



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## **The Destruction of Dwelling. Ecopoetics in the Anthropocene**

Andersen, Gregers

*Published in:*  
Lo Sguardo. Rivista di Filosofia

*Publication date:*  
2016

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Andersen, G. (2016). The Destruction of Dwelling. Ecopoetics in the Anthropocene. *Lo Sguardo. Rivista di Filosofia*, 21(2), 77-90.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Articoli/3*

## ***The Destruction of Dwelling*** **Ecopoetics in the Anthropocene**

Gregers Andersen

---

Articolo sottoposto a *peer-review*. Ricevuto il 27/01/2016. Accettato il 26/02/2016

---

We are on the brink of entering a new age in Earth's history that calls for a radical rethinking of what Heidegger conceptualizes as dwelling. As the notion of the Anthropocene makes it ontologically impossible for humans to let non-human entities appear in their own presencing, Heidegger's fourfold dissolves and a new geomorphic fold emerges as the ground for human existence. In this article I trace how this fold transfigures the relationship between poetics and ecological engagement, and thereby constitute a new operating space for contemporary literature.

\*\*\*

In spite of its affinity with the situation caused by modern technology, it is at first glance fairly easy to denounce the notion of the Anthropocene by way of Heidegger's thinking<sup>1</sup>. Perceived as yet another attempt to «reckon existing reality [...] in terms of catastrophe and destruction», it would not at all be in conflict with Heidegger's late writings to take the impending annunciation of the Anthropocene as a symptom of a much more serious crisis<sup>2</sup>. That is, as a symptom of how humanity has lost sight of its own essence, since the very compulsion to define the world in terms of scientific rationality, is, according to Heidegger, what has driven human nature «into alienation» in the first place<sup>3</sup>. In fact, following Heidegger's line of thought, the scientific work on the Anthropocene discloses a deeply problematic situation. A situation, in which the Anthropocene comes to light as a product of a «technological consciousness» that has lost track of its own origin in *poiēsis*, yet at the same time appears as a

---

<sup>1</sup> The Anthropocene is a new geological epoch that we according to some of the world's top geologists has already entered or are living in «a transition towards» (C. N. Waters et al, *A stratigraphical basis for the Anthropocene?*, in *The Geological Society*, 2014. Web. 30 Marts 2015, p. 15). The term is meant to encapsulate how, from the atmosphere to the biosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere, the human signature has become of such a magnitude that it makes sense to formally announce the end of the Holocene and name the contemporary age the Anthropocene: the age of the anthropos/human.

<sup>2</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by W. Lovitt, New York & London 1977, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by A. Hofstadter, New York 1971, p. 144.

«historiographical-technological presentation of happening commensurate with that consciousness»<sup>4</sup>.

However, in this article I wish to show why any contemporary attempt to reiterate this argument would itself be deeply problematic. Instead of following Heidegger's logic to the aforementioned conclusion, I will seek to demonstrate how the Anthropocene fundamentally scars Heideggerian thinking, by destroying his concept of dwelling from within. As most readers will know, in "Building Dwelling Thinking" ("Bauen Wohnen Denken", 1954) Heidegger connects «dwelling» to the fourfold: «to save the earth, to receive the sky, to await the divinities, to escort mortals»<sup>5</sup>. Here, dwelling is simply what opens the fourfold, or what in its «presencing» preserves the fourfold<sup>6</sup>. Hence one dwells when one saves the earth, receives the sky, awaits the divinities, and escorts mortals. Yet, even though this connection between dwelling and the fourfold lies at the heart of Heidegger's text its pulse comes, as so often in Heidegger's late writings, from a sense of concern, if not urgency. Thus, we should, as readers of Heidegger's text bear in mind that his ambition is not only to «think about dwelling and building»<sup>7</sup>, but also to raise the question: «what is the state of dwelling in our precarious age»<sup>8</sup>?

One way to enter the text is therefore also by posing another question, namely why does Heidegger consider the age, he is writing in, to be precarious? Of course, this is a question that immediately points back to "The Question Concerning Technology" (1953) and some of Heidegger's other texts from the 1950s that are concerned with the prospects of «the late atomic age»<sup>9</sup>. Yet in these texts we only find indications of what I take to be the most profound cause of the precariousness referred to in "Building Dwelling Thinking". However, this argument is complicated by the fact that not even Heidegger can be claimed to have been fully aware of the implications of the precariousness he touches upon here. Rather, his thinking remains situated within a temporal horizon that does not enable him to grasp what we are today in a position to perceive as its most decisive moments. A point I will now unfold more thoroughly, before moving the discussion to the realm of contemporary literature.

