approach is called *aporetic* instead of *speculative*.[38] While this speculative approach clarifies the relation of hermeneutics to an 'external' reality – beyond culture – I will also argue that Meillassoux fails to consider how hermeneutics already extends beyond correlationism, and provides another solution to the problem.

THE CONTINGENT ABSOLUTE

Meillassoux's criticism of correlationism follows from his philosophy of the absolute. He defines the absolute as "a being whose *severance* (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not."[39] If philosophy is able to make sense of the successes of astronomy and the geosciences, which describe the history of the universe and of Earth before the emergence of complex life and consciousness – and hence as radically independent from thought –, philosophy will have to formulate a concept of the absolute as something independent of thought and concepts. While philosophy has always struggled with the absolute, what makes Meillassoux's work interesting is that it resists the common thesis according to which the absolute is a highest, perfect being. Instead, he claims that the

[38] The difference is that Meillassoux claims to have access to some absolute, while Ricoeur's hermeneutics claims that thought gets tangled up in aporia's when thinking about a time that is not human. Meillassoux, *After Finitude,* 137n6 [183n1]; for Ricoeur's theory of time, consult, above: "Discordance in Time and Narrative," 14-18.

[39] "[U]n être si bien *délié* (sense premier d'*absolutus*), si bien séparé de la pensée, qu'il s'offre à nous comme non-relatif à nous - capable d'exister que nous existions ou non." Meillassoux, *After Finitude,* 28 [51].

absolute is to be found in *contingency*, or more precisely, in what is *necessarily* contingent.[40] In *After Finitude,* Meillassoux claims to have discovered a sense of the absolute in the fact that everything that is could have been different or could not have been at all *without any reason*, and he argues that this fact itself is not again contingent but of an inevitable nature.

To appreciate the novelty of this approach, it should be contrasted to earlier understandings of the absolute. In the history of philosophy attempts have been made to identify the absolute with some highest being, such as God (Descartes) or a monistic substance (Spinoza), whose essence would involve the predicate of necessary existence. What exists necessarily must simply exist whether humans or other forms of consciousness are there to observe or constitute it. Yet, following Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* Meillassoux claims that this 'metaphysical' approach to the absolute has become impossible after the limitations posed by transcendental philosophy to metaphysics, as "no determination of an entity can tell us *a priori* whether this entity exists or not." [41] Kant's criticism of metaphysics and dogmatism argued that from a mere concept of a perfect, highest being, one may not infer its actual existence, and Meillassoux argues that this cuts short any attempt to move directly from thought to statements about what exists.

Instead of taking the metaphysical route to the absolute, therefore Meillassoux recasts the absolute in terms of contingency. It is absolutely the case, he claims, and necessarily so, that – without reason – everything could have been different, could stop existing or might not have existed at all. Meillassoux argues that *without* a dogmatic solution to the problem of the absolute, which would be to posit a metaphysical ground such as God that would provide a sufficient reason for why things are the way they are, any structure of the world is rendered arbitrary. One cannot know the reason why things are the way they are. While this might seem to bar any access to the absolute, Meillassoux argues instead that this lack of certainty

[40] Meillassoux distinguishes empirical contingency from absolute contingency. The first denotes the fact that all existing things in the world will perish, i.e., that their essence does not involve necessary existence. Absolute contingency, in contrast, refers to the knowledge of the lack of there being any reason for the existence of the world and its structure. Absolute contingency holds that there is no reason for the world to exist as it does, which means that it may perish, come to an end, or simply continue to exist, without there being any reason for why this is the case. Ibid., 62-3 [85-6].

[41] "Aucune détermination d'un étant ne peut nous dire *a priori* si cet étant existe ou non." Ibid., 32 [44].

itself *presupposes* an absolute truth, namely, that it is absolutely certain that there is no reason for the way things are. To argue that things could have been otherwise, after all, means to claim that one is certain of the absence of any determining principles or higher entities that could guarantee the principle of sufficient ground.[42] In sum, if one lets go of dogmatism, "[i]t is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist."[43]

Meillassoux cannot resist dressing up this absolute in metaphors and images to project its sense to readers. He describes this contingent absolute as a *hyper-Chaos*, "for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable."[44] While there is no principle of sufficient reason in operation in the universe, Meillassoux claims to have established a "*principle of unreason*" [*principe d'irraison*].[45] As a result, Meillassoux describes his absolute by means of the following, dramatic language:

> [it] is a rather menacing power – something insensible, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything, of realizing every dream, but also every nightmare, of engendering random and frenetic transformations, or conversely, of producing a universe that remains motionless down to its ultimate recesses, like a cloud bearing the fiercest storms, then the eeriest bright spells, if only for an interval of disquieting calm.[46]

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[42] But would it not be conceivable that there *is* a higher entity or ground that guarantees the principle of sufficient reason which is simply not *knowable* for humans? Meillassoux calls this position *fideism*, as it posits *the possibility* of there being an absolute entity beyond the limits of thought, only accessible through the nebulous roads of mysticism and revelation. He refutes this position by claiming that it claims access to something that it immediately also places beyond what can be accessed. After all, the fideist claim needs to think the absolute as beyond thought, but it thereby immediately renders this thought contradictory. In its modesty, fideism transgresses the limits of hubris. Ibid., 46-50 [63-9].

[43] "[I]l est absolument nécessaire que tout étant puisse ne pas exister." Ibid., 60 [82].

[44] "[A]uquel rien n'est, ou ne paraît être, impossible, pas même l'impensable." Ibid., 64 [99].

[45] Ibid., 60 [83].

[46] "Si nous regardons au travers de la fente ainsi ouverte sur l'absolu, nous y découvrons une puissance plutôt menaçante – quelque chose de sourd, capable de détruire les choses comme les mondes; capable d'engendrer des monstres d'illogisme; capable aussi bien de ne jamais passer à l'acte; capable certes de produire tous les rêves, mais aussi tous les cauchemars; capable de changements frénétiques et sans ordre, ou,

In metaphorical language, comparing the absolute to a menacing storm cloud, Meillassoux here describes how the contingent absolute a) is capable of changing the entire structure of givenness, rendering what was absurd logical and the inverse, b) is capable of doing so at *any moment* because there is no overarching order holding the absolute back or providing the impetus for change, and for the same reason c) could also possibly remain what it is. In short, the contingent absolute is the possibility of everything being otherwise in the absence of a metaphysical highest entity and sufficient ground.

In a final step of his argumentation, Meillassoux claims that from *knowledge* of the absolute nature of contingency, one may deduce the possibility of scientific facts about the world as independent from human consciousness.[47] In Meillassoux's reading, one should "asser[t] that every mathematical statement describes an entity which is essentially contingent, yet capable of existing in a world devoid of humanity regardless of whether this entity is a world, a law, or an object."[48] Natural scientific statements, for example portraying early pre-Cambrian events when there was no conscious life on Earth, retain the sense of something that is true *independent* of the conditions of givenness, i.e., beyond the contingent, practical conditions of science or the historical state of scientific advancement.[49] Meillassoux's philosophy of the absolute would also conceptualize the planet as an entity that exists independent of human thought, intentionality, or language. In this regard, Meillassoux also speaks

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à l'inverse, capable de produire un univers immobile jusqu'en ses moindres recoins. Comme une nuée porteuse des plus féroces orages, des plus étranges éclaircies, pour l'heure d'un calme inquiétant." Ibid., 64 [87-8].

[47] This point has been criticized extensively. According to Sebastian Purcell, for example, Meillassoux has an outdated and inaccurate view of how modern sciences proceed, which are not all mathematical in nature – think of biology or physics which allow for other methods than mathematical deduction. This criticism might take the edge from Meillassoux's position, but I do not think it takes the sting of the challenge of the arche-fossil away for phenomenology and hermeneutics. The challenge remains how to do justice to a reality without givenness departing from a philosophy that appears to take givenness as its starting point. L. Sebastian Purcell, "After Hermeneutics?" *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy/Revue Canadienne de Philosophie Continentale* 14, no. 2 (2010): 167–8.

[48] "[D]ire que tout énoncé mathématique décrit un étant en droit contingent, mais susceptible d'exister dans un monde sans homme – que cet étant soit identifié à un monde, une loi, ou un objet." Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 127 [176-7].

[49] Meillassoux's essay, however, ends rather open-ended. It remains "philosophy's task" to think through the absolutization of mathematics without relapsing into ontotheology. Ibid., 126 [175].

of the need to rehabilitate the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which would allow one to distinguish independently existing entities and their properties from the way in which they are experienced or thought. In this philosophy, the planet may be thought mathematically but is not itself a thought. After all, its history also envelops the absence of humans *and* their thought. Not only would humans depend materially on the planet, in as far as it attests to being *beyond* what can be thought, it presents a reality in which they also might not have been. Can hermeneutics make sense of this radical challenge to its attachment to mediations such as tradition, history, and language?

CORRELATIONISM

Meillassoux's recasting of the absolute is tied to a challenge to contemporary continental philosophy. According to Meillassoux, philosophy would no longer be able to think the absolute, nor understand why and how science can make claims about a time in which human thought did not exist, because of a correlationist trap it has fallen into. According to this argument, hermeneutics, too, would be seen as entangled in this trap: at least to the degree that it subscribes to narrow accounts of belonging.

Let me first construe in some more detail what Meillassoux's criticism of correlationism comes down to. Correlationism is defined as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."[50] For the correlationist, one cannot think the absolute, as the 'in itself' only manifests as something 'for us.' Thought cannot capture the absolute, only the

[50] "Par 'corrélation,' nous entendons l'idée suivant laquelle nous n'avons accès qu'à la corrélation de la pensée et de l'être, et jamais à l'un de ces termes pris isolément." Ibid., 5 [18].

correlation between thinking and being.[51] As a result, correlationism remains stuck in a "correlationist circle" [*cercle corrélationnel*].[52] For a correlationist, everything that is thought, experienced, imagined, et cetera, is so *for me*, or *for* the subject engaging in these activities, or, *for* the (anonymous) correlation supporting thought (ideology, history, structures, et cetera). Consequentially, correlationism performs what Meillassoux calls "the correlationist two-step" [*pas de danse corrélationel*] which is to assert "the primacy of the relation over the related terms."[53] For the correlationist, the relation – thought, perception, history, ideology – is *constitutive* of the relata: the relata *ontologically depend on* the relation. This is precisely the risk of radical narrow belonging in hermeneutics, which does not just posit that mediation is inevitable but that the 'external world' would come to existence *through* mediation.

According to Meillassoux, this correlationist (and problematic) rejection of the in-itself finds its roots in the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant.[54] Kant's philosophy famously distinguishes between noumena and phenomena, maintaining that all that human minds have access to are *phenomena,* things as they appear *for us* and not as they are *in themselves*. The things-in-themselves may be thought as *noumena* but can never be known. Accordingly, following Meillassoux, Kant's framework is correlationist because one cannot

[51] Ibid., 136-7nn4-5 [169n1, 170n1]. Most of all, this analysis of correlationism targets phenomenology in its various guises – Heidegger, Husserl, and Levinas are mentioned by name. Husserl, for example, is charged with presenting the transcendental ego as the foundational correlation between thought and being, while Heidegger would depart from a correlation between being and humanity as its shepherd. Such comments rely, however, on straw man versions of these phenomenologists without in depth analysis of their philosophies. I take Meillassoux's challenges to phenomenology to be provocations to further clarify the relation to the 'great outdoors' in contemporary continental philosophy rather than as conclusive arguments against it.

[52] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5 [19].

[53] "[L]a croyance en la primauté de la relation sur les termes reliés." Ibid., 5 [19].

[54] Graham Harman remarks that not all speculative realists come to a similar, critical evaluation of Kant's philosophy as Meillassoux does. He therefore even calls the relation to Kant "a key internal fissure within speculative realism." Whereas authors such as Meillassoux criticize the Kantian idea of human finitude – humanity's inability to access being itself – and retain Kant's prioritizing of the human, Harman opts for the inverse. "I reject absolute knowledge," he writes, "and retain Kantian finitude, though broadening this finitude beyond the human realm to include all relations in the cosmos." For Harman, not only humans, but all objects have a finite structure that forces them to 'perceive' the world according to their own limited capacities. Harman, "The Well-Wrought Hammer," 184–5; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5 [18].

know being beyond its relationship with the human subject, all that one knows is how being appears *after* it has been formed by the categories of the *Verstand* of the human subject. Meillassoux chides continental philosophy after Kant for remaining within this correlationist framework. The problem with correlationism is that it forecloses access to an outside world relative to thought, which renders it unable to explain how scientific assertions about such an external realm of being are possible. It can merely study the conditions under which things appear to subjects, to systems of knowledge production, et cetera, but it cannot lay claim to some reference of scientific assertions to the outside world. Accusing contemporary philosophers of adhering to correlationism, Meillassoux urges philosophy to return to "*the great outdoors* [...] that outside which was not relative to us [...] existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not."[55] Philosophy would otherwise end tied up, in Zahi Zalloua's words, "endlessly in a linguistic circle, in the old prison-house of language, trapped by unseen, epistemological falsehoods."[56]

Zalloua here alludes to what Meillassoux calls the "cloistered outside" [*dehors claustral*] of correlationism, which surfaces most clearly in hermeneutics.[57] Approvingly citing Francis Wolff, Meillassoux states that there are certain media, such as language, which are unique because they constitute their own worlds that appear to be 'external' to themselves. Language allows one to speak *of* things that seemingly lie beyond itself, i.e., *within* itself it creates the illusion of an *outside* to which it refers.[58] Yet, Meillassoux remarks, such an outside is only apparently an outside if it does not truly exist in a non-linguistic way as well. Is this cup, for example, a cup because I am able to call it so, distinguishing it from things around

[55] "[L]e *Grand Dehors*, le Dehors *absolu* des penseurs précritiques [...], ce Dehors qui n'était pas relatif à nous, qui se donnait comme indifférent [...] existant tel qu'en lui-même, que nous le pensions ou non." Ibid., 7 [21-2].

[56] Zahi Zalloua, "On Meillassoux's 'Transparent Cage': Speculative Realism and Its Discontents," *Symplokē* 23, nos. 1-2 (2015): 394, https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.23.1-2.0393; The term 'the prisonhouse of language' is taken from Frederic Jameson's book, cf. Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton University Press, 1975).

[57] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7 [21].

[58] Ibid., 6 [20].

it, or does it have an existence as cup before and after the word?[59] Does language constitute an outside or does it merely result in the projection of an outside that remains linguistic by nature? Meillassoux writes that "if this outside seems to us to be a cloistered outside, an outside in which one may legitimately feel incarcerated, this is because in actuality such an outside is entirely relative, since it is [...] relative to us."[60] While Meillassoux's critique is phrased rather provocatively and bluntly, without sustained engagement with contemporary phenomenologists or hermeneutic thinkers, it presents matters that are particularly pressing for these traditions, in their prioritizing of experience and language.

What becomes visible if we were to take Meillassoux's critique as seriously as we can? It would follow that the risks of correlationism extend to all discourses about the planet, which risk rendering it into a mere linguistic/cultural correlate if they do not approach the planet as something existing independently of and beyond culture. To give one example, in *Imagining Extinction,* Ursula Heise claims from a literary and culture studies perspective that "biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science," which explic-

[59] More so than Ricoeur, Gadamer makes several remarks that risk locking up his philosophy in a cloistered outside. Think of remarks such as "that which comes into language is not something that is pregiven before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness." In German: "das, was zur Sprache kommt, ist kein sprachlos Vorgegebenes, sondern empfängt im Wort die Bestimmtheit seiner selbst." However, if a thing becomes what it is through the word, if it is never pregiven before language, how can it then retain an extra-linguistic reality as the speculative realist would like it to do? Does it pertain to the thing itself to be expressible in language? A charitable reading of Gadamer will have to stress how language remains a *medium*, that is, a mediating factor between elements that could exist beyond this mediation. For Gadamer, the notion of *subject matter* or *Sache* would be crucial in this respect because it refers to the thing that *comes* to language, that *about which* language discusses. Yet the realist question remains whether the *Sache* is only constituted in the correlation of language, that is, to what degree it constitutes being beyond thought and language. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 470 [479].

[60] "[S]i ce dehors nous apparaît comme un dehors claustral, un dehors dans lequel il y a sens à se sentir enfermé, c'est qu'un tel dehors est, à vrai dire, tout relatif, puisqu'il est [...] relatif à nous-même." Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7 [21].

itly risks reducing folding extinction and its role in planetary history into the realm of culture.[61] Of course, there are cultural dynamics to how extinction is represented that justify such an approach, yet, if literary studies and philosophy do not move beyond this framework, they would remain locked up in a correlationist understanding of extinction as it is registered *for* a certain culture. In hermeneutics, if belonging is thought *narrowly*, especially in its radical variant, hermeneutics would lose the trail to the great outdoors. If hermeneutics is to be more than such a cultural analysis of figurations of extinction and a planet without humans, it is requisite to argue that hermeneutics can somehow extend toward being as retracted from consciousness, i.e., toward the contingent absolute.

CORRELATIONISM IN NARROW BELONGING

Contemporary hermeneutic philosophers such as L. Sebastian Purcell have acknowledged that Meillassoux's analysis of correlationism raises problems for hermeneutics. Purcell argues that "phenomenological hermeneutics is in a state of crisis," due to the developments in speculative realism. He even goes as far as to say that "unless [a provisional hermeneutic response] is undertaken, it seems likely that our program of thought will be of little more than historical interest."[62] What exactly does *After Finitude* lay bare about the limits of hermeneutics? What new problems does it introduce that may give rise to further hermeneutic thought?

Meillassoux points to two concrete issues for correlationist thought, both of which are highly relevant for my endeavour to engage hermeneutics to think through planetary asymmetry. These issues are those of *ancestrality* [*ancestralité*] and of the *arche-fossil* [*archifossile*]. Ancestrality refers to a reality that existed before the dawn of the human species or even before the emergence of any life on Earth.[63] Sometimes ancestrality is extended to what Meillassoux calls *dia-chronicity*, which involves, besides ancestrality, also the idea of a future time after humans or other forms of life have gone extinct.[64] In turn, an arche-fossil is a material

[61] Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 6.

[62] Purcell, "After Hermeneutics?," 160.

[63] Meillassoux, *After Finitude,* 10 [26].

[64] Ibid., 112 [156].

trace indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event before the appearance of terrestrial life.[65] Both ancestrality and the arche-fossil refer to being that was *not* given to consciousness, e.g., uncorrelated being, which can be thought but which is itself never reducible to a thought or an experience. Yet, despite their status as independent from human thought, Meillassoux observes that contemporary science has, nevertheless, been able to acquire knowledge of ancestral events. As an example, one could think of theories of the formation of greenstone belts or other rocks formations of the Precambrian, which can be dated back billions of years due to the use of technologies based on the constant rate of decay of radioactive atoms.[66] Such greenstone belts attest to an ancestral time before complex life on Earth, while scientists are apparently able to acquire knowledge about a time period that cannot be relegated back to a prior correlation to thought because it existed *before* thought and experience. However, according to Meillassoux, the correlationist is unable to interpret such pieces of evidence because the arche-fossil bears witness to a time *before* there was any form of givenness to consciousness or to the correlation between thought and being that takes priority for the correlationist.[67]

If one were to follow Meillassoux here, how would all this affect hermeneutics? The radically narrow understanding of belonging is clearly suspect from Meillassoux's angle. If hermeneutics thinks belonging as *constituting* being, this inevitably leads to what Meillassoux has called the *correlationist two-step*, which involves giving priority to the medium over the relata. This would be problematic because it leads to an intersubjective theory of truth that cannot account for the referent of scientific knowledge about the arche-fossil. So, radical narrow belonging could not help one think being before language, such as that there once were ancestral times resounding with the mute scurrying of trilobites across some Silurian ocean floor.

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[65] Ibid., 10 [26].

[66] Steven M. Stanley and John A. Luczaj, *Earth System History* (W.H. Freeman, 2015), 263–66.

[67] This is why Meillassoux also writes that "the virtue of transcendentalism does not lie in rendering realism illusory, but in rendering it astonishing, i.e., apparently unthinkable, yet true, and hence eminently problematic." In French: "La vertu du transcendantal n'est pas de rendre le réalisme illusoire, mais de le rendre stupéfiant: apparemment impensable, et pourtant vrai – à ce titre éminemment problématique." Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 27 [38].

In its moderate sense, the narrow account of belonging maintains that the particular (cultural) relations of belonging do not constitute being but, still, that one cannot access being *beyond* these relations. If this is the case, how one is to judge the results of sciences such geology in light of their ancestral referents? If being can only be accessed through human-made constructs, how is one to interpret the existence of a past before culture?[68] Narrow belonging does not allow one to relate to being directly, and any 'direct' reference to reality as independent of tradition, history, et cetera, would appear suspect.

For Meillassoux, this means that the hermeneut defending narrow belonging either has to renounce the scientist's claim that there really was a time *before* consciousness, but this would be to discredit entire disciplines such as astrophysics and geology, *or* she has to accept that one can think being beyond correlations. "There is no possible compromise," writes Meillassoux, "between the correlation and the arche-fossil: once one has acknowledged one, one has thereby disqualified the other."[69] In short, the object of ancestral knowledge is not compatible with the tenets of narrow belonging and therefore challenges it.

In sum, from this point on, it is clear why speculative realism is critical about the significant role of belonging to media such as language, tradition, or art in philosophical hermeneutics. If language is the fundamental 'correlation' that brings together being and thought – without allowing for a possibility of separation – then hermeneutics would indeed be unable to do justice to the arche-fossil both in the moderate and radical version of belonging. This risk becomes the greatest if language is seen as a total system that constitutes its outside (the meaning of things *of which* words speak, for example) only within its own perimeters (because these things are only to the degree that they could be spoken about, as the 'other' of language). In short, language – or tradition, or history, etc. – is suspect if it is anything but a system that can reference things that exist fundamentally outside of the universe it constructs. The key question, then, is whether a concept like belonging can be thought of as more

[68] "Ce qui nous est donné, en effet, ce n'est pas quelque chose d'antérieur à la donation, c'est seulement un donné présent qui se donne pour tel." Ibid., 16 [34].

[69] "Il n'y a pas de compromis possible entre le corrélat et l'archifossile: l'un des deux étant admis, l'autre est de ce fait disqualifié," Ibid., 17 [36].

than an inescapable correlation between thought and being. The answer, I will now argue, can already be found within Ricoeur's work. And it is affirmative.

WIDE BELONGING, PLANETARY BELONGING

In my reading of Meillassoux, above, I have tried to unearth new challenges that may help me to deepen Ricoeurian hermeneutics in facing planetary asymmetry. Meillassoux's *After Finitude* presents Ricoeurian hermeneutics with the task to conceptualize *belonging* a) beyond correlationism, and b) without recourse to a highest, absolute being – as this would entail a problematic 'dogmatic' response to the question of planetary asymmetry. I will here develop a 'wide' reading of belonging that meets these demands, but I first want to explain why I prefer the 'aporetic' solution of hermeneutics to the 'speculative' argument by Meillassoux.

FROM SPECULATION TO APORETICS

While I approach Meillassoux's speculative realism as a relevant provocation to hermeneutics to wake up from its cultural, anthropocentric slumber, there are two tensions within the speculative realist project that prevent me from simply opting for the speculative solution. First, Meillassoux deals with simplified versions of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and he overlooks how these schools of thought already move beyond correlationism. Second, and related, while Meillassoux claims a *direct* access to the absolute, he often describes this relation in metaphorical and poetic language, suggesting that poetry itself is already a site in which language moves beyond correlationism.

As to the first point, Meillassoux tends to simplify phenomenology in his relentless criticism of its project. He argues that phenomenology is a correlationist philosophy that holds that there is no access to being, as whatever presents itself would always already be constituted by mediating and preceding relations of intentionality.[70] In short, without the intentional acts of some supervening, transcendental consciousness, there would be no

[70] See, above, footnote 51.

world, no objects, and hence, there is nothing that is absolute for phenomenology, except, perhaps this transcendental ego. There are two ways to reply to this criticism.

First, this correlationist picture of phenomenology does not truthfully represent what phenomenology is. Phenomenologists have actively worked to develop philosophies that relate to being in an *uncorrelated* fashion. In a recent publication, Ted Toadvine, for example, has argued against Meillassoux that the drastic rift between an 'in-itself' and a 'for-us' fails to consider how the ancestral past is entangled with experience in a phenomenological sense – rather than separated from it. On the basis of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, Toadvine argues that "the materiality of our bodies embeds us within the a-subjective temporal flows of the elements, while our senses and affects entangle us in the generative time of evolution."[71] This means, for Toadvine, that the deep past always already *affects* human consciousness which finds itself embedded in a world that it did not constitute.[72] My body with its instincts and intuitions is enmeshed with and formed by evolutionary history that precedes any reflexive or conscious act. Inversely, Toadvine claims, any scientific inquiry into a time without humans *presupposes* "our ability to open onto a past that was never our own possibility, never our own memory—an impossible and immemorial past."[73] All of this is to say that phenomenology is not the *reduction* of the world to constitutive acts of an anonymous subject – which would be a correlationist solution – but rather the study of a field of experiences in which the subject finds much that originates beyond herself. Even in *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty already writes that "the real has to be described, not constructed or formed," which is to say that phenomenology does not result in a reduction of the world to a series of synthetic acts of the order of judgement or predication on the side of subjectivity – whether conceived of individually or transcendentally.[74]

In the previous chapter, I also highlighted how the planetary is present in Ricoeur's concept of world in terms of discordance-concordance. For Ricoeur, the world is emphatically

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[71] Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 15.

[72] Ibid., 53

[73] Ibid., 54.

[74] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), x; "Le réel est à décrire, et non pas à construire ou à constituer." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, 1945), iv.

not a site of an anthropocentric reduction of being to whatever can be articulated in the resources available to a culture – this would be the triumph of concordance over any alien or disruptive experience. Instead, world is an interplay between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, between coherence and disruption, and it is the site in which this struggle itself can become meaningful. This became clear in Ricoeur's remarks on the clash between lived time and physical time in literary worlds, where the fictive experience of time of literary writing captures the many ways in which this conflict can be faced and inhabited. Crucially, however, in all this is that Ricoeur there also comes to a solution that avoids a correlationist return of the world to some prior established relation or subjectivity. For example, the discordant-concordant world *is not* constituted by language but only *attested to* by means of language. In *Time and Narrative 1,* Ricoeur therefore writes that

> language does not constitute a world for itself. It is not even a world. Because we are in the world and are affected by situations, we try to orient ourselves in them by means of understanding. […] Language is for itself the order of the Same. The world is its Other. The attestation of this otherness arises from language's reflexivity with regard to itself, whereby it knows itself as being *in* being in order to bear *on* being.[75]

While from one perspective language appears to be a self-enclosed system of signs – the Same, or what Meillassoux calls a 'cloistered outside' – language is also geared towards something that it is not and that it does not produce or constitute. Language, it could be argued, belongs to Being that remains its other. Does this also mean that Ricoeur moves beyond correlationist approaches of narrow belonging?

[75] "[L]e langage ne constitue pas un monde pour lui-même. Il n'est même pas du tout un monde. Parce que nous sommes dans le monde et affectés par des situations, nous tentons de nous y orienter sur le mode de la compréhension […] Le langage est pour lui-même de l'ordre du Même; le monde est son Autre. L'attestation de cette altérité relève de la réflexivité du langage sur lui-même, qui, ainsi, se sait *dans* l'être afin de porter *sur* l'être," Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1,* 78 [118-9].

If one accepts that phenomenology and hermeneutics study the way in which experience, language, world, et cetera, are sites of both concordance and discordance, of experiences that are more than simply 'for us,' a more positive evaluation of belonging slowly becomes possible. In fact, from a phenomenologico-hermeneutic angle, Meillassoux himself does not manage to convincingly escape the condition of belonging to something that precedes and enables his argumentation. To paraphrase Toadvine, is it not true that any (geo)scientific inquiry into the ancestral past requires that that this past is accessible to humans, that being always already discloses itself *as* ancestral, and preceding human consciousness? Likewise, it is remarkable that Meillassoux himself cannot resist describing the absolute hyper-Chaos of contingency in a poetical language of metaphors rather than in the language of mathematics that he prefers throughout his book. For example, Meillassoux speaks of the absolute, as I quoted above, as "a cloud bearing the fiercest storms."[76] Apparently, the absolute necessity of contingency results in a complex array of affects, the meaning of which is ultimately best captured when language shakes off the possibility of a direct reference to a world beyond humans. By drawing upon such images as a menacing cloud, Meillassoux, of course, invokes a wider, historical imaginary of storms and tempests, of ancient Gods such as Thor and Zeus, and he immediately situates his discourse on the absolute within a symbolic sphere, with its proper history of visual imagery, and inherited meanings – in short, he relies on the capacity of the imagination to open up the reader's perspective to the absolute, to creatively use language to disclose a new meaning. Does this not mean that Meillassoux, too, attest to the possibilities of poetics to address discordances and rifts in experience, to use what is familiar to get a sense of what is unfamiliar, indifferent to humans – just like I argued Ricoeur does?

Given the above hesitations and comments, while I accept Meillassoux's criticism of correlationism, and while it is a useful angle to critically approach hermeneutics, all the above leads me to prefer Ricoeur's aporetic solution. This solution, too, escapes a correlationist understanding of language, as there is some 'outside' to the linguistic field, while Ric-

[76] "Comme une nuée porteuse des plus féroces orages, des plus étranges éclaircies, pour l'heure d'un calme inquiétant." Ibid., 64 [87-8].

oeur does not claim to have speculative knowledge of this outside. A wider reading of belonging will help to articulate how this aporetic solution unfolds, stressing how discordance emerges within concordance.

BEYOND CORRELATIONISM

The relevance of wide belonging is that it attests to being that is not correlated either to language or tradition. It is a fundamental concept within Ricoeur's hermeneutical thought that escapes correlationism and that opens hermeneutics to the 'great outdoors' of the planet in its asymmetry. To develop this notion, let me first return to "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," the essay I quoted above to inquire into belonging. Ricoeur writes that

> [belonging] directly designates the unsurpassable condition of any enterprise of justification and foundation, namely, that it is always preceded by a relation that supports it. Is this a relation to an object? That is precisely what it is not. [...] The first declaration of hermeneutics is to say that the problematic of objectivity presupposes a prior relation of inclusion that encompasses the allegedly autonomous subject and the allegedly adverse object. This inclusive or encompassing relation is what I call belonging. The ontological priority of belonging implies that the question of foundation can no longer coincide with that of ultimate justification.[77]

I want to point out that Ricoeur does not yet *narrow down* belonging to any particular examples of cultural relations, as Gadamer tends to do with his discussions of art, tradition, or history, and as Ricoeur tends to do in some other essays. Instead, Ricoeur here addresses belonging *in abstracto* as a type of relation pertaining to human finitude with that which precedes and supports the human condition.

[77] "[L'appartenance] désigne directement la condition indépassable de toute entreprise de justification et de fondation, à savoir qu'elle est depuis toujours précédée par une relation qui la porte. Dirons-nous une relation à l'objet? Précisément non. [...] Le première déclaration de l'herméneutique est pour dire que la problématique de l'objectivité présuppose avant elle une relation d'inclusion qui englobe le sujet prétendument autonome et l'objet prétendument adverse. C'est cette relation inclusive ou englobante que j'appelle ici appartenance. Cette prééminence ontologique de l'appartenance implique que la question de fondation ne peut plus coïncider simplement avec celle de justification dernière." Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 29-30 [44-5].

What may one gleam from this abstract approach? First of all, it is remarkable that belonging is explicitly thought of as *ontological* – Ricoeur also calls it an "ontological condition" [*la condition ontologique*].[78] At this ontological stage of Ricoeur's definition of belonging, it cannot, therefore, simply be understood as tied to specifics of historical, artistic, or linguistic fields. Instead, the wider, ontological (rather than ontic) notion of belonging that emerges from this particular quote is formed along the lines of three characteristics: its ontological priority, unsurpassibility, and its supporting function.

First, belonging remains of the order of an "ontological priority" relative to any attempt of justification or foundation.[79] This means that according to Ricoeur the human subject (and its thought) *does not* constitute being, and, hence, that belonging indicates, forcefully, that being and the thought of a subject are not immediately correlated. Thought partakes in being that was already there and that remains prior to it. This is why Ricoeur also typifies belonging as a "prior relation of inclusion."[80] This ontological priority of belonging cannot be overtaken by thought that attempts to master it, and, consequentially, one cannot reduce being to which one belongs to whatever is produced through the thought of a finite subject.

This ontological, rather than ontic, sense of belonging is evoked by Ricoeur at other points in his oeuvre as well. There is an important example of this in another essay called "Explanation and Understanding," where Ricoeur goes as far as to speak explicitly of the "*ontological relation* of belonging joining *our being to beings and to Being*."[81] Belonging does not simply denote the fact that one may, for example, speak Dutch or English, live in the 21st century, and be thoroughly familiar and inspired by modernist art – it is presented in this quote as extending beyond such concrete delimitations to a wideness of Being. While the particular relations of narrow belonging all follow upon what humans (other than oneself) have made, such as art, the contents of tradition, or the possibilities of one's language, in quotes such as the above there emerges a notion of belonging to something that is always already prior to

[78] Ibid., 27 [45].

[79] Ibid., 27 [45].

[80] "[L]a problématique de l'objectivité présuppose avant elle une relation d'inclusion," Ibid., 27 [45].

[81] "[L]a relation ontologique d'appartenance de notre être aux êtres et à l'Être." Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," 143 [181], my emphasis.

all these productions, and hence, does not depend on any human effort. Ricoeur stretches the concept of belonging here explicitly to its wide sense, for example, when he calls it a relation "to the whole of what is."[82] From these quotes and fragments, I deduce that the ontological priority of belonging hearkens back further than the cultural domain to whatever supports culture and allows it to arise in the first place. The narrow account of belonging above did not yet capture this wideness.

So far, however, the wider account of belonging still appears correlationist. Even if wide belonging is ontologically prior to media such as language, might it still not function as a correlation between thought and being in a more anonymous manner, like Husserl's transcendental ego? There are two other characteristics of 'wide' belonging that emerge in the lengthy quote from "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" that help to further underscore how Ricoeurian hermeneutics steers away from this.

The first is that Ricoeur calls belonging 'unsurpassable.' Any attempt to understand belonging presupposes it. Hence, belonging is not simply chronologically prior, but it is of such a nature that one can never 'overtake' it or acquire a distance relative to it. This also means that being to which one belongs is always richer than what can be explicated about it – even by the sciences. This observation also takes me back to Toadvine's comment that geoscience presuppose human existence to be opened to a past that exceeds it; indeed, to be able to ask questions about the world or the planet, they first have to be there *as* excessive relative to conceptions of time limited to those of mortals.

Because of this second characteristic of wide belonging, hermeneutics removes itself further from correlationism, as the unsurpassibility of belonging results in a rejection what Ricoeur calls, with Gadamer, total mediations. A total mediation, in Ricoeur's words, is "an intuition that is both first and final," in the sense that it posits and knows itself as a first ground of whatever is: such intuitions would be first, because they are foundational, and final because they also justify the trajectory that leads to their discovery.[83] An example of a total mediation is Husserl's idealism as discussed above, or a Hegelian understanding of history in which, through the mediations of the dialectical process, spirit [*Geist*] ultimately, through

[82] "[L]'ensemble de ce qui est." Ibid., 143 [182].

[83] "[U]ne intuition à la fois première et dernière," Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," 33 [49].

its own development, comes to absolute self-consciousness. Correlationism, too, results from a total mediation in the sense that it renders a particular mediation total, i.e., inevitable, so that being and this mediation are always already correlated.

In contrast, however, for Ricoeur's hermeneutics, there is no such total intuition of wide belonging, no intentional act that can constitute it, nor is there a correlation to which it can be reduced. The reason is human finitude, which means that humans never find themselves as the beginning or end of being, as "all interpretation places the interpreter in media res and never at the beginning or end."[84] There is no ultimate interpretation of reality precisely because interpretation cannot surpass belonging (which is its condition of possibility) and human finitude that render it both necessary and possible. Wide belonging, therefore, should not be seen as a kind of 'ground' upon which philosophy can build its systems. It marks what I would like to call an inexhaustible surplus of being. It is inexhaustible because it is always already there, and every attempt to reduce to particular expressions or mediating relations cannot fully capture it. It is a kind of surplus because it is also what is left beyond the horizon of any particular concretization of it. It is that which is already there even before any act of grounding, and which recedes when one attempts to reach such foundations.

Finally, and of crucial importance for extending belonging to the planetary, Ricoeur claims that this wide sense of belonging "supports" [*porte*] other relations, such as the epistemological relations that objectify being.[85] Wide belonging is not a relation to being that withdraws exhaustively or that is empty of any characteristics itself, because, whatever being is, it also allows and makes possible posterior relations such as epistemological ones. As supporting, it is not completely external to whatever is given through mediations. The incapacity of the subject to master being is therefore not a mere shortcoming that is to be lamented: it also makes of being a sort of richness that supports and that always gives rise to more to think because thought cannot conclusively capture its resources. Wide belonging does not *replace* one's more narrow belonging but rather reveals that there is something more, something Other, that can never be completely captured by any partaking in the cultural life, and that gives rise to there always being something more to say, to create, to do.

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[84] "[T]out interprétation place l'interprète *in media res* et jamais au commencement ou à la fin." Ibid., 32-3 [48].

[85] Ibid., 29 [45].

In short, while narrow belonging denotes a relation of partaking in certain 'ontic,' concrete conditions, wide belonging denotes a relation that is ontological, general, and never yet specified in terms of concrete contents. To belong narrowly to tradition, language, art, et cetera, one first has to belong to being in a wider sense, even if those narrower relations never fully capture this wideness. While narrow belonging is the heritage of all that has been said and done by one's predecessors, in a sense, wide belonging is all that has been left unsaid and undone. More so than narrow belonging, wide belonging therefore indicates a situation of asymmetry, in which humans can never overcome this condition of already being on a planet that conditions their life form while also retaining a deep indifference to human existence.

