Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism

Timothy Clark

Abstract. This paper considers the deconstructive force of climate change in intellectual and political life, especially as it undermines and challenges the terms of consumer democracy and the liberal tradition in political thought. The first half of the paper gauges this deconstructive force in relation to Derrida's legacy, arguing that environmental questions open an arena of deconstructive events foreclosed in Derrida's own work. The second half considers the deconstructive force of climate change in relation to literary ecocriticism, the study of literature and the environment.

> 'I'm not against motorists. It is a matter of individual right. Within the privacy of their own homes, everyone should be free to drive a private car as far as they like.'

Climate Change as Deconstruction

Is there something a bit suspicious in the ease with which one can adapt an account of the challenges posed by climate change to some now familiar Derridian arguments? We could describe the current state of the world as a generalisation of the condition of aporia in countless domains of life and thought, many never previously conceived as political or as involving decisions of much consequence at all (e.g. use of air conditioning) and so, one might continue, we are presented at every turn with a situation no longer intelligible in

terms programmable by the past, one, that is, now calling for genuine decision and responsibility amid the incalculable which is both their condition and moral necessity. In thus forcing a drastic rethink of the terms of innumerable inherited practices and thought, climate change could be said to open a new space for reconsideration and invention, etc. However, in 2010, this all seems in danger of stating the obvious.

To lay out some formal characteristics of a mode of thought and action is only a step. Geoffrey Bennington reminds us:

> Derrida's regular appeals to the need for invention in the fields of ethics or politics necessarily disappoint: we would obviously like to be told what to invent — at which point we would be released from the responsibility of invention. . . .[1]

Following this, it may be a sign of a stagnation encroaching upon deconstructive thinking that, if asked to respond to the challenge of an issue such as climate change never considered by Derrida, for many the reflex would be to argue, somehow, how well he had covered it already. In fact, environmental questions look like a perplexing and seemingly expanding absence or even evasion in Derrida's thinking, one it is still hard to know how to understand or address.[2]

The kind of invention demanded would presumably be less a matter of the reading of some text, argument or cultural legacy than of the keeping pace intellectually with an event whose scale, complexity and incalculability is such as to resist representation or being conceptualised. Climate change seems a happening whose trauma is to enact or entail the deconstruction of multiple frames of reference in multiple fields and modes of thought at the same time (e.g. politics, economics, ethics, cultural history, urban planning). Leigh Glover argues that climate change marks the 'end of modernity,' defining 'modernity' as the assumption that the natural world exists for human ends, the dominance of liberal-democratic systems of government embedded in market capitalism, and the privilege given to scientific knowledge as the solely reliable guide in managing the social and natural worlds.[3]

A concept used often by Derrida during the 1960s, 'closure', may be a better word than Glover's 'end' (of modernity) here. Broad awareness of even the probability of climate change marks a moment

at which a historical epoch is discerned as such, in its *closure,* rendering its intellectual structures both newly perceptible and philosophically exhausted.⁴ The epoch whose closure is at issue is that in which the finitude of the earth was ignored, discounted or forgotten. Its closure entails a realisation of the surprising degree to which even the most seemingly benign and trivial practices have operated on the false supposition of an infinite earth, an inexhaustible externality in both space and time — that natural resources (air, water, soil, and tolerable weather) are free gifts; and, finally, that future time and the terrestrial space can act as bottomless repositories for waste or for issues that thinking wishes to avoid. At the same time 'one does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline' (12), and there is sense, simultaneously, of change and of entrapment.