## 1. The Danger

Rather unsurprisingly, I am afraid, my departure point will be Heidegger's often highlighted use of Hölderlin's lines: "But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also". Heidegger reflects at length on these lines already in

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, translated by J. M. Anderson & E. H. Freund, New York 1966, p. 49.

“What Are Poets For?” (*Wozu Dichter*, 1946)<sup>10</sup>. However, it is their part in the argument that Heidegger makes on the final pages of “The Question Concerning Technology”, that we need to address, since, by way of these lines, here Heidegger reaches the notorious conclusion that «the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine»<sup>11</sup>. As many readers will know, this is a conclusion that follows and is directly connected to Heidegger’s analysis of ‘enframing’ (*Gestell*). Thus, in “The Question Concerning Technology” enframing is pinpointed as the danger par excellence, as it is defined as «that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve»<sup>12</sup>.

Yet, the meaning of this is still rather subtle, and may in fact not at all be graspable for those unfamiliar with Heidegger’s work without a recursion to the story of the history of technology that Heidegger is telling. This is a story about how ‘*technē*’, the bringing-forth (*Her-vor-bringen*) of craftsmen, was originally a revealing that happened in accordance with ‘*physis*’, the concealment and unconcealment of «the growing things of nature»<sup>13</sup>. *Technē* was in this sense not only «something poetic»<sup>14</sup>, a revealing similar to the «artistic and poetical bringing into appearance»<sup>15</sup>. It was in its respect of the processes of *physis*, the concealment and unconcealment of the growing things of nature, even more importantly also a bringing-forth that reflected an intention «to take care of and to maintain»<sup>16</sup>. It contained, in other words, a ‘saving power’.

According to Heidegger this saving power is exactly what has disappeared in the way modern technology is utilized, since «the revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging»<sup>17</sup>. What was previously revealed in accordance with the concealment and unconcealment of the growing things of nature is forced forward by modern technology in order to stand in reserve. Or, as Heidegger puts it in *Discourse on Thinking* (*Gelassenheit*, 1959): «Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry»<sup>18</sup>. In fact, from this perspective I do not at all think it is controversial to claim that Heidegger had a quite precise analytical premonition of what was coming i.e. The Anthropocene. In his description of how modern technology (as a means of modern capitalism or ‘calculative thinking’) territorializes the whole globe, it is fair to say that one finds omens of the world we are now living in. That is, a world where the imprints of the human species have gained such a geophysical magnitude that they are likely to pose a serious threat to the general well-being of the species within a few generations.

<sup>10</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., pp. 115-117.

<sup>11</sup> M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, cit., p. 50.

However, there is, as already indicated also a clear limit to Heidegger's foresight, and it is this limit that interests me, since I believe that, in the light of the Anthropocene, it makes parts of Heidegger's thinking turn against itself. That is, in accordance with the wording highlighted above, makes it 'precarious' to an extent that not only goes beyond Heidegger's own vision, but also forced the concept of dwelling to implode. This limit is, I believe, made visible by Heidegger's recurring reference to Hölderlin's lines «But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also». Thus, since these lines constitute the primary figure of thought through which Heidegger perceives and analyses modern technology, they also situate his vision inside a limit beyond which destruction is not imagined. I will in a moment try to more thoroughly explain why this limit is upheld by Heidegger, but let me first demonstrate how it appears in "Building Dwelling Thinking", as it is here established without explicit recourse to Hölderlin's lines. Instead, these lines are implicitly echoed, when Heidegger writes:

The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *real* plight of dwelling as *the* plight? Yet as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, when Heidegger claims here that «as soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer», we are once again confronted with the idea of a frail tipping point between danger and salvation. In fact, the frailness of this tipping point is like another flickering, yet never disappearing light in the deepest depth of the dark night that Heidegger is placing 'man' within. The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly the ways into the saving power shine. Yet, why is it that Heidegger, in spite of the atmosphere of urgency that he continuously seeks to create in his writings insists so imperatively on the 'not too late'? Or to rephrase the question: How does his thought depend on the limit to destruction that this 'not too late' entails? This seems to me to be the vital question that the notion of the Anthropocene in a sense forces upon contemporary readings of "Building Dwelling Thinking" as well as on readings of Heidegger's other late writings.