ASYMMETRY IN *VENOMOUS LUMPSUCKER*

The distinction between narrow and wide belonging has helped to free hermeneutics from suspicions of being correlationist. It will now also allow me to extend Ricoeur's framework to engage with Anthropocene fictions that address planetary asymmetry, such as *Venomous Lumpsucker*. The argument I want to make here is that planetary asymmetry emerges as the concordant-discordant interplay and friction between narrow and wide belonging. By stretching the fabric of what a tradition, a history, or a language, can hold together, these fictions present the being of the planet as *independent* from these relations, that is, as being to which one belongs in a wide sense. It is only *through* the limits of narrow belonging – rather than through its total collapse or absence — that this wide belonging becomes visible as *not yet* contained by narrow belonging, as the example of *Venomous Lumpsucker* illustrates.

In *Venomous Lumpsucker* a thriving extinction credit market has arisen that allows companies to offset the damage that they cause to endangered species.[86] To minimize the number of credits required, companies are allowed to digitize the species they force into extinction, uploading their DNA and records of their behaviour to a 'biobank' in the hope that these species might, at some point in the future, be resurrected. As with the real world carbon

[86] Beauman, *Venomous Lumpsucker,* 23-5.

market, "allowances, indulgences, exceptions and delays" render the system totally ineffective in limiting actual extinction rates, inviting criticism on the side of the reader of global responses to climate change and biodiversity loss.[87] In one interpretation, *Venomous Lumpsucker* takes a clear swing at the incapacity of contemporary politics to respond to the environmental crisis, and interpreters have approached the novel as a reflection on the political inequality of Anthropocene violence.[88]

When one reads *Venomous Lumpsucker* with the frames of narrow and wide belonging in mind, however, one is struck by how a large part of the novel concerns its protagonist, Karin Resaint, in her struggles with the shortcomings of the narrow, culturally mediated relations to which humans belong when these are brought in conflict with the large-scale problem of extinction. Its political message aside, the novel also addresses the complicated relation of belonging to a planet that is not simply human. In the book, Resaint dies in the wake of the complications of her journey to find a hyper-intelligent species of cleaner fish. This species, the titular venomous lumpsucker, is able to take revenge for the death of its species members., and Resaint hopes that she can unleash the wrath of the fish on herself as a punishment for her compliance with the extinction credit industry which has damaged animal life on Earth so gravely.[89]

Resaint's rather grim plan follows upon a kind of ecological change of heart she experiences in the middle of the novel. At first, Resaint is hired at an animal cognition expert whose task is to judge how intelligent a certain soon-to-be-extinct species is, and hence, what sum a company needs to pay for its eventual disappearing. The extinction of the many species Resaint assesses as an animal cognition expert for the extinction credit market mostly leaves her indifferent. It is as if the wealth of symbolic means of what would Ricoeur would have called her belonging to "a history, to a class, to a nation, to a culture, to one or several traditions" does not provide her with the means to ponder over the conundrum of extinction.[90]

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[87] Ibid., 25.

[88] Cf., María Torres Romero, "The Price of Extinction and the Epic Journey to Mourn Beyond the Human in Ned Beauman's *Venomous Lumpsucker*," *Lagoonscapes* 4, no. 2 (2024): 360.

[89] Beauman, *Venomous Lumpsucker,* 240.

[90] "[U]ne histoire, à une classe, à une nation, à une culture, à une ou des traditions." Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology," 267 [328].

Through such cynical explorations of the human incapacity to relate meaningfully and adequately to something like extinction, the novel stresses how humans in their narrow belonging fail to come to terms with ongoing planetary changes in biodiversity. In fact, nothing in Resaint's belonging in a narrow sense, that is, her upbringing, her culture, her language, her values, et cetera, prepared her for grappling with species extinction, and the behaviour of almost all other characters in the novel satirically displays the incapacity of folding the planetary scale of extinction into matters of human concern.

Yet Resaint converts from moral indifference to moral engagement after watching a video of a (fictive) species of parasitic wasp called *Adelognathus marginiatum* crawl out of its host spider. The improbable symbiosis between spider and wasp involves hormonal manipulation on the side of the wasps' larvae that leads the spider to create a web that protects the wasp's larvae when they enter the cocoon stage, after which "the larva would poison the spider, disembark from its abdomen, and suck out its juices."[91] From the sheer contingency of such unlikely species existing, Resaint draws the conclusion that life on Earth must have "some sort of inherent value", and from this her moral repugnance at humanity's relation to other beings wells up that motivates her to use the venomous lumpsuckers in her plans to even out the ecological score.[92] Ultimately, her argument rests upon a sense of wonder found at the very limits of what can be meaningfully spoken or reasoned about. In her analysis of the novel, Erin James observes that "it is this awe for the processes of life, not scientific facts about the threats it faces, that lies at the root of [Resaint's] epiphany."[93] What is disclosed is hence not a deeper law behind the fleeting order of the world, but rather the flimsiness of order, the much vaster chances of there not being anything at all.

Resaint's sentiment alludes to what Meillassoux described as the absolute: the necessity of contingency, the ground that is nothing but the absence of any necessary grounding.[94] This experience of contingency manifests Resaint's wide belonging to the planet. It emerges

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[91] Beauman, *Venomous Lumpsucker,* 110.

[92] Ibid., 115.

[93] Erin James, "Fiction, Belief, and Climate Change: Paratexts, Skeptics, and Objects of Care" in *The Routledge Handbook of Fiction and Belief,* ed. by Allison James et al. (Routledge, 2023), 333.

[94] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 62-3 [85-6].

not as something that can adequately be spoken of but rather as narrow belonging – language, history, or even ethics – rendered inadequate; it is as if Resaint learns to care only *through* the inadequacy of these resources, not by finding a new, stable correlation between the planet and human culture. All of this comes together in Resaint's use of the term "the Black Hole" to describe the horror and confusion she feels when the contingency of the existence of life on Earth dawns on her. The confrontation with the contingency of life and the imminent demise of so many other species, like a Black Hole, sucks up everything in its vicinity, contorting any sense of scale, rendering "any other moral question […] irrelevant."[95] The Black Hole forms a "breach like no other breach that had ever preceded it," it ruptures all the expectations one may foster on the basis of whatever tradition one belongs to, "a breach that could not be measured on any existing scale."[96] The relation to extinction and contingency is of the order of a breach that is always in surplus to what can be rendered meaningful through the means of culture, it is sensed as that which extends beyond narrow belonging.

Within *Venomous Lumpsucker,* something refuses to come to the light or to clarity within the concepts, beliefs, et cetera, of Resaint's tradition, while it nevertheless manifests itself as the core matter of the novel. Of course, Resaint moves toward action, unfolding within the world she shares with other humans, translating her wonder to the human world by committing to an act of ecological justice. But her action – having herself punished by venomous lumpsuckers – is futile, absurd, and in no way closes the breach that has opened in her world. What becomes visible, as if glimpsed sideways, in the ending, is the ultimate fragility of narrow belonging, its contingency, because it is always supported by a wider sense of belonging that may never completely be articulated within its registers. Interpretation takes place from a situated perspective, but it must also presuppose that being resides elsewhere than the situation in which one finds oneself, and that there are things that can only present themselves as riddles and breaches, as interruptions and discordances.

[95] Ibid., 118.

[96] Ibid., 119.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have employed the language of 'belonging' in hermeneutics to explore its relation to the planet in its asymmetrical relation to human existence. I have first introduced a distinction between 'narrow' and 'wide' belonging, the first referring to a sense of belonging to particular traditions and other cultural mediations, the second to a form of belonging that extends beyond these mediations. To explore this second, wider sense of belonging, I have introduced Meillassoux's philosophy as a partner of dialogue for hermeneutics. Rereading Ricoeur's discussions of belonging through the lens of Meillassoux, my aim was to develop a sense of wide belonging that stresses the openness of hermeneutics to being that is always more than any 'correlation' can capture. In this way, Meillassoux's speculative realism allowed me to deepen understanding of how hermeneutics relates to what is independent of thought, which helped me to connect hermeneutics to the planet in its asymmetry to humans. As Richard Kearney writes about Ricoeur, "the ultimate horizon of Ricoeur's work remains, from beginning to end, the horizon of being which signals to us obliquely and incompletely: a promised land but never an occupied one."[97] This means that Ricoeur departs from being as *always more* than whatever can be given through the particular mediations that bring being to consciousness, which makes his work particularly apt to engage with the planet as something that will remain even when humans are no longer around.

[97] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Ashgate, 2004), 4.

MATERIALITY

TRACES OF HUMANITY

The Anthropocene as a planetary condition sparks questions about the universality of 'humanity' today and, related to this, about whether it is still possible and desired to defend some form of humanism, understood here as a secular appeal to an ideal, universal form of the human that, if realized, would result in the flourishing of human life on Earth. On the one hand, the Anthropocene, named after the 'human' (the *anthrōpos* [ἄνθρωπος]), appeals to new forms of human universalism; as a condition of human making that affects the entire planet, the Anthropocene concerns all humans inhabiting Earth (although in different, inequal ways). On the other hand, many critics have pointed out that universalism easily dissimulates the inequalities in terms of vulnerability and responsibility among humans, while it could propagate Eurocentric conceptions of humanity, suppressing alternative conceptions of what it is to be human. Moreover, as the Anthropocene marks the material inscription of human history in geological history, it also raises the concern whether ideals of humanity are able to take on board the entanglement of humans with nonhuman entities, such as other animals, technological artefacts, or the geophysical forces at play within the Earth System.[1]

In this chapter, I will explore these tensions through the lens of Ricoeur's humanism in *Time and Narrative,* where Ricoeur defends an idea of 'humanity' that emerges from the open-ended, discursive interaction between a plurality of traditions and that offers a horizon of hope for future emancipation of all of humanity. Ricoeur offers his reader a theory of human universality that avoids the pitfalls of the essentializing Eurocentric approaches toward 'humanity' criticized above. However, it does not yet address humanity's relation to the materiality of the planet. By 'materiality,' I refer to the planetary system as a geophysical collection of forces and flows of energies, including the inorganic lithosphere. The Anthropocene introduces a geophysical notion of humanity as "a major geological force," and to understand

[1] Cf. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

how this raises new questions for universalism and humanism, I will introduce the anti-humanistic work of cultural theorist Claire Colebrook to develop a more material reading of Ricoeur.[2] I will argue that while Ricoeur tends to conceive of human universality and humanism without addressing their relation to the planet humans inhabit and impact, his work also allows for a more material reading due to the importance of *traces* for hermeneutics. Read as a humanism of traces and inscriptions, Ricoeur's theory may be opened to the planetary by situating interpretation between meaning and the physical planet.

In what follows, I will first claim that the Anthropocene presents two concepts of 'universality' – global and planetary – which present distinct challenges for thinking human universality and also humanism [*Anthropocene without Anthrōpos*]. The globalist aspect involves questions of social justice and intercultural plurality, while the planetary aspect involves the issue how to think humans as enmeshed with a geophysical, planetary system. This distinction will be illustrated and pondered over in reference to Samantha Harvey's novel *Orbital,* which follows astronauts on the ISS during a day in their life. In the next section [*Humanism in* Time and Narrative], I will argue that Ricoeur develops a theory of humanism and human universality that relies on the capacity of traditions to communicate with other traditions, and I will claim that this model navigates the problems of globalism – most concretely, the risk of presenting a false universality that subdues human, cultural plurality. In the third section [*Planetary Inhumanism*], I will then point out, using Colebrook's inhumanism, that Ricoeur's model has not reflected on the relation between this universal horizon of communication and the material, geophysical planet, which leads to the suspicion that a focus on communication and interpretation dissimulates problematic elements to thinking about humanity. In the fourth section [*Materializing Ricoeur's Humanism*], however, I will argue that Ricoeur's theory can be reread by shifting attention to the notion of the trace, which is of paramount importance to his concept of tradition, and, hence, of universality. The trace is a mediating phenomenon, situated between an anthropo-acentric time of nature and time belonging to the human world of meaning. Developing these insights further than Ricoeur has taken them, I claim, his hermeneutics of the trace and his humanism can be read as also including

[2] Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 618.

reflection on planetarity, while this model also counters blind spots within Colebrook's work, such as the inevitability of interpretation and historical situatedness.

ANTHROPOCENE WITHOUT *ANTHRŌPOS*

GLOBAL AND PLANETARY HUMANITY

To make more concrete the most important tension concerning humanism in the Anthropocene, I first turn to the Booker prize winning novel *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey, which narrates a day in the life of the crew of the International Space Station (ISS).[3] I will use this novel to bring into focus the distinction between the global and the planetary in relation to conceptions of humanity, as it beautifully illustrates two different perspectives on humans in their relation to the single planet they inhabit.

The first perspective, which I will call 'global,' is cosmopolitan and humanist. This perspective is implied when the astronauts look down on Earth only to see the unfulfilled promise of a single humanity that is finally united across cultural differences. From the ISS, just some traces of human life are visible, such as city lights at night, while the planet mostly manifests itself with the "humanless simplicity of land sea," in "its fulness, its absence of borders."[4] Similar to Carl Sagan and his utopic meditations on the *Pale Blue Dot* photograph, which "[challenged] our posturings, our imagined self-importance," the astronauts in Harvey's novel consider how the unity of the planet puts pressure on divisive human constructs over which so much blood has been spilled.[5] From their view, there are "no countries, just a rolling indivisible globe which knows no possibility of separation, let alone war," which they feel ought to inspire humanity to accept its condition of inhabiting a single, unified globe. [6] This means giving up on war and conflict over borders that are not even visible from space and calling a halt to the folly of anthropogenic climate change. Globalism will therefore be the result of a human work of connection across borders, building systems of communication

[3] Samantha Harvey, *Orbital* (Vintage, 2024).

[4] Ibid., 72.

[5] Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (Random House, 1994), 9.

[6] Harvey, *Orbital,* 72.

and exchange that would unite societies across the Earth. Planetary unity becomes an invitation to discover a new way of inhabiting the planet, an inspired globalism of aligning human plurality with the unity of its shared material conditions.

The other perspective of the novel, however, which I will call 'planetary,' complicates this picture. It perceives humanity not as a unified ideal but rather as a material force operating on the planet. While the planet itself may be a single system, it does not constitute a unified whole that seamlessly holds together its parts, as it is enmeshed with the (material) divisions and tensions of geopolitics. "[J]ust as the sculpting force of gravity has made a sphere of the planet […], so has politics sculpted and shaped and left evidence of itself everywhere."[7] From this planetary gaze, humanity appears as a multi-faceted but material force among forces within the Earth System. In fact,

> [human politics] is a force so great that it has shaped every single thing on the surface of the earth that they [the astronauts] had thought, from here, so human-proof. Every swirling neon or red algal bloom in the polluted, warming, overfished Atlantic is crafted in large part by the hand of politics and human choices.[8]

In contrast to what the humanist, global perspective brings into focus, human politics does not unfold within an immaterial bubble that could just burst if only it were to attune itself to the untainted planetary unity, simply because the planet has *absorbed* the inscriptions of human politics, because politics has become *planetary*, and it thereby explodes the separation between humans and the Earth on which the globalist image relies.

This tension between globalism (assuming a rift between humanity and the planet) and planetarity (viewing humans as enmeshed with the planet) plays itself out in scholarly debates about the value of the concept of humanity and humanism in the Anthropocene. The globalist perspective gives rise to questions of social justice, such as what is the most just distribution of responsibility of the Anthropocene across a plurality of cultures and societies. The planetary perspective instead gives rise to ontological questions, questioning the sepa-

[7] Ibid., 75.

[8] Ibid., 74.

ration of something as 'humanity' from the materiality of the planetary system. Both positions, therefore, have something to say about the possibility of remaining 'humanist' in the Anthropocene.

HUMANISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Humanism is a broad and multifaceted term that envelops many traditions, religious, philosophical, and historical contexts.[9] In the discussions relevant to my work, humanism tends to be seen as an ideal that originates in (but is not completely reducible to) eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpretations of Renaissance conceptions of the universal model of Man. Rosi Braidotti argues that this conception of humanism is exemplified by Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, that "combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress."[10] As such, humanism implies a secular view on humans, a view that introduces a particular ideal model of what it means to be *fully* human, for example: a self-conscious, rational being. Humanism is therefore intricately linked to human universalism, which is the position that there is some quality to being-human that is shared by all humans alike, across the manifest cultural differences. Humanism argues that an ideal model of being-human may be drawn from these universal qualities, and it argues too that actualization of this ideal would result in human flourishing.

Humanism cannot be thought without conceptions of history. Its universalism is the basis for a particularly secular understanding of history as a single term, that is, as *history* rather than *histories*.[11] Assuming the perfectibility of the human, in the nineteenth century, ideals of the human were used to imagine a (single) historical process, in which humans are able to progressively actualize this ideal through their own efforts. In William Schweiker's

[9] Cf. Tony Davies, *Humanism* (Routledge, 1996), 1-7.

[10] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity, 2013), 13.

[11] Through a semantic analysis, Reinhart Koselleck points out that before the 18th century history was not conceived of as a collective singular, but, instead, as a plurality of different, individual histories. The idea that there is some overarching, universal history that collects all of these in a single story of humankind only became current after the French Revolution. Cf., Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Suhrkamp, 1995), 50-1; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (MIT Press, 1985), translated by Keith Tribe, 28-9.

words, "[f]or a humanist the purpose of thought and action is human flourishing, achieved by means of the distinctive human power to act and so to create history, whatever other non-human purposes and goods might obtain."[12] Humans *shape* themselves through their history, and what we are today is the result of past human efforts Through this understanding of human history, humanism lays claim to a universal perspective. History supposedly envelops *all* humans..

Even before the Anthropocene debates took off, critics had contested humanism for a long time. They often argued that humanism tends to result in Eurocentrism, which means that a particular European tradition of thought, stressing critical reasoning and the capacity of reflection, is taken to be exemplary of what it universally means to be human. In Rosi Braidotti's analysis, for example, "Europe as universal consciousness transcends its specificity, or, rather, posits the power of transcendence as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity."[13] Moreover, critics such as Tony Davies argue that the ideals of humanity would have always been gendered and racialized, taking the White European Male as the ideal model of what it means to be human, while those not fitting this ideal are 'othered' and possibly seen as less-than-human.[14] Indeed, to determine what constitutes the human is always also to determine who falls outside of its perimeters – the bloody histories of colonization and racialization attest to the horrors to which this can lead.

In the present context of the Anthropocene, the spectres of humanism materialize once more, and this has incited new criticisms of its potential dangers.[15] As to its resurfacing, in his work on Anthropocene humanism, François Prouteau observes that

> [T]he Anthropocene, an epoch shaped by the impact of human genius but also of human *hubris* on the Earth System, questions and prompts a new understanding of what the *anthropos* is […]. In other words, what does it mean to become truly human with

[12] William Schweiker, "Paul Ricoeur and the Return of Humanism," *Journal of French Philosophy* 16, no.1/2 (2006): 23.

[13] Braidotti, *The Posthuman,* 15.

[14] Davies, *Humanism,* 141.

[15] Jeremy Baskin, "Paradigm Dressed as Epoch: The Ideology of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Values* 24, no. 1 (2015): 9–29.

> other living beings in the Anthropocene, from a personal and community perspective, at different, local, national, international, and global scales.[16]

However, according Jeremy Davies's succinct summary of debates on the term *Anthropocene*, concepts such as *humanity* or *anthropos* are often seen as too universalist and too technocratic.[17] The Anthropocene would be too universalist because it "neglects humanity's division into a multitude of unequal social groups, and the ways in which wealth, nationality, ethnicity, gender, class and so on mediate the relationships between those groups."[18] Humanity would become "an abstract, homogeneous mass," while the term "wrongly implies that humanity is united in culpability, in vulnerability, and in the need for self-protection."[19] On top of this, the concept of humanity is often also technocratic, as it "presents human nature itself, the technological impulse of the *anthropos*, as a full and adequate explanation for the course of history."[20] This means, as Bonneuil and Fressoz have highlighted in their *The Shock of the Anthropocene,* that history is often modelled as driven by a certain teleological process of a series of technological inventions, from agriculture to the steam engine, which downplays the importance of human politics.[21] The Anthropocene's *anthrōpos* is therefore highly

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[16] François Prouteau, *Anthropology of the Anthropocene. Ideas for a Courageous Education* (Routledge, 2024), 30.

[17] Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (University of California Press, 2016), 52.

[18] Ibid., 52.

[19] Ibid., 52–53.

[20] Ibid., 53.

[21] Bonneuil and Fressoz observe how environmental historians, such as John McNeill, have described the historical development of humanity's relation to the environment in terms of large-scale, anonymous processes, which tends to efface any recourse to human agency, politics, and historical context. They write that "the historical account of the environmental crisis that results from this [technological approach] is one of a more or less undifferentiated demographic, economic and technological growth, with no focus on the strategies of the actors involved, the choices that could have been made differently or the controversies and conflicts around these choices." Instead, the propose a series of Anthropocene historical narratives that intend to unearth the entanglement of environment history with moments in time when things could have taken a different turn, identifying the institutions and agents responsible for prohibiting this. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene,* trans. David Fernbach (Verso, 2016), 56-7; "Le récit historique de la crise environnementale qui s'en dégage est celui d'une croissance démographique, économique et

contested, and if one were to follow its critics, one could only defend any conception of humanity in the Anthropocene that is aware of a *plurality* of cultures, identities, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities, while this 'humanity' would not be able to become some sort of technologically mediated universal subject geo-engineering its way out of the Anthropocene. I will later argue that Ricoeur's humanism is able to navigate these problems, as it resists *both* a 'monological' account of humanity *and* a technocratic understanding of it.

Related to these problems of universalism and humanism is the tendency in philosophies of the planetary Anthropocene to adopt a 'view from nowhere' on the planet, i.e., to assume a gaze that is totalizing, encompassing the planet in its entirety, and supposedly 'neutral' as it would no longer be bound to particular histories, traditions, et cetera, which is the kind of perspective that undergirds a techno-scientific ideological grasp of the Anthropocene. This is the kind of detached perspective that Hannah Arendt and other continental philosophers already rejected, as I discussed above, in the context of the emerging Space Age after the Second World War.[22] For contemporary scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff, the claim of geoscience to observe the planet from a God's-eye view's implies "unification of […] vision across the time and space of geologic practices [that] seemingly offers an undifferentiating and indifferent politic." [23] That is, the claim to neutrally observe the planet in its entirety is to present one's position as a neutral standard, one that obscures both its rootedness in particular (often Western) histories of scientific practice and the political results to which it may lead.

In Harvey's novel, the globalist view of humanity, which emerges when the astronauts perceive the Earth from a great height and imagine humans as unified, is an example of this outsider's perspective. The overview effect obtained when observing Earth from space is taken as a neutral, outsider's gaze, which ushers in utopian visions of a single humanity that has been able to overcome (and perhaps abandon) its cultural differences, but this globalist

technologique, assez indifférenciée, sans que l'on puisse y lire des stratégies d'acteurs, des choix qui auraient pu être faits autrement, des controverses et des conflits autour de ces choix." Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Fressoz, *L'événement anthropocène. La Terre, l'histoire et nous* (Seuil, 2016), 73.

[22] Cf. above, 57-69. There, I claim that although the planetary 'view from above' is at odds with the hermeneutic project and its conception of the human as a situated being, the notion of 'world' can envelop this tension and the discordances to which it gives rise.

[23] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 4.

image may emerge only if the technological and cultural histories that enable this perspective are suppressed.[24] As such, the planetary view "designates a single point of experience from which departure for the future is projected."[25] In short, humanism may result in the claim to a 'transcendent' or 'neutral' view on what it means to be human, which, critics argue, is never truly transcendent but always also particular, tied to the immanent processes and histories of politics that it fails to take into account.

A final angle of criticism against humanism is the call of scholars in the Anthropocene to consider humans simply as a part of the planet rather than as some extraordinary being that transcends the networks that comprise it. Instead of taking into account the material consequences of human agency, the concept of agency itself has to be revisited, according to these scholars: agency arises in networks comprised of humans and nonhumans. From this critical angle, humanism would make the mistake of attributing agency exclusively to human agents, who are taken to be, to some degree, in control of the development of their own history. However, the Anthropocene would illustrate how entangled human actions are with non-human beings, forces, or processes that are not simply to be backgrounded in the light of environmental problems. Jairus Grove, for example, invokes Jane Bennett's idea of "thing power" to emphasize the "surprising self-organizing actions of those 'things' that are too often believed to be under dominion of the humans that developed and deployed them," and directs attention to how in the Anthropocene humanism would miss "the productive and directive capacity of nonhuman forces in networks better called assemblages."[26] In this view, 'agency' becomes a broad term that captures human intentional action but also the way in which objects and things resist human intentions or have new possibilities in the world emerge. Humanism would make the mistake of supposing that there is something properly human that could be isolated from the networks in which agency arises. While these accounts

[24] Note, however, that the novel also contests the idea of a cultureless or ahistorical perspective, as it relates in detail how the overview effect is mediated by experiences and histories that the main characters bring along.

[25] Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes,* 27.

[26] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 20, quoted in Jairus Grove, *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2019), 135; Grove, *Savage Ecology,* 135.

often leave the crucial question open what exactly is understood by 'agency,' they have the merit of raising the question by what means a properly 'human' agency is isolated from the networks and assemblages in which it is involved.

In what I called the planetary perspective of Harvey's novel *Orbital,* the astronauts observe how seemingly 'natural' phenomena attest to 'human' politics, such as that algae blooms reflect political choices in food production that have resulted in massive amounts of runover nitrogen. Instead, however, of thinking of the planet as *humanized*, following post-humanists such as Grove, one should perceive in such phenomena the planet's material agency, the capacity of entities to respond to and co-shape human action unfolding within networks not of human making. If humanism commences by attributing agency *only* to humans, it would be of little use to ponder over the composition of actions and histories by many agents, most of which are non-human.

In short, with its planetary scope, the Anthropocene raises many questions pertaining to humanism and its ideals of humanity. First, it renews the impulse to think through the tension between human universality and particularity. Can one determine what is universally human, or does such an attempt necessarily overwrite cultural diversity of humans across the planet – perhaps even as "the imposition of Western beliefs on other peoples and cultures?"[27] *Orbital* raises this concern as well, as the astronauts aboard the space ship all have different cultural backgrounds from which they relate to the Earth – Japanese, Russian, American, British, and Italian – while they are all equally confronted with the single planet above which they float. Second, the Anthropocene urges one to rethink the relation between human unity and plurality; the unity of humanity in sharing a single Earth System is at odds with cultural/economic differences among humans in terms of responsibilities and vulnerabilities concerning the geophysical changes it envelops.[28] Finally, the Anthropocene also gives impetus to understanding how humanity is related to and distinguished from the material contexts in which it acts. By framing human history within geological history, the geophysical

[27] Schweiker, "Paul Ricoeur and Humanism," 23.

[28] "Humans are and will remain divided on the question of how to relate to what I have called the planet. But in the age of anthropogenic climate change, the planet has emerged as an inescapable or unavoidable matter of concern," Chakrabarty, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis University Press, 2023), 4.

Anthropocene perspective prioritizes the material impact of humanity in the Earth System, where it interlocks and enmeshes itself with other, non-human, physical forces, and feedback loops. Does the concept of 'humanity' give rise to the idea that humans are somehow set apart from the other forces at play in within the Earth system, as if it is a stage upon which humans can act? Or can the idea of 'humanity' still allow one to consider how human action is so thoroughly entwined with the actions of nonhuman agents that the stage is itself part of the play?

HUMANISM IN *TIME AND NARRATIVE*

In the short exposé of criticisms of humanism in the Anthropocene above, two points of view emerged. From the first 'globalist' view, what matters are questions of social justice. Is humanism in the Anthropocene able to deal with the plurality of *human* cultures and positions globally, given the inequalities in terms of damages and responsibility? The other view, however, aims to innovate a humanist ontology: does the concept of humanism obscure the planetary enmeshment of humans with nonhuman (material) forces?

What I want to show in this section is how Ricoeur's hermeneutics and its concept of humanity, particularly as it surfaces in *Time and Narrative 3,* responds to the first challenge, which relates more closely to the global sense of humanity as one-yet-plural. Instead of renouncing the idea of a single humanity, even before the Anthropocene debate began, Ricoeur's hermeneutics developed a theory of human universalism that includes the multiplicity of traditions and perspectives of humans across the globe, whilst also upholding an ideal of intercultural exchange that leaves the concept of the human open. Ricoeur's humanism balances plurality and unity, bridging differences across traditions and cultures, without, however, eradicating them in favour of some new figure of Universal Man.

In this section, I will explain how Ricoeur's critical appropriation of Kant's humanism leads him to a discursive, plural humanism, in which translation and hospitality play a key

role. However, what remains absent in this is a detailed reflection on the challenges of planetarity to humanism, that is, on the relation between cross-cultural humanism and the geophysical planet on which it unfolds.[29]

HISTORICIZING KANT'S HUMANISM

One of the pressing concerns of critics of humanism in the Anthropocene is the tendency of a single (Eurocentric) model of the human to subsume all others and to position humanity above all other beings. Often, critics such as Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro point to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant as a crucial stage in this historical development, as Kant would have conceptualized humanity as "constituent power, the autonomic and sovereign lawgiver of nature," thereby ascribing certain (Western) Enlightenment ideals to the essence of humanity that from the outset subsumes discussions of human universality under a particular, i.e., Eurocentric frame of understanding.[30] Given the amount of critique levelled at Kant, it seems that one should be critical of Ricoeur's humanism as viable for the Anthropocene, as he openly confesses that "like Kant, I hold that every expectation must be a hope for humanity as a whole, that humanity is not one species except insofar as it has one history,

[29] In a review of David Utsler's *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy*, Mick Smith observes that Ricoeur's hermeneutics "proves ecologically recalcitrant." By this he means that Ricoeur's hermeneutics and humanism relies on a human exceptionalist thesis, according to which "interpretation and understanding are deemed universal features of human, and only human, existence." In my response to these tendencies in Ricoeur's work, I will not attempt to extend the interpretative potential to other beings, such as nonhuman animals, although I do not want to claim that such extensions would be impossible. Following a critical analysis of humanism of Claire Colebrook, I will instead question whether the extension of the model of interpretation to other beings does not repeat problematic elements of humanism, and I will instead analyse how interpretation itself has both human and, if you will, inhuman sides to it – even in Ricoeur's work. Mick Smith, review of *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy* by David Utsler, *Environmental Philosophy* 22, no.1 (2025): 158-9.

[30] "[P]oder constituinte, legislador autonomo e soberano da natureza." Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Há Mundo por Vir? Ensaio-Sobre os Medos e os Fins* (Cultura e Barbarie & Instituto Socioambiental, 2015), 43; Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Polity, 2017), 28.

and [...] that for there to be such a history, humanity as a whole must be its subject as a collective singular."[31] Yet, to conflate Ricoeur's position with Kant's would be to miss Ricoeur's critical interventions in order to encroach on some form of humanism that would be acceptable in a globalized context and that safeguard his humanism from most of the anti-humanist criticism in the Anthropocene debates, while showing possible ways forward in discussions on what it means to be human on a single planet.

I take most of Ricoeur's reflections on human universalism from *Time and Narrative 3*, from the important chapter "Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness," where Ricoeur develops a conception of humanity in discussion with a hermeneutics of history.[32] History is considered to be an "open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation," a middle way between the multiplicity of perspectives, narratives, and traditions that operate within historical time with some form of unity that would justify still speaking of *one* historical time.[33] It is therefore by means of considerations of historical time that the universality of humanity emerges. This universality, however, is only reached through a critical dialogue with humanism as it developed in the philosophy of Kant. Ricoeur is mostly critical of Kant's assumptions of the a-historicity of Reason, of a static universalism, and of history as something to be *made* by humans.

To understand Ricoeur's modifications of Kantian humanism, then, it is first necessary to get a grasp of Kant's framework. Kant's humanism applies an *ideal* (rather than a timeless Idea of Reason) of humanity to the empirical reality of human history, to perceive such history as unified *and* as teleologically progressing toward human emancipation. As is well known, in his essay on Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*], Kant had already spoken of "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity," that is, as a process *worked through* by humans

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[31] Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3,* trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 215; "Comme Kant, je tiens que toute attente doit être un espoir pour l'humanité entière; que l'humanité n'est une espèce que dans la mesure où elle est une histoire; réciproquement que, pour qu'il y ait histoire, l'humanité entière doit en être le sujet au titre de singulier collectif." Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3: Le temps raconté* (Seuil, 1985), 312.

[32] Ibid., 207-41 [300-47].

[33] "[Une] médiation ouverte, inachevée, *imparfaite*." Ibid., 207 [300].

themselves to dare to use their *own* (autonomous) understanding: *"Sapere aude!"*[34] The essence of humans is to be free and rational, yet, to manifest these qualities, Kant's humanism asserts that humans need to create the right historical circumstances. In "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," Kant therefore uses the ideal of humanity as a rational being to read history *as if* it were progressing toward the manifestation of rationality.[35] Despite the horrendous suffering in history, the *a priori* idea of a rational, free humanity would allow one to read history as ultimately, slowly moving toward the conditions in which this concept could attain actualization, that is, for Kant, in a "civil society which can administer justice universally."[36]

This perspective on history is humanist not just because of its secular ideals, but also because Kant stresses that the progressive nature of history is not given, because the predispositions of humanity will be nothing but the fruits of its own labour and projects.

> [M]an was not meant to be guided by instinct or equipped and instructed by innate knowledge; on the contrary, he was meant to produce everything out of himself. […] It seems as if nature had intended that man, once he had finally worked his way up from the uttermost barbarism to the highest degree of skill, to inner perfection in his manner of thought and thence (as far as is possible on earth) to happiness, should be able to take for himself the entire credit for doing so and have only himself to thank for it.[37]

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[34] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. and ann. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 54; "*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit.*" Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? (1784)," in *Politische Schriften*, ed. Otto Heinrich von der Gablentz (Springer, 1965), 1.

[35] Immanuel Kant, "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (1784)," in *Politische Schriften*, ed. Otto Heinrich von der Gablentz (Springer, 196); Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. and ann. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

[36] "[Eine] allgemein das Recht verwaltenden bürgerlichen Gesellschaft." Ibid., 45 [14].

[37] "Er sollte nämlich nun nicht durch Instinkt geleitet, oder durch anerschaffene Kenntnis versorgt und unterrichtet sein; er sollte vielmehr alles aus sich selbst herausbringen. […] Der Mensch sollte, wenn er sich aus der größten Rohigkeit dereinst zur größten Geschicklichkeit, innerer Vollkommenheit der Denkungsart, und

While nature might have equipped humanity with the capacity to reason, the development of this faculty in the species passes through experiment and conflict, stumbling its way toward "the full development of [its] natural capacities."[38] In the introduction to the Cambridge edition of Kant's political writings, Hans Reiss therefore writes that

> [s]ince nature has endowed man with reason, and since the purpose of nature is to realise man's essence, nature has made man in order that he should become rational. […] Man as a rational being therefore needs to live in a historical process. History is a progress towards rationality […].[39]

Kant's humanism, therefore, is rooted in an a priori notion of humanity as *ideally* autonomous and self-conscious, which provides the hermeneutic tool to read history as having a direction, while it would be "our own rational projects" that could speed up the work to reach this terminal point and "accelerate the coming of this period which will be so welcome to our descendants."[40]

Before I will set apart Ricoeur's humanism from Kant's, one should observe that Ricoeur shares with Kant the hope that history may retain its universal horizon, that it may be more than what Kant called "an otherwise *planless aggregate* of human actions."[41] This is perhaps Ricoeur's most classical humanist and universalist commitment, and one that is to balance the risk of hermeneutics to collapse reality into a relativistic multitude of unrelated perspectives. In the Anthropocene, too, this demand for universality corresponds to the Anthropocene's planetary reach, affecting all humans, although in diverse ways.

(so viel es auf Erden möglich ist) dadurch zur Glückseligkeit empor gearbeitet haben würde, hievon das Verdienst ganz allein haben, und es sich selbst nur verdanken dürfen." Ibid., 43 [12].

[38] "[D]ie völlige Entwickelung der Naturanlagen in ihrem Fortgange." Ibid., 49 [19].

[39] Hans Reiss, "Introduction," in Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings,* ed. and ann. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1970), 36.

[40] "[W]ir könnten durch unsere eigene vernünftige Veranstaltung diesen für unsere Nachkommen so erfreulichen Zeitpunkt schneller herbeiführen," Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 50.

[41] "[E]in sonst planloses *Aggregat* menschlicher Handlungen." Ibid., 52 [22].

For Ricoeur, human universality connects to humanism insofar one may hope that human history can still be the locus of emancipation – and hence, of human flourishing. Emancipation, in Ricoeur's view, is inherently universal. It is only worthy of its name if it "holds for everyone and always," i.e., for all of humanity and not just for particular groups, nations, or peoples.[42] In the Anthropocene, when humanism is placed under such an aegis of emancipation, it could be defended that it proscribes a response to rather than a dissimulation of the inequalities and social injustices at play between human societies: a moral and political proscription that arises out of the willingness to look beyond the borders of one's community.

Through such a universalist commitment, then, one encounters a vision of a history as glimpsed in Harvey's *Orbital,* when the astronauts gaze upon the planet's unity wondering whether humans could not "stop tyrannizing and destroying and ransacking this thing one thing on which our lives depend" and find peace with each other.[43] Like the astronauts, Ricoeur commits himself to a concept of history as more than a contingent series of conflicts, one that at its very limits points to emancipation.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of history and humanity also take a clear distance from Kant, and Ricoeur's critical appropriation of Kant avoids the pitfalls of humanism in the Anthropocene discussed above. Ricoeur balances Kant's model that is so firmly rooted in a singular conception of humanity according to (Western) Enlightenment ideals with a more pluralistic understanding. Ricoeur acknowledges the criticism, already aired at the time of *Time and Narrative* by thinkers such as Adorno, that universal conceptions of humanity may end up justifying and encouraging Western oppression and violence of others. He stresses that the twentieth century saw "the beginning of the rule of instrumental reason, the power given to rationalizing hegemonies in the name of universalism, [and] the repression of differences in the name of [Reason's] Promethean claims."[44] If removed from empirical and historical conditions, which are always already plural, the idea of a single humanity and a single history may easily facilitate such terror in the name of a false universalism. Although

[42] "L'émancipation vaut pour tous et pour toujours." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 225 [327].