Climate change politics today is mostly the politics of closure in self-denial, most obviously so in the case of sometimes unscrupulous attempts to throw mud on the climatologic evidence. Environmental problems implicate huge and relatively new questions of ethics, personal identity, knowledge, social justice, animal rights, the claims of future generations, the value of the nonhuman, and the limits of classical economics, etc., yet they have now been overwhelmingly co-opted as primarily questions of better management. Over the past twenty years a process of 'ecological modernisation' has sought to normalise and internalise environmental issues into the workings of industrial capitalism by making them issues of improved efficiency and distribution. Environmental politics becomes recast as merely a debate about measures such as pollution credits, carbon offset schemes, improved energy efficiency and the supposed benefits of a greener consumerism. To try to manage the planet's atmosphere — a boundary condition for life — by making it part of a carbon trading offset scheme or of some kind of market looks like a peculiar variant of the ancient fantasy of establishing some self-moving system of rationality that can be master of its own conditions. A dangerous fantasy of this kind is also arguably built into the basic mechanisms of liberal democracy conceived as an institution for the procedurally neutral representation of competing interests, for this means in practice pitting the environment as someone's 'interest' to be gauged in competition with other 'interests'. These is a general evasion of the contradiction between a viable environmental ethics and the basic tenets and

operations of liberal, consumer democracy and industrial capitalism, their demand for endless capital accumulation ('growth').

'Closure' is here suggested in a sense supplementing Derrida's arguments about the 'closure of metaphysics', not as simply corresponding to or instantiating them. Derrida's readings trace in numerous texts and contexts how a drive towards totality, purity or unity both needs and denies conditions of contingency, otherness and difference, yet his readings do not address the material finitude of the planet as itself an encompassing site of deconstructive effects. For Derrida, the included-as-excluded may manifest itself in logical incoherencies, semantic and conceptual slippages etc. of a text or system of thought: to these may surely now be added the event of a pervasive, impersonal contestation of innumerable modes of thought, systems of production, planning and government — of numerous human "constructions" of the world (literally as well as figuratively) — newly highlighted as inscribed in material contexts and systems which they only imagined they could command or incorporate. 'Isn't there an element excluded from the system that assures the system's space of possibility?' (*Glas*).[5]

A geographical and geological contingency, the finitude of the earth, now compels us to trace the anthropocentric enclosure of inherited modes of thinking and practice. The enlightenment project to render all the elements of nature part of a calculable technics is made to face its own dysfunction in the agency of what had previously been excluded from reckoning, or, more precisely, in that which had always been included-as-excluded. The condition of closure renders anachronistic inherited economic, political practices and modes of judgement without acceptable alternatives appearing in their place. The epoch whose intellectual closure is now visible, the 'flat earth' epoch so to speak, inaugurates the need to think a bounded space in which the consequences of actions may mutate to come back unexpectedly from the other side of the planet. The 'environment' is no longer thinkable as an object of 'crisis' for us to decide on or manage:[6] it ceases being only a passive ground, context and resource for human society and becomes an imponderable agency that must somehow be taken into account, even if we are unsure how.

'Deconstruction is what is happening' — this is Derrida in 2002, listing various contemporary disruptions and dislocations in the human world, 'crises, wars, phenomena of so-called national and international

terrorism, massacres that are declared or not, the transformation of the global market and of international law'. Again no reference is made to environmental/material issues or dangers. Derrida's list remains an anthropocentric and limited account of 'the rhythm of what is happening in the world'.[7] This characterisation of 'deconstruction' excludes effects of non-human agency. The thought of climate change means that, once again, we seem suddenly in need of confronting how current modes of thinking and acting are inadequate or anachronistic. In Derrida, the falsely circumscribed context of deconstruction's happening enables a far more manageable (if already 'impossible') conception of what the political sphere is and the agencies that inhabit it. Against this, the closure of epoch associated with recognition of the finitude of the earth opens up or renders unignorable a new front of deconstructive effects.

Derrida's foreclosure may become apparent in one way in which the deconstructive agency of the earth — using this singular term for an incalculable material multiplicity — now 'manifests' itself in so-called scale effects. The reasons for the scare quotes around 'manifest' will become apparent. Scale effects are straightforward to exemplify but impossible to apprehend in any particular individual case: what is insignificant or trivial for an individual, say driving a car, regarded by some even as a right, becomes a matter of social concern when thousands and millions of people do it and at even larger scales it becomes a threat to the integrity of the environment itself. Numerous acts of individual unimportance or insignificance mutate into an impersonal geological force. It is a matter of *context*, familiarly perhaps, but here less in the sense that the context determining an individual action cannot be bounded ('no context admitting of being closed' etc), but, as the scale changes, of one action metamorphosing into another one, and the trivial into the disastrous. Whatever one may think of 'the American of life', it would be of little consequence if it concerned only a few thousand or a few million people living at such cost. Extended to the hundred of millions, however, it now becomes newly perceived as a dangerous assault upon the global commons.