My answer to this question is that this limit to destruction (which the 'not too late' entails) is exactly what gives meaning, indeed existence, to Heidegger's conceptualization of dwelling. Without this limit, this conceptualization is, as we shall now see, not capable of having the significance that Heidegger firmly believes it to have. In fact, without this limit a number of Heidegger's concepts are put in a state of severe crisis, since they obtain their power from being formulated as alternatives to the challenging claim that according to Heidegger

---

<sup>19</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., p. 159.

characterizes the revealings of modern technology. These concepts depend on the condition that man's comportment towards *physis* is not tampered from the beginning. That is, not always already shaped as an expression of violence and dominion<sup>20</sup>. In "Building Dwelling Thinking" this is indirectly visible in a number of passages. For example, one should not be too surprised that Heidegger writes here: «To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparring and preserving*»<sup>21</sup>.

Thus, what is made apparent by this passage is how Heidegger links dwelling to saving, and saving to the preservation of «each thing in its nature». In this sense, dwelling is basically described here as a comportment that allows the concealments and unconcealment of *physis* to take place at its own tempo. Indeed, this is by no means a way of thinking that in Heidegger's writings first presents itself in "Building Dwelling Thinking". Already in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" ("Brief über den Humanismus", 1946) one finds the following passage:

To embrace a "thing" or a "person" in its essence means to love it, to favor it. Thought in a more original way such favoring [*Mögen*] means to bestow essence as a gift. Such favoring is the proper essence of enabling, which not only can achieve this or that but also can let something essentially unfold in its provenance, that is, let it be<sup>22</sup>.

Dwelling enables that this gift can be bestowed. It is an existential attunement that allows something to evolve and dissolve without interference, or as Heidegger puts it in yet another passage from "Building Dwelling Thinking": «To save really means to set something free into its own presencing»<sup>23</sup>.

However, in the Anthropocene all this comes to pass, as this notion basically implies that we have arrived at a point where the concealments and unconcealment of *physis* can no longer be positively distinguished from human influence. Everything is tangled together, as the short history of humanity fuses with the present and the near future of the planet in a 'forced marriage' that gets more destructive by the day. We have, in this sense, moved beyond the limit to destruction that Heidegger imagined. The saving power he believes is to be found in dwelling is no longer there, since it is in a deeper ontological sense no longer possible «to set something free into its own presencing». Rather, the whole globe has become an object of humanity's challenging claim. The consequence is that the meaning that Heidegger applies to dwelling implodes. From being something 'precarious' the concept moves into a state of obsolescence, and the same goes for the fourfold, as this concept depends on the same limit to destruction as

---

<sup>20</sup> For instance, this is the reason that *the event* (*das Ereignis*) cannot be forced forth according to Heidegger. Similar to the romantic idea of poetic inspiration it can only be invited to happen through waiting, which is essentially also why in his late writings Heidegger prefers to talk about revealing in terms of a *clearing* (*Lichtung*).

<sup>21</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, edited by D. F. Krell, San Francisco 1993, p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, cit., p. 148.

the concept of dwelling. This is made clear when Heidegger writes: «Dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things. But things themselves secure the fourfold *only when they themselves as things* are let be in their presencing»<sup>24</sup>.

Stated differently, it is only possible to enter the fourfold when under the safeguard of dwelling things are let be. As already pointed out, the trouble is that it is in a fundamental epistemological and ontological way no longer possible to let things be in the Anthropocene. In this age everything is already inscribed with the marks of calculative thinking, as historical and contemporary capitalism has territorialized the globe in its entirety – most dominantly through its influence on the global climate. Indeed, this development has been quite interestingly described by Tian Song. In an article titled “Global Warming as a Manifestation of Garbage” (2012) Song states that:

We have now entered a new period of history; I call it the Age of Limited Earth. We have only one Earth, and the Earth is limited. In the Age of Limited Earth, the capitalistic economy meets its upper limit immediately, i.e., the Earth itself<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, what Song indirectly makes apparent with these lines is how the limit (which for Heidegger constituted the decisive barrier between challenging and letting be) is no longer there, since «in the Age of Limited Earth, the capitalistic economy meets its upper limit immediately, i.e., the Earth itself».

## 2. The Geomorphic Fold

However, what this also means is that the analysis has arrived at a point where a new question emerges. Thus, if we are no longer in a position to dwell in the Heideggerian sense of the word and therefore also no longer capable of entering the fourfold, then what kind of fold or folds are we left with? Indeed, this question points to another important question, namely how the notion of the Anthropocene transfigures the relationship between poetics and ecological engagement, as, in a strict Heideggerian sense, this relationship can no longer be established through the passage of dwelling. But let me not pace the argument, and instead initiate my exploration of these two questions by turning to a text recently published by Tom Cohen.