[43] Harvey, *Orbital,* 73.

[44] "[L]'essor de la raison instrumentale, l'élan donné aux hégémonies rationalisantes au nom de l'universalisme, la répression des différences liées à ces prétentions prométhéennes." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 212 [308].

Ricoeur does not explicitly mention colonialism, in that context, as well, colonizers could claim to operate in the name of 'civilized' universalism, so that it became the 'white man's burden' to educate the 'others.'

In contrast to any monological conception of humanity, the emancipatory ideal of humanity that undergirds Ricoeur's approach to history as universal is explicitly pluralistic in nature, containing from the very beginning difference and alterity, and the right to contest any *a priori* notion of what it means to be human. Against essentialist notions of humanity, Ricoeur argues that "in particular, the right to be different ceaselessly counterbalances the threats of oppression linked to the very idea of a universal history."[45] The right to be different should be understood here as a demand posed on any concept of universality, namely, that any concept of humanity is only universal if it corresponds to human plurality. Unlike Kant's model, which departs from a determined ideal of humanity as rational, free, and reflexive, Ricoeur argues that one cannot overwrite the plurality of traditions and cultures that his hermeneutic philosophy accepts as its points of departure. This is why Ricoeur goes as far as to reject the possibility of an *a priori* source of truth concerning history (and, in its wake, humanity), which according to him would relapse into a "radically monological truth."[46] Ricoeur rejects this monological, false universalism (as it also haunts certain analyses of the Anthropocene), because it will end up in grave injustices when it fails to recognize its others, that is, all other cultures, peoples, societies that proclaim their own discourses on humanity and history at odds with those developed in Europe.

Importantly, next to criticizing the ideal of humanity in Kant's humanism, Ricoeur also challenges an understanding of history as the project of the self-realization of humanity, which, to him, might end up thinking history solely in terms of control and mastery.[47] For Ricoeur, even if history is made by humans, its course is never to be determined or controlled by human agents. First, the hand that writes history necessarily ends up spilling ink in the terms of unintended by-effects which may mock the intentions its historical agents had. Second, as Marx also observed in his analysis of the eighteenth Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon, humans make history in conditions they did not make, that is, history always already affects

[45] "[D]es droits à la différence." Ibid., 215 [312].

[46] "[U]n principe de vérité radicalement monologique." Ibid., 226 [327].

[47] Ibid., 213 [308-9].

them before they can affect it.[48] Explicitly renouncing Kant's idea of history as a "task before us" or "an optative, even a future indicative," Ricoeur therefore thinks that history and the state of humanity cannot be analysed solely in terms of intentional human effort but should rather be seen as the struggle of humans *within* history to try to respond in imperfect ways to whatever is thrown at them.[49] Staying true to the hermeneutics of belonging, Ricoeur maintains here that it is not possible for humans to overcome their immersion in history, which means that history always also *precedes* any human reflection or action, that is suffered and endured as much as it is made.[50] "[C]onsciousness [is] exposed to the efficacity of history," Ricoeur writes, and this does away with dreams "of the sovereign consciousness, transparent to itself and the master of meaning," simply because history remains a force that is already at work, affecting humans in ways that they can never see through completely.[51] In short, history cannot be approached from an *a priori* idea that would allow a gradual mastery over its course by human subjects.[52]

In these ways, Ricoeur inherits but complicates a Kantian model of history and humanity, aiming for some form of universality that acknowledges a) the plurality inherent to humanity, b) its historicity, and c) the practical immersion of humans in history rather than

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[48] Marx famously wrote: "Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorhandenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen." Karl Marx, "Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte" in *Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe. Juli 1851 bis Dezember 1852,* ed. Martin Hundt et al., vol. 10 of *Karl Marx Gesamtausgabe,* ed. by Günter Heyden et al. (Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1985), 96; "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (International Publishers, 1963), 15.

[49] "[L]a disponibilité de l'histoire devient un optatif, voire un indicatif futur." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 212 [307].

[50] Cf., above, "'Belonging' as a Hermeneutic Concept," 111-124.

[51] "[L]a notion de conscience exposé à l'efficience de l'histoire […] offre une alternative valable à celle de conscience souveraine, transparente à elle-même, maîtresse du sens." Ibid., 219 [318].

[52] Here, Ricoeur anticipates Reinhart Koselleck's critique of modernity, to which I turn below. Like Ricoeur, Koselleck argued that, as Michael Boyden puts it, "in modernity […] it is humanity itself rather than some supernatural force that is conceived as the main catalyst of historical change." Michael Boyden, *Climate and the Picturesque in the American Tropics* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 175

their transcendence. As such, the kinds of criticisms levelled at 'universal Man' by critics of humanism in the Anthropocene do not cut to the core of Ricoeur's humanism, which begins by setting itself apart from any essentialist, established notion of what it means to be human, while also deconstructing the idea that history is a 'human' product furnished through instrumental or technological control. If history is suffered as much as it is made, Ricoeur's humanism does not allow for techno-utopian schemes of geo-engineering or of reducing the Anthropocene to a mere cybernetic problem of design – if there is something like a universal humanity with a universal history, it will not be that of a triumphant, merely rational Man that overcomes the conditions that hindered progress. If Ricoeur, however, also remains committed to some form of human universalism in history, it becomes necessary to now understand on what basis this universalism may be grounded, if not on some ahistorical conception of Man?

'PLURALISTIC UNITY' AND RICOEUR'S HUMANISM

While Ricoeur is critical of Kant, he does balance such critique with a nuanced form of humanism that retains the hope that humanity may be seen as a "pluralistic unity", i.e., a unity that consists of a multitude of perspectives that are not reducible to a larger master narrative that would encapsulate all other narratives, nor to some transcendent, ahistorical essence of humanity.[53] I will here discuss three lines of thought of Ricoeur, mostly taken from *Time and Narrative*, that explain how universality may be reached without abandoning the call for plurality and particularity, namely, the transcendental structures of historicity, the model of inter-traditional dialogue, and the possibilities for hospitality inherent in translation and narrative. On the basis of these, Ricoeur's humanism may be characterized as a discursive and narrative humanism, which avoids the issues of humanism in the Anthropocene of a) overlooking inequalities, b) a technocratic approach to humanity, and c) of assuming a God's-eye view.

My approach to develop Ricoeur's humanism based on *Time and Narrative* provides a new angle to his work, as other commentators have tended to focus on other texts. What my

[53] "[U]ne sorte d'unité plurielle." Ibid., 207 [300].

reading will add is an emphasis on the connections between humanism and Ricoeur's hermeneutics of history, which others did not pick up. For example, Farhang Erfani and John F. Whitmire, Jr. point directly to Ricoeur's comments on translation and language to develop a Ricoeurian answer to globalism and universalism.[54] As another example, William Schweiker discusses both an early paper by Ricoeur on humanism, which focuses more closely on the role of intellectuals in technological society, and his comments on the topic in *Oneself as Another*, without, however, addressing the connections between humanism and history.[55] This is why I turn to Ricoeur's chapter "Toward a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness" in *Time and Narrative,* where Ricoeur carefully works through a universalism based on the *form* of humanity's historicity, i.e., on those factors that render human existence *historical*.[56] When Ricoeur discusses the formal aspects of historicity, he does not claim that these provide a concept of humanity to which certain qualities could adhere, as they instead merely describe a shared condition that makes it possible to be historical in different ways. Ricoeur uses Reinhart Koselleck's framework of historicity to outline these universal, formal aspects of the human historical condition.

In *Futures Past,* Koselleck argues that historical time emerges from the interaction and changing relation between what he calls the "space of experience" [*Erfahrungsraum*] and the "horizon of expectation" [*Erwartungshorizont*].[57] The space of experience refers to all inherited possibilities of practical know-how and knowledge of which a particular culture makes use at a particular time.[58] It can contract or expand, depending on how the past is integrated

[54] Farhang Erfani and John F. Whitmire Junior, "A New Fragility: Ricoeur in the Age of Globalization," in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work,* ed. Farhan Erfani (Lexington, 2011).

[55] Schweiker, "Paul Ricoeur and Humanism."

[56] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 208-216 [301-313].

[57] On these two concepts in Koselleck's own work, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 349-376; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 267-289.

[58] Ricoeur points out that the German word *Erfahrung* is broader than what tends to be captured by 'experience' in French (or English). It does not just concern visual perceptions but also a sense of acquired skill, "a question of something foreign being overcome, of some acquisition that has become a *habitus*." In this sense, experience denotes how the remnants of the past remain in the present as living potentialities rather than as part of a dead archive. "[I]l s'agit toujours d'une étrangeté surmontée, d'un acquis devenu un *habitus,*" Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 208 [302].

into the present. Modernity, for example, is marked by a shrinking of the room of experience, because, for moderns, the past is often seen as something to be overcome through innovation and criticism, rather than as a heritage that should inform the present.[59]

Koselleck's other term to describe historical time is the horizon of expectation, which refers to all the expectations that a culture or community projects towards its future; it can be broad or narrow, far or close.[60] It includes all that is hoped for, wished for, all that is feared or desired, "in short, every private or public manifestation aimed at the future."[61] To take the example of modernity again, its expectations range far and wide, as it assumes that almost anything is possible for humans and their technological mastery over themselves.[62]

Historical time, for Koselleck, describes the dynamics between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations, that is, history emerges when a culture's living relation to its past negotiates with what it understands to be possible in the future. Historicity is therefore the lived presence of the past in the space afforded by accumulated and integrated experience, set out against the horizon of the present's openness toward the future, marked as much by rational expectations as by desires, fears, et cetera.[63] Over time, this relation can change, as Michael Boyden observes in his study of Koselleck in the light of the Anthropocene, because Koselleck argues that "metahistorical pregivens" function as "stabilizing factors in

[59] Ibid., 211 [305].

[60] Ibid., 208-9 [302].

[61] "[B]ref toutes les manifestations privées ou communes visant le futur." Ibid., 208 [302]

[62] Ibid., 211 [305].

[63] Boyden argues that this approach of historical time renders Koselleck's account valuable for Anthropocene studies, which have to balance giving credit to (geo)scientific, empirical study of the Earth system, and criticism of the ideological approach of the climate as a singular, global phenomenon in which these sciences are entangled. While Koselleck acknowledges that there is a prelinguistic reality, he also points out how "human history takes shape in shifting contexts of justification." For Boyden, this means that "how we approach the climate change debate thus depends on whether we write about it as an eyewitness of weather events, whether we belong to a dominant Western state with research infrastructure to model climate variations, and whether we represent a group or state directly threatened by the consequences of global warming." Boyden, *Climate and the Picturesque*, 178.

the production of histories," while, however, they themselves "might […] be subject to processes of spatio-temporal change."[64] However, the human conception of time remains historical as long as there is an interaction between the categories of experience and expectation.

In these two categories, Ricoeur perceives a universal structure of human historicity without having to give in to human essentialism. Koselleck's categories are universal because they can be applied to any historical period at any place of the globe, while one can remain agnostic about their content. "[B]ecause these categories are transcendentals […] they make possible a conceptual history of the variations in their content."[65] They merely describe, at a general level, the tension that any historical culture has to negotiate between experiences collected in its past and what it expects of the future. Unlike with Kant's notion of humanity, for example, one does not need to appeal to concepts such a rationality, autonomy, et cetera: Koselleck's framework is, in the first instance, merely a description of what constitutes historicity. It therefore constitutes a sort of formal universality tied to the human condition that keeps open the room for different, particular contents. This allows Ricoeur to defend claims such as that all humans are historical, but that they are so in diverse ways.

On this universal basis, Ricoeur develops a discursive and narrative humanism that unfolds from the human capacity to mediate the relation between experience and expectation. A first, important line of thought is developed in *Time and Narrative 3,* where Ricoeur appeals to the rootedness of humans in traditions as the locus where a certain tension between particularity and universality can play out.[66] Traditions may seem to be emblems of particularity rather than gateways to the universal. Is it not always *my* tradition from which I speak or engage with others? Yet, as Ricoeur insists elsewhere, one needs to go beyond such

[64] Ibid., 180.

[65] "[P]arce que ces catégories sont des transcendantaux […] elles rendent possible une histoire conceptuelle des variations de leur contenu." Ibid., 214 [310].

[66] Ricoeur distinguishes between "traditionality" [*traditionalité*], "traditions" [*les traditions*] and "tradition" [*la tradition*]. 'Traditionality' refers to the structures of human existence that allow it to inherit from the past, while 'traditions' refer to the concrete contents that are handed over. The last sense, 'tradition', is the one we discuss here, and it refers to the claim to truth staked out by each concrete tradition. Ibid., 227 [328].

"cliches and anathemas concerning tradition," and he turns his attention to communication *between* traditions to argue for the universality inherent in traditionality.[67]

An important part of this communication relies on and addresses any tradition's claim that its conception of the world is true. One does not just inherit ideas and works from the past, but also "beliefs, persuasions, convictions; that is, ways of 'holding for true'."[68] Again, at first glance, such claims to truth appear to inhibit communication, capturing interlocutors in "rigid, embalmed and dead traditions."[69] Would this not result in the impasse that you have your truth, and I have mine? Yet, adopting ideas from Habermas, Ricoeur ties the idea of an inheritance of ways of holding for true to the dialogical ideal at work in communication, directing traditions toward "a speech situation characterized by a consensus arising out of the very process of argumentation."[70] Without going into the details of Habermas' theory of ideal communication, it suffices to say that this means for Ricoeur that traditions do not fix, once and for all, what is to be held as true. His hermeneutic or discursive humanism discerns some room for universalism in those moments in history where traditions were able to communicate across their differences, providing "the experience of a type of reciprocity of intention

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[67] Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action,* ed. Richard Kearney (SAGE, 1996), 8; "[S]ortir des clichés et des anathèmes […] concernant [la tradition]." Paul Ricœur, "Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe?" in *Politique, économie et société: Écrits et conférences,* ed. Pierre-Olivier Monteil (Seuil, 2019), E-book.

[68] "Ce que nous recevons du passé, ce sont en effet des croyances, des persuasions, des convictions, c'est-à-dire des manières de 'tenir-pour-vrai'." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 223 [322].

[69] "[D]es traditions figées, embaumées, mortes." Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos," 8.

[70] "[U]ne situation de parole caractérisée par un consensus issu du procès même de l'argumentation." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 226 [327]; Ricoeur discusses Habermas' theory of communicative action with a reference to the book named after this theory. As is well-known, Habermas attempts to unearth the transcendental conditions of communication, arguing that each communicative act appeals to and presupposes a certain ideal of unfettered communication and dialogue, in which the strongest argument could prevail, a concept that he uses to develop a notion of deliberative democracy. For Ricoeur, the most essential element of this thought is the idea of a universalism that remains open-ended and that considers dialogue itself as the horizon for this universalism, although he counter-balances the a-historicity of Habermas with the historical rootedness of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Suhrkamp, 2011); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon, 1984).

and recognition of this intention."[71] From this point of view of a critical hermeneutics, the claims to truth of traditions should instead be seen as *presuming* a truth that remains up for debate. This presumption is always temporary, meaning that it is held true only "so long as a stronger reason, that is, a better argument, has not been established."[72] If traditions are interpreted as such, their particularity resides in their *specific* proposal of what is true, while their universality emerges from their openness to debate with other traditions, the capacity to communicate *across* difference, that is, to translate why certain matters appear to them as true. The convictions inherited within traditions are merely "anticipations of understanding" that attempt to bring to language insights that could, in principle, be communicated to those dwelling in other traditions as well.[73]

If seen as such, a tradition's claim to truth does not lock one within one's community but necessitates discussion with others, which projects a certain human universality that is simultaneously an ideal of human flourishing for Ricoeur. The universality of humanity thus projected is therefore not an a priori truth about humans but only becomes manifests once one places truth at the horizon of dialogues with other traditions, communities, and cultures. 'Humanity' as universal and unified emerges as a temporary, assumed, hoped-for, regulative idea, that, despite its virtual status, is strong enough to take traditions out of their particularity and have them enter discussion. As Ricoeur phrases it in an interview with Richard Kearney, for any claim to universal truth, "it's only discussion with the other which may finally convince the other that it's universal."[74]

A final important model for Ricoeur's humanism balancing a universal horizon of history while acknowledging the inevitability of particularity can be found in his reflections on translation, as Farhang Erfani and John F. Whitmire, Jr. underscore in their essay on Ricoeur's reply to globalism.[75] In translation, considered by Ricoeur as an act of hospitality, a particular kind of universality across difference is enacted, because translation sets what is foreign at

[71] "[L]*'expérience* d'une certaine réciprocité d'intention et de reconnaissance d'intention." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 226 [328].

[72] "[A]ussi longtemps qu'une raison plus forte, c'est-à-dire un argument meilleur, ne s'est pas fait valoir." Ibid., 227 [329].

[73] "[L]es anticipations de l'entente." Ibid., 227 [328].

[74] Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 150.

[75] Farhang and Whitmire, "A New Fragility."

work within one's own language or cultural repository, without, however, reducing or overcoming its alterity. Instead, one's own world turns out to be able to respond to an impulse that is not its own, that is, to extend itself beyond what was deemed possible before. This capacity, for Ricoeur, denotes a particularly humanist horizon. In an essay on the future of Europe, Ricoeur even remarks that "if there is only one human race, it is because transferences of meaning are possible from one language to another; in short, because we can translate."[76] Needless to say by now, this universality of the human race emerges not through the institution of a single language able to absorb all others but rather through the work of difference and the openness to difference of which each particular language is capable.[77] In practice, things are often more nettlesome, of course, and often the language of the powerful fails to consider itself on equal footings with the languages of the marginalized. Nevertheless, what Ricoeur points out is the potentiality at the heart of all languages to resist this closure in favour of openness.

Ricoeur addresses these particular capacities of translation as a form of hospitality, as it is "really a matter of living with the other in order to take that other to one's home as a guest."[78] There are two forms of such translative hospitality that Ricoeur discerns. The first is the "linguistic hospitality" of any act of translation, which denotes the capacity of one language to receive the heritage of another and to give its own words to what is foreign. Besides linguistic hospitality, Ricoeur also distinguishes a "narrative hospitality," one that involves the willingness of a community to listen to the stories others tell about it and to integrate these in its own narrative about itself.[79] This narrative hospitality often takes place in the context of an exchange of memories of suffering, where the self-congratulatory narratives of political communities are challenged by the witnesses of their shadow sides.[80] These other

[76] "S'il n'y a qu'une espèce humaine, c'est en particulier parce que des transferts de sens sont possibles d'une langue dans une autre, bref parce que l'on peut traduire." Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos," 4.

[77] See also footnote 31 above, on page 121, in which I cite Gadamer making a similar claim about language.

[78] "Il s'agit bien d'habiter chez l'autre, afin de le conduire chez soi à titre d'hôte invité." Ibid., 4.

[79] Ibid., 8.

[80] Ibid., 7.

narratives, Ricoeur argues, will mostly target the narratives of the 'founding events' of a community, which allow for the repetitive commemoration and repetition of a supposed origin of a community that are taken to be immutable and in an important sense incommunicable – to open up what has become rigid in these narratives is the greatest impulse the exchange of memories can provide.[81]

This narrative hospitality therefore offers a "plural reading" of the past, one that can be liberating and open new trajectories toward a more universal understanding among different cultures.[82] By revising its story of the past, a community returns to unkept promises that it may have even forgotten but that are very much alive for those still living through the consequences of this forgetfulness. Such promises signal different – more just – trajectories that history could have taken and that could still inspire the present community to rethink its conception of the future. This emancipatory ideal is central to Ricoeur's notion of narrative hospitality. He writes that "the liberation of this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives."[83] In the best case, this liberation paves the way for forgiveness and a changing of the past "not as a record of all that has happened but in terms of its meaning for us today."[84] The working-through of the colonial past, for example, by lending an ear to stories of those who were enslaved and the echoes of their pain in the lives of their descendants may hopefully inspire other ways of moving forward, not neglectful of the grave injustices hiding under the wings of alleged progress.

When Ricoeur reflects on linguistic and narrative hospitality, he therefore shows how a humanism is possible that emerges not from the certainty of a priori principles but rather from the acknowledgment of finitude and limits, a humanism that allows itself to be revised and that is humanist and universal in as far as it dares to open itself to this possibility. This

[81] Ibid., 7.

[82] Ibid. 7.

[83] "La délivrance de ce futur inaccompli du passé est le bénéfice majeur qu'on peut attendre du croisement des mémoires et de l'échange des récits." Ibid., 8.

[84] "Sa puissance [du pardon] 'poétique' consiste à briser la loi d'irréversibilité du temps, en changeant, sinon le passé en tant que recueil de tout ce qui est arrivé, du moins sa signification pour les hommes du présent." Ibid., 10.

possibility relies on the other factors I discussed earlier, namely, the possibility of communication across traditions and the historicity arising from a dialectics between past experiences and future expectations. Only by allowing one's presumptions of truth to be challenged can one renew one's expectations of the future, only by rereading the past through the narratives of others may one critically engage with the living heritage that forms the space of experience.

Ricoeur's discursive and narrative humanism, then, calls for is openness to difference, revision, and the possibility that understanding others may radically impact what one understands by the word 'human.' In terms of the novel *Orbital* that has accompanied my reflections, Ricoeur's model would be close to the global image of humanity, which arises out of the desire for some form of unification among humans on this single planet, but without the God's-eye perspective that the astronauts adopt. The cultural embeddedness of Ricoeur's universalism avoids any short-cut by resorting to a supposedly 'neutral' technological means of achieving this unity, and while he would resist the possibility of any human to transcend to the perspective of a God. That caveat makes Ricoeur's humanism able to withstand the criticisms levelled at the *anthrōpos* in debates on the Anthropocene because it reaches its levels of universality only when reflection passes through the stories and calls to justice of other cultures and communities. This requires a continuous process of revision and attending to others, and one can therefore never claim to occupy the space reserved for humanity in its universality. It is therefore also a *futural* model of humanity, a humanism that conceives of humanity as always to come, while this future is never a matter of mere technological prowess as it involves history as it is suffered as much as it is acted upon. To be humanist in this sense in the Anthropocene would mean to keep one's interpretations of the Anthropocene condition open, to actively seek out the plurality of perspectives and understandings of what it means to dwell on a planet, to not give the final word to a techno-scientific, monological truth that assumes to overcome all these tensions and differences.

Nevertheless, while it remains useful for globalist perspectives on humanity, it should also be noted that Ricoeur's model does not incorporate reflections on humanity's enmeshment with the planet as a material entity, composed of both anthropogenic *and* non-anthropogenic forces. How could the universality of human communication meet that other univer-

sality of humans being a physical part of the same planetary system? The planetary perspective puts pressure on the open-endedness of Ricoeur's theory, with its endless horizon of time for humans to engage in their discussions, histories, and translations, given that he thinks 'humanity' as something to come rather than as a fact to be established. As I argued in the previous chapter, planetarity envelops the potential of human extinction, its time therefore effaces the ever-receding horizon of universal humanity.[85] To what degree is Ricoeur's work able to not just respond to questions about globalism and universalism, but also about material planetarity and human universalism?

PLANETARY INHUMANISM

What could it mean to think *materially* about or beyond humanity in the Anthropocene, that is, to somehow relate aspirations toward a universal sense of humanity to its legacy that will be retained in the Earth's lithosphere, where the consequences of human actions are registered as a dramatic loss in biodiversity, sudden increase in greenhouse gases, an explosion in the amount of new minerals created through synthetic processes, and so forth? To answer this question is to provide one's understanding of what constitutes 'the material' realm, or,

[85] In *The Inhuman,* Jean-François Lyotard had one of his characters in a philosophical dialogue cynically remark upon philosophy's insistence on open-endedness and a perennial desire to keep questions open. In a universe marked by impermanence, this insistence on infinite horizons appears to have become questionable, especially if one no longer holds onto any transcendent or timeless realm of Forms. "For you [philosophers] solutions are just illusions, failures to maintain the integrity due to being — or some such thing. Long live patience. […] While we talk, the sun is getting old. It will explode in 4.5 billion years. […] With the sun's death your insoluble questions will be done with too. It's possible they'll stay unanswered right up to the end, flawlessly formulated, though now both grounds for raising such questions as well as the place to do this will no longer exist." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time,* trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Polity, 1991), 8-9; "Une solution est pour vous une illusion, un manquement à la probité due à l'être, je ne sais quoi. Longue vie à votre patience. […] En attendant, le soleil vieillit. Il explosera dans 4,5 milliards d'années. […] Avec sa fin, c'en sera fini aussi de vos questions insolubles. Elles seront peut-être restées sans réponse jusqu'au bout, impeccablement bien traitées, mais elles n'auront plus lieu d'être posées, et plus de lieu pour l'être." Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Galilée, 1988), 17-8.

more precisely, what 'matter' is – that enigmatic something that Schelling once called "the darkest of all things."[86] Two options seem open considering the present question.

One option would be to consider matter through an extension of the humanist framework as itself imbued with properties traditionally only prescribed to humans, for example by arguing that the geophysical planet itself is already capable of narrative – and hence, capable of being included in Ricoeur's notion of narrative hospitality, traditionality, and historicity in some sense. This what David Utsler argues in his *Ricoeur and Environmental Hermeneutics,* when he claims that the environmental crisis incites one to interpret "earth-nature as another and oneself as earth-nature," which gives rise to "a sense of intersubjectivity with other-than-human nature."[87] Building on this claim, hermeneutics would then be charged with the task to respond to the Anthropocene by listening to the 'stories' that the planet 'tells'—even if these are not articulated in 'human' language, ranging from other animals to rocks and landscapes, and to allow these different perspectives to extend and modify one's understanding of what it means to be human on a planet that would have always contained more-than-human histories.[88] Such extensionist models risk, however, submitting to what is sometimes called *hyperhumanism,* that is, a form of humanism in which properties deemed essential to humans are extended to other forms of being – the assumption being that only those beings are worthy of moral, historical, or political consideration that are *like humans*, which means that a certain anthropocentric standard would be maintained.[89]

Another option is to argue that the significant extension of human action into the material planetary realm challenges the foundations of humanism. Instead of extending or modifying it, to think materially would be to rethink drastically what it even means to be human.

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[86] "Das Dunkelste aller Dinge, ja das Dunkel selbst nach einigen, ist die Materie," Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Von der Weltseele: Eine Hypothese der höhern Physik zur Erklärung des allgemeinen Organismus* (Holzinger, 2016), 14, my translation.

[87] Utsler, *Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy*, 31.

[88] This is argued for by 'material ecocritics' who maintain that the nonhuman environment itself displays such qualities as narrativity and agency. See, for example, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity," *Ecozon@* 3, no. 1 (2012): 75-91.

[89] Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook, "Preface: Postscript on the Posthuman," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman,* ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (Columbia University Press, 2017), xviii.

Such a challenge is found in the work of Claire Colebrook.[90] Colebrook is known as editor and contributor to the *Critical Climate Change* series at Open Humanities Press, which she founded together with Tom Cohen, and which has become a major reference in the field for its daring emphasis on the contingency and finitude of human agency in the ecological crisis.[91] Colebrook's 2014 book *Death of the PostHuman* appeared at a critical moment in academic debate on the literary and philosophical implications of the Anthropocene concept, as she challenged prevailing assumptions that humanity could simply 'return' to some more harmonious comportment toward other beings and nature, even if this would entail going beyond humanism.[92]

Here, I will present some of its main ideas to provoke Ricoeur's hermeneutics to turn toward the planet. My aim is not to follow Colebrook blindly but to bring her position into dialogue with hermeneutics, in order to deepen Ricoeur's conception of humanism in light

[90] In literary scholar Peter Boxall's words, Colebrook's inhumanist thought intends to criticize "the late-century fantasy of a frictionless specularity, in which humans or posthumans create and recreate their environments at will." That is, Colebrook also resists the enthusiasm of posthumanists that assume that humanity can endlessly reinvent itself - be this in discourse or through technological interventions. Posthumanism in this form still presupposes that humanity can be saved and is even worthing saving, still retains the ideal of humanity as a self-producing, self-interpreting entity. For Colebrook, the challenge is to 'return' to the inorganic potentials from which humanity emerged, that is, to abandon humanity in favour of a truly entangled thought, where the mindless and senseless take the place of consciousness and meaning. Peter Boxall, *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 12.

[91] Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook, "Critical Climate Change" (Open Humanities Press), accessed March 10, 2024, http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/series/critical-climate-change/

[92] Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Open Humanities Press & Michigan Publishing, 2014); Colebrook's target is mainly posthumanism, which opposes the 'Man' of humanity by rethinking humans in terms of relationality, embeddedness, complexity, entanglement, or technology. Colebrook distinguishes several senses of posthumanism, which, however, share certain characteristics. First, there is the posthumanism of thinkers such as Nick Bostrom that is sometimes also called transhumanism, which emerges as a call for "cognitive, moral, lifespan, or emotional enhancement" of humans. Second, posthumanism may also refer to humanity's technological (and ecological) extension toward and entanglement with other beings, as exemplified by thinkers as Donna Haraway or Bruno Latour. Finally, there is the posthumanism that challenges humanity's supposed exceptional worth, which is associated with ecophilosophical discourse that has argued against anthropocentrism. Weinstein and Colebrook, "Preface," xix.

of the Anthropocene. In this section, I will first discuss Colebrook's discontent with humanism and then her own 'inhuman' alternative.

COLEBROOK'S CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM

The mission statement of the *Critical Life Studies* book series, of which Colebrook is an editor, states that

> despite attempts to move quickly through humanism [...] to more adequate theoretical concepts, such haste has impeded the analysis of how the humanist concept of life is preconfigured or immanent to the supposedly new conceptual leap.[93]

Materializing humanity, Colebrook argues, involves taking seriously the hypothesis that the planetary crisis is not the result of humanity *failing* to be properly human, but that humanity is from its beginning a destructive force that arises out of mutations and disturbances of non-human and inorganic, planetary forces. Humanity would be a concept that built on a kernel of violence that any promise of the arrival of a 'true' humanity in some distant future can only dissimulate but not confront.[94] To have a future as humans would therefore not be to stick with humanism that continues to obscure its violent origins but, instead, in some sort of Nietzschean turn to a prior will to power, to *inhumanize* humanity. For Colebrook this means to open other modes of being human by engaging with the inorganic forces that would have composed humans and that would still harbour other potentialities beyond the figure of a self-reflexive, futural, 'true' humanity.[95]

Given its polemical agenda, it is not surprising that Colebrook's work has met with resistance. *Death of the PostHuman* is often discussed as a landmark in the debate, yet its tone

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[93] Jami Weinstein, Claire Colebrook, and Myra J. Hird, "Critical Life Studies," in *Posthumous Life. Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman* (Columbia University Press, 2017), edited by Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook, i.

[94] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman,* 141-2.

[95] Colebrook speaks, for example, of the "pulsation of differences in a time other than that of self-defining humanity" which would precede any established concept of humanity, including those arrived at through hermeneutic mediations. Ibid., 142.

is often denounced as too pessimistic and gloomy. Timothy Clark, for example, calls Colebrook's philosophy "explicitly nihilistic," and Adeline Johns-Putra thinks that it presents a daunting account of "the contingency of human agency."[96] Stacy Alaimo, however, argues that Colebrook's "extensive, bold, and often disconcerting work on the concepts of extinction and the anthopocene [sic] make her the preeminent philosopher of these emerging fields of thought."[97] Still, while her name is often invoked, it is rare to find a sustained analysis of her philosophical commitments and arguments that lead not just to a deconstruction of humanity but also point forward to other futures for humanity. What does she claim about humanism?

Humanism, in Colebrook's analysis, should be taken as a broad term that captures a cluster of characteristics, namely, a commitment to human exceptionalism, a central focus on human agency and its capacity to give shape to human life, and an understanding of history as progressively leading to the manifestation of the true form of the human. Colebrook's surprising claim is that many posthumanists, who are generally critical of humanism, have inherited some of these problematic elements of humanism. For example, she argues that a humanist conception of humanity holds, first, that the human is an exceptional creature, set apart from the rest of being, on the basis of some properties that other beings would not possess. In classical humanism, it was argued that humans are exceptional because they can reason, but even contemporary posthumanism would be committed to human exceptionality. Posthumanism tends to locate humanity's special ontological status in its own lack of essential qualities that allow it "to be in command of his own open, self-creative, and purely potential being."[98]

A second characteristic Colebrook ascribes to humanism is a belief in humanity's radical futurity, meaning that humans are those beings which relate to what they will or can be. This futurity, according to Colebrook, is adopted too by many alleged post-humanists as a promise of the arrival of a *proper* mode of being human once a certain shift in perspective

[96]Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 151; Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 30.

[97] Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Pleasures and Politics in Posthuman Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 227n5.

[98] Weinstein and Colebrook, "Preface," xvi.

has taken place. Because posthumanists think of humans as lacking in essential qualities, Colebrook maintains that they position the human being as a virtual entity, as "nothing more than self-creating potentiality."[99] One could here think, of course, of existentialism and its approach of human existence in terms of the notion of the project, but, in a different vein, also of certain trans-humanist ideas of limitless technological enhancement of humans. In these cases, being-human is not merely to lack something, it is also to become the activity that gives shape to and supplements what is missing.

An example Colebrook gives of this implicit resurfacing of humanism is the work of philosophers like Bernard Stiegler, who have argued that technological artefacts – such as cave painting, but later also other mnemotechnics such as (digital) archives – made possible a particular human existence, as those beings who relate to (their) being.[100] While for Colebrook this would mean that the human species is artificial through and through, i.e., that there is no 'natural' way of being human that could provide criteria of what human life should look like, Stiegler would also, still, argue that there *is* a *proper* way of *using* technology in order to become human. Namely, a relation to technology is encouraged that allows humans to constitute and individualize themselves, to, in Colebrook's paraphrase, "be artists of [them]selves."[101] For Colebrook, this is a humanist norm that clashes with the claim that all human life is already artificial. If human life is artificial, this means that there is no 'natural' or 'right' way for humans to be human, and it becomes impossible to determine the criteria for the truest expression of human life itself would be. According to Colebrook, what keeps returning, therefore, in such attempts to overcome the humanist human is the humanist conception of humans as (ideally) self-interpreting, self-creating beings, one that is conjoined

[99] Ibid., xvii.

[100] Claire Colebrook, "All Life is Artificial Life," *Textual Practice* 33, no.1 (2019): 6; Colebrook's point of reference for her discussion with Stiegler is mostly his seminal *Technics and Time*, which argued for the importance and constitutive role of *tertiary retention*, i.e., the externalization of memory through mnemotechnics, in the constitution of the human's relation to being and itself. Colebrook's discussion of Stiegler is brief, but it illustrates well her critique of contemporary posthumanism and continental philosophy. Bernard Stiegler, *La technique et le temps 1: La faute d'Épiméthée* (Galilée, 1994); Bernard Stiegler*, Technics and Time 1*: *The Fault of Epimetheus,* trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Standford University Press, 1998).

[101] Ibid., 8.

with the assumption that one may arrive at "a proper mode of self-regulation."[102] As with Kant's humanism, a certain ideal form of humanity is therefore still posited, one that retains the Enlightenment's commitment to humanity's capacity to give shape to itself, even if the contents of the ideal have shifted over the centuries.

Finally, Colebrook also asserts that humanism tends to reply to its critics in a way that only strengthens attachments to itself. While the worthiness of humanity may be challenged, for example because of its role in causing the disastrous anthropogenic planetary crisis, such challenges only allow humanism's humanity to redeem itself in the promise of a better, more human future, one that would more properly be *its* future. In contemporary post-apocalyptic literature and cinema, Colebrook observes that a particular, Western part of humanity generates images of itself and the disastrous consequences of its actions for other life forms and vulnerable humans.[103] However, such productions often involve a redemption arc in which humanity can 'finally' return to its universal form, which tends to be figured as an ecologically minded or socially just 'proper' mode of being human.

In James Cameron's *Avatar*, a favourite example of Colebrook's, the West is pictured both as a violent, colonizing force wreaking wreckage on the eco-utopic planet of Pandora, but also as the only power able of saving indigenous communities under threat: it is ultimately a Western soldier that is able to rescue Pandora from his own troops, which means that the film simultaneously chides and heralds the West as problem *and* solution.[104] "It turns out that even the end of the world is not the end of the world," Colebrook writes elsewhere about these dynamics, "it is, instead, an occasion for heroism, humanism, and justification of all we happen to have been for the sake of a future that is truly *ours.*"[105] The point for Colebrook is that the West and its conception of humanity thus moves beyond itself not to destroy itself, or to create room for other ways of being human, but to reinvest its commitments in itself as a promise of a redeemed and better future, that is still seen as *its* proper future.

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[102] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman,* 57.

[103] "Faced with the end of the world, while recognizing that it is *we* who are part of a world destined to end, all we can do is hold on to who we are." Claire Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 9.

[104] *Avatar,* directed by James Cameron (20th Century Fox, 2009); "These threatened other worlds nevertheless seem to exist to save, and be saved by, *us*." Colebrook, *Who would You Kill?,* 9.

[105] Ibid., 4.

Whenever (Western) humanity faces the horrors that have been able to unfold under its banner, the rejection of these actions only results in a call for more or better humanism. In David Chandler's paraphrase of Colebrook, "'never again' is always therefore just the prelude to the next hubristic assertions of human-centred solutions, leading to the next claims of 'never again' in an ever repeating cycle of imaginaries of human mastery."[106] 'Humanity' may be destroyed but only in the name of a more humane future in which humanity emerges anew.