One difficulty is that, considered within the terms of current liberal democracy, its remit bounded by national frontiers and conceptions of state sovereignty, legitimated as a defence of individual right and blind to scale effects, the global violence of 'the American way of

life' becomes invisible. Climate change thus raises at a different pitch
the argument that environmental issues resist and question the bases
and assumptions of the liberal tradition in political thought,[8] i.e. that
tradition which conceives the state primarily as a means to secure
the maximum autonomy of individuals within it on an egalitarian
basis.

Scale effects impose unprecedented difficulties of interpretation and
imagination which seem to exceed anything envisaged by Derrida:
of conceiving that even trivial personal decisions about food, ways
of travelling to work, gardening etc. all become significant or not
depending on the contingency of how many others have done, are
doing or will do them, anywhere on earth, implicating acts of seeming
irrelevance in incalculable impacts. On top of this, to consider scale
effects is also to multiply bewilderingly the number of things that
could — conditionally — be considered a significant 'environmental
issue'. A list might include: day to day assumptions about life style,
the voting trends of various countries, the fuel efficiency of modern cars
and heating systems, population trends and sexual habits, definitions of
the good life, the nature of money and exchange, the aspirations of the
poor, the politics of national sovereignty, the impersonal demands of
'advanced' infrastructures that imprison their inhabitants in a kind of
'energy slavery' (William Ophuls),[9] the size of households, the melting
threshold of arctic tundra and the exact nature of innumerable other
unknown or badly understood biological, meteorological and chemical
processes, and so on. Each issue in itself is made more problematic by
scale effects that render each of significance only in possible relation to
the others together, now, in the past and over an indefinite future.

Derrida's political thinking concerns a 'negotiation' with conflicting
or contradictory demands in relation to the legacies in which we
find ourselves, those that would determine an identity, that involve
the giving or refusing of consent to conventional or legal statutes
or interpellations, or which relate to the borders and membership
of a polis (e.g. democracy). Foreclosed, however, was consideration
of innumerable happenings which are not conventionally decisions,
representations, or acts of refusal or welcome, the physical side effects
of, say, travelling to a conference to put one's argument on these
matters, effects which, however tiny, may be immediately implicated
in possible action-at-a-distance across the planet.

For Derrida a decision 'worthy of the name' of decision is one made when procedural or inherited guidance on an issue has been exhausted or breaks down and one risks the responsibility of a decision outside given protocols.[10] Yet the aporia — if that is still the word — to be negotiated in this case is not a lack of plausible measures that might reduce pollution in specific instances (e.g. different transport systems, altered fertilizer use, population controls, revised modes of accounting, a new anti-luxury ethic etc.) but that the global scale of the issue, combined with scale effects and other uncertainties, derides the significance of any one measure at any one place or time. Even as the global stakes become higher, the term 'decision' must become diluted almost out of all recognition in relation to the kinds of daily banality implicated in climate change. For any individual, the situation is simultaneously a generalisation, intensification and yet trivialisation of Derrida's notion of decision as a negotiation with the undecidable — what is being decided when I turn on a light, buy a particular kind of pineapple, or fly to a conference? What could a decision 'worthy of the name' be in such a context? The very element that renders some trivialities potentially disastrous in the longer term, the effects of scale, necessarily includes the almost complete irrelevance of my own 'decision' at the present time. Yet the less my share of the blame, the greater the overall responsibility.