In his essay “The Geomorphic Fold: Anapocalypts, Changing Climes and ‘Late’ Deconstruction” (2010) Cohen indicates on several occasions that «a biomorphic and *geomorphic* turn» has taken place, but does not offer a clear definition of the term «geomorphic fold»<sup>26</sup>. Yet, in his exploration of «how the geomorphic logics released by a dawning era of climate change diagnose what

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> T. Song, “Global Warming as a Manifestation of Garbage”, in *Impasses of the Post-Global. Theory in the Era of Climate Change* vol. 2. Edited by H. Sussman. Open Humanities Press, 2012: pp. 108-125.

<sup>26</sup> T. Cohen, *The Geomorphic Fold: Anapocalypts, Changing Climes and ‘Late’ Deconstruction*, in *Oxford Literary Review* 32 (2010), p. 76.

is called 'deconstruction' today», Cohen does come up with a few suggestive remarks that I feel are worth further reflection in light of the arguments made this far<sup>27</sup>. Thus, in the essay Cohen acknowledges that:

The new' time of abrupt geomorphic mutation is far more 'out of joint' than the dark underbelly of another 'new world order'. This time is not of phenomenology nor of its deconstruction. For however, disjointed the phenomenological presence was, it was always a present that differed from itself. The logics of 'climate change' are even more Hamlet-like since they inhabit a present that is zombied by what it knows would be now irreversible, yet which it does not see, and hence occludes<sup>28</sup>.

This description is important, because it is indicative of an existential circumstance, which Cohen also touches upon, and which seems to attach itself to this «new time of abrupt geomorphic mutation». Because what does it mean in a deeper sense to «inhabit a present that is zombied by what it knows would be now irreversible»? Could one obvious existential consequence of this not be claimed to be that «we already regard the present retrospectively, as a moment that from the perspective of [a] catastrophic future might have been avoided»<sup>29</sup>.

To be more precise, what I believe Cohen encourages us to grasp is how the vast time scales that arrive with the Anthropocene inaugurate a new existential setting that calls for new ontologies. This new setting, which, following Cohen, we may name the geomorphic fold, is not only different, but radically separated from the Heideggerian fourfold, as it situates the present and coming generations in a world where physis cannot be set «free into its own presencing», since it is already radically altered. It is perhaps even more important to note how this geomorphic fold connects the human subject to a future, where the past and present is already archived. Hence, when one talks about the Anthropocene, what one is really talking about is the magnitude and longevity of human imprints in «the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere»<sup>30</sup>. Take for example the phenomenon already highlighted by Cohen, namely anthropogenic climate change. It is estimated that some of the strongest greenhouse gasses presently emitted by humans may have a warming effect on the atmosphere «50,000 years» into the future<sup>31</sup>.

To inhabit the geomorphic fold therefore also means to inhabit a relation to time that is marked by more than premonitions of coming disasters and collapse. What the allusions to tipping points with «abrupt and irreversible» changes in the reports by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) more fundamentally implies is that our new time of geomorphic mutation is likely to be marked by an acceleration that will take

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75-76.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> C. N. Waters et al., *A stratigraphical basis for the Anthropocene?*, in *The Geological Society*, 2014. Web. 30 Marts 2015, p. 17

<sup>31</sup> P. J. Crutzen and E. F. Stoermer, *The 'Anthropocene'*, in *The Future of Nature*. Edited by L. Robin, S. Sörlin, and P. Warde, New Haven and London 2013, p. 484.



us further and further away from the condition that Heidegger envisioned as a condition for dwelling<sup>32</sup>. As human-induced changes are likely to produce new changes in an ongoing circle of feedback loops, the geomorphic fold will keep bringing what was in the past archived in the future to light. It will keep bringing into reminiscence the challenging claim as a cause for a frustration and a regret that cannot be relieved. Indeed, to use a term deployed by Derrida, it may even be the case that this archive was from quite early on already «archiviolithic» in essence<sup>33</sup>. That is 'archive-destructing', as there seems to be no guarantee that in the very long run Earth will through the aforementioned feedback loops not enter a «super-interglacial» with the power to wipe out all signs of humanity<sup>34</sup>.