All the above leads to Colebrook's ultimate concern with humanism, namely, that it is a kind of interpretative machine that reaffirms itself despite and in neglect of its material conditions and consequences. In reply to the wreckage created in the name of 'humanity,' humanism still continually promises to move beyond itself to finally become itself. This continuous promise of a better future avoids the hypothesis that the very structures of humanism might not harbour the solution of the Anthropocene problems but form its root cause. Could it be that the planetary crisis is not some accidental problem for humanism but that it is directly enabled by life-denying forces operating within it, forces that only become visible if the continuous self-redemption of humanism is called to a halt?

It is clear that Ricoeur's humanism, which I discussed above, has not yet entertained the material, geophysical basis of 'humanity,' nor its connection to disruption and destruction, while Ricoeur does appear to subscribe to humanism's futurity: the open-ended nature of the concept of the human in his hermeneutics allows him to always see the human as something to come, while each interrupted dialogue between cultures would be read as hinting at a future dialogue to come. From Colebrook's perspective, what is particularly troubling about Ricoeur's discursive humanism is that it falls prey to the dissimulative elements inherent in humanism. While it steers away from any essentialist notion of what constitutes 'humanity,' Ricoeur's humanism does remain tied to a figure of humans as interpretative beings, while he also ties interpretation to a universal, futural horizon hinting at understanding to come.

[106] David Chandler, *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing, and Hacking* (Routledge, 2018), 200.

From Colebrook's perspective, this is problematic. To begin, Ricoeur's focus on discourse and exchange of narratives may steer away from the material conditions and consequences of interpretation, i.e., the way in which discourse arises from and inscribes itself into the planetary. Further, the idea of human as (self-)interpreting beings makes it exceedingly difficult to consider alternate conceptions of what it means to be human. As Colebrook writes somewhere, "*adding* other stories or perspectives, or aiming for maximal inclusion will only reinforce the sense of 'Man' as an already universal being."[107] That is to say, the openness to the 'otherness' of other traditions from the perspective of Ricoeur's humanism is mediated by the idea of an assumed sameness, namely, that all humans are always already interpretative beings capable of reflexion through interaction with others. Yet, Colebrook criticizes this hermeneutic subjectivity, which is always situated within a 'world' of meaning, rendered in "terms of future-orientedness, horizons of sense, comprehension, and possibility," and that would "preclud[e] us from thinking beyond a highly normative conception of the human."[108] Following Colebrook's logic, to overcome humanism one must be willing to think of human life as inhuman, as something that *lacks* a future, that is *irreflexive* and *destructive* of its environment.

[107] Claire Colebrook, "After Narrative: A Response to Birgit M. Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele," *Parallax* 23, no. 4 (2017): 419. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1374511.

[108] Claire Colebrook, "Images without Worlds" in *Fragmentation of the Photographic Image in the Digital Age,* ed. Daniel Rubinstein (Routledge, 2020), 13.

THE INHUMAN HYPOTHESIS

Colebrook's criticisms of humanism are shared by others, but unique is her focus on *human extinction.*[109] "If […] we entertained the erasure of the human […] then there might be a future," Colebrook boldly proclaims.[110] With this philosophy of extinction, Colebrook argues that the *idea* of humanity dissimulates both its material foundations and its constitutive violence, and that, hence, an *extinction* of humanity understood in a humanist sense could open doors for thought that would otherwise remain closed. Only an 'extinction' of the continuously promised future of humanity can open pathways to consider other ways of being human that explore what is possible once the repetitive nature of humanism is called to a halt. This call to extinction therefore relies on what I will call Colebrook's *inhuman hypothesis*, according to which humanism is the result of prior, inorganic, destructive forces that enable humanism to operate whilst remaining out of view for humanist self-understandings.

I call this a *hypothesis* because Colebrook tends to gesture in its direction only tentatively, using rhetorical questions and 'what if'-statements, instead of presenting a fully-fledged theory.[111] While Colebrook presents inhumanity in tentative terms and as a specula-

[109] See, for example, the following quote in an article by Bruce Erickson, which relates humanism to a continuation into the future of a colonial system, stressing how humanism would reaffirm itself considering the problems it causes. Like Colebrook, this targets the allegedly repetitive nature of humanism in face of challenges that could also call for a revision of its foundations. "[I]n its attempt to place environmental collapse and change as the defining problem of all of humanity in the future to come, the Anthropocene discourse legitimizes the continual colonial assertions of jurisdiction through conservation." Bruce Erickson, "Anthropocene Futures: Linking Colonialism and Environmentalism in an Age of Crisis," *EPD: Society and Space* 38, no.1 (2020): 112.

[110] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman,* 58.

[111] In *Death of the PostHuman*, almost all chapters proceed by focusing on a particular topic within contemporary theory related to the Anthropocene to then argue that current approaches repeat rather than break away from humanism, while most conclude with the suggestion of confronting recurring assumptions about the value of human life, sustainability, humanism, cosmopolitanism, et cetera. For example, the introduction closes with the rhetorical question "what happens if one thinks the vision of no one, of the human world without humans that is still there *to be seen*?" Instead of answering this question, however, Colebrook remains in a speculative mode, suggesting what "might" happen if one were to accept the premises of such questions. In short, her 'inhuman' alternative to posthumanism remains gestured at but is not developed in a coherent manner. In my text, I have done my best to scramble together her several suggestions and propositions

tive concept, adopting it opens a new critical angle on hermeneutics in a planetary age, precisely because it challenges the idea that interpretation *itself* can be conceptualized *without* considering the 'pollution' or the 'disturbances' that render it possible. As Ricoeur might say, this makes Colebrook a true master of suspicion, who, like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud challenges the transparency of consciousness to itself, arguing that its encryptions render it unable to see itself as it is.[112]

Colebrook often appeals to Deleuze and Guattari in developing this inhuman hypothesis, as they too prioritize relations, differences, becoming, and intensities over any fixed being in terms of settled identities or reflexive consciousness.[113] As is well-known, Deleuze chides Western thinking for conjuring up an "image of thought," which emerges from the belief that humans can view the world as something that is at a remove of them, and which can therefore be represented through various media, ranging from art to philosophy to literature.[114] While this image of thought leads to the idea that humans may 'capture' some reality that remains external to them, Deleuze argues that humanity is always already entangled in

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into a coherent framework, which I believe Colebrook has in mind in formulating her criticisms on posthumanism. Ibid., 28.

[112] I will return to the hypothesis of the 'masters of suspicion' below, as it also forms a part of a possible Ricoeurian rebuttal of Colebrook's position. For Ricoeur, the masters of suspicion may have challenged the transparency of consciousness to itself, but they have always placed over and against the idea of an immediate transparency that of a mediated, interpretative understanding of the self, one which would disclose new horizons of possibility for humans. I will argue below that Colebrook remains more on the fence about the possibilities of interpretation, as she both calls for radically new interpretations of what it means to be human *yet* also raises doubt about the very act of interpretation in general. For Ricoeur's comments on the masters of suspicion, see: Paul Ricœur, "La psychanalyse et le mouvement de la culture contemporaine," in *Le conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (Seuil, 1967), 148-51; Paul Ricoeur, "Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture," trans. Willis Domingo, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics, 1,* ed. Don Idhe (Athlone, 1989), 148-150.

[113] Given the focus of this chapter, I cannot go into further detail about the work of these prominent post-structuralists, nor about the limits and merits of Colebrook's interpretation of their work, and I will have to make do with a few sketches and outlines that direct us towards Colebrook's central take-away from their work: ecological thinking requires a thinking that returns from the formed to the unformed powers that would make all thought possible.

[114] "L'image de la pensée." Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 169-218; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* trans. Paul Patton (Bloomsbury, 1994), 171-223.

reality and that thinking itself is in some form an expression of (rather than taking-a-distance-to) reality. Thinking and representation never exceed the networks that compose reality, and abstraction is therefore itself always the result of concrete interactions among factors within the compositions of reality.

Colebrook once uses the term "chaosmos" to speak of this prior reality of forces and becomings, existing prior to abstraction, which is a useful concept to understand her inhumanism.[115] Concretely, her philosophy of the chaosmos argues that "relatively stable terms or beings" emerge from the "forces of chaos," whether these terms and beings are physical objects such as tables or chairs, or 'immaterial' entities such as ideas and concepts.[116] In this Deleuzian, post-structuralist picture, everything exists as the result of becoming, as a modification of relations between prior factors that give rise to it.[117] The same therefore goes for abstract concepts such as 'humanity,' which, too, emerge from changing relations between nonhuman factors, and they therefore become a kind of 'by-product' of other changes in other forces. As a by-product, humanity is not *originally* or *properly* a process of self-interpretation, as (post)humanism has it according to Colebrook, but rather the result of a schism, a rift, or disturbance of qualities and relations that precede it. In the beginning one would therefore not find the capacity to speak, interpret, et cetera, as a Ricoeurian hermeneutics has it, but a kind of "defilement" of an array of relations that are not 'human' to begin with.[118] Conceptualized as such, the origin of humanism, its 'properness', would not be a future state in which it would fully express itself and thereby overcome many of the ecological or intercultural problems of today, but instead, what is proper about humanity is its improperness, its polluting of an origin that is not human. Disruption would *be* its origin.

[115] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, 226.

[116] Ibid., 109.

[117] Ibid., 111–2.

[118] Ibid., 180.

This disruption, however, would not be a fact of the past from which humanism has moved on. It would resurface continuously, Colebrook maintains, in the life-denying or thanatological sides to human life as it unfolds in the Anthropocene.[119] Because *humanism* conceives of every emerging obstacle or sign of violence as a chance to finally leap toward its promised form – the ideal of humanity at the end of history – Colebrook argues that it is ultimately unable to come to terms with the constitutive violence that would accompany the emergence of the figure of the human. Humanism would therefore be fundamentally *unsustainable*, as it intensifies its disruptions by proposing itself again and again as the answer, and it would not be able to think of any future for humans other than a return to self-interpretation and self-creation, that is, forms of humanity that are in denial of the aimless, futureless mutations of the chaosmos.

These theses of Colebrook's become more concrete in her suggestion that it might be productive to conceive of human life in a viral rather than an organic manner. Although Colebrook only develops these ideas in some broad gestures, allow me to trace what kind of 'inhumanist' picture emerges from them.[120] In a series of articles and essays, Colebrook poses the thesis that the (post)humanist conception of humanity as a self-creating entity is closely aligned to theories of organic life, which hold that life is the search for some equilibrium between internal processes of an organism and the external world on which it relies.[121] With a

[119] "To be a body is to be a consuming body, to be in a relation of destructive consumption with what is effected as other, as resource, through consumption. Climate change would be the condition of human organicism in general: for there would be no climate, only *clinamen,* an inclination, deviancy or parasitism that creates a supplemental body (of man) who would then retroactively imagine that he has an environment, a *klima,* for which he ought to have been more mindful." Ibid., 178.

[120] Developing this thesis, Colebrook refers both to the works of Gilles Deleuze already cited and to Michel Serres's analysis of parasitism, which radically challenged philosophy's (and Western thought's) dependency on models of organicism and balance, as well as on originality and authenticity. As will become clear, parasitic or viral models do not depart from systems have an original state of equilibrium but, instead, locate generative moments in splits, mutations, disjunctions, et cetera. Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Bernard Grasset, 1980); Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Shehr (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[121] See, for example, the chapter "Time and Autopoiesis: The Organism has No Future," in *Death of the PostHuman*, where Colebrook argues that "to be a self has […] always been intertwined with what it means to be a body, and both these terms – self and body – have, in turn, been defined through a capacity of trauma, where trauma is imagined as the rupture of a border." Colebrook claims that in Western thought, even in later

reference to Freud's psychoanalytic adaptation of theories of life in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Colebrook argues that the organism requires a border or membrane to open to the external world on which it depends, while it also needs to filter the input from the external world in order not to be destroyed by it.[122] As such, an organism's outside "is always an outside *for* this bounded body, […] managed so as to produce only the alteration or perturbation required for ongoing self-maintenance."[123] Organic life is opened to the outside only in as far as this outside can be taken up into a further process of self-production – if it were to open itself too radically, it would be overwhelmed by external forces, as happens in trauma. According to Colebrook, such theories of life return analogously in humanism, which holds that challenges to humanity are only there for humanity to overcome and integrate within a more proper, balanced future – one that is, for example, more sustainable – just like the organism filters and incorporates its outside in order to strengthen itself.

In contrast to this organic form of life, inhumanity as an alternative for humanism points to a conception of humanity resembling a virus, rather than some possibly organic unity. Colebrook explicitly states that "it would be worthwhile to consider a theory that might entertain a thought of viral of malevolent life," that breaks with the self-repetitive nature of

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developments in posthumanism, the human body has been defined in terms of a bounded system with borders that always run the risk of being ruptured, while organisms tend to interpret the environment in ways that help to sustain and continue their life within these boundaries. Against this thesis of the importance of 'bounded life', Colebrook presents the thesis there that there is, instead, always a "self-destroying or suicidal trajectory immanent in life. […] A species can only survive by mutation and by *not* being itself; any species also […] takes a toll on its milieu that might lead (as in the case of man) to the destruction of life in general. How could one define this dissolution as tragic or traumatic or, more simply, undesirable if one were not to assume already the primacy of bounded self-maintaining life?" (128-9) In short, over and against the organic model, Colebrook positions the idea of a "post-traumatic" (129) life that does not operate by means of membranes and equilibria with the environment. Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, 124-5, 128-9.

[122] Freud argues that the development of life requires a 'membrane' for the organism to shield it from influx of energies in its environment that would destroy it. This means, he argues, that the organism sacrifices a part of its living tissue to become inorganic (to some degree) to function as a membrane, i.e., that there is a death that becomes the condition of life. Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustzprinzips,* ed. Lothar Bayer and Hans-Martin Lohrmann (Reklam, 2013), 32-3; Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (Liveright Publishing, 1961), 21-22.

[123] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman,* 126.

organisms and, allegedly, of humanism too.[124] As said, in Colebrook's Deleuzian interpretation, humanity arises from mutations of prior networks of nonhuman forces in the chaosmos, which is already an explanation of anthropogenesis closer to viral models. Unlike an organism, a virus "does not maintain itself, and is not a living system precisely because it *is* only in its parasitic capacity to open life forms to variations that would not be definitive of an autopoetic relation."[125] A virus does not have a metabolism of its own, but it enters the cells of other organisms, hijacking their metabolism to generate copies of itself, which may spread to other parts of the organism or to other organisms where they continue to mutate and spread. Unlike organisms, therefore, viral 'life' is not aimed at some equilibrium of its metabolism with the outside world – it does not have a metabolism of its own – nor does it establish a membrane between itself and its environment, and it does not interact with an environment that it interprets to produce itself. It operates blindly, as it were, by mutating and spreading itself without building a higher or more complex life form out of itself that, like all organic life, would have to find some balance between its inside and outside.

If one were to consider human life as a viral modal of life, one would confront humanism's attachment to properness and parochialism of a human future.[126] A viral future is one

[124] Ibid., 129.

[125] Ibid., 136.

[126] While the critical angle of Colebrook's intervention here raises new questions and opens new horizons to explore for hermeneutics, as I will also argue below, I do hesitate about adopting her model without further questions, especially when facing the paradoxes her claims appear to incite. For example, Colebrook's destruction of humanism has a clear *moral* and *political* aim, as becomes clear in *Who Would You Kill to Save the World?*. There, she chides humanism for the colonial and dehumanizing tendencies to which it allegedly would give rise, while the turn to the viral model is one way to break with humanism. Yet I do wonder whether viral thinking can be operationalized in the name of an emancipatory gesture that would recognize the plurality in ways of being human: would viral thinking not justify violent intrusion and parasitism as much as recognition of radically different, non-reflexive modes of being-human? The problem seems to be that the 'virus' is presented both as a model that *more truthfully* describes the (malevolent) material reality of humanism *and* the name of a metaphor that might enable some form of emancipation from the shackles that Colebrook perceives in humanism. The kind of emancipatory horizon suggested by her criticisms of Western humanism do not sit well with her arguments, borrowed from Serres, that "to live and inhabit is to be parasitic, to pollute, to alter the *clima*, to effect an inclination that cannot be remedied or mitigated by some return or retrieval of the proper." However, if humanism always already *actually* has parasitic or viral properties (that it may not perceive

of mutations *beyond* oneself, without return *to* oneself, and without any underlying notion of what would properly be like to *be* oneself. This viral hypothesis does not lead back, according to Colebrook, to the existentialist-humanist understanding of humans as essentially without essence (and hence responsible for their existence), but instead opens the possibility that humanity is in fact "a series of potentialities that could branch out into territories beyond its own self-maintenance."[127] In Colebrook's logic, it will only be the virus that has a future because it does not have a future of its own – it avoids the ceaseless repetition of the violence allegedly attached to the origins of humanism. It replicates without the teleology of organicism and finds ways to move forward without returning to itself; it can adapt without requiring equilibria and harmony. This is why Colebrook argues that "as long as we calculate the future as one of sustaining, maintaining, adapting […] there would be no future for us other than an eventual, barely lived petering out," while a turn to viral models might lead one to "entertai[n] the erasure of the human (especially as […] a self-maintaining nature that can sustain itself through reading itself) [so that] then there might be a future."[128]

Colebrook thinks that the viral model may allow one to acknowledge that the Anthropocene demands more than a continuation of the organic / humanist / reflexive model, instead calling for the need of a *qualitative* or *intensive* change in the concept of what it means to be human.[129] According to Colebrook, climate change, biodiversity collapse, and other manifestations of the Anthropocene signal not merely an influx of a new discourse to be interpreted by humanity but also target the very idea of humanity as an *interpreting* agent,

itself), would it not, according to Colebrook's own logic, already partake in reality in a way that she deems desirable? I think this conundrum can only be overcome by arguing and developing criteria for what it would mean to be 'properly' viral, that would allow one to explain why humanism's current virality is insufficient or problematic, but it appears that her criticisms have destroyed all 'humanist' options available to such ends – balance, reflection, harmony, sustainability, justice, et cetera, are all out of the window at this stage. Her analysis seems to run into an aporia at this stage. Ibid., 180.

[127] Ibid., 138.

[128] Ibid., 58.

[129] "In intensive quantities it is not a question of equivalent units of more or less, but of speeds and thresholds that have the capacity to produce differences in kind. […] Had the social sciences taken on a [this intensive] complexity they would have to consider the possibility that the units with which they work – humans, societies – would alter in kind, beyond recognition, at certain speeds and thresholds." Ibid., 56.

whether this agency is placed on the level of individuals, communities, or even on the level of something like 'life itself'. [130] The Anthropocene thus enforces the extinction of a *certain* humanity, namely, not just of the human species but primarily of a sense of humanity as promising a sustainability of "itself in a more viable manner," [131] one that is committed to "imagin[ing] a future of *living on*" rather than what Colebrook thinks is necessary, namely, to think "living otherwise." [132] What is needed, according to Colebrook, is therefore to confront humanism's ideal of humanity with the idea that violence and mutation enable it to exist, while humanity's emergence from the chaosmos allows one to entertain the thought that it *could have been composed differently* than a self-interpreting, self-creation force, and to wonder if an *inhuman* future is possible – one that perhaps does not think in terms of compositions, reflection, et cetera, at all.

In a Nietzschean moment, exploring this latter question, Colebrook in fact argues that the inhuman may transform humanity *qualitatively*. Instead of extending a disguised humanism, the exposure to the viral tendencies in human life would result in an explosion of possibilities to be *beyond* the human. "To consider the future *intensively* we would at least begin with the possibility that an event might occur to 'us' that would create a mutation of such a force that 'we' would no longer exist." [133] That is, an intensive change would sabotage attempts of humanism to overcome challenges in revised versions of a *better* humanism. One could compare this transformation to a tipping point of a complex system, where a minor change in input could trigger a set of feedback loops that change the system's operating space entirely. Likewise, attention to the forces that compose 'us' makes it possible to think radically new beginning and revolutions in the understanding of the human, one that does not return to reflexivity or self-creation, but that moves forward, parasitically, through mutations and disruptions. Who knows what other concepts of agency, life, and history might become possible? Colebrook retains hope that the destruction of humanity might "move [us] forward

[130] "[C]limate change will not simply disturb human life, requiring it to sustain itself in a more viable manner, but will alter the very unit of 'the human'." Ibid., 56.

[131] Ibid., 56

[132] Ibid., 42.

[133] Ibid., 58.

to the 'superman'" who "[frees] the inorganic potentialities that exist now only in confused and all too human composites."[134]

In short, the Anthropocene, marking the enmeshment of humanity with the planetary, is a time of intense and radical demands for Colebrook. Not only should all hope for a bright future for humanity be destroyed, but one also needs to be able to plunge oneself in an abyss of being in which there no longer is any stability, just a wild array of chaotic forces weaving and unweaving temporary forms out of an unformed chaos that even seems to outdo Meillassoux's hyper-Chaos in its horrors. If one takes Colebrook's uncompromising demands seriously, nothing short of an entire revolution in the concept of humanity is necessary. Is Ricoeur's theory able to respond to and be informed by such demands? What would a Ricoeurian hermeneutics look like that situates interpretation within the planetary? And could Ricoeur nuance some of Colebrook's drastic suggestions?

MATERIALIZING RICOEUR'S HUMANISM

In this concluding section, I will invoke Colebrook's work to extend hermeneutics towards the planetary *materiality* of humanity in the Anthropocene, while I will also argue that hermeneutics offers resources beyond Colebrook's model to take this leap. While Colebrook fails to consider the historicity of her own claims, as well as the resources of interpretation on which she draws, my claim will be that her work still invites a reading of Ricoeur's humanism that places larger emphasis on the constitutive function of material *traces* for human universality. Rereading Ricoeur, I will argue that his model of narrative hospitality and inter-traditional dialogue turn out to rely on the possibility of the physical inscriptions of culture, which allows it to transmit its heritage throughout time. In this model, 'humanity' is a mode of inhabiting the aporetic space between the meanings afforded and handed down through traces and their materiality that wrests itself free from this imposed meaning. This interpretation explains how a hermeneutic humanism does not just address questions of intercultural plurality but also of humanity's planetary impact.

[134] Ibid., 138–9.

COLEBROOK VERSUS HERMENEUTICS

If one were to read Ricoeur through Colebrook's lens, the core problem of hermeneutics would lie in what is excluded by sticking to a discursive universalism as Ricoeur does, namely, the "non-anthropic relations, potentials and forces" from which any concept of humanity would allegedly arise.[135] By retaining an understanding of humanity as linguistically and narratively grounded, that is, by granting a crucial role to self-interpretation (mediated by hospitality), Ricoeur would risk that any discursively or narratively achieved 'new' conception of what it means to be human is only an "extension [of the concept of the human] by degree, not a difference in kind."[136] What remains the same is the idea that humans are interpretative beings. For example, while Ricoeur's humanism might call for the integration of a plurality of narratives to upend the centrality of a particular Eurocentric figure of 'Man,' his model still presupposes that being-human means being capable of self-interpretation, of narration, et cetera. For Colebrook, this commitment forecloses the hypothesis that human life is *not* primarily meaningful or interpretative, or that interpretation is the kind of polluting, virus-like intervention in the chaosmos that Colebrook holds it to be. *How* does the interpretative 'subject' of Ricoeurian hermeneutics come into existence, that is, on what *pre-human, inorganic* and *pre-linguistic* qualities does it rely, and do these not destabilize the idea of self-interpretation across cultural and narrative differences?

In my sketch of Ricoeur's humanism, it became clear that it responds foremost to tensions and questions pertaining to the plurality of traditions, while there remained a paucity of reflection on how humanism would touch upon its embeddedness in the material planet. Admittedly, this paucity is not coincidental, as Ricoeur, in his few comments on the ecological crisis, has tended to approach questions of the human relation to 'nature' from a distinct anthropocentric perspective. In an interview, Ricoeur even states that "we know that for there to be human life after us, there has to be a nature after us, then, in this sense, the preservation of nature is part of the humanist project."[137] Ricoeur's humanism, therefore, seems to 'read'

[135] Ibid., 107.

[136] Ibid., 108.

[137] "Maintenant nous savons que pour qu'il y ait une humanité après nous, il faut qu'il y ait une nature après nous; alors, en ce sens, la préservation de la nature fait partie du projet humaniste." Paul Ricœur,

the nonhuman planetary solely in terms of continued human survival, rather than as a challenge to humancentric conceptions.

From Colebrook's critical life studies angle, the hermeneutic subject can only *be* departing from a prior inorganic realm, as its central capacity to speak never transcends the material networks from it emerges. "Before there is something like a language […] there must be the formation of qualities and the creation of differences," Colebrook asserts, i.e., a reality already composed of differences and tensions that allow the speech of and among traditions to emerge in the first place.[138] The problem with Ricoeur's model would then be that in its promise of a discursive, narrative, open-ended human universalism, it has failed to consider how the capacities of communication and interpretation emerge from material forces beyond those that are meaningfully articulated by hermeneutics. This is not a mere ontological commitment, from Colebrook's angle, as it would also come paired with certain ideal models of what it is to be properly human, namely, to be able to reinterpret oneself. This would overlook that to be properly human, humanity has to rely on the inorganic realm of qualities and relations that produces it, i.e., to be properly human one has to first be (im)properly inhuman.[139] In as far as a focus on reflection, interpretation, and self-creation excludes an understanding of humans as expressions of nonhuman forces, any attempt to move beyond humanism would repeat this obscuring of material properties.

While Ricoeur's humanism might therefore respond to issues of globalism and intercultural dialogue, for Colebrook the question would remain whether it is not implied in the violence she attributes to conceptions of 'humanity' that fail to read themselves as emerging from originary acts of destruction. How could Ricoeur respond to this charge?

"L'Éthique, le politique, l'écologie," *Écologie & Politique* 56, no.1 (2018): 43; Paul Ricoeur, "Ethics, Politics, Ecology," trans. Kathleen Blamey, in *Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics,* ed. Catherina Goldenstein (Polity, 2020), 114.

[138] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, 111.

[139] Indeed, Colebrook views 'humanity' as emerging from an act of 'polluting' nonhuman forces, which is not merely to carve out a space for one's own but is truly a disruption. "Pollution is not simply making a niche, having a world that would, in turn, contribute to other worlds; to pollute or mark a space as one's own habitus is to subtract, diminish and defile the origin's integrity." Ibid., 179.

HERMENEUTICS OF THE TRACE

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of humanity can be extended toward the material planetary, if one places larger emphasis on the crucial role Ricoeur ascribes to *traces* in constituting any form of human universality. This emphasis immediately brings his philosophy closer to answering to the concerns of Colebrook's. Like Colebrook, hermeneutics as a philosophy of textual mediation has also always resisted the idea of a fully transparent, self-interpretative consciousness. This plays out in themes such as that of belonging, so crucial to Ricoeur, which ties consciousness to a surplus that it can never master nor control, which is antithetical to the idea that consciousness somehow freely 'produces' meaning in an instrumental fashion by subjugating the outside world to its categories of thought.[140] Hermeneutics describes humans as obliged to ceaselessly go through mediations, wandering without ever returning to the source of meaning. Hermeneutics is also a philosophy of *traces* and inscriptions, and it does not commence with some capacity of free self-interpretation but always instead proceeds through the materiality of archives, documents, and marks. This has important consequences for its relation to planet as a geophysical system.

What is a trace for Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*? Put simply, for Ricoeur, a trace is a presence of an absence. A trace is present as a mark that is left behind; it is something tangible, a remainder, that one can see and inquire about. Yet, in its presence, this mark attests of something that is absent, namely, of a passing of something or someone that is no longer here: footsteps in the mud, the tracks of animals in the woods, a piece of evidence left behind on a crime scene. Such traces signal in the present that something or someone passed by, that something took place, while they do not bring back this past moment as something that is present. As such, the trace "signifies something without making it appear."[141] It registers the fact of passing and retains this having-passed-by into the present. This means that on the one hand, as Ricoeur writes, "the trace is visible here and now, as a vestige, a mark," that is to say, the trace is what manifests itself in the present moment of the observer as something to be

[140] Cf. above, "'Belonging' as a Hermeneutic Concept," 111-124.

[141] "*La trace signifie sans faire apparaître.*" Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 125 [183], original emphasis.

seen.[142] On the other hand, however, "there is a trace (or track) because 'earlier' a human being or an animal passed this way." [143]

These two sides of the traces, its presence as mark and the absence of the passing, can be mapped onto the two distinct-yet-related times that Ricoeur discerns in *Time and Narrative,* namely, physical time and phenomenological time.[144] The trace as a 'static' mark, that retains the past corresponds to linear, physical time of mere duration and persisting as time passes by. As a mark, the trace also "suggests the idea of a harder, more durable support than the transitory activity of human beings," because human work inscribes itself into the materiality of its environment, entrusts this materiality, too, to carry over their endeavours into the future stretching on beyond them.[145] "People pass, their works remain. But they remain as things among other things."[146] The work remains because it endures through physical time, while the moment in which it was made fades away into the past. Physical time is therefore the time *in which* the trace remains while retaining the past, even if the time of action moves ever forward, away from the past.

In the second sense, the trace is dynamic and should be placed in the context of lived time or phenomenological time. It *shows* in the present moment that something else *was* here before, and it retains the fact that something took place for something or someone. As a remnant of a passing, it appeals "to the significance of a passed past that nevertheless remains preserved in its vestiges."[147] These vestiges, if they record past actions, seldom merely retain the imprint of an individual action but often also the 'world' in which this action unfolded.[148] For example, a statue found at an archaeological site may attest to a foregone ritual context of people who inhabited the place before. Beyond the physical time of the trace as a thing or

[142] "[L]a trace est visible ici et maintenant, comme vestige, comme marque." Ibid., 119 [175].

[143] "[I]l y a trace parce que *auparavant* un homme, un animal est passé par là; une chose a agi." Ibid., 119 [175].

[144] Cf. above, "Discordance in Time and Narrative," 14-18.

[145] "Il suggère d'abord l'idée d'un support plus dur, plus durable que l'activité transitoire des hommes." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 120 [176].

[146] "[L]es hommes passent; leurs œuvres demeurent." Ibid., 120 [177].

[147] "[À] la *signifiance* d'un passé révolu qui néanmoins demeure préservé dans ses vestiges." Ibid., 120 [176].

[148] For the Ricoeurian concept of 'world', see above, 87-107.

a mark, a significance is then unveiled that points toward the lived time of (human) agents, acting together within the coherence of a certain world that may have vanished with its occupants.

Ricoeur's reflections on traces are relevant because their mediating status between a physical and a 'human' time relate to how his concepts of humanity and humanism. The trace, Ricoeur maintains, is a necessary condition for tradition, and hence, for any humanism founded on the concept of tradition. As I argued, Ricoeur's discursive or narrative universalism relies on the idea that traditions can reinterpret themselves through the stories or claims to truths of other traditions and languages. In *Time and Narrative 3,* Ricoeur argues that traditions would not be possible without the mediating work of traces, which places them within the tension between physical and human time. After all, traditions, relying on the transmission of the past toward the future, inscribe themselves in material time, through archives, documents, and traces, without the past would not remain to be handed on. In Ricoeur's words:

> Between a trace left behind and followed, and transmitted and received tradition, there is a deep-lying affinity. As left behind, through the materiality of the mark, the trace designates the exteriority of the past, that is, its inscription in the time of the universe.[149]

This notion of the trace is then brought together with the time of tradition in the model of the *document*. A document is a trace that is collected and preserved, that is, one that people in the past deemed important enough to transmit to future generations. As such, the document is a trace – inevitably a physical inscription – that opens up the time of tradition, which can only affect the present from the past through the mediation of traces that retain this past into the present.[150] In short, *there would be no human universality without material inscription, because there could be no traditions without traces that carry forth their heritage into the*

[149] "Entre trace *laissée* et parcourue et tradition *transmise* et reçue, une affinité profonde se révèle. En tant que laissée, la trace désigne, par la matérialité de la marque, l'extériorité du passé, à savoir son inscription dans le temps de l'univers." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 229 [331].

[150] Ibid., 229 [331].

future. Universality relies on *externalized* inscription of phenomenological time in physical time, where the 'trace' mediates between the two time orders.

As such, the concept of humanity and the ideals of humanism are fundamentally related to a process of inscription, invoking a (geo)physical time that Ricoeur deliberately thinks of as a time that is *not* human. Ricoeur touches on these insights, but in discussion with Colebrook, it deserves more attention than he gives it. The trace-like nature of tradition shows, after all, that being-human always also relies on an act of *externalisation* of cultural expressions, which are inscribed in a physical temporality that is fundamentally irreducible to 'human' time. This dependency of the time of traditions and intercultural dialogue on a nonhuman time illustrates a different tendency in Ricoeur's work besides the anthropocentrism also present in his work: humans always already partake in and rely on a time that is *not their own* to *be human.*

Would it be too much of a stretch to read the importance allotted to the trace as an example of a viral tendency in Ricoeur's humanism? Traditions open the possibility for something like a humanist history as a pluralistic unity, while they only do so based on traces that are inscribed in nonhuman, physical time, through a disturbance or change of the material realm that precedes the human, a realm that is not-yet and never fully human. Ricoeur is explicit about the material and non-anthropocentric nature of physical time, which can never be reduced to the phenomenology of time, that is, to the time of discourse in which a speaker reflexively denotes the present as *her* present.[151] Yet, because the trace partakes in both times simultaneously, Ricoeur's humanism moves in two opposite directions at the same time: the more one moves toward a universal human time of unfettered discourse among traditions or toward a time of narrative hospitality, the more one relies on the rootedness of traditions in a physical time that is that of 'nature' before it is that of humans. In Colebrook's terms, the trace that opens the possibility for a humanist, universal history does so only under the condition that this history is simultaneously turned into an array of things in physical time that always carries the potential to *no longer* be read or interpreted or transmitted to the future, that is, to become mere objects. This means that Ricoeur acknowledges the viral

[151] Ibid., 19 [30].

tendencies within hermeneutics, the space for which is opened only by intervening and altering a sphere of being that precedes humanity as an interpretative force.

By stressing this reading of Ricoeur, hermeneutics is no longer antithetical to Colebrook's explorations of inhumanity. It is particularly close to Colebrook's inhumanist explorations of archives and the act of writing. Colebrook argues, for example, that "humans will be readable in the scar they left upon the earth."[152] Taking seriously this idea of a human inscription that may outlive human readers, Colebrook attempts to 'read' cultural productions *as if* the context in which they were produced is effaced, that is, as if these productions are *nothing but* material inscriptions. One would have to read texts as "remaining, unread, dead objects without authors audiences," that is to read without the assumptions that "texts or letters were the work of a living body."[153] A text then becomes a "hybrid assemblage of marks, stains, signs, tears, [and] human-animal-technical inscriptions" that resists reduction to any single history or interpretative situation, in short, a text is pushed to the asymptotic limit of becoming a mere trace, something left behind and opened to forces beyond the human. [154] The tragedy of inscription that opens meaning by surrendering it to a time that remains indifferent or foreign to human meaning is not far removed from Ricoeur's own reflections, as when he writes that the trace records how, when "people pass, their works remain […] as things among other things."[155] His philosophy already includes the possibility to think a future *beyond* human horizons of meanings, that is, to think of a time in which humanity has gone extinct and all its works remain as mere physical traces, mere 'things' that remain.

Within Ricoeurian hermeneutics, the autonomy of the time of nature means that it is completely thinkable that there be a future without recipients to carry forth the work of traditions, either through the devastation of the archives through floods, fires, or war, or, as a final horizon looming beyond all horizons, through the extinction of the human species. Heritage may be passed on but it is never free from the risk to collapse into ruins, and one may never be completely sure whether these material conditions of possibility for traditionality (and hence, for Ricoeurian universality) do not contribute to its very collapse. This is the viral

[152] Weinstein and Colebrook, "Preface," x.

[153] Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman,* 39.

[154] Ibid., 34.

[155] "[L]es hommes passent; leurs œuvres demeurent." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* [177].

threat at the heart of Ricoeur's humanism, one that makes it possible as much as that it puts it at risk.

HERMENEUTICS VERSUS COLEBROOK

While Colebrook's theory may inspire to read Ricoeur's work as possibly opened to the viral/material Anthropocene, Ricoeur's hermeneutics in turn also raises questions for Colebrook's endeavours, which, I will now argue, does not pay heed to 1) the way in which human experience already touches upon the inhuman, 2) the historical situatedness of her own claims, and 3) her reliance on interpretation. It is therefore worthwhile to stick with a re-reading of Ricoeur rather than to abandon the hermeneutic project.

First issue: Colebrook does not address the way in which human experience itself is already entangled with the inhuman, material properties of the planet, which results in a call to transgress human experience that is too radical and drastic, as it presupposes an absolute rift between the human and the inhuman. While Colebrook claims that humanity has to be destroyed in order to free the 'superhuman' potentials of the inorganic world, the viral-like continuation of human 'life' freed from its attachments to reflexivity and sustainability, from a Ricoeurian perspective, such a direct call to move toward the material planetary would be an all too hasty attempt to transcend certain limits within which the human condition unfolds. Recall, for example, that Ricoeur's philosophy forbids reducing human time to physical time and vice versa – the aporia's with which *Time and Narrative* struggles arise precisely out of the irreducibility of these two concepts of times. It would be impossible according to Ricoeur to conceive of a purely *inhuman* time without invoking, indirectly, subjective experiences of time, as, for example, the 'instant' of physical time could not be conceptualized without secretly borrowing from the living 'now' of consciousness.[156] In this sense, Ricoeur would perhaps also agree with a recent remark by Ted Toadvine, who argues that "the apocalyptic imagination that obsesses contemporary culture […] is made possible only by the revelation within our hearts of an impossible future that outstrips every imagination."[157] In other

[156] See, above, 97-107.

[157] Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 60.

words, only within lived experience manifests the presence of a physical time that is not lived and that calls for reflection precisely because of its paradoxical status.