Climate change seems a peculiarly monstrous cultural/political/ economic/ philosophical/ethical and scientific hybrid in Bruno Latour's sense.[11] That is, the phrase works as a condensed cipher for the destabilisation of such previously decisive dyads as nature/culture, science/politics, fact/value. Collapsing the broadest upon the smallest scale, merging the trivial and the catastrophic, its planetary scale compels us to think and act as if already citizens of a world polity, even as it undermines the credibility of any such thing. 'Deconstruction' in the sense identified with Derrida seems to undergo a new and initially 'deranging' revision of its contexts, a variously disconcerting or exciting upping of the ante. With the thought of climate change, topics that have been the focus of kinds of deconstructive reading or debate over the decades — the closure of Western metaphysics, the ethical claims of nonhuman life, the auto-immunity of democratic institutions, the limits of classical economic accounting, definitions of the human, the conflict of the faculties, the concepts of borders and

boundaries, the nature of responsibility etc. — all now seem put into play at the same time. Charles S. Brown writes that 'by defining our problems as either economic or biological, political or philosophical, we reproduce the structure of the academy, but fail to appreciate the kind of essential interconnections that ecological thinking in particular has emphasised.'[12] Yet how to rethink next to everything at once?

The second part of this paper traces deconstructive force of climate change in relation to ecocriticism, the study of literature and the environment.

Climate Change: the Closure of Ecocriticism?
That the closure of an epoch is not its end is a point familiar to readers of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967).[13] It also sums up the quandary of world society after the farce of the 2009 UN conference at Copenhagen. A condition of closure in self-denial characterises the way Western consumer democracies, especially in Europe, have now moved beyond any substantive 'politics of sustainability.' Ingolfur Blühdorn and Ian Welsh argue that what now takes centre ground is rather 'the management of the inability and unwillingness to become sustainable.'[14]

One effect is the proliferation of a merely 'symbolic politics,' political actions designed to appease and, effectively, to deceive — deceive, that is, a public that in many ways prefers to be deceived. Jens Newig offers an analysis of the various modes of and reasons for 'symbolic legislation.' Of particular relevance here is the following:

> A socially relevant problem, for which at a given point of time there is either no appropriate solution or only one that entails short-term costs exceeding the short-term benefits, is likely to be dealt with through symbolic legislation.[15]

The underlying rationale is not to deal with a problem, but to manage the inability or unwillingness to deal with it. Newig refers to a piece of symbolic legislation in Germany in 1995, the *Ozongesetz* or summer smog act, a ban on high emissions from cars that was widely supported yet quite useless in practice because of the various conditions, thresholds and exceptions built into it. While many

motorists supported the ban, few in actuality even respected the temporary speed limits it introduced. In effect, the ban papered over fundamental conflicts in those that supported it, between concerns for public health and the freedom of motorists:

> By symbolically integrating incompatible interests held by the same individual, the *Ozongestz* successfully attended to a psychological division *within* rather than *between* individuals. It thus displays qualities of a tool of individual as well as societal self-deception.[16]

Put another way, 'we may glimpse the closure. I do not say the *end.*'[17]

How far is even the fast emerging critical school of ecocriticism describable in terms of a condition of closure in self-denial? There is, first of all, one striking fact to consider: that while climate change is prominent in contemporary environmental writing and science fiction, eco-criticism itself rarely directly addresses the topic in its interpretations of literature and culture. It is mostly at issue only obliquely or implicitly. To work through various extant anthologies of ecocriticism is to draw a striking absence of work on climate change. The only academic article directly on the topic of climate change ever to appear in the leading ecocritical journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* is disarmingly direct about its intellectual helplessness. Ken Hiltner compares the contemporary challenge to that of air-pollution in early modern London, and how John Evelyn misleadingly scapegoated brewers and dyers for a problem caused by the general population:

> perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from [Evelyn's] *Fumifugium* is that, when confronted with the challenge of representing what neither reader not writer may wish to acknowledge about their shared practices, the causes of the environmental crisis may be misrepresented, though perhaps unintentionally… it is a real danger brought about by the challenge of representing a problem that nearly everyone is causing, but that people are hesitant to confront because they are unable to stop contributing to it.[18]