Still, compared to this, it seems much more likely that the geomorphic fold will continue to cause excessive inner folding. As *Dasein* continues to become more and more dependable upon *design*, it is Peter Sloterdijk and not Heidegger, who can help us grasp what "shelter" will mean in the 21st century. Hence to Heidegger shelter (*Underkunft*) is again something that follows from dwelling. It is simply what dwelling provides in its release from the challenging claim, or as it reads rather abstractly in *Discourse on Thinking*:

The region gathers, just as if nothing were happening, each to each and each to all into an abiding, while resting in itself. Regioning is a gathering and re-sheltering for an expanded resting in an abiding. So the region itself is at once an expanse and an abiding. It abides into the expanse of resting. It expands into the abiding of what has freely turned toward itself<sup>35</sup>.

In this sense dwelling provides consciousness with a shelter to expand poetically. It is what enables meditative thinking to encounter the world anew, as dwelling places meditative thinking on a track that from within waiting opens onto to the possibility of the event (*das Ereignis*), the lighted clearing (*Lichtung*) where a poetical bringing into appearance becomes possible.

It is exactly this strange relationship with meditation that the concept of shelter is relieved from in Sloterdijk's philosophy. Here this concept is in a very straight forward fashion linked directly to the architectural folding of space, and therefore also framed in a way that in contrast to Heidegger's conceptualization is not rendered obsolete by the Anthropocene. Thus, when I claimed above that the geomorphic fold is likely to continue to be folded excessively within, I was aiming at something that is basically incommensurable with Heidegger's idea of shelter as a meditative folding of space, namely a kind of reality that seems to unfold with the escalating destruction inherent to the Anthropocene. A reality that distinguishes people by their capability to fold space in an architectural

---

<sup>32</sup> L. Bernstein, & R.K. Pachauri & A. Reisinger. *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. Geneva, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2008, Web. 13 February 2015, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Translated by E. Prenowitz, in *Diacritics* 25.2 (Summer, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> J. Zalasiewicz et al, *Are we now living in the Anthropocene?*, *GSA Today* 18.2. (2008, Web. 3 June 2015, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, cit., p. 66.

manner that either provides them with proper shelter or expose them to disastrous events.

Indeed, this is an avenue of thought I like now to explore further by transposing the discussion to the medium of poetry. One may of course wonder how this medium will enhance our perspective on the disastrous consequences of the Anthropocene. Yet, as we will see, this medium provides us with an opportunity 'to look the beast straight in the eyes'. That is to move speculatively into a future 'fleshed out' in manner one rarely encounters in scientific or philosophical works. However, before arriving at this point, we will first need to address the more general question of how the notion of the Anthropocene transfigures the relationship between poetics and ecological engagement.

### 3. Eco-poetics in the Anthropocene

The reason is quite simple: Heidegger's conceptualization of dwelling has had a clear influence on eco-aesthetical thinking. Therefore, the introduction of the concept of the Anthropocene complicates and problematizes not only the concept of dwelling, as such, but also its influence on eco-aesthetics. This is especially true of the eco-aesthetical connection between poetry (*poiēsis*) and the saving power, as this connection has been quite influential in works of ecocriticism. For example, in Jonathan Bate's ecocritical classic *The Song of the Earth* (2000) one finds the following paragraph:

Heidegger asks us to suppose that the poem is like the peasant farmhouse in the Black Forrest; it gathers the fourfold of mortals, gods, earth, and heaven into its still site in simple oneness. It orders the house of our lives. By bethinking us, it makes us care for things. It overrides dualism and idealism; it grounds us; it enables us to dwell. In this account, 'earth' is crucially different from 'world': 'world' refers to the historical mode of living, which for modernity means living in an instrumental relationship to the earth. To be attuned to earth is to live in another way, to respect the difference, the 'self-concealing', of entities even as they are 'unconcealed' in poetry. To be attuned is, for Heidegger, to dwell. 'Mortals dwell in that they save the earth...Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from spoliation'. This is in the strictest sense an eco-poetic<sup>36</sup>.