In this light, second, it should also be pointed out that Colebrook's dreams of a clean break with humanism dissimulate their own rootedness in historical time. Can one really move, for the last time, beyond humanism and the way it holds sway over history, collapsing all ideas of the human as an interpretative agent in a clean sweep? Or is this call for radical new beginnings itself a manifestation of a *certain* set of presuppositions about humans that arise in a particular historical moment in time? Ironically, from Ricoeur's view, Colebrook's call to escape from humanism carries some characteristics that render it typically *modern,* which, following Koselleck, Ricoeur defines as a time period arising out of a shrinking of the space of past experience and an expansion of the horizon of expectations.[158] Does Colebrook not ask her readers to overcome all inherited notions of what it means to be human, while she assumes that they are in complete freedom from the chains of past traditions, and she entertains utopic expectations of what is possible once humans take this leap beyond themselves toward the 'superhuman'? While Colebrook deconstructs humanism's humanity for its alleged reliance on limitless self-interpretation, she demands the most radical interpretative revolutions from her readers. Ricoeur's model will always be more hesitant, acknowledging the inevitable limits human agents must reckon with, including the materiality of the trace on which their traditions depend that extend traditionality beyond the realm of human control toward physical time.

Finally, while Ricoeur might acknowledge the value of thinkers such as Colebrook as 'masters of suspicion,' he would also maintain that their suspicion should be accompanied by a method of decoding that can disclose dissimulated or hidden sides of humanity. The phrase 'master of suspicion' [*maître du soupçon*] comes from Ricoeur's essay "Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture," where he introduces the phrase to characterize the critical interventions of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.[159] Their works put into doubt the transparency of consciousness to itself: for these thinkers, economic relations, the will to power, or the unconscious create a rift between how consciousness appears to itself and what it

[158] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 210-2 [304-7]; also, see, above: "'Pluralistic Unity' and Ricoeur's Humanism," 171-181.

[159] Ricoeur, "Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Culture," 148 [149].

really is.[160] In a similar vein, Colebrook criticizes humanist self-consciousness, which fails to even consider the thanatological forces that render it possible, always projecting its true self as a task to complete in some future. However, while Colebrook's intervention is geared against interpretation in a broad sense, Ricoeur points out that the three masters of suspicion are *not* merely 'destructive.' They offer *new hermeneutical keys* to decipher the dissimulations of consciousness to *extend* consciousness rather than destroy it. "All three free our horizon for a more authentic speaking, a new reign of truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique but by the invention of an art of *interpreting.*"[161] Over and against the *immediacy* of appearance, a *mediated* hermeneutics is placed as a method of reading consciousness. Does the same not hold for Colebrook, despite her criticisms of interpretation? From this angle, it could be argued that Colebrook's viral inhumanism does not break as much as it would like to with models of interpretation, for it simply calls for a *deeper,* more truthful interpretation of the (in)human condition. Does it not also still rely on some sense of self-interpretation that is now mediated by an attention for latent processes in the 'chaosmos' that give rise to consciousness? Does Colebrook therefore not still call upon the interpretative capacities of readers, one that likewise promises a *different* future worth considering beyond the destruction of humanism? If this is the case, the challenge does not require one to abandon hermeneutics and its version of humanism but instead to develop a form of critique that can somehow deepen one's understanding of interpretation, materiality, and reflexivity.

This pushback to Colebrook's conclusions means that I do not think that Colebrook provides one with enough to simply *destroy* hermeneutics, as her inhumanism fails to make clear from what position its leap of faith toward other compositions of being-human would

[160] Ricoeur places the masters of suspicion in the tradition of (hyperbolic) doubt of Descartes. While Descartes already thought that the thing was an illusion, i.e., that its appearance to the senses could not be trusted, he failed to consider whether in consciousness "meaning and the consciousness of meaning coincide." Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were to continue the cartesian project of hyperbolic doubt and apply it to consciousness itself, to render it doubtful. "[Descartes] ne doute pas que la conscience ne soit telle qu'elle s'apparaît à elle-même." Ibid., 148 [149].

[161] "Or, tous trois dégagent l'horizon pour une parole plus authentique, pour un nouveau règne de la vérité, non seulement par le moyen d'une critique 'destructrice,' mais par l'invention d'un art d'*interpréter*." Ibid., 149 [149].

actually be possible, that is, how it would free itself entirely from the 'shackles' of interpretation and historicity. Its value for my discussion, as I see it, is therefore mostly to push hermeneutics beyond the assumption that interpretation can simply be taken as a process without material consequences, while it also addresses the fact that these consequences may undermine the future of interpretation. In short, Colebrook posits some limits for the hermeneutic subject that it cannot overcome by proposing more meaning and more interpretation but that instead attest to some sense of fragility and discordance within hermeneutics and its attempts to formulate a renewed humanism. These sides to hermeneutics emerged by considering traces and the physical time they bear witness to.

Of course, there remains room for further explorations of how hermeneutics could move in the directions explored by Colebrook. There is, for example, the limit and the risk of silence that pertains to the material consequences of interpretation. Ricoeur's hermeneutics presupposes that traditions are, in principle, always able to respond to and articulate answers to questions posed by others, as well as to share memories and narratives. The universality in his hermeneutics thus remains operative as long as the discussion keeps on going, which in turn means, as I have argued, as long as new traces are being generated. Yet the viral or life-denying elements of which Colebrook warns do much to threaten this constant presence of speech and exchange, as their violence could end in silence. There is the silence of the extinction of the human species that looms as a risk in the Anthropocene, and whose spectre is already conjured up by the trace-like nature of the heritage of traditions that 'remain' while 'people pass.' There is also the silence of exhaustion of voices that can no longer muster the energy to respond because ways of human life being reduced to the bare life of mere survival under the devastating effects of ecological disaster. Finally, there is the silence of the refusal. There are those who refuse to speak because they have given up faith in the powers of dialogue and exchange, the angry silence of the oppressed who have become cynical after waves of violence have washed away the value of words and of the promise for a better world. This silence belongs to all those who know that there is a viral violence of discourse operating beyond the meaning it claims to project. What remains possible for hermeneutics in the face of these forms of silence, which interrupt its unshakable commitment to communication? These are issues looming at the horizon of hermeneutics, which inspire rather than end further hermeneutical inquiry.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have argued that the Anthropocene raises new questions about humanity, humanism, and human universality. On the one hand, the Anthropocene signals the emergence of a *global* condition, in which intercultural conflicts are situated within the framework of sharing a single planet. I have argued that Ricoeur's humanism, based on communicative and narrative capabilities, can navigate the tensions of this demand, recognizing intercultural plurality while also articulating a sense of human unity. On the other hand, however, the Anthropocene also marks the inscription of humans into the geophysical planetary. Using Colebrook's provocative work, I have argued that Ricoeur's humanism needs to be extended to fully answer to this dimension. The notion of the trace as a condition of possibility of tradition and culture turned out to be pivotal in this. While Ricoeur argues that human universality resides in the capacity of traditions to consider the truth claims of other traditions, traditions in turn are only possibly through inscriptions in physical time, which is never exhaustively 'humanized.' In short, Ricoeurian humanism retains a sense of the limits of what humans can do, retaining, too, a sense of discordance to the physical world.

The result of this intervention is therefore that Ricoeur's hermeneutic humanism opens to the material planetary by becoming *fragile* and *discordant*. It becomes discordant because being-human does not just include a plurality of human perspectives and traditions but also the nonhuman materiality of the traces that render it possible. The relation between these two sides remains *discordant* because they imply two contrasting times, always at odds with each other, as I argued above. Ricoeur's humanism becomes fragile because the traces and inscriptions may interrupt inter-traditional communication that renders humanity's universality possible. Traces do not simply become a part of the universal horizon that is opened through inter-traditional communication, pertaining, as they do, to a time that is physical before it is human. Nevertheless, this fragility and this discordance are not obstacles to overcome but, rather, conditions of possibility for Ricoeur's humanism, which remains in the midst between the universalism projected by communication and the inhumanism projected by its material conditions.

This tension is also retained in *Orbital,* the novel I have invoked throughout this chapter. *Orbital's* tone is ultimately that of wonder and aporia, of stumbling upon an experience that unfolds as *too much* to get a stable view of it. The astronauts return to Earth with their

"eyes filled with sights that are difficult to tell."[162] Hermeneutically, this is a crucial point. It is difficult to tell of the planetary, if not impossible. One of the astronauts observes that "she often struggles for things to tell people at home, because the small things are too mundane and the rest is too astounding and there seems to be nothing in between."[163] In some way, then, the 'experience' of the planetary appears to call for a hermeneutics of discordances, that is, of telling or interpreting what does not fit in the world as one knows it. There is a surplus of meaning that manifests itself, a surplus that is not yet addressed by the critical-inhuman framework planetary that the astronauts adopted when they saw how planet and politics merged. This surplus which can never be done justice to in words does not free the astronauts of burden of the need to speak, and they long to share and speak about what they have seen. There remains a commitment to the universality of communication, even in these extreme circumstances, to try and share sights that are difficult to tell.

[162] Harvey, *Orbital*, 3.

[163] Ibid., 17-8.

MULTISCALARITY

RECEPTION AND FRAGILITY

What happens when narratives invoke multiple, discordant temporal scales of the Earth system at the same time? Dale Pendell's novel *The Great Bay* dramatizes the tension between the multiple scales of the Earth system by presenting readers with a fictional archive spanning sixteen thousand years. It collects fragments of human lives alongside descriptions of vast geological changes in a particular geographical area.[1] Starting in the year 2021, *The Great Bay* imagines how a mysterious, global pandemic wipes out most of human life on the planet, tracing a series of testimonies and narrative fragments that reflect the adaptation of a host of unrelated characters to rising sea levels and changing environmental conditions.[2] Yet, the lack of continuity between fragments in *The Great Bay* frustrates attempts to care about its characters or to find coherence among the storylines that makes it possible to interpret the meaning of the novel as a whole.[3] Literary theorist Marco Caracciolo has even argued that "the gaps between the novel's multiple story lines are so significant that — far from creating suspense, curiosity, or surprise — they fundamentally deny any satisfying

[1] The 'Great Bay' in the title refers to the formation of a huge bay in California after sea levels rise. The novel chronologically works its way through deep time, tracing what happens in and to this area. Each chapter departs from a different period, commencing with a description by an omniscient narrator (a "panoptic" to use the novel's term) of the relevant climatological changes, to then present one or several "documents" that reflect human life during that period. Dale Pendell, *The Great Bay: Chronicles of the Collapse* (North Atlantic Books, 2010).

[2] Pendell's novel was written in 2010, so that it is a matter of eerie coincidence that its 'prediction' of a global pandemic in the year 2021 aligns with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the real world in that particular year.

[3] In a relatively early essay on the novel, Alexa Weik von Mossner argues that the literary strategy of *The Great Bay* results in a lack of identification with its plot(s) and characters. Pendell would cut the "empathetic ties to human individual protagonists" in favour of a view of geological transformations. Alexa Weik von Mossner, "Science Fiction and the Risks of the Anthropocene: Anticipated Transformations in Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay*," *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014): 214.

emotional dynamic."[4] It is as if this novel, by narrating at multiple temporal scales at once, presents the planetary as fundamentally discordant to those on which individual lives unfold.

Novels such as *The Great Bay* touch upon the problem of multiscalarity in the Anthropocene. The Earth system is a multiscalar system, which means that there it envelops processes spanning and interacting across multiple temporal and spatial scales. This multiscalarity introduces problems of translation of phenomena from one scale to the other. Phenomena that are visible in a particular way on one temporal or spatial scale appear qualitatively different on other scales. In an early exploration of this effect, Blaise Pascal observed that "from afar a town, a farmland, is a town and a farmland; but as you approach, there are houses, trees, tiles, leaves, grass, ants, ant legs, to infinity."[5] This is not to say that a town is *actually* a mere constellation of houses, trees, et cetera, but rather different scales make different phenomena visible. The Anthropocene is often framed as a time in which this clash of scales becomes prominent problem. While phenomena such as global warming unfold on the large scales of the planet, environmental action is often organized locally – as the famous slogan 'think globally, act locally' also has it. As a geological phenomenon, however, the Anthropocene requires reflection on how local and individual choices and actions tie into the collective impact of humans on the Earth, mediated by technological infrastructures, and leaving a legacy that will last millions of years. These scales are difficult to bring together into a coherent picture, as qualitative changes occur when one moves from the local to the planetary scale – humanity considered as a collective on a planetary scale is not simply an aggregate of individuals but a wholly different something. In short, there is a need to translate across the different scales of the planetary system, while the disjunctive nature of these scales makes such translation difficult. It is difficult to integrate insights developed by geoscientists about the anthropogenic influence on the planetary system as a whole in the lifeworld of individuals. How can my individual choices be informed by information about the

[4] Marco Caracciolo, "Emplotment Beyond the Human Scale: On Deep Time and Narrative Nonlinearity," *Poetics Today* 42, no. 3 (2021): 351. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-9026131.

[5] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Hackett, 2004), 22; "Une ville, une campagne, de loin, c'est une ville et une campagne ; mais à mesure qu'on s'en approche, ce sont des maisons, des arbres, des tuiles, des feuilles, de l'herbe, des fourmis, des jambes de fourmis, et ainsi à l'infini. Tout cela s'enveloppe sous le nom de campagne." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées,* ed. Louis Lafuma (Seuil, 1962), 65.

collective impact of humans on the planetary system, given that on this latter level my individual choices are completely insignificant? How to read my world using multiple scales at once?

In this chapter, I want to raise the question what it could mean for readers to interpret a novel such as *The Great Bay* in which planetary discordance emerges among the different temporal and spatial scales included by the work. In hermeneutics, interpretation is often taken to end with the *application* of the meaning of a text to the world of the reader, disclosing new possibilities or meanings in the real world.[6] Yet, what happens if discordant fictions are interpreted, which suggest that any meaning found on the 'lower' levels of the lifeworld is incongruent with what becomes visible on the scale of the planet as a whole? Applying *The Great Bay* to the reader's world, the effect does not seem to be an *increase* of meaning or the disclosure of *new* possibilities of action but instead a destabilization of the reader's world. What happens to interpretation and application if higher-level scales 'unframe' the meaning found at lower-level scales?

To study the effects of multiscalarity on the way in which readers relate to Anthropocene fiction, I will here set up a conversation between Ricoeur's theory of reader reception and two recent, important contributions by Timothy Clark and Adeline Johns-Putra. [7] Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* is a prominent, and oft-cited investigation into the issues of multiscalarity in Anthropocene fiction, which constructs a detailed image of the problems of scale effects for the relation between texts and readers. Clark argues that the disorienta-

[6] See, for example, Paul Ricœur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 116; Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," trans. John B. Thompson, in *From Text to Action*: *Essays in Hermeneutics, 2,* with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 77; Ricoeur takes and further develops the notion of 'application' [*Anwendung*] with a reference to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, where Gadamer calls for a renewed theory of application of the meaning of texts to the current situation of readers as an essential part of the hermeneutic process of interpretation. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1960),312-7; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (Continuum, 2004), 305-9.

[7] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (Bloomsbury, 2015); Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

tion of the Anthropocene challenges many dearly held assumptions about literature. In contrast, Adeline Johns-Putra, a leading scholar in climate change literature, has argued that a certain level of disorientation can guide readers toward new, more ecologically attuned attitudes, and I pick up her work here to balance Clark's critical angle. Both emphasize the importance of discordance and disorientation in understanding Anthropocene fiction. By reading their contributions through the lens of Ricoeur's theory of reader reception, in which the meaning of a text arises in the interplay between text and reader, I will argue that multiscalarity gives rise to a mode of reading that welcomes rather than overcomes discordances between the different scales of the planet in application to the reader's world. Inversely, the key role granted to disorientation and discordance by Clark and Johns-Putra helps me amplify the importance of discordance within Ricoeur's theory of literature.

By moving Ricoeur's theory toward the specific issue of multiscalarity, I will maintain that Anthropocene fictions do not just propose new worlds to readers but, instead, reveal the reader's capacity to imagine the limits of the world vis-à-vis the planet. Fragile reception takes place when a reader, on several levels, becomes aware of his capacities to constitute something in his imagination that he cannot comprehend or control, which means that the power to imagine may also work to undermine rather than increase established, familiar meaning.[8] What is gained, most importantly, by fragile reading is that the conflict of different scales of the Anthropocene acquires affective and semantic value for readers, who learn to realize what is at stake in living in a planetary crisis the eludes their familiar scales of perception and action.

DISCORDANCE IN RICOEUR'S RECEPTION THEORY

Before I turn to a discussion of the problem of multiscalar discordance, I will here first explore the role of discordance in Ricoeur's theory of reception. This will prepare me to analyse

[8] This is not just a passive opening-up to the text. In imitation of Haraway's play on the word responsibility, we should view the reader as vulner-able, that is, *able* to actively take on an attitude that is simultaneously receptive and productive, able to let himself be 'wounded' in the sense that what was familiar has become unfamiliar but still gaining something in the process. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chtulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 78.

how planetary discordance can be *applied* to the worlds of readers. Ricoeur's reception theory balances the activity of the reader with his passivity when opening himself to literary texts. On first glance, one could hardly imagine a more gullible, passive attitude than that of the fiction reader, an attitude which, in Northrop Frye's words, "begins in a complete surrender of the mind and senses to the impact of the work as a whole," and who lets himself be taken by the hand of an author to enter the unreal reality of literature.[9] However, in Ricoeur's view on interpretation, the reader is actually a crucial part in the *constitution* of a text's significance, which arises dynamically from a reader's actualization of the world that is only potentially or virtually included in the text before it is read. "[I]t is only through mediation of reading that the literary work attains complete significance [because] considered apart from reading, the world of the text […] remains in suspension."[10] Ricoeur's theory of reading therefore stipulates that the rhetoric of the author, inscribed in the configured literary text, is counterbalanced by a reader who is able to respond in the active process of refiguration of the reader's world.

I will develop these insights to later be able to claim that in the case of discordant, multiscalar texts, the process of reading does not just lead to an increase in meaning but also to an increase in fragility on the side of the reader: reading the means actively exposing oneself to discordant and troubling facets in the text. In the case of *The Great Bay*, for example, the question then becomes if its discordance shatters the worlds of readers or merely heightens a sense of the limits of these worlds. In that latter case, "reading itself becomes a drama of discordant concordance," moving back and forth between familiarity and unfamiliarity.[11] Interpretation, then, is never the overcoming of discordance for Ricoeur but also always the dynamic opening of what is familiar to discordance within one's world, which transforms the familiar without necessarily destroying it.

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[9] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 77.

[10] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 158-9; "Son statut ontologique [du monde du texte] reste en suspens: en excès par rapport à la structure, en attente de lecture. C'est seulement *dans* la lecture que le dynamisme de configuration achevé son parcours." Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3: Le temps raconté* (Seuil, 1985), 230.

[11] "La lecture […] devient elle-même un drame de concordance discordante." Ibid., 168-9 [246].

Here, I will follow and expand on Ricoeur's argumentation in the chapter "The World of the Reader and the World of the Text" in *Time and Narrative 3*, which contains his most elaborate analysis of the process of 'application' or refiguration by literature of the world of the reader.[12]

AESTHETIC DISTANCE AND THE RHETORIC OF FICTION

In *Time and Narrative 3,* Ricoeur picks up his three-stage model of mimesis (prefiguration, figuration, refiguration), to return with a more detailed analysis of the dynamics of the application or appropriation proper to mimesis$_3$ – which is the moment when a text begins to inform and transform a reader's world.[13] Framing this process in terms of rhetorics, Ricoeur argues that the aesthetic distance of literary texts achieved in mimesis$_2$, the stage of configuration, unleashes new possibilities in the worlds of the reader through a dynamic communication "that finds its starting point in the author, crosses through the work, and finds its end-point in the reader."[14] Interpretation results from the struggle of readers with the world proposed by the (implied) author of a literary text, which they apply to their own worlds without completely submitting to it.[15] This means that refiguration relies on a certain autonomy of the text in its configuration.

Indeed, Ricoeur argues that it is the text itself, separated from its author, which can communicate and influence readers to be appropriated in one way or another. The configured work places itself at a distance from lived reality, while still anticipating a reader to

[12] See the chapter "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader" in ibid., 157–92 [228-64].

[13] Cf. my earlier explication of the mimetic circle above, 77-87.

[14] "[Il y a une] sorte de communication qui prend son point de départ chez l'auteur, et traverse l'œuvre, pour trouver son point d'arrivée chez le lecteur." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 160 [231].

[15] It is important to underscore at this stage that Ricoeur does not want to return to some psychologizing hermeneutics by introducing the 'author' once more into his considerations, which would bracket the autonomy of the text that has become such a paradigmatic assumption after structuralism. Ricoeur argues that what he emphasizes instead are "the techniques by means of which a work is made communicable," that bear the marks of the "strategy of persuasion" of the author. Importantly, "these techniques can be discerned in the work itself," which is why Ricoeur never refers to the flesh-and-blood author but merely to the 'implied author' of a text – a term that I will develop below in more detail. Ibid., 160 [231].

come and actualize what it contains only virtually. As I discuss above, this means that literature as mimesis is not a copy but a representation of the world of action. Ricoeur develops this understanding of literary configuration in dialogue with Aristotle's *Poetics* in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, where he appraisingly adopts Aristotle's definition of 'plot' [*muthos*] as "the arrangement of the incidents."[16] Emplotment constitutes the aesthetic distance that a reader needs to cross.

In Ricoeur's reading, the plot represents actions by arranging events in a particular order, and as a result produces something *new* that does not ultimately refer back to a reality that already existed as structured in this way.[17] Factors such as beginning, middle, and end, which constitute a plot's wholeness, are not already prefigured in reality but, instead, arise hand in hand with the configuration of events into a narrative. This is why one should not be surprised, Ricoeur argues, when Aristotle writes that "a poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably."[18]

Ricoeur, in his turn, proposes a dynamic understanding of plot based on Aristotle's thought that emphasizes how it constitutes aesthetic distance. Ricoeur argues that one must not even speak of 'plot' but of *emplotment* [*mise en intrigue*].[19] In Ricoeur's words, "imitating

[16] "*σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτον*," Aristotle, *The Poetics,* in *The Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style*, by Aristotle, Longinus, and Demetrius, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe and W. Rhys Roberts (Harvard University Press, 1982) 1450a.

[17] Ricoeur therefore denounces the language of *reference,* at least, in the sense of literature having a sort of *first-order* reference to reality as it exists *before* the literary work is produced. Above, I explain why, however, he does think literature makes a sort of *second-order* reference to possible worlds to be appropriated by readers, see above, 88-94.

[18] Even this probability arises out of the structured plot itself in relation to the expectations of audiences and not out of what is probable in reality. Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1451b.

[19] Aristotle speaks of "the arrangement of the incidents," in Greek: ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις. The word σύστασις is often translated as 'system', implying a static configuration of parts, but Ricoeur proposes to read it as the activity of organisation, which marks the plot as an operation rather than as a product. Ibid., 1450a12; Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 1* (Seuil, 1983), 57, Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33.

or representing is a mimetic activity inasmuch as it produces something, namely, the organization of events by emplotment."[20] What the plot produces through configuration is therefore something new, a poetic product that brings into play a certain (aesthetic) distance relative to the (practical) reality it represents. While the configured narratives of literature are therefore not merely imitations of reality, Ricoeur does think they point ahead (or back) to reality by containing within themselves certain elements that presuppose audiences and readers. By having an effect on readers, a text turns its distance to reality into a productive one, into a distance that discloses new possibilities – Ricoeur speaks of the effects of fiction which are both "revealing and transforming" the possibilities that are dormant within the worlds of readers.[21] Even in Aristotle's work, a plot has to have a particular magnitude and duration that are not determined by the represented action but by the effect it is to have on its audience. Aristotle writes, for example, that a good plot "must have length but must be easily taken in by the memory."[22] Ricoeur notes that in this way an external criterion (the memory of the audience) becomes an internal criterion for the well-crafted plot, which points out the significant role of reception in emplotment.[23]

In *Time and Narrative 3*, Ricoeur picks up this analysis to study the way in which the distance implied by configuration prescribes and effectuates a certain experience on the side of the reader. Ricoeur calls this particular, literary experience across distance '*aisthēsis*,' "the multiple ways in which a work, in acting on a reader, *affects* that reader."[24] Aisthēsis is two-sided, coming both from the text and from the reader. It "combin[es] […] passivity and activity": passivity in as far as texts already *prescribe* a certain reception, activity in as far as it is

[20] "L'imitation ou la représentation est une activité mimétique en tant qu'elle produit quelque chose, à savoir précisément l'agencement des faits par la mise en intrigue." Ibid., 34 [59].

[21] "[R]évélante et transformante." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 158 [258].

[22] "ὥστε δεῖ καθάπερ ἐπὶ τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ζώων ἔχειν μὲν μέγεθος, τοῦτο δὲ εὐσύνοπτον εἶναι, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν μύθων ἔχειν μὲν μῆκος, τοῦτο δὲ εὐμνημόνευτον εἶναι." Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1451a.

[23] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 39 [67].

[24] "[L]'exploration des manières multiples dont une œuvre, en agissant sur un lecteur, l'*affecte.*" Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 167 [243].

up to the reader to actualize (or resist) these prescriptions.[25] To understand these dynamics between text and reader, it is therefore useful to trace the process of reception from the codes inscribed in the text to the active decoding on the side of the reader.

Beginning this process on the side of the text, Ricoeur commences his analysis of reception by emphasizing the presence of the author in the text, who has written her work with a certain aim and effect on audiences in mind, using such anticipated results in the structuring of the work. Reading a text, one always reads a particular someone's words and this 'someone' is present in the text as its 'implied author,' a term that Ricoeur picks up from the rhetorical narratology of Wayne C. Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction.*[26] Booth defines the implied author as "an ideal, literary, created version" of the writer and not as the biographical person, nor necessarily as the narrator.[27] The term refers, as might be expected, to the kind of author that the text implies, along with her world view, norms, and objectives that motivate the configuration of the story to achieve certain effects on the reader, who is seduced to enter into the author's implied moral universe and perhaps even share the values brought into play.[28] An example that might clarify this concept is the implied author of Henry Fielding's famous novel *Tom Jones*, who more or less coincides with the chatty narrator who clearly speaks in favour or against particular characters: this novel leaves the reader relatively little room for his own evaluations, as all the events are obviously stamped with the

[25] "Cet être affecté a ceci de remarquable qu'il combine, dans une expérience d'un type particulier, une passivité et une activité, qui permettent de désigner comme *réception* du texte l'*action* même de le lire." Ibid., 167 [243].

[26] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961).

[27] Ibid., 74–75.

[28] Booth argues that the implied author exerts her influence by anticipating certain effects on readers *through* textual configuration. He addresses such factors as the choice of the point of view, the efforts to set up a certain moral universe against which one is to judge the characters, the logic governing the balance between commentary and drama as marks left by the implied author, all of which position the reader to undergo the effects of the work. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, for example, the (intended) double effect of moral judgment and sympathy arises for the protagonist because one achieves just the right kind of distance to her because of Austen's mix of narrator's commentary with Emma's point-of-view. The reader is thereby placed at a spot from which he can judge Emma's behaviour (through the commentary) but still feel with her (through sharing her point-of-view). Booth asserts that such textual effects can be analysed as the implied author's rhetoric. Ibid., 243–66.

moral evaluations of the narrator.[29] Ricoeur argues that the implied author is present in a text in as far as it is a form of communication in which an author attempts to *seduce* the reader to submit to her axiological universe.[30] In this way, the text already points to or anticipates its reception, creating a room for aesthesis even across the distance relative to audiences implied by the configuration of the text.

Importantly for the analysis of texts such as *The Great Bay,* Ricoeur claims that implied authors are always present in the text, even if they hide themselves behind a text that presents itself as lacking a narrator or even a literary author – such as when a novel presents itself as a document merely stumbled upon in an archive. In *The Great Bay,* the author dissimulates himself behind the random collection of narrative fragments in an archive without apparent internal coherence, bestowing these fragments with the aura of realism as found documents. Yet, such "effacement of the author," Ricoeur writes in this respect, "is one rhetorical technique among others; it belongs to the panoply of disguises that masks the real author uses to transform himself or herself into the implied author."[31] While the haphazard and incomplete nature of the archive that constitutes *The Great Bay* generates an image of human reality as detached from the 'plot lines' of geological change, this image is still only conjured up by "the rhetoric of dissimulation" that is, ultimately, the result of a strategy of the author.[32] Ricoeur would still place this strategy under the heading of a rhetoric that includes "choices and […] norms that make the text […] the work of some speaker."[33] In a sense,

[29] At some point in the novel, the narrator even confesses that of all his characters, he feels most for Sophia, Tom Jones's love interest, thereby explicitly inviting a particular evaluation of this character. Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (Wordsworth Classics, 1999), 302.

[30] Ricoeur makes it clear that the implied author is a distinct category of analysis from that of the narrator, a rift which becomes apparent whenever "the narrator [*narrateur*] is dramatized as narrator." This happens, for example, in the case of the unreliable narrator, when it can become evident that the implied author passes judgment on the narrator. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 162-3 [236].

[31] "[L]'effacement de l'auteur est une technique rhétorique parmi d'autres; elle fait partie de la panoplie de déguisements et de masques dont l'auteur réel use pour se muer en auteur impliqué." Ibid., 161 [233].

[32] "La rhétorique de la dissimulation." Ibid., 161 [234].

[33] "[A]ux choix et aux normes qui font précisément du texte l'œuvre d'un énonciateur." Ibid., 161-2 [235].

the scale effects of *The Great Bay*, which juxtaposes narrative fragments with omniscient descriptions of geographical changes to the environment over the centuries and millennia, are examples of such a rhetoric, that, even if it appears to challenge the value of literature and narrative, is still the result of narrative communication and an implied author.

Ricoeur, however, wants to go even further than this by arguing that reading is not "a complement [a text] can do without."[34] To dispel the illusion that texts *exist* as texts without readers, Ricoeur turns to Michel Charles's analysis of certain literary texts that explicitly prescribe how they are to be interpreted, which highlights how reading is involved in the very structure of texts themselves.[35] In *Les Chants de Maldoror,* for example, Lautréamont famously warns his reader that if he does not "become of a sudden momentarily ferocious like what he is reading," bringing both a "rigorous logic and a spiritual tension at least equal to his distrust [then] the deadly emanations of this book will imbibe his soul as sugar absorbs water."[36] This warning interprets, ahead of the reader, the work itself, and appears to constrain the readers drastically in the options they have in appropriating it. Nevertheless, while Lautréamont inscribes a demand into his work of being read in a particular way, Ricoeur argues that Charles perceived that such prescriptions remain "so ambiguous that, by disorienting the reader, they free him."[37] Texts as *Les Chants de Maldoror* can, for example, lead to resistance on the side of the reader, or, at the very least, lead to a heightened consciousness of what it means to read in the first place. This creates space to evade the traps of the implied author and to take on the responsibility of reading differently. Another way of phrasing this is that the more a text prescribes a way of being read, the more explicit the reader's assigned

[34] "[L]a lecture s'ajoute au texte comme un *complément* qui peut faire défaut." Ibid., 164 [239].

[35] Michel Charles, *Rhétorique de la lecture* (Seuil, 1977).

[36] Comte de Lautréamont, *Les chants de Maldoror*, trans. by Guy Wernham (New Directions, 1965), 1; "Plût au ciel que le lecteur, enhardi et devenu momentanément féroce comme ce qu'il lit, trouve, sans se désorienter, son chemin abrupt et sauvage, à travers les marécages désolés de ces pages sombres et pleines de poison; car, à moins qu'il n'apporte dans sa lecture une logique rigoureuse et une tension d'esprit égale au moins à sa défiance, les émanations mortelles de ce livre imbiberont son âme comme l'eau le sucre." Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror: Les chants de Maldoror* (Librairie Générale Française, 1963), 41.

[37] "[L]es prescriptions de lecture déjà inscrites dans le texte sont si ambiguës qu'à force de désorienter le lecteur elles le libèrent." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 165 [240].

role becomes, and, consequently, the easier it becomes to resist this role. Somewhere between absolute constraint by the text and an absolute resort to solely one's own judgements is where the act of reading will have to find its balance. In the case of *The Great Bay*, part of the struggle of readers is to decode what the text signals when it begins narratives, only to abandon them without resolution: is the reader called upon to fill the lacunae between one narrative and another, or is a reading implied that results in a reflection on the limits of the act of reading at all?[38] Even the latter option would still point out how texts exploring the limits of reading call for reading to be actualized.

Both the 'implied author' and the inscribed rhetoric of reading point toward a reader who responds. This is why I now turn to Ricoeur's analysis of the theory of reading, for which he uses, mostly, the works of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauß, who are pioneers of the reader-response theory of literature.[39]

PHENOMENOLOGY OF RECEPTION

While texts do not exist without allusion to a reading to come, for Ricoeur, it is up to the reader to respond to this prescription of reading. This response has two sides, Ricoeur maintains: one which unfolds on the level of the phenomenology of reading in the concrete, individual experience of the text, the other on the level of a more general, intersubjective hermeneutics of literary history. Here, I turn first to an exposé of the phenomenology of reading, which take on significance for me because it shows the fundamental role that discordance

[38] All texts risk remaining unread, dead traces, as I argued in the previous chapter, that is, to be mere traces. This does not contradict the thesis that a text is only a text properly speaking when it is turned from a trace into a work projecting a meaning – this work is done by the reader according to Ricoeur.

[39] The latter's reputation has recently received blows from which it will be hard if not impossible to recover. A polemic started when historian Jens Westemeier was commissioned by the University of Constance to examine accusations that Jauß had been a part of the SS and Waffen-SS during the Second World War, accusations which include partaking in a voluntary foreign mission and even of having committed war crimes. Students of Jauß have attempted to defend his reputation against these claims. For an overview of this discussion, see: Jens Westemeier, *Hans Robert Jauß: Jugend, Krieg und Internierung* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2016); Westemeier's book is attacked by a defendant of Jauß here: Roland Galle, "Hans Robert Jauß im Kreuzfeuer: Anmerkungen zu Publikationen von Jens Westemeier, Ottmar Ette und Frank-Rutger Hausmann," *Romanische Forschungen* 130, no. 4 (December 15, 2018): 480–502.

plays in the experience of readers.[40] In the chapter "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader," Ricoeur develops this phenomenology mostly on the basis of Wolfgang Iser's work.

Wolfgang Iser was part of the so-called Constance School of literary theory (together with Jauß), and he is well-known for developing reader-response theory within literary studies. His works in the 1970s played an influential role in shaping the way literary theorists approached the role of readers, granting them a more active part to play in the constitution of meaning than new critics or structuralists allowed. When Ricoeur turns to Iser, it is to highlight the *incomplete* nature of literary works, which call for their *completion* in the act of reading performed by flesh-and-blood readers. According to Ricoeur, Iser gives two reasons why in a phenomenology of reading the reader is not just a supplement but a constitutive part of the literary work.[41]

What does it mean that a text is incomplete? This means, for Iser, that literary texts demand concretization in the reader's imagination. A novel, for example, is a text that requires the reader to build images in his mind of the characters and the events of the work. The novel's content gives sketches and hints for this, but it never exhaustively prescribes the way in which this concretization must take place.[42] There will remain lacunae, or what phenomenologist Roman Ingarden called "places of indeterminacy" [*Unbestimmtheitstellen*], where the text is poor in determinacy. At such moments, different interpretations remain possible, and hence it is up to the reader to both complete and make concrete what the text proposes.[43]

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[40] This will also gain prominence in Johns-Putra's theory below, and this present subsection prepares sustained discussion with her framework. See below, "Johns-Putra's Discordant Affective Reading," 258-269.

[41] Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (Wilhelm Fink, 1976); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (Wilhelm Fink, 1994); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

[42] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 166–7 [244]; Compare Iser's essay on the phenomenology of reading, which was not yet included in the original, German edition: Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 276–82.

[43] Roman Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk: Mit einem Anhang von den Funktionen der Sprache im Theaterschauspiel* (Niemeyer, 1972), 261–70; Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,* trans.

Next to this, the literary work does not appear for readers as a whole, as readers only encounter it sentence-by-sentence. A literary work only exists "as the intentional correlate of a sequence of sentences."[44] This means that the work as a whole arises as the single object that readers assume and construct *behind* the multiplicity of sentences. For Iser, a literary text forms a unity, but this unity – the world of the text – is only discovered and developed sentence by sentence rather than in one blow. Ricoeur adopts Iser's notion of the "wandering viewpoint" to make this point, which "expresses the twofold fact that the whole of the text can never be perceived at once and that, placing ourselves within the literary text, we travel with it as our reading progresses."[45] Voyaging through the text, the reader gradually builds an experience of its meaning as a whole. Each sentence builds on and modifies a reader's expectations that are the aggregated product of all sentences before it: in turn, each sentences creates new expectations that are in their turn validated or modified by sentences to follow.[46] What happens early in a novel changes the expectations about what will happen, which, if these expectations are upset, will cast a different light on what came before and the expectations to which that gave rise. The point is that the world of the text arises ultimately and gradually out of this process of modification of such expectations, which means that this

Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Northwestern University Press, 1973), 233-240; Ricoeur also frames the tension between reading and text as one between transcendence and immanence. William C. Dowling explains this in the following, illuminating way: "As I write this sentence, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy sits among other objects on the shelf across from me. But with this difference: the world of Middle Earth, of Frodo and Gandalf and Aragorn and the others, is 'immanent' within its three volumes, waiting to be brought alive or set free in the consciousness of a reader, as is not the case with the pipe rack or tobacco jar sitting beside them on the same shelf. What Ricoeur means by 'transcendence' then follows directly. As I begin to read, the world of Middle Earth takes shape as the setting of actions and events that are projected as having taken place independently of—that is, 'transcending' — the narrative discourse in which they are reported." William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative: An Introduction to* Temps et Récit (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 97.

[44] "[L]e corrélat intentionnel d'une séquence de phrases." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 167-8 [245].

[45] "[I]l exprime ce double fait que le tout du texte ne peut jamais être perçu à la fois; et que, situés nous-mêmes à l'intérieur du texte littéraire, nous voyageons avec lui au fur et à mesure que notre lecture avance." Ibid. 168 [245].