In others words poetry is for Bate, as it was for Heidegger, a way to enter dwelling and therefore also a way to become attuned to the concealment and unconcealment of the growing things of nature. Poetry is by Bate simply conceived as a doorway through which «man opens his eyes and ears, unlocks his heart, and gives himself over to meditating»<sup>37</sup>. That is to dwelling, the existential mode of letting things be that destroys the challenging claim and saves the earth. Or at least this how it is supposed to be. For as it was the case with Heidegger's conceptualization of dwelling Bate's eco-poetics is thought from within a temporal horizon, where modernity is equivalent to a human ambition

---

<sup>36</sup>J. Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, London 2000, p. 262.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 268.

for total technological domination. Within this horizon man seeks to master everything, to unconceal every geophysical process so that the whole of physis can stand in reserve and be put to use as a means for capital, but the saving power remains. There are still unspoiled concealments and unconcealments left to save, if man can just change to another mode of existence, step into another type of comportment, where the challenging claim belonging to calculative thinking is replaced by poetical attunement and meditative thinking<sup>38</sup>. Thus, we are with Bate's description of eco-poetics once again left in a temporal horizon that lies prior to the geomorphic fold that encapsulates us all in the Anthropocene.

That said, I am of course aware that this analysis to some extent clashes with the scientific discussions on the official starting point of the Anthropocene. As the three starting points most frequently discussed all lies prior to the publications of the texts by Heidegger and Bate I am dealing with, it could be argued that these texts are in fact products of the Anthropocene rather than predating it<sup>39</sup>. Yet, what interests me here is the ontological and epistemological gesture that is embedded in the impending annunciation of the Anthropocene. Indeed, in this regard it does not even make much sense to claim that the notion of the Anthropocene first came to life, when Dutch Nobel Prize laureate, Paul J. Crutzen, coined the term back in 2000. Rather, the concept of the Anthropocene has only very recently gained the ontological and epistemological significance I grant it here by way of the publications of the geologists who explore the scientific validity of the term. Hence, the notion through which I am here critically exploring Heidegger's and Bate's conceptual idioms is a profoundly new one.

By the same token, it is in a temporal horizon that lies beyond Bate's writings that we must seek the contemporary meaning of eco-poetics. In the same way that dwelling can no longer be conceptually grasped as that which (in a strict Heideggerian sense) activates the saving power, so can the poetical stance that attunes us towards the concealment and unconcealment of the growing things of nature no longer be regarded as a clear path to ecological engagement. Since the scientific work on the Anthropocene has simply antiquated these ideas i.e. once and for all disclosed them as too romantic, what links poetry and ecological engagement is to be sought elsewhere. In fact, in this regards it seems reasonable to consult contemporary literature instead of reducing literature to something

---

<sup>38</sup>To be fair, Bate is of course not the only one who has taken this as a prescription for a way out of the escalating ecological crisis. For instance, in *Heidegger, Politics and Climate Change. Risking It All* (2008) Ruth Irwin claims that «the element of perceive attunement (*Gelassenheit*) is precisely what is missing from philosophical discourse about the relation between contemporary human beings and the environment», p. 187.

<sup>39</sup>These three discussed starting points are 1) 10.000 years BC at the beginning of the Holocene, as it was also at this point in time that the majority of humans became farmers instead of hunter-gatherers. 2) 1784, as this year was marked by James Watt's invention of the steam engine that accelerated the industrialization. 3) 1945, as this year is the starting point for decades of intense nuclear test explosions that has left a clear human signature in the chemistry of the Earth.

that underpins or simply exemplifies a philosophically developed strategy. A trap that both Heidegger and Bate in retrospect clearly stumble straight into.

With these remarks I do of course not intend to imply that we can do without the metalanguage of philosophy all together. For instance, I think Bruno Latour puts us on the track of something important, when he reminds us in his fourth Gilford Lecture, titled “The Anthropocene and the Destruction of The Image of the Globe”, how aesthetics originally referred to an ability «to perceive and to be concerned»<sup>40</sup>. That is, an ability to «render oneself sensitive»<sup>41</sup>. Undoubtedly, poetry has in the Anthropocene not lost this ability to make us sensible, or in Heideggerian terms, attuned (*gestimmt*). Rather, the question is sensible of what, attuned to what, if not the concealment and unconcealment of the growing things of nature?

In the Swedish poet Johannes Heldén’s short text *Terraforming* (2013) we get a interesting answer to this question. Here Heldén draws on a poetical strategy that mixes biological and geological descriptions presented in an almost scientific language, with more traditional poetical descriptions. Similar to the integration of non-literary text fragments that one often finds in conceptual poetry, this strategy generates a text that matches the narrative framework that encircles it. This framework is provided by seven sections with texts of dividing lengths, each carrying a short title followed by a noted timespan. For instance, the first section is titled “Ecopoiesis/0-125 years”, the next “Protein/125-250 years” and in this fashion onwards until the seventh and final section titled “The Nomad’s House/293-300 years”.