[46] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 108–18 [177-93].

world is constituted in the experience of reading and not anywhere in the text alone. Iser writes:

> Each sentence can achieve its end only by aiming at something beyond itself. As this is true of all the sentences in a literary text, the correlates constantly intersect, giving rise ultimately to the semantic fulfilment at which they had aimed. This fulfilment, however, takes place not in the text, but in the reader, who must 'activate' the interplay of the correlates prestructured by the sequence of sentences.[47]

The world of the text is therefore not the sum of all sentences but rather the experience that is the result of *moving* through them one by one. The reader constructs this world by allowing his expectations, which are themselves built on retention of previous sentences, to be continuously altered.

Taken together, these two features show that the reader can and must respond to the text as his activity concretizes the intentional correlate of the work. The text itself, on the other hand, is revealed to be at the same time poor in determinacy and excessive in meaning.[48] No text can fully control the way it is read, as the very constitution of the literary work relies on the synthesizing wandering viewpoint of the reader to concretize the intentional correlate of the sentences – this is what Ricoeur calls the lack of determinacy. But precisely because of this lack, literature allows for multiple and different readings, which result in an inexhaustible excess of meaning over any concrete interpretation. As with a musical score, the text can be 'performed' differently when each reading places emphasis now here, now there, or stitches together its component in other ways, resulting in vastly different intentional correlates.[49] An important conclusion of this theory is that it will never do to simply study the way a text prefigures its reading experience, because the meaning of the literary work does not lie solely in the text but also in the actual, and partly free, response of the

[47] "[J]eder Satz [vermag nur zu erreichen], was er 'besagen' will, wenn er auf etwas hinzielt. Da dies für alle Sätze in fiktionalen Texten gilt, strahlen ihre Korrelate ständig ineinander, wodurch die von ihnen visierte semantische Erfüllung angezeigt ist. Diese Erfüllung indes findet nicht im Text, sondern im Leser statt, der das in der Satzfolge vorstrukturierte Zusammenspiel der Korrelate 'betätigen' muß." Ibid., 110 [180].

[48] "[U]n défaut de déterminité, mais aussi un excès de sens." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 169 [274].

[49] Ibid., 167–8 [246].

reader to the work, which is "a dynamic *interaction* between text and reader."[50] According to Ricoeur, from this, three dialectics of reading ensue that are of interest for the current chapter.

First, there is a dialectic between discordance and concordance. Especially in modern literature, to read is to resist the author and her deceptions: the reader must work actively with or against the implied author to 'finish' the story that seems fragmented and discordant. Modernists, like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, even place the burden of configuration fully on the shoulders of the reader, who will not only have to picture the diegetic world but also actively construe the text's coherence (which is no longer given).[51] Important, however, is that this "strategy of deception" still relies on the assumption of coherence which counterbalances the discordance on the level of the text itself.[52] In *The Great Bay*, for example, the 'shock effect' achieved by the discordance between the narratives and the geophysical frame that accompanies them arises in large part out of the frustrations of readers that proceed by looking for coherence among the narratives but failing to find the means to establish such unity: without this desire for coherence, however, the novel would fail to achieve this effect. This will be important later, as the back-and-forth between discordance and concordance means that even the planetary, multiscalar discordance of novels such as *The Great Bay* relies on certain traditional assumptions of readers, expecting some form of literary unity, even if they upset these assumptions.

[50] "[E]iner dynamischen Wechselwirkung von Text und Leser." Iser, *Act of Reading*, 107 [176].

[51] As Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative 1*, this continuous burden of interpretation to constitute coherence (but always at the price of further question, inciting the need for further interpretations) is exactly what Frank Kermode analyses in his *The Genesis of Secrecy*. Interpretation of certain works (the Gospels, Kafka, Joyce) creates rather than abolishes indeterminacy, in as far as every interpretation must be selective and leaves details at the wayside that will spawn the need for further interpretation. That which is excluded in one reading becomes the point of departure of another. The reader will therefore have to keep on responding, with each new interpretation only creating further questions and puzzles. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Harvard University Press, 1979).

[52] "[L]a stratégie de déception." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 168 [246].

A second dialectic, according to Ricoeur, is that between "a lack of determination and an excess of meaning."[53] Precisely because texts are never able to determine their interpretations ahead of the moment of reading, they cannot but allow for multiple readings. Ricoeur goes as far as to argue that reading here approaches writing, in the sense that "through its unavoidably selective character, reading reveal[s] an unwritten aspect in the text."[54] The reader finishes the text by concretizing it and by bestowing it with form, taking over from the point at which the author had to abandon the work. In an important sense, works like *The Great Bay,* which are so indeterminate qua structure and plot that they appear to break the narrative form elicit the most productive and original modes of reading. Pendell's book raises questions, for example, about what this selection of narratives is meant to illustrate, whether thematic resemblances are to be followed or abandoned, and about the 'meaning' or intention of the discordance between planet and world at its heart, and any reading will have to navigate these elements.

Finally, there ensues a dialectic between familiarity and unfamiliarity, as the reader must have some access to the book's meaning, at least enough to make its world his, but he should not become so completely subjugated to it that he loses himself entirely. On the other hand, a work that keeps its doors shut to the reader will not find its completion in the act of reading. Readers therefore have to open themselves for the experience prescribed by the text, which, however, is immediately also limited by the recognition that the text's excess of meaning "negates all the reader's attempts to adhere to the text and to its instructions."[55] This negativity is important for Ricoeur, as it creates the demand that the reader becomes active, resisting and completing the text beyond what is already inscribed in it. This pushes readers from what is already familiar to them to what is new or unfamiliar. Only after reading can one

[53] "[U]n défaut de déterminité, mais aussi un excès de sens," Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 169 .

[54] "[P]ar son caractère inéluctablement sélectif, la lecture révélait dans le texte un côté non écrit." Ibid., 169 [247].

[55] "La 'bonne' lecture […] assume le démenti infligé par le surplus de sens, le polysémantisme de l'œuvre, à toutes les tentatives du lecteur pour adhérer au texte et à ses instructions." Ibid., 169 [247].

determine "whether or not the stasis of disorientation has generated a dynamics of reorientation."[56] However, Ricoeur would see in the disorientation of works such as *The Great Bay* the contours of a literary experience that is constituted *both* by the text and by the reader. As such, this experience can achieve something new for readers precisely by putting pressure on what is already familiar to them.

In sum, what I want to draw from Ricoeur's discussion of Iser, is that reading and reception include discordance. The very act of reading plays out the discordance between the horizon of the text and that of readers, while, for Ricoeur, any interpretation can only partly answer to the polysemy of a text, which, due to a lack in determination, always allows other readings to emerge that are in tension with it. Moreover, a text has an effect solely to the degree in which readers manage to actualize its unfamiliarity through their capacities of concretization and structuring. This therefore involves a moment of defamiliarizing what the reader thought to already know or understand. Disorientation is the condition for reorientation.

HERMENEUTICS OF RECEPTION: RICOEUR ON JAUß

The second strand of Ricoeur's reception theory is a *hermeneutics* rather than a *phenomenology* of reception, for which Ricoeur critically adopts the works of Hans Robert Jauß. According to Jauß, the reader is situated within a community of readers by partaking in a broader literary history. Readers do not find their minds blank, their expectations void, when they first read works such as *Hamlet* or a *Don Quixote*, as these works have co-shaped the historically acquired pre-knowledge that readers have about such matters as genre, tropes, and emplotment strategies. The work of a hermeneutics of reception is to return to past literary products to unearth the gap they once provided between the expectations of the audience of their age and innovation performed by the work.[57]

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[56] "[C]'est l'après-lecture qui décide si la stase de désorientation a engendré une dynamique de réorientation." Ibid., 170 [248].

[57] Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Suhrkamp, 1982); Hans Robert Jauß, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw, with an introduction by Wlad Godzich (University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Hans Robert Jauß, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, with an introduction by Paul de Man (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Here, again, reading is a matter of discordance, because it aims at retrieving the unfamiliarity that a work introduced in literary history. Ricoeur points out that in Jauß's early works, literary history is understood to be a *tradition* that combines continuity and discontinuity. Each literary work constitutes a gap between what was handed down – "the system of references shaped by earlier traditions" – and the new horizon of expectation it opened.[58] It replies to the expectations engendered by works that precede it, while it also adds something to this heritage that can only be understood in terms of its deviation from these sedimented expectations. The task of the literary historian, in this theory, is to attempt to recover the original horizon of expectations to be able to mark out the innovation that a particular work has achieved.

In his later works, as Ricoeur discusses, Jauß further develops this schema into a theory of reading that goes through three steps. The first step of Jauß's reading theory involves the act of simply reading a book once to follow its story in the way most readers approach literary works. Then, in a second step, a transition is made from a first 'enjoyment' of the book to understanding it. This understanding is always selective, Ricoeur points out, as readers re-read the work with particular questions in mind. As an example, one may think of questions such as how the first line of Anna Karenina foreshadows its end – such reading is therefore guided by the awareness of particular lacunae left open by the first reading, and it brings out new answers but at the price of backgrounding certain other elements that fall beyond the perimeters of the questions adopted by the reader. Finally, in a third step, the hermeneutics of reception goes further by adding a historizing element to interpretation. It situates the work in its historical context to perceive it as an answer to questions its original audience had.[59] This literary hermeneutic is not just an archaeology of public taste because after the historical reading, one will have also learned something about oneself and one's expectations of literature by unearthing their history, while this may also deepen the appreciation of the work, if only by "disentangl[ing] aesthetic pleasure from the mere satisfaction

[58] "[L]e système de références façonné par les traditions antérieurs." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 171 [251] .

[59] Ibid., 174–5 [256-7].

of contemporary prejudices and interests."[60] To discover that the classics were once innovative is thus to learn something new about one's own sedimented expectations about literature.

For the purposes of this chapter, which aims to study how multiscalar discordance may enter the act of interpretation, it is important to note that this approach conceives of the familiar as the once unfamiliar. Phrased otherwise, hermeneutics aims to reread familiar expectations of literature by rendering vivid again the question to which they responded, that is, to regain a sense of such expectations as unfamiliar or new. Why does one have this particular set of expectations of literature, what gaps did they allows audiences of the past to cross over? Answering this question is to see the familiar as the once unfamiliar, and this is why Ricoeur can place "the merely historicizing question - what did the text say? […] under the control of the properly hermeneutical question - what does the text say to me and what do I say to the text?"[61] The third step is therefore of more than mere historical interest, because it remains guided by the first two steps, which anchor it in the reader's present.

If performed well, Ricoeur states that, according to Jauß, this process ends in a moment of *catharsis*, designating the unleashing of effects of the work on the reader as the result of his effort of reading.[62] The aesthetic distance provided by the literary work relative to one's regular experiences can shake or confront the customs and norms of the reader when the alien world presented in the text inspires the reader to see things differently. The work then presents an alternative view of things to the reader.. "[C]atharsis sets the reader free for new evaluations of reality."[63] Precisely because the work takes one out of one's context, opening a distance and a discordant, unfamiliar force relative to what is known as familiar, can it smash sedimented preconceptions on the way back from the world of the text to that of the reader. Ricoeur describes this moment of 'purification' as the moment when "readers are rendered free in spite of themselves": by submitting to the work and allowing the work to

[60] "[D]égager le plaisir esthétique de la simple satisfaction des préjugés et des intérêts contemporains." Ibid., 175 [257].

[61] "La question simplement historicisante – que disait le texte? – reste sous le contrôle de la question proprement herméneutique – que me dit le texte et que dis-je au texte?" Ibid., 175 [257].

[62] Ibid., 176-7 [258-9]; Jauß, *Aesthetic Experience*, 92-111 [165-191].

[63] "La *catharsis* […] rend le lecteur libre pour de nouvelles évaluations de la réalité qui prendront forme dans la relecture." Ibid., 176 [258].

render unfamiliar what was familiar, new horizons are opened *beyond* the work – as it is allowed to *work upon* the reader.[64]

DISCORDANCE WITHIN RECEPTION

Ricoeur's appropriations of Jauß and Iser have as their most important conclusion that reading is not just a 'reception' of a pre-structured message but that it involves a particular kind of activity on the side on of the reader. This activity co-constitutes the meaning of the work. However, this activity is only active in as far as it is also passive and receptive – reading 'creates' meaning through submission *and* resistance to the work that is read. It is thereby situated in what could be called a liminal zone between the reader and the text. An important quote of Ricoeur's explains this well:

> Reading appears by turns as an interruption in the course of action and as a new impetus to action. [...] To the extent that readers subordinate their expectations to those developed by the text, they themselves become unreal to a degree comparable to the unreality of the fictive world toward which they emigrate. Reading then becomes a place, itself unreal, where reflection takes a pause. On the other hand, inasmuch as readers incorporate – little matter whether consciously or unconsciously – into their vision of the world the lessons of their readings, in order to increase the prior readability of this vision, then reading is for them something other than a place where they come to rest; it is a medium they cross through.[65]

[64] "[L]e lecteur est rendu libre malgré lui." Ibid., 178 [260].

[65] "Celle-ci apparaît tour à tour comme une *interruption* dans le cours de l'action et comme une *relance* vers l'action. [...] En tant que le lecteur soumet ses attentes à celles que le texte développe, il s'irréalise lui-même à la mesure de l'irréalité du monde fictif vers lequel il émigre; la lecture devient alors un lieu lui-même irréel où la réflexion fait une pause. En revanche, en tant que le lecteur incorpore – consciemment ou inconsciemment, peu importe – les enseignements de ses lectures à sa vision de monde, afin d'en augmenter la lisibilité préalable, la lecture est pour lui autre qu'un *lieu* où il s'arrête; elle est un *milieu* qu'il traverse." Ibid., 179 [262-3].

It cannot be emphasized enough that only the crossing of this textual 'medium' [*milieu*] that itself does not find its origins in the reader activates the reader's capacity to *create* something. This means that *in* the reader's imagination, through his 'wandering viewpoint,' he is able to craft a world and bestow it with meaning, while he himself *has not created* this world that he takes from the text. The literary world is, after all, received from the work, while this statement immediately needs to be supplemented by the claim that this reception is nowhere if not in the reader's active concretization of the world of the text.[66]

In light of the remainder of this chapter, I would like to emphasize with Iser that interpretation is therefore always a discordant process that involves equally activity and passivity, familiarity and unfamiliarity. Through interpretation, readers discover that they can formulate what they did not yet know themselves capable of formulation. In Iser's words, "the production of meaning in literary texts [...] does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness."[67] Through the act of reading, then, the reader can discover that he can formulate what he could not think of before.

This point is further clarified by recourse to a section of George Poulet's 1969 essay "The Phenomenology of Reading," which is quoted approvingly by Iser in *The Act of Reading,* and which captures the spirit of Ricoeur's work too. Poulet asserts that through *reading* one constitutes, as it were, a subject different from oneself *within* oneself. Reading is therefore not merely a triumph of a hermeneutic subject that *enriches* itself through engagement with texts but also features a moment of alienation or disruption when the reader's activity is used to welcome something external to him within himself. In Poulet's words:

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[66] This idea was already prefigured in Gadamer's hermeneutics, which discusses the interaction between text and interpreter under the banner of a dialogue. Gadamer argues that while "the text brings a subject matter into language," it remains ultimately "the achievement of the interpreter" that it can do this. "Der Text bringt eine Sache zur Sprache, aber daß er das tut, ist am Ende die Leistung des Interpreten. Beide sind daran beteiligt." Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 390 [391].

[67] This quote is taken from the last chapter of the English edition of *The Implied Reader,* which misses in the German original. See also my footnote 42 on page 227. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 294.

> I feel sure that as soon as I think something, that something becomes in some indefinable way my own. Whatever I think is a part of my mental world. And yet [when reading a novel] here I am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist. Already the notion is inconceivable and seems even more so if I reflect that, since every thought must have a subject to think it, this thought which is alien to me and yet in me, must also have in me a subject which is alien to me. It all happens, then, as though reading were the act by which a thought managed to bestow itself within me with a subject not myself. Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I which I pronounce is not myself.[68]

Reading is therefore at once something the reader *does,* while this *doing* is immediately also a submission to something or someone else, whose thoughts are thought as if they were one's own – but only if this sense of ownness is transposed by intrusion of another.

Formulated in terms of discordance, this means that readers *learn* by injecting their own capacities with something that is other or not yet known, that is, by rendering what was familiar unfamiliar, only to discover the unfamiliar capacities and potentialities of what appeared to be already known.[69] Through reception of work, the capacities of a reader are provoked and pushed beyond their limits by first surrendering them to something that is other than the reader – the text – to then let this other guide readers toward new possibilities of acting and relating to the world. The surplus of the text – both indeterminate and excessive in meaning – allows something new to emerge from the mists of the familiar. In these ways, as an individual or as part of the public, reading becomes both an interruption and augmentation of praxis: a submission that enriches the reader's capacity to resist and alter the course of things.

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[68] George Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1, no.1 (1969): 56, parts of which are quoted in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 153-4 [248-9].

[69] In the previous chapter, I discussed the possibility of a 'viral' reading of hermeneutics, in which interpretation moves through processes of mutation and sprawling, rather than in a circular fashion. In some way, here, the 'intrusion' of the voice of another in one's own imaginary capacities is another example of elements within hermeneutics that move in the proximity of such viral or parasitic models of interpretation. Cf., above, "Colebrook's Critique of Humanism," 183-190.

Yet, a question should be posed to Ricoeur's theory, which is whether it goes far enough in the direction of this discordant, fragile reading to cope with the kind of planetary discordance that emerges in Anthropocene fictions. Novels such as *The Great Bay* appear to prioritize de-familiarizing strategies to such a degree that they block or suspend any return to what was familiar, so that they *weaken* rather than *deepen* a reader's understanding of the world (and the planet). The focal point of this problem lies in Ricoeur's adherence to the thesis that literature, in its appeal to the reader, is "undividedly revealing [*révélante*] and transforming [*transformante*]," to the point where "discovering [*découvrir*] and inventing [*inventer*] are indistinguishable."[70] In this quote, invention is framed as a species of discovery, that is to say, as the realization of a possibility that was already there. As I have shown above, Ricoeur always thinks of such possibilities as elements of the practical understanding and the semantics of action that form the prefigurative stage of mimesis and narrative.[71] Yet, are there truly any precursors in practical understanding for what it means to view human agency from a planetary perspective that lie dormant and await 'discovery'? The Anthropocene requires that we place the planetary 'background conditions' in the forefront, which appears to interrupt the 'semantics of action' by figuring human agency as mere physical occurrence, embedded without larger forces and flows of energy. From the perspective of this challenge, however, Ricoeur's mimetic spiral that begins and culminates in practical understanding would become something of a straight-jacket, confining humanity to the limits of practical understanding, which would from the outset hamper the openness somehow required to conceptualize human action as an integral part of the planetary.

The authors I will study in the rest of this chapter provide necessary interventions in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. However, I will stress that they do not abandon hermeneutics but merely stress the importance of reckoning with discordance within interpretation when engaging with Anthropocene fictions. Ricoeur's reception theory will therefore be challenged and pushed beyond its limits, while it still adds crucial elements to understanding the role of discordance in interpretation.

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[70] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 158 [229].

[71] Cf., above, 77-87.

CLARK'S DISCORDANT SCALAR READING

A first intervention can be found in the work of Timothy Clark, whose name is closely tied to scale critique in the Anthropocene. What happens to interpretation and the role of the reader when a text invokes multiple, conflicting scales at the same time? Ricoeur's work reflected on discordance in reception, but it has not touched upon the problem of multiscalar texts, which imply several, conflicting scales of reading simultaneously. In this section, I will therefore read Timothy Clark's pioneering work on multiscalarity from the angle of reader reception theory, highlighting the specific challenges it poses for theories of interpretation and hermeneutic application.

Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* is often seen as a watershed publication in drawing literary theory and ecocriticism away from a place-based orientation which emphasized locality, dwelling, or meaningful readings of the landscape to a broader, planetary outlook that includes a reflection on the complexity involved when considering the multiple scales of the planet in geoscientific terms.[72] As Eva Horn writes, "to speak of humans as a geophysical force implies a passage between incompatible scales – from individual actions to collective or cumulative behavior, and from collective behavior to a kind of agency that is effective on a global level."[73] Approaching environmental problems on the planetary scale would disrupt inherited modes of reading and interpreting on lower-level scales due to the scale effects of the planetary system that engender a certain "unreadability" of the Anthropocene.[74] This became apparent, too, from my example above of *The Great Bay*, in which a deliberate confusing play with scales frustrates attempts to interpret the meaning of the novel.

In contrast to Clark's often pessimistic readings, I will argue that Ricoeur allows me to claim that the discordance ensuing from multiscalar reading is not a merely negative result, in as far as such reading complicates but does not destroy the meaning found on any

[72] Marco Caracciolo, for example, points out how Clark criticizes the assumption of ecocriticism that interventions on the level of cultural analysis may sort some kind of positive effect on the level of the climate system. The spatial and temporal scales of cultural intervention, Clark argues, cannot be scaled up to those of the planet without giving rise to qualitative changes of phenomena under consideration. Marco Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*: *Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (University of Virginia Press, 2021), 20.

[73] Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 141.

[74] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 13.

single scale considered alone.[75] This conclusion further develops intuitions that Clark himself sometimes brings to the surface, as he writes that, "the breakdowns of inherited demarcations of thought can still become a means of disclosure and revision, tempering the sense of alarm with a host of new insights."[76] This section will therefore end with a complication but not abolishment of a hermeneutics of reception.

SCALE EFFECTS

In this section, I will first explain Clark's analysis of scales in Anthropocene fiction, to turn to its implications for the hermeneutics of reception in the following section. As I will explain here, Clark has argued that the discordance between the multiple scales of the Anthropocene destabilizes common practices and assumptions of interpretation. To understand such scale effects, it helps to first define what a scale is before turning to Clark.

A scale is not a medium through which something is measured, such as length or duration. Instead, a scale is a "variation of orders of magnitude" within a certain measure.[77] I rely on the same unit of measurement whether I am tracking how much my sons have grown or estimating the distance between the Earth and the Moon. Yet the enormous difference in order of magnitude between these examples also marks a different relationship to space itself, not least because each requires entirely different kinds of instruments to measure it. As in this example, a scale tends to only draw attention to its characteristics when one compares

[75] Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw interpret Clark as claiming that reading should unfold on multiple scales at once, i.e., that the planetary does not *overwrite* the 'cultural' or more phenomenologically attuned modes of interpretations but merely *adds* to them – although this 'supplement' of the planetary gives rise to new tensions and questions. Clark would be "advocating reading simultaneously through multiple and contradictory interpretive frameworks," which means that scale framing is not an attempt to simply abandon the (familiar) appearance of the planet on lower scales of perception in everyday life. They argue that while "while the [planet] always exceed the [cultural scale], the abstractions of the latter will not make any sense, particularly given its dynamic and emergent nature, without the localizations of the former." As will become apparent below, I second this interpretation, arguing that scale effects, in this way, give rise to a complicating discordance that is troubling not because it would be reductive but simply because more dimensions are added to interpretation that give rise to new fault lines of interpretation. Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw, "Introduction: The Rising Tide of Climate Change Fiction," *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 1 (2018): 3.

[76] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, xi.

[77] Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 144.

it to other scales. Horn and Bergthaller describe this as a "*scale variation*."[78] Such variations may in turn give rise to scale effects, which "appear when the process of upscaling or downscaling beyond a given threshold brings about problems in functionality, structure, resilience or even vitality."[79] An example is how architectural models of buildings on a smaller scale have completely different structural qualities than those on the scale on which they are built.[80] In his work, Clark defines scale effects as the effect that occurs when "phenomena that are invisible at the normal levels of perception but only emerge as one changes the spatial or temporal scale at which the issues are framed."[81]

In the case of the Anthropocene, Clark argues, scale effects have the perilous consequence that seemingly progressive interpretations on lower-level scales may turn out to have destructive sides on a higher-level of analysis – such as when "an advance of human freedom" due to the extension of human rights of larger parts of the globe is accompanied by a destructive shadow side of "a species experiencing a boom in numbers […] through the discovery of vast resources of fossil fuels."[82] With Clark, authors as Derek Woods have therefore argued that the Anthropocene does not have human intelligence as its object but instead "modern terraforming assemblages," consisting of a multitude of human and nonhuman agents, such as technologies and inorganic systems, that together result in the planetary forces causing the Anthropocene.[83] Does the Anthropocene therefore question the validity of interpretations and reception of works that adopt individual human scales as their frame of reference? This would mean that Anthropocene fictions such as *The Great Bay* suggest that the hermeneutic model of application has become problematic, as they explore some insurmountable tensions between the planetary scale and those involved in meaningful human action on lower levels.

Clark's analysis is developed in discussion with the work of Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz in their study of how the "technological complexity" of human agency gives rise to

[78] Ibid., 144.

[79] Ibid., 145.

[80] Ibid., 144.

[81] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 22.

[82] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 13.

[83] Derek Woods, "Scale Critique for the Anthropocene," *the minnesota review* 83 (2014): 138.

a series of dysfunctions that exceed human control.[84] Clark particularly refers to the concept of three levels of complexity in the relation between human agency and technology that these authors develop in *The Techno-Human Condition.*[85] Level I complexity describes traditional notions of technology as instruments used with a particular aim, while Level II addresses higher-level context of technological and social networks in which these particular technologies are embedded. Finally, Level III indicates the incalculable and complex impact of technology on a "physical and temporal scale and complexity [that] overwhelm both traditional conceptions of what a thing is and what 'understanding' it could mean."[86] Clark's example, again taken from Allenby and Sarewitz, is how an invention as the automobile can be seen as means of transport (Level I), as embedded in socio-technological systems relying on fossil fuel extraction (Level II), but also as entangled in large-scale environmental histories of resource systems, capitalism, climate change, aesthetics, even freedom and emancipation (Level III). The point for Clark is that in the Anthropocene, "more events and problems are emerging at Level III, rendering obsolete modes of thought that are confined to Levels I and II, even if those still describe the kinds of thinking almost all people try to live by."[87] In short, the Anthropocene results in a kind of scalar disorder, in which planetary scales are implied beyond what humans can easily make sense of or take responsibility for.

SCALAR DISORDER AND HERMENEUTICS

This Anthropocene disorder gives rise to three related blows to inherited modes of reading and interpreting that have implications for the Ricoeurian model as I developed it above.

First, Clark is critical of theories of interpretation that claim that reading ecological aware texts can change the world by changing cultural narratives. In this approach, which surfaces in ecocriticism, "a critic's job is taken to mean highlighting the book as enacting in fictional miniature a cultural politics that could be held usefully to apply, scaled-up again, to

[84] Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, *The Techno-Human Condition* (MIT Press, 2011), 70.

[85] Ibid., 31-85.

[86] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 7-8.

[87] Ibid. 9.

innumerable people and situations in actual life."[88] There are for Clark two problems with this ecocritical aim in the Anthropocene, taking into account scalar effects.

First, because the goal of interpretation is already identified beforehand, it entraps interpretation within a narrow circle of truisms and morally self-evident statements, for instance that one should have more respect for the nonhuman world.[89] In Ricoeurian language: pre-understanding would be so guiding in the interpretation that this risks overwriting the unfamiliarity of texts, or the possibility that they disrupt rather than affirm one's view of the world. Second, and more problematically, this kind of criticism, because it departs and culminates in a refiguration of the 'cultural imaginary,' adopts a model of purposeful human action in which culture is seen as an important determinant for actual outcomes. This kind of criticism would be blind to processes on larger scales that are beyond conscious direction and that completely disorient understanding of human agency and the world (Level III processes).[90] Clark asks whether it is really culture and ideas, convictions and images that drive the changes on a planetary scale, or whether it is rather more anonymous and large-scale "material modes of production, food habits, energy use, reproductive trends and so on."[91] If the latter, would criticism then not just be "a consolidating kind of diversionary side-show, blind to its relative insignificance"[92]? Turning a critical eye to Ricoeur's theory as I elucidated it above, one may wonder whether it is enough to depart from a symbolically mediated practical understanding or whether the Anthropocene forces us into the multiscalar ambiguity of

[88] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 77.

[89] Ibid., 77.

[9090] When Ricoeur discusses the political efficacy of the imagination, he is susceptible to similar criticism. Arguing that the imagination plays a role in political life by engendering a dialectics between ideology and utopia, or, between conservative but inevitable forces related to the identity of a group and expectations of this group's future that may even call for a subversion of its identity, his analysis always remains close to the sphere of human, intentional agency, closed-off, conceptually at least, from the intrusions of nonhuman forces or from the political consequences of human actions on the nonhuman planet. Paul Ricœur, "L'idéologie et l'utopie: deux expressions de l'imaginaire sociale" in *Du texte à l'action: Essais d'herméneutique, 2* (Seuil, 1986), 397-393; Paul Ricoeur, "Ideology and Utopia" in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, 2,* with a foreword by Richard Kearney (Northwestern University Press, 2007), 308-325.

[91] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 19.

[92] Ibid., 21.

a kind of semantic purgatory, in which the meaning of things on one scale is held in suspense when seen on another scale.

Second, Clark also criticizes the idea that literary history and the past contexts of canonical texts are meaningful points of reference in the Anthropocene. Contemporary readers will have to engage in a new kind of retroactive activation of meaning in literary texts that did not explicitly thematize the impact of human actions on Level III processes of the planet. The pronounced role of automobiles in *The Great Gatsby*, to use Clark's example, cannot now be "disengaged from such environmentally degrading impacts as increased consumption, [...] and expanded resource use," even if this was not Fitzgerald's intention or even if these connections were lost on his contemporaries.[93] This means that "to name or describe the significant act being represented in the text, we must now respect the break between the retrospective insights of the Anthropocene and the poem's [or narrative's] more benign significance in its original context."[94] For Clark, this retrospective reading deregulates intended and inherited meanings of a text, which disrupts what Gadamer would call a text's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the way a history of reception has already impacted and furnished the reader's expectations upon encountering an influential text.[95] It is as if a force alien to tradition comes to subvert the text, and "reading cannot pretend to be just some act of retrieval," because the horizon of the text will always have been too limited to do justice to the newly discovered planetary horizon of the Anthropocene.[96] Reading then becomes the mark of a break or rupture to the past, and the focus is not on the innovative contribution of a work to its tradition but on the blindness of a large part of literary tradition for the entanglement of humans with

[93] Ibid., 52; Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby: The Authorized Text,* ann. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Simon & Schuster, 1995); One could also think of the examples given by Pieter Vermeulen in his *Literature and the* Anthropocene, which "show how insights into the entanglement of nature and society and of life and geology make it possible to revisit literary history and read *Moby-Dick*, for instance, as a dramatization of the human's destructive mania in the face of a wilful nature, or appreciate the extent to which Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* powers its iconic account of American freedom and transcontinental mobility through the obscene expenditure of fossil fuels." Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020), 19.

[94] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 53.

[95] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 298-305 [305-12].

[96] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 54.

larger-scale physical processes. This, too, impacts Ricoeur's hermeneutics of reception, as its inclusion of historicist modes of reading it now puts it under pressure.

In a final blow Clark strikes out at both the narrative representation of climate change and at the climate novel as its popular format. Clark's critique is split in two strands here. First, he argues that the Anthropocene cannot be represented through narrative. "Scale effects in particular defy sensuous representation or any plot confined, say, to human-to-human dramas and intentions, demanding new, innovative modes of writing that have yet convincingly to emerge."[97] Because the Anthropocene resists readability on any one scale alone, always implying an interplay between scales, Clark argues that narrative representation – tied to familiar, human scales – necessarily simplifies the dimensions of the planetary to the degree that it loses it. For Clark, narrative cannot address the planetary adequately because "[the Anthropocene] cannot be pictured adequately in some sensuous image in the way that, for example, poverty can be depicted in the form of an ill-fed family huddled together in a shabby room."[98] The Anthropocene would therefore raise questions about the representative functions of narrative, which would fall short of capturing the inter-scalar dynamics of the planetary crisis.[99]

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[97] Ibid., 80.

[98] One may wonder, however, whether Clark's argument does not cut some corners here. Is poverty, for example, really captured by such a simple image, which does not yet tell the reader anything about its deeper sociological and economic causes? On the other hand, could a picture of ecological destruction through large-scale mining or the image of enormous algae blooms not also symbolize the Anthropocene in a similar abbreviated way? These questions could direct us to the first volume of *Time and Narrative,* where Ricoeur's attempts to stretch the notion of plot and narrative to still hold up on the levels of the geographical scales implied by the work of historians such as Ferdinand Braudel. Braudel is well-known for invoking the *longue durée* of history, the embeddedness of human agents in larger, environmental and sociological histories. While neither Braudel nor Ricoeur trace historical processes all the way up to the level of planetary scales, it does show that the plot and narrative representation are already more flexible and able to take on scalar effects than Clark makes it seem here. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 73; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 1*, 206-226 [287-315].

[99] Strangely, Clark himself wrestles with the question of how important the matter of representation is when it comes to narrative. While some part of his own work is dedicated to criticizing the limits of narrative representation, as in his example of the image of poverty, he later accuses literary scholar Adam Trexler of focusing too strictly on representation. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 179.

The second strand concerns the question whether the form of the novel is suited at all to deal with the scalar problems of the Anthropocene. One element of this critique is that novels might be too conventional, which is again a question of how to balance familiarity and unfamiliarity. For Clark the novel's familiar, "still-dominant conventions of plotting, characterization and setting," will have to be "openly acknowledged as pervaded by anthropocentric delusion" because they cut out a realm of human agency as distinct from the more anonymous planetary.[100] Such illusions would be all the more perilous as they buy into what readers find 'interesting,' which are, according to Clark, mostly human-human conflicts.[101] In terms of this chapter, the novel then becomes the locus where the unfamiliar more-than-human dimensions of the Anthropocene are tamed and reduced to a kind of soothing representation of a familiar scene. These two strands taken together lead to a denunciation of narrative art in the Anthropocene, which, in Ricoeur's vocabulary, would mean that the planetary is a temporal phenomenon that utterly resists humanization because it would so unfamiliar that it can only trump and not widen what is familiar to readers.

Overall, Clark's attention for the scalar problems of the Anthropocene presents the haunting presence of the planetary scale as a potential *rupture* for literature and its readers. This means that, ultimately, the planetary is 'framed' by Clark as a radical form of unfamiliarity and discordance, which is to say, something that cannot be framed within the languages, traditions, and symbols of a culture of readers but that will present itself as fault lines in this received cultural repository. The challenge this poses for a Ricoeurian model as I have described it above is whether this kind of unfamiliarity can still result in a re-description or refiguration of what is familiar, that is, whether any act of application or reception is possible of these planetary scalar effects, which provide a new, large-scale framing of human agency.

SCALE EFFECTS AS MEANINGFUL DISCORDANCE

Clark mostly emphasizes how the Anthropocene upsets inherited modes of reading and interpretation, as I have stressed in the previous section. This may give rise to the idea that the

[100] Ibid., 191.

[101] "Artistic work that attempts to convey the Anthropocene at its most counter-intuitive has the challenge of somehow mapping it onto those topics and psychological and cognitive structures that constitute the 'interesting' […] for art and literature are nothing without a significant audience." Ibid., 176.

Anthropocene also puts pressure on literary hermeneutics in a Ricoeurian vein. In this section, I would like to defend hermeneutics by deepening it in dialogue with Clark's theory. My strategy here will be to position Clark within a hermeneutics of reception, which allows me to show why scale effects not only complicate interpretation but also generate a new meaning of texts. To illustrate this claim, I will first present Clark's scalar critique of Raymond Carver's *Elephant* to then connect this to Ricoeur's model of reception.

As an example of scalar framing, Clark interprets *Elephant* – a short story by Raymond Carver – on three different scales to show how these scalar frames respectively affect the meaning of the story.[102] Like many of Carver's stories, *Elephant* takes place in an unnamed, generic semi-urban American setting. Its protagonist and narrator is a divorced man, ensnared by the financial and emotional demands of several of his family members – his mother, brother, sister, and son – who keep requesting him to send more money. Although his own financial situation is tight, he knows his relatives are struggling, and he finds it difficult to refuse their calls. Pressure and frustration occasionally overwhelm the protagonist, and he sometimes threatens to simply leave it all behind and migrate to Australia. Resignation and some sense of peace always win out in the end. The story ends when the narrator runs into a colleague who drives a brand-new car, bought on loan, inviting him to soar off together toward nowhere in particular.

Clark's reading of this short story is innovative because he goes to great lengths to show how traditional literary criticism ignores or brackets planetarity by limiting its scope to scales of a personal or national scope. On the first scale, Clark argues, the story is simply a narrative in which "love and forgiveness prevail in a tale of minor but genuine domestic heroism."[103] On this scale, the reader is asked to understand and evaluate the narrator's psychology and his struggles, perhaps with a sense of sympathy and charity, forgiving him for letting himself be used by his relatives. On a second, wider, scale however, the narrative unfolds beyond personal concerns of the characters, and literary analysis would zoom out to discuss questions of what the story symbolizes about, for example, American culture at large, such

[102] Ibid., 97-104; Raymond Carver, "Elephant," in *Elephant and Other Stories* (Collins Harvill, 1998), 73-91.

[103] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 99.

as its "materialism and its concept of gender, especially masculinity."[104] What does the story reveal and presuppose, for example, about being a male member of a certain economic class and race in America at a certain historical moment in time? These two scales of analysis remain in the comfort zone of much literary criticism according to Clark, while it is only on the third level of a planetary scale that "human history and culture can take on unfamiliar shapes."[105]

The third, planetary scale is obviously not intentionally implied by the story. This 'Level III' reading, as Clark shows, traces the physical consequences of characters' actions *in neglect of* explanations by means of intentions or cultural tropes on lower-level scales, escaping awareness of the characters and narrator. What emerges from this large-scale reading is "a kind of environmental 'unconscious'," which has "nothing to do with personal complexes or psychic dynamics."[106] In this frame, for example, the choice of the protagonist of *Elephant* to help his family would be less significant than the very fact that he contributes to climate change by having children in the first place.[107] Instead of the personal motivations, family dynamics, or economic structures that give rise to the familiar conflicts of *Elephant*, this planetary scale would rather zoom out to capture "the material infrastructure that surrounds and largely dictates the lives of the people, the houses, the cars, the roads."[108] It is important to note that Clark argues that this scalar reading destabilizes the other two scales, both of which circled around human agents in cultural environments, while on this larger scale interpretation is confined to "reading people as things."[109]

In Clark's view, then, scalar effects can profoundly disturb the meaning found on lower-level scales, which are the scales mostly invoked in literature. Clark argues that scalar effect risks *de-familiarization* of the everyday human world.[110] This is why Clark calls the

[104] Ibid., 100.

[105] Ibid., 101.

[106] Ibid., 104.

[107] Ibid., 108.

[108] Ibid., 104.

[109] Ibid., 103.

[110] Clark's disruptive 'level III' reading of *Elephant* shows similarities to Arendt's analysis of human agency appearing as mere behaviour when imagined from an Archimedean point in space. "[I]f we apply the Archimedean point to ourselves, then these activities will […] appear to ourselves as no more than 'overt

result of such a distanced, critical reading a kind of "unframing" of the previous scales which lose their coherency.[111] His reading of *Elephant* therefore shows a discordance between the several scales on which it can be read, suggesting that the Anthropocene gives rise to an impossible and conflictual reading that ends without synthesis.

If we approach this reading through Ricoeur's reception theory, however, a more positive understanding of scale effects is possible. Ricoeur would point out that a "scale effect" is an effect of reading. It is a disruption of a text's significance, a hiccup of meaning from which the text only suffers because the reader is willing to first invest in the project of finding meaning in the text in the first place. This project itself is a product of tradition, in the sense that the reader only expects there to be meaning in narrative because he has been taught to do so by other works. The effects of surprise and confusion when an established meaning is unframed on larger scales would not arise without the expectations furnished by tradition.

In this respect, it is relevant to quote Ricoeur, who argues that even when authors use a "strategy of deception" to confuse readers, "the presupposition of this strategy, without which it would have no object, is that the reader expects a configuration, that reading is a search for coherence."[112] Indeed, a geoscientist who approaches the planetary *only* on the third, planetary level – without any narrative need for human concordance – would never suffer from any kind of scale effect because as scientist it would suffice for her to study, for example, variations in oceanic salinity without any reference to how these affect the narratives of humans living elsewhere on the planet – she does not expect or look for coherence among her scientific findings and these narratives. The scale effect, therefore, depends on the reader's desire for concordance. It is the resistance of a text against this desire that gives rise to the scale effect and the accompanying disorientation – without this desire for concordance, such effects would simply not arise.

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behavior,' which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats." Hannah Arendt, "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society* 18 (2007): 54.

[111] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge,* 104.

[112] "La présupposition sans laquelle cette stratégie serait sans objet est que le lecteur attend une configuration, que la lecture est une recherche de cohérence." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 3,* 168 [246].

While Clark appears more critical about what scale effects do to the meaning of texts in his reading of *Elephant*, this conclusion is also in line with his other tenets of his thought. He argues that "reading at several scales at once cannot be just concerned with the abolition of one scale in the greater claim of another but a way of enriching, singularizing and yet also creatively deranging the text by embedding it in multiple and even contradictory frames at the same time."[113] In my Ricoeurian approach of Clark's ideas, then, literary narrative still provides something unique and relevant in reflections on the Anthropocene, as it is the place in which the discordance between living experience and the planetary can unfold *within the unity of a single work* – even if this discordance never gives rise to any stable meaning able to gather together all the different scales.

This also means that scale effects do not show the limits of literary texts but rather an unexpected but troubling excess of meaning. To be precise, Clark argues that neither author nor context of the work stabilize a text's meaning, but this could just as well direct one to the kind of textual excess that Ricoeur described in his reading of Iser. Is it not a matter of an 'excess of meaning' rather than a deficiency of the text when *The Great Gatsby* now allows itself to be read as an unintended defence of petro-infrastructure in its celebration of the car?[114] In fact, would such a re-orientation of meaning be possible in any other way than *through* the narrative text? By raising these questions, Clark's work makes the case for a type of anachronistic reading *of the tradition* that is only possible because the text is in excess relative to its author and situation of production.[115]

This means that I argue that the discordance among scales can generate new meaning. In fact, does Clark's reading of 'Elephant' not enable a kind of *tragic* understanding of human agency? In this tragic reading, human agency works against itself at large scales precisely because of its intentions and hopes on a lower scale. To what degree might we say that the protagonists of such stories appear like Oedipus, whose actions intended to avoid their destiny only work to bring it about faster? Following Clark, as one moves up the scales, one begins to perceive a particular blindness on the side of characters to the real effects of their actions, which could with some creativity be framed as what Aristotle called would have

[113] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 108.

[114] Ibid., 52.

[115] Ibid., 61–65.

called their "great error" or *ἁμαρτία* [*hamartia*], and while one may cheer for graceful actions on a lower scale, events still turn from good to bad when they spell out disaster on a neglected, larger scale.[116] Through a Ricoeurian-Aristotelian lens, Clark's reading unearths many elements required for a kind of planetary tragedy, one that at least still provides the reader with a world in which human action can acquire a meaning – even if this world is one of human folly or hubris. In this way, too, scalar reading might not only be a form of un-doing but an increase in meaning relative to more traditional readings.

This culminates in a vulnerable or fragile reception theory. Tradition becomes fragile in scalar reading because the know-how of reading it hands down is brought to collide with a geoscientific view that resists it, while it is nevertheless still tradition itself that opens one to the realization of cultural inadequacy to respond to the Anthropocene. By going back to important works, one can now perceive what escaped attention before, but this surplus of what was unfamiliar cannot easily be incorporated into the familiar. But this interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar unfolds only because there is a commitment of readers to familiarity and to the quest for meaning in the first place.

JOHNS-PUTRA'S DISCORDANT AFFECTIVE READING

Above, I have explained that Ricoeur thinks the reader plays a *constitutive* role for the literary work, I have raised the question whether the Anthropocene and its challenge to consider human agency as part of the 'planetary' are not too much of a rupture or a break to be captured by the mimetic circle by way of Timothy Clark's work, which argues that the reader is led astray by the familiarity of novels rather than helped to face the unimaginable dimensions of the Anthropocene. Yet I countered this pessimistic conclusion by pointing out how reception can include discordance and how the interplay between scales may create room for different and other readings. What is still missing in this account, however, is the question of how *discordance* can *affect* readers in their construction of a text's meaning.

If discordance between scales, as between the physical scales of climate change and narrative fragments in *The Great Bay,* is included in a theory of reception and of reading, what

[116] Aristotle, *The Poetics,* 1453a15.

does this discordance do to the reader and the challenge to refigure the world? Can such texts that attest to a surplus of the planet over familiar scales of understanding still *move* the reader in ways that disclose something new for them? In short, can discordance *do* something to readers? To graft an analysis of the role of discordance in reception onto Ricoeur's model, I will now turn to *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* by literary critic Adeline Johns-Putra that deals with this issue.

Adeline Johns-Putra is an influential figure in literary debate on climate change fictions, having written important reviews of the current literature, as well as a hallmark introduction to climate change and literature published by Cambridge University Press.[117] In *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel,* Johns-Putra argues that Anthropocene fictions critically use prevalent tropes in climate change discourse to play into reader's emotions and compassion – into what they find interesting – while they also simultaneously ironize and problematize the reader's identification with these elements of the novels.[118] Johns-Putra formulates a "critical eudaemonistic framework" of reading that approaches literature as sites where compassion with characters can help readers formulate a vision of the good life, while a critical awareness of pitfalls and shortcomings of particular methods of identification is self-reflexively attained through ironizing.[119] Using irony or other disruptive literary effects, Johns-Putra argues, is a way in which novels generate unfamiliar or discordant affects for readers, *through* revealing short-coming of lower-level (and familiar) tropes and meanings. This makes her account a perfect addition to Clark's scalar readings and Ricoeur's re-

[117] Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009057868.

[118] One should not understand Johns-Putra's notion of identification too narrowly as identification with human agents. First, she is well aware that climate fiction novels invite identification beyond the species boundaries, as in Barabara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* where the protagonist identifies with monarch butterflies perched on her family's property. Second, Johns-Putra, as I will argue, discusses identification under the guiding thought of a radical posterity – which involves caring for non-human life forms. My remarks here on Johns-Putra's notion of identification work to underscore that Ricoeur's notion of reading is perhaps more about the constitution of possible *worlds* within the characters act rather than an act of empathy with characters.

[119] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 45.

ception theory, which left the question open how discordance may work upon readers exactly.[120] My aim with this section is therefore to build on the above, allowing me to answer the question how discordance plays a role in the way readers apply highly discordant Anthropocene fictions to their worlds.

FROM POSTERITY-AS-PARENTHOOD TO RADICAL POSTERITY

In the introduction to *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, Johns-Putra draws attention to the fact that the discourse about the Anthropocene often implies a frame of posterity as seen through the lens of parenthood, which means that the future of the planet is figured and made meaningful in terms of structures related to family life and heritage passed onto one's descendants. This involves the trope that one should care about the future of the planet because 'we' care about 'our children,' who will inherit this planet from those presently living.[121] This figuration of posterity, which Johns-Putra dubs "posterity-as-parenthood," can be analysed in terms of this chapter as the folding of what is unfamiliar and even unknowable about the future of climate change and the Anthropocene into the familiar and known schema of family ties and obligations to one's descendants.[122] While she argues that this trope of posterity-as-parenthood helps human agents to see the unfamiliar phenomenon of climate change as a moral problem and "creat[es] a sense of transcendence and timelessness [and]

[120] Johns-Putra explicitly discusses Clark's work, which, she argues, would "offe[r] no normative guidance beyond a recognition of [...] the Anthropocene's ontological confusion," neglecting to explore the potentialities of climate change fiction to furnish relations to human and non-human others in innovative ways." Ibid., 35.

[121] For an analysis of the prevalence of this trope, published after Johns-Putra's work, one may consult the useful article by Kyrre Kverndokk, which traces the dynamics of how 'family time' – the experience time involved in one's relation to one's children and grandchildren – comes to overwrite planetary time. Kverndokk warns that this is never a neutral exchange, as it may promote certain heteronormative assumptions, given its rootedness in images of the heterosexual family and the 'naturalness' of having children of one's own. Cf., Kyrre Kverndokk, "Talking About Your Generation: 'Our Children' as a Trope in Climate Change Discourse," *Ethnologia Europaea*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.974.

[122] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 6–7.

feelings of care and love,"[123] it also involves several risks, such as paternalism and parochialism. Johns-Putra's aim is therefore to move beyond posterity-as-parenthood to what she calls radical posterity, a form of relating to the future that is not anthropocentric and that escapes certain of the parochial or narrow elements attached to thinking about the future in terms of parenthood.

According to Johns-Putra, the problematic elements of the posterity-as-parenthood trope can be teased out when it is framed in terms of contemporary discussions on intergenerational care ethics. Care ethics is founded on the idea that the relations built in the act of caring have a moral value that is not captured by other classical ethical theories such as utilitarianism or deontological ethics.[124] Johns-Putra departs from Cristopher Groves's recent formulation of care ethics in an intergenerational context, which argues that "care provides a robust ethical motivation for our obligations to unknown and unborn others," and she notes how this formulation is a possible reply to shortcomings of Rawlsian intergenerational justice.[125] For Rawls, Johns-Putra notes, justice requires that any existing inequalities in terms of wealth maximize opportunities for those who are most disadvantaged in comparison to other systems – and this principle holds within and across generations, therefore encompassing future generations as well. Yet, while Rawls' model of justice therefore extends toward the future, Johns-Putra argues that it is "a relatively conservative account of the future in terms of economic growth," adopting models of progress in terms of wealth accumulation that are precisely put into question in the context of the Anthropocene.[126] The future would therefore be rendered in terms of present needs, which again are framed in terms of economic growth and capitalist accumulation, which, in Ted Toadvine's words, "sustains the world in a state that as much as possible resembles our present."[127] Instead, caring would be an alternative that tries to attune to what those who come might need in their own, perhaps

[123] Ibid., 5.

[124] Cf. Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), 25-61.

[125] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel,* 16–23; See also: Christopher Groves, *Care, Uncertainty and Intergenerational Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[126] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 14.

[127] Ted Toadvine, *The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 204.

unfamiliar terms, including other frames of evaluation than mere wealth or capital accumulation. The caregiver thereby exposes herself to being changed by the act of care, having her conceptions challenged of what is just or what counts as the good life.

Johns-Putra wants to go further, however, than merely substituting a Rawlsian analysis of obligations to the future with a care-ethics based approach. She points out that even care ethics runs into important limits as a theory of intergenerational ethics for the Anthropocene. Three such limits emerge, which I think can be framed as variations on the tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity.

First, using the work of care ethicist Joan Tronto, Johns-Putra points out that intergenerational parental care ethics may lead to paternalism (when care givers think themselves better able than the care receiver to see what is needed) and parochialism (only caring for one's own community).[128] In both instances the familiar triumphs over the unfamiliar: in the first case, the caregiver is unreceptive to the alterity of the needs of the care receiver, while in the latter, the familiarity of the community is used to exclude unfamiliar others in need. Second, Johns-Putra reveals several identitarian facets in care ethics, which refer to those elements that presuppose or even prescribe a determined identity for either the care giver or receiver. For example, parental care ethics presupposes a heteronormative framework in its reliance on family structures as ethical metaphor, and, likewise, some care ethicists have tended to fix the image of the caregiver as essentially feminine, which is problematic as it might reaffirm a history of the subjugation and exclusion of women from the political.[129] Finally, it is often assumed that care for future generations applies only to *humans*, which excludes a reflection on our geological entanglement with other species. And even if these nonhuman species are taken aboard in environmental ethics, Johns-Putra argues that this mostly happens at the price that the familiar overwrites the unfamiliar when humans assume that they can 'hear' or 'speak for' the voice of nature, whereas Johns-Putra prefers a more modest recognition of insurmountable difference.[130]

[128] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 20; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

[129] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 21–3.

[130] Ibid., 27–30.

While posterity-as-parenthood is a prevalent trope that might sometimes limit ethical reflections, novels can also overcome these limits of parental care ethics in the Anthropocene, and they can direct us instead towards what she calls "radical posterity."[131] She uses this term for a vision of care for the (deep) future in which both assumptions of a nostalgic or stable identity and that of anthropocentrism are avoided. Here, she draws on Catrina Mortimer-Sandilands's ecofeminist work, which has articulated identity as an open process that takes shape through action.. This means that identity of agents is only achieved *after* the risky act of establishing oneself in the world in the face of others, because action initiates something new in the world and is open-ended.[132] For Sandilands, the openness of action-based identity can be extended to 'agents' operating in the nonhuman world, and Johns-Putra argues that "what we call nature is just as radically contingent as human identity," which allows us to "locat[e] non-human and the human self within the same ethical universe."[133] Both humans and nonhumans can be agents giving shape to themselves through initiating new trajectories in the world. For Johns-Putra, this notion opens the door to an extended sense of posterity, which allows for more radical differences relative to present identities of care givers than traditional care ethics does. Instead of thinking posterity in terms of caring for one's own children, with the assumption that they will be like oneself, radical posterity could be the basis of a new account of care that undoes the conservative and ideological elements in parental care ethics. It attunes human agents to other possibilities of being and relating to the nonhuman world in ethical ways. Literature can help in this process through a mode of reading that Johns-Putra calls 'critical eudaemonistic' reading.

CRITICAL EUDAEMONISTIC READING

How could one transition from the familiarity of posterity-as-parenthood to the daunting unfamiliarity of radical posterity? Johns-Putra argues that Anthropocene fictions may have a role to play in this process in as far as they allow for a critical eudaemonistic reading. This kind of reading, its name suggests, must be two things at the same time, namely 'critical' and

[131] Ibid., 23.

[132] Catrina Mortimer-Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[133] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 29.

'eudaemonistic' (here to be loosely translated as related to the good life, the flourishing of a particular life form).[134] Johns-Putra comes to the idea of eudaemonistic reading by means of an original appropriation of Martha Nussbaum's work on political and ethical emotions. Nussbaum developed the thesis that emotions are not merely passive affections but that they help make adequate judgements about what is important for one's well-being and flourishing, that is, they can be seen as "eudaemonistic evaluations."[135] In that respect they also have ethical consequences, because they may guide one in the search for the good life. Johns-Putra connects the idea of eudaemonistic evaluations to literature through the assumption that "the novel exerts a complex emotional appeal on the reader," which due to the ethical nature of emotion might "pla[y] a role in the formation of an ethical position."[136] That is, literature could help explore different emotions and, hence, different evaluations of the good life.

In Johns-Putra's interpretation of Nussbaum's theory, eudaemonistic evaluations are often made in a relation to the suffering of others, either in real life or in stories. Therefore, compassion is a key element in this theory, as compassion "bring[s] home to the witness of suffering her shared vulnerability with the one suffering."[137] In an eudaemonistic judgement informed by compassion, one learns that the suffering of others should matter to oneself because being human involves a similar fragility and possibility of suffering. The unfamiliarity of the suffering of the other becomes a new familiarity with one's own suffering, which leads to the eudaemonistic understanding that the suffering of others can reveal what truly matters in one's own relation fragility. Johns-Putra calls this ethical search based on emotions such as compassion the very "crux of Nussbaum's ethical framework,"[138] and she also underscores that because of the focus on shared suffering, compassion does, for Nussbaum, not

[134] Of course, eudaimonia here refers to 'happiness' [*εύδαιμονία*] as it is developed in Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle argues that happiness is not mere pleasure but consists in living well, connecting "[h]appiness [εύδαιμονίαν] with a form of good life or doing well." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1926), 1098b5.

[135] Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 300.

[136] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 40.

[137] Ibid., 43.

[138] Ibid., 43.

rely on a superficial familiarity with or similarities between the observer and the sufferer – it cuts through to a more fundamental level of sharing a condition of being.

Compassion can thus also transgress a limited understanding of identity and identification based on a likeness in terms of social categories, and its openness to otherness is explored most widely in literature, where eudaemonistic evaluation allows readers to explore intimately the conditions and emotions of a vast array of real and imagined agents. Indeed, viewed through this lens, literature can make an ethical appeal to the reader "because it seems to allow the witnessing of the experiences of unknown others, widening the circle of concern."[139] It invites the reader to compassion with the suffering of others, which is also an invitation to understand differently what makes a good life.

Another way in which Johns-Putra approaches these insights is through Nussbaum's concept of "tragic spectatorship," which is developed across Nussbaum's oeuvre and which describes how compassion can develop through a particular mode of tragic reading.[140] In the classical tragedies, Nussbaum asserts, spectators were reminded that they themselves were vulnerable to the kinds of loss that tragic protagonists faced, and this reminder served to direct audiences from disgust or distance towards the protagonist to a space of compassion and shared suffering. "Tragic spectatorship," summarizes Johns-Putra, "involves, then, not just the witnessing of tragic events but a process from unconcern to concern, as a shared exposure to those events is gradually revealed."[141]

Importantly, tragic spectatorship can, according to Nussbaum, even overcome species differences. For, "the spectator's assumption of immunity from distress, so rudely disrupted by tragic narrative, includes the notion that the *human* spectator is exempt from the kind of deprivations that non-humans might undergo."[142] A sense of tragedy binds together humans and non-human in their capacities to undergo rupture, suffering, et cetera, which therefore closes the ontological gap often created between human and non-human life forms. Tragic

[139] Ibid., 44.

[140] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Compassion & Terror," *Deadalus* 132, no. 1 (2003): 25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027819.

[141] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, 52.

[142] Ibid., 52.

spectatorship points to a fundamental vulnerability bridging what sets apart humans from nonhumans and from which a deep interspecies compassion can ensue.

Johns-Putra adds to Nussbaum's account a layer of "critical awareness" that she deems missing, so that eudaemonistic reading becomes *critical* eudaemonistic reading.[143] She points out several shortcomings of Nussbaum's account, which on the one hand might be too optimistic about literature's ethical efficacy (does awareness of shared potentiality of suffering lead to actual action?), while on the other still buying into the identitarian tendencies of care ethics or the ideology of texts (what if novels use emotional appeals to seduce the reader to submit to racist or sexist worldviews?).[144] In her critical reply to these shortcomings, Johns-Putra develops a reading that is both aware of the pitfalls of the identificatory means of eudaemonistic reading and that points out how novels themselves play with and go against these means.[145] The reading she proposes, therefore, "involves a focus on the sympathetic [...] journey undertaken by the reader in empathy with narrators or protagonists, as well as a readiness to read that sympathy as destabilised by such elements as unreliable narrators or focalisers."[146] Like Ricoeur's reading of Iser's idea of the wandering viewpoint above, Johns-Putra argues that literature invites readers to unfold their meaning part-by-part as a kind of journey through the text, which always also calls upon readers to fill in the gaps and lacunae left open. Interestingly, some of these lacunae that call for a shift in a reader's view-

[143] Ibid., 41.

[144] "On this view, the novel would set up what Keen calls 'situational empathy', inviting the reader to step into a familial relationship (or circle of concern) within the novel, and to care for, rather than with, child characters. Where that circle of concern repeats traditional nuclear family dynamics and invites the reader to inhabit idealised stereotypes built on heavily gendered norms, the reader is, as it were, interpellated as parent into suspiciously heterosexist or patriarchal ideological expectations." Ibid., 49; Suzanne Keen points out the risk for empathy engendered by literature *only* for characters perceived as part of the in-group of readers – she calls this "bounded strategic empathy." Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2007), xiv.

[145] Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel,* 51.

[146] Ibid., 53.

point are enabled by rather traditional modes of plotting. "[S]eemingly retrogressive and anthropocentric evocations of reader empathy and inhabitation" could be deployed to "destabilise the very idea of coherence in world and identity."[147]

Throughout her book, Johns-Putra points out how climate change fictions first call for identification with (human) characters, implying well-known and often anthropocentric tropes, only to destabilise or ironize this identification in a larger stage, which opens possibilities for thinking the future in terms of radical posterity. In Johns-Putra's reading of *Flight Behaviour* with which I open this dissertation, for example, the ending in which the protagonist watches as a flood washes away her hope for a better life is interpreted as a literary device aimed to criticize and overturn the reader's identification with the individual, personal journey of its protagonist. Readers are shocked out of their traditional patterns of reading, which tend to zoom in on human protagonist immersed in meaningful worlds to instead zoom out and consider the way in which human actions are entangled in much larger, nonhuman, biophysical processes related to climate change.[148] One could therefore say that at least some Anthropocene fictions play into familiar tropes and styling devices only to use them to generate shock-effects for the readers. After all, "[i]f the eudaemonistic rug is to be pulled out from under the reader's feet, the reader has to be standing on that rug in the first place."[149]

In comparison to Clark's scalar critique, Johns-Putra is much more optimistic about the possibilities unveiled through such effects as destabilization of a text's scale. Whereas Clark mostly argued that the Anthropocene disorder frustrates and complicates interpretation, Johns-Putra maintains, using her theory of radical posterity, that the disorientation of the Anthropocene could provoke a renewed sense of a broader reorientation that includes nonhumans and thinking on other than human scales of time and space. In Ricoeur's terms, discordance would therefore not be a terminal point of interpretation beyond which it can

[147] Ibid., 39-40.

[148] Johns-Putra thinks that one ought to read "[t]he abruptness of the turn away from Dellarobia as the facilitator of an overwhelmingly conservative and conventional set of readerly sympathies and parental ethics, towards a distinctly unconventional and radical kind of posterity." Ibid., 163.

[149] Ibid., 53.

no longer precede but merely a relay station, after which new trajectories and other figurations of the human and the nonhuman become possible. Anthropocene fiction ties into what is familiar to draw readers in but only to force them beyond this sphere of familiarity, into new configurations of how human agency is entangled with the planet.

Yet, while Johns-Putra's work on reception of Anthropocene fictions could be grafted onto the type of reception theory I have developed by reading Ricoeur in conjunction with Clark, some questions remain open. Johns-Putra's framework might explain why some novels end on a critical note by appealing and then frustrating the expectations of readers, but it does not yet investigate how such frustration might inspire new readings of the reader's world. Therefore, to conclude this chapter, I would like to explore what happens if discordance gains an even more prominent role in interpretation and reception, critically drawing from but also moving further than Johns-Putra's *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel.*

THE FRAGILE READER

In this chapter I raised the question whether the discordance emerging from the scalar effects of novels such as *The Great Bay* can inform rather than disrupt the interpretative process which culminates in the application of texts to the world of readers, even if these novels appear to communicate primarily that the way in which readers tend to interpret and give meaning to their lives by means of narrative is simply irrelevant on the scale of anthropogenic climate change. What may one expect of such a reading against reading? Can reception theory in Ricoeurian vein still provide concepts to elucidate such matters? In exploring this question, I took a long road through Ricoeur's reception theory, Clark's scalar critique, and Johns-Putra's eudaemonistic reading, tracing the interplay between concordance and discordance in their respective takes on the disruptive effects of Anthropocene fictions on readers.

This now allows me to formulate a reader reception theory of discordant Anthropocene fiction, one that holds that the *productive* effect of novels such as *The Great Bay* is to have the reader *produce* discordance to heighten a sense of *human fragility* in facing the planet. I will call this model of interpretation and application a *fragile* hermeneutics of Anthropocene fiction. Importantly, this interpretative process does not result in a complete surrender of the meaningfully structured human lifeworld to an abstract geoscientific planetary

perspective, as if science were to replace lived experience. Instead, when such novels bracket and critique human meaning-making practices, for example by showing the contingency and fleetingness of human lives when they are approached in conjunction with geological change, this should itself still be seen as a *meaningful* expression of *discordance*. I therefore share the conclusion of what Ted Toadvine writes elsewhere in his explorations of the phenomenology of deep time, namely, that "[w]hat characterizes the experience of the deep past is precisely its unsettling, vertiginous character, the loss of all common markers and measures."[150] Yet, this 'loss' is still part of an *experience* – mediated by fiction in my case – and not the absence of experience. This loss can only be figured against a backdrop of such common markers and measures, that is, against the horizon of a meaningful world. Within their configuration, the planetary discordance of such Anthropocene novels crafts a representation of meaningful human action as *limited* when placed over against the scales of the planet, and thereby sketch a particular outline of what it means to be a human agent – even if this outline results in a sketch of how humans run up against limits that they cannot overcome.

While these novels *weaken* the meaning found on the level of the human lifeworld, they also attest to a particular *power* on the side of the reader, namely, the power of the reader's own imagination to actively produce discordance in the reception of a text. One could summarize this position as the thesis that discordant Anthropocene fiction does not only call for a *familiarization of the unfamiliar*, when the world of the text inspires a rereading of the reader's world, but also a *defamiliarization of the familiar*, when the reader discovers how his own process of reading limits, brackets, or even destabilizes his modes of meaning-finding and meaning-bestowal. It is as if within the familiarity of the hermeneutic, interpreting subject, some other force is found to be operative, one that works within interpretation against interpretation.

I will now work toward this model of reading by once more going over Clark's scalar critique, Johns-Putra's eudaemonistic reading, and Ricoeur's reception theory, moving from the matter of *representation* on the side of the text to the *response* on the side of the reader.

[150] Toadvine, *Memory of the World,* 54.

"READING REWRITES ME"

In the context of this dissertation, I conceptualize fragility as the situation in which literature, Anthropocene fiction in particular, does not propose new worlds to readers but reveals the reader's capacity to imagine the limits of the world, human action, and interpretation. Instead of providing a refiguration of the world – which would still operate within the space provided by the world – such fictions put pressure on the very structure of worldliness, by which I mean the structure in which, from a general, cultural context, humans 'read' and navigate particular experiences and situations within the symbolically mediated lifeworld. Fragility is not simply the abandonment of the world but the emergence of discordance within it: it is the experience of the limits of worldliness within the world itself. From the above, I will distil three senses of fragility related to the reception of discordant Anthropocene fictions: scalar fragility, affective fragility, and, finally, a receptive fragility – all of which function in interplay in the reception of Anthropocene fiction.

Before fleshing out these three senses of fragility, I would like to place them under the banner of a slogan found in recent work of Juliette Singh. In *Unthinking Mastery,* Singh develops a theory of reading from a post-colonial position, where she understands reading to no longer be an act that tries to 'master' the text, as if meaning is something to be achieved through the struggle with a text that ends up in a situation of control and overview. Instead, she proposes a reader who lets himself be vulnerable to the text to allow the text to change him. In this context, Singh speaks of "vulnerable reading," which is the kind of reading that "rewrites me."[151] The idea of a reading that rewrites oneself captures powerfully the force of fragility at play in my discussion of Anthropocene fictions, which concerns not just a certain formation of world but the very formation of world itself – while it is still the reader who performs this act of rewriting which becomes a form of effacing at its most extreme.[152]

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[151] Juliette Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Duke University Press, 2018), 24.

[152] Admittedly, however, my intentions are different than Singh's, who hopes to unearth a new form of being-human through the affective power of texts, i.e., her work is still directed at a successful refiguration. The kind of discordances that take the foreground in my chapter here are rather introduced to pinpoint the interpretative potential of *not* arriving at such new models of being-human. Singh writes that "the act of reading [is] vital to the process of imagining otherwise and dwelling elsewhere, to the relentless exercise of unearthing

The first kind of fragile rewriting can be found in Clark's scalar critique. As I explained, Clark is critical of ecocritical approaches that would fail to address the destabilization of texts when they are read at multiple scales at once. Especially the 'level III,' planetary scale of the Anthropocene presses upon but also disrupts meaning established on lower-level scales, such as those of society, the environment, or those of individual psychology. A first fragility of reception emerges here, namely, the capacity of Anthropocene fictions to radically challenge the structures of meaning-bestowal on the temporal and spatial scales on which most human orientation on the lifeworld takes place. These scales become complicated when they are brought into dialogue with the planetary level of analysis: one can think of how the Level III reading of Carver's *Elephant* put to the side most elements that were relevant on lower-level readings. Yet I also argued that the disorder resulting from this contrast also implies a reader, who is affected by the scalar problems that Clark brings to light – discordance is an effect of reading, and, hence, emphasizes the importance of interpretation.

To understand what it means to be affected by scale effects, the reader therefore needs to be figured more prominently in a theory of reception of Anthropocene fiction. It was the work of Johns-Putra that allowed me to further describe how factors such as empathy and tragic spectatorship, employed within a search for the good life, can be used to provoke and challenge familiar but problematic assumptions about the future in the Anthropocene. Novels may be traditional forms of representation, but they can play with and then confront the sets of sedimented expectations on the side of readers. When Anthropocene fiction ironizes these expectations or generates shock effects that suddenly bracket them, Johns-Putra even argues that fiction can blaze the trail toward a caring relation to a future that is allowed to be radically different from the present.

Johns-Putra's eudaemonistic reading highlights a further fragility involved in interpretation of discordant Anthropocene fiction. This second, affective fragility has two sides. First, Johns-Putra's theory, using Nussbaum, considers reading itself as an act of becoming fragile in the sense of opening oneself to discordant experiences of suffering. Literature generates a tragic spectatorship that transfers the suffering of fictional others to readers, who in

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and envisioning new human forms and conceptualizations of agency." From the perspective of authors such as Clark, such an approach would, perhaps, grant too much of a refigurative power to literature in the face of the scalar problems of the Anthropocene that also marginalize the potentials of interpretation. Ibid., 6.

turn become aware of their *capacity to suffer.* This entails a rather literal sense of fragility as the possibility of physical or mental suffering, to which all readers as mortal beings remain susceptible. Second, once readers are called upon in this way by the text, the text may use this very empathetic capacity of the reader to create further shock-effects that challenge the parochial or in-group structures on which empathy tends to rely. This shocks readers out of a limited set of familiar values, and it would open them to consider new ways of reading the world. While Clark's analysis ended on a note of disorientation, Johns-Putra therefore shows that a kind of reorientation may take place that unfolds precisely *through* disorientation.

Then there is also a receptive fragility that deepens the two other forms fragility – scalar fragility and affective fragility. I want to show how Ricoeur's reception theory allows me to think the *activity* of interpretation as simultaneously *passive*, which, when applied to Johns-Putra and Clark, reveals how discordance and application can affect the reading subject. The result of this will be a clearer emphasis on the reader's *production* of the scalar and affective fragilities as I just discussed them, which, as a production for a state of being-affected appears to deconstruct or complicate the very idea of agency and activity. In short, what Ricoeur allows me to think is the *active* role of the reader in completing literary texts, while this activity is at the very same time a *passivity* in the sense that the reader submits to the literary work to achieve this task.

What is possible for the reader in reading is possible only by means of what becomes possible through the work. Working with Iser and Jauß, Ricoeur emphasized how reading is not a supplement crafted onto the text but the active, historically situated, construction of the text as a unified object referring to a possible world. Remember that Ricoeur argued that reception attests of the indeterminacy *and* the excess of texts, as it activates the lacuna of a text to complete it, giving rise to the possibility of further readings. This means that readers will have to submit to the text, but this submission is never fully passive: it involves the activity of realizing its meaning and unity. On the other hand, the activity of reading also never shakes off its rootedness in passivity and submission: reading is, as it were, thinking thoughts that are not one's own, performing an activity of which one is not, in a strict sense, the agent. This model deepens the senses of fragility already exposed by Johns-Putra and Clark.

Applying this model of reception as an interplay between activity and passivity first to Johns-Putra, her model of reading becomes ever more closely related to a sense of fragility.

Johns-Putra emphasized the compassion engendered by fiction, but what Ricoeur would point out beyond her account is that the reader also *produces* his object of compassion – the persons he suffers with – only through the act of his reading. There is no tragic spectatorship without the reader giving shape to the play – in line with Iser's idea of a wandering viewpoint, the suffering other of fictional narrative only becomes someone to relate to after the reader has followed the text and exercised his imagination to constitute its entire world, the events of which it consists, and the way in which these affect characters. This even deepens the fragility already exposed by Johns-Putra in two ways.[153]

On the one hand, because readers have to 'produce' the fictional others in their imagination, they can form closer relations to them than to real persons, for, responding to the indeterminacy of the text, readers constitute an image of characters in all the minutiae of their depicted lives. Literature allows one a proximity to others, through the right granted to the narrator to know the inner life of characters, which is beyond what is possible in reality. Yet, while this seems to reduce literary characters to mere correlates of the reader's imagination, the imagined other remains utterly mysterious to the reader as well. After all, this imagined other arises through the efforts of the reader, but her origins lie *beyond* these efforts: it is the literary text as an object out there in the world that enables this exercise of the reader's imagination, and the other person thus also remains *unfamiliar* because external to the reader. That is, the reader comes closer to the fictional other than he can with any other

[153] It might help here, to further clarify the odd status of the imagination, to invoke Sartre's view that the imaginary object would be something given to consciousness by itself and thereby different from perceived objects. This is indeed one of the remarkable properties of imagining. One constitutes objects that have no reality outside of the subject who is doing the imagining, but they remain objects nonetheless, that is, they are also posed as things *external* to consciousness, to which consciousness in an analogous fashion with objects in the world. "Le mot d'image ne saurait donc désigner que le rapport de la conscience à l'objet; autrement dit, c'est une certaine façon qu'a l'objet de paraître à la conscience, ou, si l'on préfère, une certaine façon qu'a la conscience de se donner un objet." Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination,* ed. and intr. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Gallimard, 1986), 21; "The word 'image' could only indicate therefore the relation of consciousness to the object; in other words, it is a certain way in which the object appears to consciousness, or, if one prefers, a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination,* ed. and with a historical introduction by Arlette Elkaï-Sartre, trans. and with a philosophical introduction by Jonathan Webber (Routledge, 2004), 7.

person amongst whom he lives because he has projected her in his imagination, 'created' her in a sense, but this only deepens the wonder at her otherness because the source of this creation lies beyond him. The fragility that follows from this is that the reader is confronted with a possible intimacy that is at the very same time a form inseparable distance, introducing discordance and ambiguity into the literary work.

A further fragility ensues from this, as this interplay between familiarity and unfamiliarity reflects on the reader and his relation to his own imagination. This Ricoeurian inspired analysis of compassion in fiction thus reveals that the reader can produce an 'object' that he neither comprehends, in the sense of forming an exhaustive concept of it, nor controls, which, in turn, reveals a strange otherness lingering in his imaginative capacities because it were these capacities, which might naively have been understood to be under *his* control as *his* faculties, that formulated what he did not know himself capable of formulating. Above, I quoted George Poulet's essay "Phenomenology of Reading" in the light of Ricoeur's work to sketch how reading results in the constitution of another self *within* oneself. Poulet argued that through reading, one thinks thoughts that are not one's own, thought by an 'I' that is not oneself. Poulet therefore ultimately states that, in reading, "I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me."[154] This is what also became apparent when revisiting Johns-Putra's work on literary affects with Ricoeur's reception theory in mind: while reading, one does not just experience a feeling-with the other, but one discovers the capacity to constitute an otherness that remains beyond oneself. One's own capacity of imagination destabilizes oneself: the imagination is both something one does and that one undergoes.