It seems clear from the text that these 300 years run from a time resembling the present and 300 years into the future. The terraforming, Heldén’s text refer to in the books title, can in this sense be read without any controversy as a terraforming that shares obvious characteristics with the terraforming that defines the Anthropocene. Yet, this of course also means that the text is highly speculative. It appropriates one of the main functions that literature has in our time, as it allows itself to describe a future world which, due to epistemological norms, science only vaguely allows itself to anticipate. For instance, in the section titled “Mnium/267-275 years” the text reads:

there’s no one left to dream about  
finds an intercom signals echoing on the other end,  
raindrops shatter on the roof  
*the philosophy of time travel* see halogen lamps flashing  
a kilometer distant  
“death penalty reinstated  
meat industry reinstated  
greenhouse effect irreversible  
currency reinstated

---

<sup>40</sup> B. Latour, *The Anthropocene and the Destruction of The Image of the Globe*, youtube.com, 2013. Web. 4 Marts 2015.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

slavery reinstated  
fossil fuels reinstated, excavated”  
*the tall grass*  
and what are planets – if not huge rocks abbreviated to names<sup>42</sup>.

From these fragments it is possible to piece together a world, where the «greenhouse effect» has not only become «irreversible», but where the remains of human society has also abandoned its initial attempts to change course. Indeed, in this world these attempts seem to have flipped into reverse and prompted regressive forms of interhuman behavior. However, a more detailed picture of this world is not drawn. It is rather characteristic of the aesthetical style of the text that such details remain blurred, as ‘the anthropos’ in the Anthropocene that Heldén sketches is quite seldom the center of attention. The speculative impulse that makes literature such an important asset at the threshold of the Anthropocene is here not so much deployed in order to sketch the future of humanity, but rather deployed in order to sketch geomorphic developments.

The poetics Heldén develops in the text can therefore be termed geocentric, yet, as already pointed out, it is not a geocentrism totally cleansed of human perspectives. Anthropocentrism is here rather a small part of the geocentrism that dominates the text, or we could also say, that any human perspective is here clearly situated within the geomorphic fold. That is, within a fold in which it is in a Heideggerian sense not only impossible to dwell (because this fold is a byproduct of the challenging claim), but where it is also extremely difficult to dwell (in a more expanded sense of the word), because it is a fold undergoing extreme and accelerating changes. Just listen to the opening passage from the section titled “Capillatus/250-265 years”:

Vast grass fires drift over the plains. Storm circle the planet in twenty minutes, sometimes less. Smokelike tornadoes rise, they look like ink in water. And the ash, elevated in black swaths, obscures the sun. The lichen smells of burning cedarwood and turpentine. The dull ash clouds react when they reach the apricot-coloured overcast – thunderstorms grow more violent, more frequent. The first waterdrops. The fires are extinguished by the downpour<sup>43</sup>.

As geomorphic descriptions such as this dominate the text, what becomes apparent is the scale of the geophysical forces that have already been set in motion at the threshold of the Anthropocene. Reading Heldén’s text is, in this sense, like witnessing in fast forward how feedback loops from tipping point transgressions form an increasingly devastating spiral of geophysical transformations. It is like being placed within a temporal horizon where the past is stored, or archived to such an extent that the future is already given as something horrible. And this is only half of it, since this temporal horizon is from a present perspective pushed further and further into the future. Indeed, this movement means that the aforementioned horizon becomes a fold from within which it is impossible

---

<sup>42</sup>J. Heldén, *Terraforming*, Stockholm 2013.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

to retrospectively regard the present «as a moment that from the perspective of a catastrophic future might have been avoided». In other words, through the speculative power of literature dwelling is here framed within a fold where it cannot be associated with either hope or regret. It is simply relieved of standing in any kind of relationship with the saving power.

So, is this how the notion of the Anthropocene transfigures the relationship between poetics and ecological engagement; by placing any allusion to a possible saving power in an epoché? Not quite, but it is certainly not an answer we can skip easily over. After all, as Claire Colebrook has pointed out in *Theory and the Disappearing Future* (2012), it may be that for too long: «the horizon of promise has blinded us to the encroaching but inassimilable horrors of timelines and logics that are outside calculation and intention»<sup>44</sup>. Yet, the destructiveness that lies within the possible future scenarios that the natural sciences are now working with, are (at least in principle) to a large extent still avoidable. Whatever one may think of coming developments it would therefore also be premature to claim that the human species dwell in utter hopelessness. Even if nowadays it does «seem easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism»<sup>45</sup>.