Ricoeur's reception theory also allows me to cast a new glance on Clark's scalar reading and its implied fragility of meaning across different scales. While Johns-Putra's theoretical model pays a lot of attention to suffering with (fictional) others, Clark's work discusses more explicitly the spatial and temporal framing in which these others are situated. This further destabilizes the hermeneutic subject. In Ricoeur's terms, novels do not just invite readers to identify with characters but also rely on readers to constitute the broader 'world' which is the intentional correlate of the text itself. Using Iser's work, Ricoeur explained this

[154] Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," 57.

process, unique to literature, as the one in which the reader's 'wandering viewpoint' cumulatively builds up the world-object by allowing sentences to create new anticipations and modify expectations built up earlier, morphing into a singular intentional object.[155] The important point here is that this process involves much more than *just* the characters and their actions, as it includes the formation of an entire picture of the kind of setting that the characters are in, the sense of the connection between different chapters and elements of the story, as well as a feeling for how nonhumans and objects are involved in the temporality of expectations concerning their role for the plot.[156] In this way, the reader is also always *beyond* the characters who are *in* the world that he constitutes by reading because he acquires an overview position on the plot that characters necessarily lack (which is easily exposed in the possibility of a re-reading, that gives the reader the obvious advantage of knowing what will befall the characters). Readers therefore do not just suffer with these strange, fictional others that they can come to know more closely than anyone else in reality, they are also more *distanced* from these persons than they are from real person because they have an overview position that is unique to the reader who helps to complete the world of the work. This distance, in turn, creates the troubling distance from which the entire problematic of scalar reading is made possible and inevitable. One can feel with the characters, trace their fate on temporal and spatial scales attuned to their thinking and acting, or one can resist this lower-level scalar framing and instead frame the diegetic world on scales in which this suffering has become insignificant. The 'other' that one lends oneself to when reading is therefore not merely the voice of other human beings as acting or thinking subjects close to ourselves: this 'other' may give rise to thoughts that imply frames of such scales that they warp, distort, or even abandon what becomes visible of the human or human-like characters of the narrative.

Taking together Ricoeur, Johns-Putra, and Clark allows me to develop a theory of reading as a becoming-fragile of the reader, who allows himself to be confronted with the otherness in himself as well as the otherness of the world he constitutes through reading. There is a sense of affective fragility – the reader risks being upset by becoming invested in the story – that can explain an important part of a text's transformative effects on the reader. This fragility is at times productive and destructive. It is productive because it allows the reader to

[155] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 109–18 [177-93].

[156] Cf. Iser's discussion on depragmatization. Ibid., 61 [89].

leave or pause any fixed identity he brings to the text and thus it opens the room for literary efficacy; reading then becomes a willingness to risk one's autonomy and feelings of control for an intrusion of unfamiliarity that is both outside and inside of oneself (because imagined by oneself), but that is new or enriching precisely to the degree that it is other from the reader. On the other hand, it is destructive because the reader never fully recovers from the discovery of the leak that imagination and fiction can spring to any sense of being a subject in control over its capacities and faculties. In himself he discovers the capacity of being worked upon by the other, and even his own imagination turns out to be of a mixed nature: both *his* and *not his* at the same time.

Literature is one of the loci in which this strange capacity is developed most strongly and therefore one of the riskiest endeavours. Invoking a reader who responds by being affected by the work, it allows readers to lend their capacities to produce discordances within and beyond himself that heighten the sense of his own fragility vis-à-vis a world or a planet that is not his own.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which planetary discordance, as manifested in Anthropocene fictions such as *The Great Bay*, can be included in model of reception as outlined by Ricoeur. To develop this model in more detail, I have staged a dialogue between Ricoeur's work and that of Timothy Clark and Johns-Putra. I raised the question whether literature could balance projecting new worlds to be inhabited with the rupture of planetary multiscalarity, and I have answered this by developing a reception theory in which discordance plays a fundamental part.

From Timothy Clark, I took the problematic of multiscalar reading and argued that this deepened but did not abolish the role of the reader in the construction of the meaning of a text. Reading his work through the lens of reader-reception theory, I have tried to argue that reading involves recognizing the fragility of any sense made of a text on any particular scale, as this can be disrupted when the text is read with another spatial or temporal scale in mind. This, however, has always been part of what Ricoeur calls the indeterminacy of the text, which still corresponds to a plurality of – possibly discordant – readings. From Johns-Putra, I took the problematic of affect, and I have argued that the construction of suffering others

by the reader's imagination attests of the correlation between interpretation, fragility, and discordance. Reading is not merely an understanding or figuration of suffering, it both attests of the capacity of readers to suffer *and* it renders itself susceptible to ironizing or disruptive effects when reading is disrupted by literary strategies aimed to unveil the parochial nature of some affects.

All of these dynamics make that reading Anthropocene fiction does not simply reorient a reader but instead increases the awareness of discordance in the everyday experience of the world, and of himself as in control over his own imagination: in applying discordant Anthropocene fictions, readers discover new lines of fragility and limits to the way in which they read or find meaning in the world. This increased discordance, however, is not merely a negative effect. It also attests of the capacity of literature to reflect and encourage an exploration of the limits of human agency and understanding, and to give emotional and semantic value to these limits – literature stays with the conflict at the heart of multiscalarity in a way that sciences merely operating on the planetary scale cannot do, as they would remain blind to the tension between the stakes at the different scales on which the Anthropocene can be approached.

Let me conclude by turning back to the novel with which I started these reflections. What does my reading of Ricoeur add to the types of interpretations that Johns-Putra and Clark would provide of this novel? For Clark, *The Great Bay* would perhaps best illustrate how a conflict of scales can be destructive of meaning: the higher-level, geological frame destabilizes the meaning of the lower-level storylines. However, in my Ricoeurian adaptation of reader response theory, I would instead argue that it is precisely this tension between scales that is generative of meaning, although the work fails to provide a single, stable frame of interpretation. *The Great Bay* does not merely attest to a certain incompatibility between the scales of regular human experience and those of geology, but it addresses the *meaning* of this discordance without, however, resolving it. Johns-Putra would point out the critical possibilities inherent to such an effect of disorientation: shocking readers out of their emotional identification with individuals may generate a sense of how their lives are entangled in larger geological processes. Yet, as I have argued above, Johns-Putra does not extensively trace the process in which this shock-effect is returned to the world of the reader: how exactly does this lead to a refiguration of the reader's world? In my modified Ricoeurian reception theory,

the discovery of this disorientating meaning would only be possible through the work of the reader of himself, who has to struggle and balance the two scales of the work (the personal narrative and the geological scale), who has to follow the abruptly abandoned narrative arcs of the different characters, and who has to wonder why or how their interpretations of their lifeworld are still meaningful given the anonymous backdrop of geographical changes. The disorientation to which all of this gives rise can be applied to the reader's own world but not in the sense of disclosing clear new models of agency or moral evaluation. Instead, perhaps, the reader will now interpret his own embeddedness in the world as a mere fleeting instance of a larger geological history, while this reading may in turn unleash affects pertaining to fragility: anxiety, wonder, frustration, confusion, et cetera. And, on even another level, the reader may also wonder what it tells him about his own relation to the world and the planet that he has produced this disorientation, this increase of discordance, which results from his imagination never entirely being his. In short, beyond Clark, Ricoeur's reception theory helps to clarify why a conflict between scales is generative of meaning, while, beyond Johns-Putra, his model provides more detail about the way readers integrate experiences of discordance in their understanding of the world.

In these ways, novels such as *The Great Bay* push interpretation to its very limits, where even the collapse of interpretation turns out attest to the power of interpretation. This collapse is still only the result of interpretation. The power of interpretation has now become a power to disclose a powerlessness within one's powers. What was familiar is weakened in its familiarity – the lower-level scales of interpretation are rendered suspect or at least are shown to be limited in their scope. This loss of familiarity is not compensated by some overarching frame of interpretation, there is no new, clear outline of a coherent world that encompasses the conflicts among the scales. The step taken here, however, by the act of reading, is that this weakening, this disorientation, this frustration has emerged with all its affective and semantic troubles as a problem to be addressed by readers. The problem is rendered visible – and urgent – as a troubling question still awaiting the right language to be posed.

CONCLUSION

PLANET AND PLOT

In his work *Escape Vehicle No. 6*, visual artist Simon Faithfull launches an office chair into outer space.[1] From a field of southern England to the very edge of the atmosphere, thirty kilometres from the surface of the Earth, the chair ascends attached to a weather-balloon and tethered to a camera that documents its vertiginous ascent. Originally presented to a live audience, a shortened version of the video of the chair's journey can now be found on YouTube. Escape Vehicle no. 6 artistically explores planetary discordance through the tension that arises when the chair moves across contexts and visual perspectives on the Earth.



Figure 4. Two stills depicting the dizzying ascent of a chair tethered to a weather balloon, as part of a visual artwork by Simon Faithfull. Stills taken from Simon Faithfull, *Escape Vehicle no. 6* (2004), SD Video, 25min. Printed with permission of the artist.

When they appear within their context of use on the surface of the planet, mundane things such as chairs belong to what phenomenologists call the world. The world is the meaningful backdrop, the horizon against which such everyday things make sense to us. As an everyday object, situated within a world, a chair is immediately familiar – its meaning comes prefigured through the routines in which it plays a role, the settings in which one typically

[1] Simon Faithfull, *Escape Vehicle no. 6* (2004), SD Video, 25min.

finds and uses it, and its relation to other objects like tables and desks. We all know, without a second of hesitation that chairs are to sit in – that they belong in offices, lecture halls, homes: this is so self-evident that to spell it out even has something embarrassing. The world is the pre-understanding that guarantees this self-evidence.

In *Escape Vehicle no. 6,* Faithfull relocates the chair from the world to an alienating *planetary* context. When the chair floats far above the Earth's surface, the Earth is no longer the lived horizon of phenomenological hermeneutics – no longer a world in which we dwell – but a distant, material body among other celestial bodies drifting in the depths of space. That is, when the chair finally emerges above the curvature of the Earth, it has become unworldly, it has entered the visual registers of the planetary. The immediate understanding of the chair as something to sit on now rings with discordance relative to the lack of any meaningful context of use in the immensity of space.

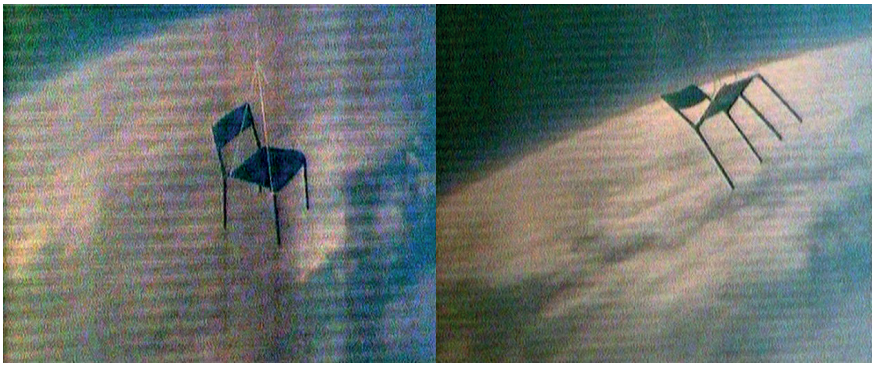


Figure 5. The chair is leaving the atmosphere. Two stills from Simon Faithfull*, Escape Vehicle no. 6,* (2004), SD Video, 25min. Printed with permission of the artist.

Near the video's end, the curvature of the Earth starts to dart in and out of view, the planet itself wreathed in a blanket of clouds, while the camera trembles violently as the chair starts shaking and dancing. One of its legs breaks off and soars toward the planet's surface. As the camera swoons, the pitch-black nothingness of space becomes visible beyond the planet's edge. It is impossible now to tell up from down. Somehow, the camera endures just a moment longer as the chair before the video erupts in a pixelated static. Then, the recording suddenly ends, before it manages to register what will happen to the chair. What is clear,

however, is that it is no longer situated within a world that provides it with a meaning. It is therefore as if the artwork sacrifices its point of view to take the leap toward the planetary absence of viewpoints and horizons – a gaze from nowhere, severed from the world.

Faithfull's work dramatizes a distinction of world versus planet that I have used and complicated along the trajectory of this dissertation. I have argued that the fact that humans inhabit a planetary system is not simply congruent with the fact that they also inhabit the world in a hermeneutic sense, and the emergence of planetarity within the world comes paired with experiences of discordance and disruption. Nevertheless, I have also argued that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of discordant concordance may help one inhabit this tension, and one of the important results of Anthropocene narratives would be that they explore the way in which such tension unfolds. They can help to give it a place within the world of readers, even if it calls the sense of world into question through such discordant elements of the planet as its verticality, asymmetry, materiality, and multiscalarity. In this dissertation, it is therefore as if I have strapped the three volumes *Time and Narrative* to Simon Faithfull's chair, and launched them into the ether, to observe what happens when Ricoeur's hermeneutics is brought into discussion with the planetary. When these volumes now come crashing down again in this conclusion, I will gather their remains, and study if and how these fragments provide new angles on the Anthropocene.

In closing this dissertation, I want to pick up on the concept of a fragile hermeneutics that I have hinted at many times above. Most attention above has been directed to the negative side of fragility – discordance. Nevertheless, I have also claimed that hermeneutics can help to inhabit and think through the implications of discordance, and I now want to explore how the notion of fragility can make this claim more concrete.

FROM DISCORDANCE TO FRAGILITY

In developing the idea of a fragile hermeneutics, I have claimed that planetary discordance is not overcome through interpretation of Anthropocene fictions. Instead, such discordant fictions may serve to raise awareness of the fragility of humans in the Anthropocene when it comes to their relation the planet. This notion of fragility is informed by Ricoeur's conception of fragility in his later works, while I will also extend it beyond what Ricoeur does with the

term. Fragility, for Ricoeur, denotes that which is "perishable due to its natural weakness and […] threatened by the blows of historical violence."[2] I think that Ricoeur's emphasis on weakness in this definition, as well on the possibility of perishing, points in the direction of the frictions I have introduced in this dissertation between the planet and the world. However, while Ricoeur connects fragility to responsible action, I rather want to connect fragility to the contingencies of the planetary – to those elements that humans must reckon with but that are beyond human influence, and hence, beyond the practical realm that that Ricoeur's work on narrative zooms in on.

As I will argue here, Ricoeur understands fragility most often as pertaining to (human) individuals, while he also connects the term to practical philosophy, arguing that it is closely related to a notion of responsibility. I will argue, instead, that if fragility is conceptualized considering the relation of humans to the planet, it does not concern a relation between individuals. Neither is it category pertaining to praxis. It instead involves an awareness of the limits of the human condition in the Anthropocene in as far as the planet can never exhaustively become an object of human control or practical understanding, nor can it without disturbances enter the world in a hermeneutic sense. A fragile hermeneutics then is a humble hermeneutics that opens itself, through the cracks and ruptures within the world, to the excess of the planetary relative to the world of practical concerns and everyday perception.

First, however, let me develop Ricoeur's own concept of the fragile in some detail. Ricoeur discusses fragility most explicitly in a lecture simply called "Responsibility and Fragility."[3] In this lecture, Ricoeur commences by separating the tragic from the fragile. The background of this distinction is that Ricoeur has been asked to respond the question whether history can still have a sense given the great tragedies of the twentieth century. At the start of the lecture, Ricoeur opts to reformulate this question. He argues that instead of moving from some overarching sense of history towards notions of responsibility, one should rather

[2] "[L]e fragile, c'est-à-dire à la fois le périssable par faiblesse naturelle et le menacé sous les coups de la violence historique.". Paul Ricœur, "Responsabilité et fragilité" in *Politique, économie et société: Écrits et conférences, 4,* ed. Pierre-Olivier Monteil (Seuil, 2019), E-book; Paul Ricoeur, "Responsibility and Fragility" in *Politics, Economy, and Society: Writings and Lectures, Vol. 4,* ed. and intr. Pierre-Olivier Monteil, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Polity, 2021), 65-80.

[3] Ricoeur, "Responsibility and Fragility."

travel "the narrow path from the sense of responsibility to the sense of history."[4] This reformulation resists the idea that history writ large can provide a horizon of sense or any preestablished meaning that would from the outset render the course of its events legible, providing its agents with clear tasks to be achieved. In the same spirit, Ricoeur also prefers to move away from the grand term of the tragic, which invokes images of a set destiny that is unavoidable by the agents living in its shadow. After all, tragic actions aiming to avoid the destiny of the protagonists only hasten its arrival. In contrast to the tragic, Ricoeur argues, the notion of the fragile might be a better approach to history, one that avoids a sense of inevitability that effaces all responsibility on the side of agents, even if fragility shares with tragedy "a sort of stubbornness in finiteness, an isolation from the other."[5] Yet, while tragedy presents this 'stubbornness' as an insurmountable fact of the human condition, a sense of fragility, Ricoeur argues, solicits responsibility.

While Ricoeur does not connect these ideas to the concept of the planet, I think they can help to drive home a point that I have tried to make in this dissertation. In the Anthropocene, such insights are valuable because they also avoid reading the current climate crisis as an inevitable tragedy or as a meta-narrative that reduces all the many stories to be told about it to a single frame of reference. The risk of the Anthropocene collapsing a multi-faceted political history into a single frame of explanation has often been noticed by scholars, who argue that it would invite Eurocentric perspectives, and that it would be blind to political, economic, and cultural diversity among humans.[6] Ricoeur's distinction between the fragile and the tragic can help counter such tendencies within the Anthropocene. Fragility stipulates that history is not fixed and that it is not written as a single, universal narrative. This idea also came to the surface in different terms, when I discussed Ricoeur's humanism as resisting the idea that history is something that humans make or produce at will. Important in all of this is that a fragile reading of Anthropocene fictions along the lines of Ricoeur's concept of fragility complicates the idea that a coherent, fixed story can be told about it, while this tension

[4] "[L]a voie étroite allant du sens de la responsabilité au sens de l'histoire est encore ouverte." Ibid., 65.

[5] "[L]e fragile, comme le tragique, révèle une sorte d'obstination dans la finitude, de clôture à l'autre." Ibid., 66.

[6] I discuss some of these critiques in more detail at two earlier moments of this dissertation. Cf., above, "The Discordant Planet," 24-35, and "Humanism in the Anthropocene," 156-162.

and resistance of the planetary to such narrative frames can still be attested to within narrative.

Ricoeur further conceptualizes fragility in interplay with the notion of responsibility that accompanies it, maintaining that there is an "intrinsic tie" between the two terms.[7] Because the fragile is not tragic, that is, because the fate of the fragile is not yet determined, there is something to be done for what or who is in a situation of fragility. The fragile calls to action, it bestows responsibility onto those who witness it. Ricoeur therefore writes:

> We feel that we are solicited, enjoined by the fragile, […] enjoined to do something for…, to bring assistance, of course, but more than that, to promote growth, to foster accomplishment and flourishing.[8]

This specific call of the fragile, Ricoeur argues, engenders a sense of responsibility that is fundamentally forward-looking, i.e., a responsibility that involves more than identifying oneself as the author of past, harmful actions. This forward-looking responsibility instead accepts the task to enable the fragile to thrive, and therefore looks ahead, "directed to the future of a being who has to be helped to survive, to grow."[9] Fragility therefore gives rise to responsibility, according to Ricoeur, as well as to the commitment to responsible actions in the world. It spurs witnesses on to become active, to change the world, and, perhaps, their interpretations of it.

Such responsibility, Ricoeur maintains, is held toward individual others. In fact, Ricoeur maintains that the fragile appears in the form of *other humans* who are at risk of perishing or of having to endure injustice; it is therefore foremost a relation to a (human) "someone."[10] The call of the fragile that renders one responsible comes from "an other who declares that we are responsible – or better, an other who makes us responsible, or as Levinas says,

[7] "[U]n lien intrinsèque." Ibid., 66.

[8] "Nous nous sentons requis, enjoints par le fragile, […] enjoints de faire quelque chose pour…, de porter secours, certes, mais mieux, de faire croître, de permettre accomplissement et épanouissement." Ibid., 66.

[9] "C'est vers le futur d'un être qu'il faut aider à survivre, à croître, que nous sommes dirigés." Ibid., 67.

[10] Ibid., 67.

summons us to responsibility."[11] Fragility is founded on particular relations to persons who suffer, while Ricoeur also thinks that it stems from a shared sense of being human. For example, he maintains that responsibility comes from a "fundamental similarity as human beings."[12] Fragility and responsibility therefore invoke, for Ricoeur, relations between individuals, who share a sense of both being humans.

While Ricoeur's analysis of the fragile can help to move the Anthropocene debate from meta-narratives to more particular calls to action, issued by those most vulnerable to its disastrous effects, it is not necessary to limit the fragile to a relation between particular individuals nor to a practical category closely tied to responsibility and action. What Ricoeur calls the 'natural weakness' of the fragile refers to a certain passivity of human agency that I think cannot be captured by integrating the fragile within models of responsible action. True, fragility calls to action, but the fact that humans are fragile, *naturally* fragile, also points toward a certain dimension of contingency to the human condition which can be responded to but that cannot be overcome through action. Through such ideas as 'wide belonging,' or through my material reading of Ricoeur's humanism, I have attempted to show that the relation to the planet contains certain aspects that escape human action and that become visible through its limits. Fragility denotes, for me, also all those aspects that lie beyond what humans can change or control about the Earth, to which, however, they are forced to relate.

This more passive sense of fragility also briefly emerges in Ricoeur's lecture. This sense no longer concerns a relation to *particular individuals* vulnerable to violence in unjust situations, but it denotes a more *general* weakness of the *human world* as something that is perishable and contingent. This sense of a more general fragility emerges, for example, when Ricoeur, with implicit reference to Hannah Arendt, denotes the fragility of "all things humans, in themselves so ephemeral."[13] Human works, Ricoeur observes, are entrusted to the *polis*

[11] "L'appel, l'injonction, la confiance aussi, qui procèdent du fragile, font que c'est toujours un autre qui nous déclare responsables ; mieux, qui nous rend responsables, ou, comme dit Lévinas, nous appelle à la responsabilité. Un autre, en comptant sur moi, me rend responsable de mes actes." Ibid., 68.

[12] "N'est-ce pas finalement de mutuelle reconnaissance qu'il s'agit, d'une reconnaissance où l'autre cessera d'être étranger pour être traité comme mon semblable, selon la fondamentale similitude humaine?" Ibid., 68.

[13] "[Les] choses humaines, en elles-mêmes si fugitives, si fragiles […]." Ibid., 72.

for their retention into the future, where they are, however, exposed to the additional fragility of the possibility of political violence. Importantly, for me, fragility here means more than a relation to a particular someone, as it also stands for the possibility – the inevitability – of all things human withering away, for their openness not just to historical violence but also to the simple fact of the passing of time, the eroding work of forces at play on the planetary level.

As to the ties between fragility and practical philosophy, Ricoeur's work also provides some opening to extend fragility beyond the concept of responsibility. Interestingly, Ricoeur cites Hans Jonas's work, which has argued that the temporal horizon of responsibility should stretch out into the distant future, incorporating the disastrous ecological effects of contemporary actions and rendering present agents responsible to avoid them.[14] Ricoeur summarizes Jonas's famous imperative of responsibility as the one "that requires us to act in such a way as to ensure that humanity will continue after us, guides us in the direction of a future as vast as the distant effects of our technological interventions."[15] Ricoeur merely takes note of Jonas's examples to then put them aside. Yet their inclusion shows that Ricoeur connects fragility to deep future effects of present-day actions on the habitability of the Earth It then becomes intertwined with the planetary level on which these effects unfold. This upscaling, however, I would argue, already changes the notion of fragility from the sense attributed to it by Ricoeur.

This change becomes more manifest in David Utsler's interpretation Ricoeur's essay. In his environmental interpretation, Utsler argues that "the fragility of human action" lies at the heart of the planetary crisis, which both means that there is something about the human condition that places humans in an asymmetrical relation to the planet and that attempts to mitigate this dependency tend to deepen it rather than efface it. "It is because of our own fragility," Utsler argues, "- that is, being ill-equipped to survive in the environment – that we take up measures to ensure our longevity. Yet it is those very measures that now threaten our

[14] Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Insel, 1979).

[15] "L'impératif qui nous demande d'agir en sorte qu'il y ait encore une humanité après nous oriente vers un futur aussi vaste que sont lointains les effets de nos interventions technologiques." Ricoeur, "Responsibility and Fragility," 68.

hope of surviving."[16] Human agents often do not oversee the consequences of the actions they initiate, which means that any well-intended intervention may evolve in unexpected and sometimes unintended ways. Despite best efforts, actions could backfire and destroy the conditions that render the human form of life possible. To mitigate this uncertainty, action on a collective level is required, one that takes place on the level of the *polis* rather than on an individual basis, but here the capability of engaging in an adequate response is missing, given the complex, large-scale, and interconnected nature of environmental issues. The extension of responsibility into the deep future does therefore not only correspond to the fragility of suffering others, instead, it generates a new fragility, namely, one that arises out of the inadequacy of inherited models of responsibility in dealing with the novelty and multiscalarity of the planetary scale of the Anthropocene. The radical extension of responsibility risks destabilizing it, diffusing it across temporal and spatial scales.

In short, while I follow Ricoeur in his conception of the fragile as distinct from the tragic, I hesitate to place it in the framework of individual relations and of praxis. The kind of fragility exposed in this dissertation is better understood if it is not paired with 'responsibility' but with a sense of human limits in facing the Anthropocene and the planet.

INHABITING FRAGILITY

Taking all the above into account, this dissertation adds another dimension to Ricoeur's conceptualization of fragility, one that is implied by it but not explicitly worked out. This fragility concerns the ultimate inadequacy of inherited means such as tradition to make sense of the collision of planet and world. While Ricoeur emphasizes how fragility and responsibility imply each other, connecting the fragile to a *practical* philosophy of action, I also think that fragility attests to those elements of the human condition that direct attention to what complicates the practical relation to the world. Humans are fragile because the semantics of praxis can be frustrated or disrupted, because the planet on which praxis unfolds never without remainder enters the world of human affairs.

[16] David Utsler, *Paul Ricoeur and Environmental Philosophy* (Lexington, 2024), 78.

Inhabiting this sense of fragility calls for an awareness of the limits of human action. The relation between (discordant) Anthropocene fiction and such humility has been remarked before by others. In an article that explores how catastrophic futures of the climate change system enter different ways of engaging with the future – analytical prediction, political agitation, climate change fiction – Joe P.L. Davidson and Luke Kemp argue that literature can productively *estrange* audiences from the present, opening up pathways to new, different futures.[17] Fiction teaches "epistemic humility," by which the authors mean that "there are aspects of climate catastrophe that are beyond present comprehension."[18] Anthropocene fiction is characterized by Davidson and Kamp as a genre that often explores "the inability to imagine the future," which "highlights the *partiality* of visions of catastrophe."[19] As I have argued as well, the interpretation of Anthropocene fiction may result in a sense of the limits of human action vis-à-vis those elements of the planet that cannot exhaustively be captured in images or words, narrative representation or programmatic approaches to praxis, and that will not enter the perimeters of technoscientific control or manipulation. Each of the four main chapters of this dissertation can be read through this lens of fragility and a sense of human limits. As such, they give further shape to the idea of a fragile hermeneutics, while they also further substantiate the specific kind of relation that I would like to attach to fragility. By means of conclusion, I will here maintain that the need for a sense of *temporal, semantic, finite,* and *subjective* fragility has emerged throughout the chapters above.

In the chapter on 'verticality,' I emphasized that the Ricoeurian notion of 'world' does not have to be understood in a strictly anthropocentric sense. The world is the site where the limits of human agency and the intrusion of a nonhuman, physical time enter in conflict, giving rise to various, always incomplete mediations between a human sense of time and a physical sense of time. The interpretation of discordant Anthropocene fictions heightens the sense of how the discordance between these concepts of time is always already present in the world. Such fictions imply a physical – planetary – time in which humans are not at home, but with which they have to live. Physical time erupts in the worlds of literature, as Ricoeur

[17] Joe P.L. Davidson and Luke Kemp, "Climate Catastrophe: The Value of Envisioning the Worst-Case Scenarios of Climate Change," *WIREs Climate Change* 15, no.2 (2024): e871. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.871.

[18] Ibid., 8.

[19] Ibid., 8.

showed in his interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway,* and literature is charged with the task of figuring out how the conflict between physical time and lived time is inhabited in diverse ways by its different protagonists. All this means that the hermeneutic sense of world refers to more than a closed-off realm of meaning: the world is in some way the mediation through which the tension between meaningful experience and physical time is inhabited. Interpreting discordant Anthropocene fictions can therefore engender a sense of *temporal* fragility: the awareness that time is never fully human, that within the world of human meaning a discordant, physical time becomes present with which one must reckon. This describes the awareness of the ephemeral nature of human actions and meanings, their inseparability from a temporality in which they might at some point no longer mean anything at all.

In the chapter on 'asymmetry,' I argued that the Ricoeurian notion of 'belonging' can be extended to capture the sense of the existence of the planet *without* humans. While, in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, belonging tends to be understood as an insurmountable relation to a cultural context that precedes reflection, I have maintained that a 'wide' sense of belonging captures a broader entanglement of humans with being that does not belong to them, and that could be without them. The interpretation of discordant Anthropocene fictions could result in a glimpse of this sense of wide belonging. A fragile hermeneutics of Anthropocene fiction focuses on how literature allows us a glimpse of the incapacity to fully grasp human belonging to the planet. Through the failures of more narrow means of belonging to relate to the planet, a planetary surplus becomes visible over these narrow means of belonging. Interpreting discordant Anthropocene fictions can therefore engender as sense of fragility of a *semantic* nature, which involves the realization that the planet always also escapes what is said about it from a situated, cultural, historical perspective – wide belonging can never be brought back to be a correlate of such forms of belonging.

In the chapter on 'materiality,' I argued that Ricoeur's humanism can be brought in dialogue with humanity's planetary imprint in the Anthropocene through a consideration of the fundamental role that traces play in hermeneutics. Traces enable traditions, as the material heritage of tradition inscribes itself in documents and archives that can be passed on to later generations when earlier generations pass away. This durability of traditions also invokes the side of the trace as a mere physical inscription. This side of the trace carries but also resists the meaning bestowed on traces by traditions and their interpretations, even if it

enables traditions to exist in the first place. A fragile hermeneutics of Anthropocene fictions can read the traces of traditions as abandoned, as mere material imprints on the planet, heightening a sense of fragility of any conception of 'humanity' as an ideal that has to emerge through the works of culture and through the dialogue among cultures. Such discordant fictions can bring to the fore the trace-like nature of human works through which human(ist) universality would have to emanate, which allows one to interpret these works as the remainders of a tradition without a future, that is, as remainders that are no longer passed on. In turn, the fragility such insights invite pertains to a sense of *finitude*. By giving shape to themselves, humans have to rely on traces left in a physical time that they did not make and that enables as much as threatens the universal horizon of their works, traditions, histories.

Finally, in the chapter on 'multiscalarity,' I concluded that reading discordant Anthropocene fictions, especially if they involve multiple, conflicting scales, leads to increased fragility on the side of the reader. Through engaging his capacities to imagine and complete such literary works, the reader lends himself to the disruptive, other force of the text, which, in the case of multiscalar Anthropocene fiction, ends up unsettling expectations for some coherent meaning often sought in such novels. This fragility invites reflections pertaining to the loss of experiencing oneself as a *subject* in control over its own faculties. Instead of 'mastering' the sense of a text, fragile hermeneutics emphasizes that one always also must submit one's powers to the text to complete its meaning – I placed this insight under a motto of Julietta Singh that 'reading rewrites me.' Next to this, interpreting discordant Anthropocene fictions does not result in a triumphant exit out of this process of submission and interpretation, as they give rise to a sense of conflicting meanings on different scales: the reader emerges from the text with new questions about the relationship between his everyday experience and anthropogenic processes on a geophysical, planetary scale, and without a coherent frame to bring these two scales together.

All in all, the sense of humility to which a fragile hermeneutics of Anthropocene fiction can give rise is marked by rendering readers more aware of a) their entanglement in a (geo)physical time that is indifferent to humans even if humans now impact Earth history, b) the ineffable aspects to the planet that undermine and complicate meaning, c) the finitude of the human dependency on physical inscriptions to interpret itself, and d) the instability of the subject that opens itself to the multiple scales invoked in the Anthropocene. What I have

here called fragile hermeneutics is hence aporetic in nature, as it ends in a sense of encountering certain limits that human action and meaning making cannot overcome.

According to this dissertation, the planet cannot without remainder be reduced to a cultural symbol, a narrative, or a term within the semantics of action. Still, narratives themselves explore this surplus of the planet and through discordances, help relate to what would otherwise escape. While the planet is an elusive concept, such mediating narratives are important as the Anthropocene signals a time in which praxis is found to be entangled with processes that only become apparent on a planetary scale. The trouble that started in the Anthropocene is that the human world has become closely entangled with the planet due to the anthropogenic impact on the planet, even if the planet is difficult to integrate within practical understanding. Ricoeur's treatment of the aporia of time, the perennial conflict between the time of the soul and that of nature already prepared this insight that situates humanity in between conflicting approaches to the world between which humans cannot choose. What I have tried to show is that a hermeneutics of Anthropocene fiction can render this conflict fruitful, in the sense that Anthropocene fictions are meaningful stories about how the human world – and the ways in which narrative builds the world – run into the limits posed by the planet.

The appearance of such limits does not free one from the imperative to act, nor does it render the world of human action futile and meaningless. Fragility does not justify inaction. What a fragile hermeneutics does do is embrace the ambiguities of inhabiting a planet that does not belong to us. It engenders a sense of wonder for the planet that both sustains and interrupts the stories we tell of ourselves. It is as if through such planetary discordances a moment of silence is approached within narrative, a hesitation of language manifested within language, through which something other is glimpsed of human life on Earth – if only sideways. The planetary is this hesitation and this silence in narrative. It is beyond the reach of this dissertation to spell out in detail the ways in which such a sense of fragility could inform practical understanding, how this silence can connect to what we do. Nevertheless, I hope that its minimal effect will be to warn of the semantic hubris that forces the planet into the shape of concordant stories, and I hope this invites the silence of the planet's deep time to resound more forcefully through the incessant murmuring of the world.

APPENDICES

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SUMMARY

SAMENVATTING

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SAMENVATTING

Deze dissertatie vertrekt vanuit discussies over het Antropoceen – het geologische tijdperk van de mens. In deze discussies speelt de aardwetenschappelijke benadering van de aarde als een planetair systeem een prominente rol. Hoewel deze benadering nieuwe aspecten van de mens zichtbaar maakt – bijvoorbeeld dat de mens nu een 'geologische kracht' zou zijn – staat ze ook haaks op de beleving van de wereld in een alledaagse zin. Zo denken geologen in termen van miljarden jaren, terwijl onze alledaagse beleving op veel kortere termijnen gericht is. Hoe kunnen we een plek geven aan zulke spanningen tussen de alledaagse beleving van de wereld en de wetenschappelijke inzichten op planetair niveau?

In deze dissertatie gebruik ik het werk van de Franse filosoof Paul Ricoeur om over dit vraagstuk na te denken. Mijn uitgangspunt is dat zijn filosofie belangrijke inzichten kan bieden over onze relatie tot de planeet, mits zijn inzichten *verdiept* worden door een engagement met het planetaire denken. Ricoeurs denken onderzoekt namelijk hoe mensen omgaan met situaties waarin hun interpretatie van de wereld uitgedaagd wordt. Het planetaire denken kan als zo'n uitdaging gezien worden, omdat het allerlei vastgeroeste aannames over de plaats van de mens op aarde in twijfel trekt. In deze dissertatie werk ik daarom met enkele kernbegrippen van Ricoeur, zoals 'toebehoren' of 'menselijkheid,' waarbij ik laat zien hoe deze begrippen vernieuwd en verdiept moeten worden zodat ze ons het planetaire in het licht van de alledaagse ervaring helpen te duiden. In mijn interpretatie staat de fragiliteit van de mens tegenover de planeet centraal staat: wij behoren aan de planeet toe, maar de planeet behoort niet toe aan ons.

Omdat Ricoeurs werk een sterke nadruk legt op het belang van verhalen en literatuur om de wereld van betekenis te voorzien, werk ik in ieder hoofdstuk met literaire verkenningen van de spanningen tussen de menselijke wereld en de aarde als een planeet. Ik bepleit dat in zulke '*Anthropocene fictions*' de spanningen en grenzen van de menselijke alledaagse ervaringen zichtbaar worden. Mijn verdieping van Ricoeurs werkt met literair wetenschappelijke en filosofische discussies over deze thematiek en literatuur, waardoor zijn hermeneutiek in een hedendaags krachtenveld geplaatst kan worden.

SUMMARY

This dissertation departs from discussions surrounding the Anthropocene—the geological epoch of humans. In these discussions, the Earth-scientific approach to the planet as a complex, planetary system plays a prominent role. While this approach highlights new aspects of humanity—for example, that humans are now a "geological force"—it also stands in tension with the everyday experience of the world. Geologists think in terms of billions of years, whereas our daily experience is oriented toward much shorter timescales. How, then, can we make sense of these tensions between the everyday experience of the world and scientific insights at the planetary level?

In this dissertation, I turn to the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur to reflect on this question. My starting point is that his philosophy can provide valuable insights into our relationship with the planet, provided these insights are deepened through engagement with planetary thinking. Ricoeur's thought examines how humans deal with situations in which their interpretation of the world is challenged. Planetary thinking can be seen as such a challenge, since it calls into question long-held assumptions about humanity's place on Earth. For this reason, I work with several of Ricoeur's key concepts, such as "belonging" and "humanity," showing how these concepts must be renewed and deepened in order to help us interpret the planetary in light of everyday experience. In my interpretation, the fragility of humans in relation to the planet is central: we belong to the planet, but the planet does not belong to us.

Because Ricoeur's work places strong emphasis on the importance of stories and literature in providing meaning to the world, I include literary explorations in each chapter to examine the tensions between the human world and the Earth as a planet. I argue that in such "Anthropocene fictions," the tensions and limits of human everyday experience become visible. My engagement with Ricoeur is enriched by literary, scientific, and philosophical discussions on these themes and works of literature, thereby situating his hermeneutics within a contemporary field of forces.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Boris R. van Meurs (1994) completed the bachelor's program Psychology at Utrecht University, after which he obtained a research master's degree in (Continental) Philosophy at Radboud University. He continued his studies by following a post-master program to teach philosophy at Dutch high schools. After working at a school in Zwolle for a year, he returned to Nijmegen for a position as a PhD / lecturer, of which this dissertation is the product. Boris has published on his research in academic journals, such as the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* and *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrijft voor Wijsbegeerte*, and more popular outlets, such as *Wijsgerig Perspectief*.

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