On the other hand, this statement (that it is premature to claim that the human species dwell in utter hopelessness) also brings the argument in dangerous proximity of the frail tipping point between danger and salvation that haunted Heidegger's thinking and Bate's ecopoetics. If there is still hope then there is also still a saving power. However, as I have extensively shown in this article, it cannot be the saving power conceived by Heidegger and Bate. Things are already too murky, too mixed up to be restored to a state, where they can be set free into their own presencing. In the geomorphic fold that is the Anthropocene an anthropogenic terraforming has begun that will last thousands of years into the future.

Heldén's text makes this, although within a shorter time scale, admirably clear. Yet, as it follows the developments of the geomorphic fold deeper and deeper into the future, it indirectly also carves out a lacuna between the present and the future. Two temporalities appear with two different modes of human existence. On the one hand, the fold becomes a place where neither hope nor regret exists, as total destruction has from a human perspective always been irreversible. On the other hand, this fold makes the present visible as different, as another type of place within its geophysical transformations. A place where there is to some extent still the possibility of a controllable symbiogenesis, of transformations that do not trigger tipping points, and therefore also a possibility for humans to dwell in a steady developing environment.

In this sense the text does not only represent the present as a moment that from the perspective of a catastrophic future should be regarded with regrets, but

---

<sup>44</sup> C. Colebrook, "Introduction", in *Theory and the Disappearing Future*, edited by T. Cohen, C. Colebrook, and J. H. Miller, New York 2012, p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Jameson, quoted in B. Latour, "The Anthropocene and the Destruction of The Image of the Globe", *youtube.com*, 2013. Web. 4 Marts 2015.

also as a moment carrying within it 'a not too late'. Not, of course 'a not too late' equivalent to 'the not too late' found in Heidegger's and Bate's notions of the saving power, but another kind of 'not too late' that in Heldén's text is lighted poetically by the depiction of different temporalities, different mutations of the same geomorphic fold. One can therefore also say that the poetics that emerges with Heldén's text is a poetics that not only render its readers sensible of the difference of worlds that are likely to belong to the Anthropocene. It is also a poetics that calls for ecological engagement so far as (in spite of its geocentrism) it anthropocentrically frames different possibilities for being human. These possibilities are most extremely marked up by the two aforementioned modes of existence. That is, on the one hand of a mode of existence for which neither hope for a better future nor regret for a wasted past can reasonably exist, and on the other a mode of existence for which controllable symbiogenesis is at least in principle still obtainable.

I write 'in principle' because this second mode of existence also comes to light as a mode of existence to which there indirectly belongs a very precarious kind of political situation. Indeed, we may relate this situation to what was recently dubbed by Naomi Klein as «a stranglehold», a situation in which «the actions that would give [...] the best chance of averting catastrophe – and would benefit the vast majority – are extremely threatening to an elite minority» that has serious political and economical power<sup>46</sup>. Frankly, it is in this sense also a political situation to which there belongs a predominant affective relation that even though it cannot – as shown above – be reduced to hopelessness, must be described in terms of a certain helplessness. A helplessness, which foundation I believe Latour pinpoints rather precisely, when, in light of the escalating ecological crisis, he states that «one of the *affects of capitalism*, that is, of *thinking* in terms of capitalism, is to generate for most of people who don't benefit from its wealth a feeling of *helplessness*»<sup>47</sup>.

In other words it is a helplessness that is evoked by what Mark Fisher a couple of years ago termed 'Capitalist Realism', or «the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economical system, but also that it is now impossible even *to imagine* a coherent alternative to it»<sup>48</sup>. What is encouraging about the eco-poetics that appears in Heldén's text is that it does not in any way eclipse that this kind of paradigm today totally exercises its power on affections and thoughts, indeed presents itself as a necessity in all areas of life. Rather, it reflects the dominance of this paradigm without confusing helplessness with hopelessness, as it shows how hopelessness belongs to another, possibly coming, temporal horizon of the geomorphic fold. At the same time it is not an eco-poetics that gives any recipes for actions. The precarious political situation is just presented. But in the light of the depictions of the fold's developments it prepares the ground for more explicit collective actions, struggles for both a better present and future.

Gregers Andersen, Københavns Universitet  
✉ grega@hum.ku.dk

---

<sup>46</sup> N. Klein, *This Changes Everything. Capitalism vs. the Climate*, London 2014, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> B. Latour, *The Anthropocene and the Destruction of The Image of the Globe*, cit.

<sup>48</sup> M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, London 2009.