Climate change and global warming do not appear in the index of
Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2004).
   Buell writes there:

> Environmental criticism in literary studies has, thus far,
> not changed literary studies or environmental humanities
> so much as it has been increasingly absorbed therein. . . . its
> durability so far rests on its having introduced a fresh topic
> or perspective or archive rather than in distinctive methods
> of inquiry.[19]

This seems disappointing and even surprising, given how deeply the
environmental 'crisis' might seem to question the inherited order.
One factor might be the domination of political and intellectual life
by modes of legitimation that appeal to the would-be 'progressive'
liberal tradition. Richard Kerridge highlights this as posing a particular
challenge for eocriticism:

> unlike feminism, with which it otherwise has points
> in common, environmentalism has difficulty in being a
> politics of personal liberation or social mobility . . . environ-
> mentalism has a political weakness in comparison with
> feminism: it is much harder for environmentalists to make
> the connection between global threats and individual lives.[20]

Nevertheless, a vast body of ecocriticism reads as an attempt to address
environmental questions by linking itself to this usually individualistic
discourse of legitimation, however compromised it might be by also
serving as the ideological glue of market democracy, with its deceptive
hyping of individual 'choice'.[21] A lot of environmental criticism
becomes in danger of comprising a symbolic cultural politics,
analogous to that green consumerism which depicts the causes of
environmental danger 'as a series of bad household and/or personal
buying decisions' (Timothy W. Luke)?[22] This is not just to make
the crude point that most Western ecocritics inhabit a lifestyle that
stands at best in a strained relation to their professed politics, that they
drive cars, fly to international conferences, and work in an education
system dedicated to enhancing the 'competitiveness' of their nation
states etc. The deeper issue may be the methodological liberalism

of their thinking, for, like green consumerism, much ecocriticism takes the individual attitude as its starting point and then argues for a change in the choices which that individual makes. Thus, it is hoped, the growth of an 'ecological awareness' through the study of environmentalist non-fiction, eco-poetry or real ventures into the wild, will be somehow sufficient to produce an ecologically viable society. Such thinking effectively recognises that climate change enacts a drastic reconfiguration of given distinctions of public and private but, without more sustained work on the nature of the state, ideology, modes of production etc, still seeks to engage it solely in terms of individual attitude and choice. The focus on the individual, whether as green consumer, a reader of an ecocritical argument, or as a backpacker, reinforces the illusion that reality and power remain a matter of individuals pursuing their rights and opinions ('do you buy climate change?').

Another result is that green attitudes so easily recoil into a kind of personal moralism:

> the search for new ethical and political traditions . . . tends to reduce questions of environmental ethics to issues of personal conscience. . . it appears that concern for political reform almost falls away altogether in the search for an appropriate individual consciousness and lifestyle. . . [23] (Bob Pepperman Taylor)

This can be called a symbolic politics insofar its unreality and political naivety enable those who advocate it to demand changes they both want and do not want.

Other ecocritical arguments are more sophisticated than the stance of calling for changes in attitude. The issue of climate change, however, does seem to present something so close to paralysing that even more intellectually and politically astute kinds of environmental criticism and politics seem to have become what Blühdorn calls 'simulative politics,' a far more troubling concept than 'symbolic politics:'

> The theory of *simulative politics* replaces the negative, defeatist — and very modernist — concept of *politics as a farce* with the much more positive notion of *politics as simulation*. It acknowledges, firstly, that in advanced

> modern societies comprehensive political ideologies —
> including ecologism — are increasingly irrelevant, and
> secondly, that the capacities of politics, i.e. of democratic
> negotiation, decision and control, has become increasingly
> restricted.[24]

A simulative politics is what emerges when it is no longer possible
to oppose a merely 'symbolic' politics with an supposedly genuine
or acceptable one. Simulative politics is the pseudo politics of the
condition of intellectual closure. In relation to the specific issue
of ecocriticism and climate change one could re-inflect 'simulative
politics' to name arguments that perform an involuntary anachronism:
inadequate, partial or insufficient readings offered in a context in
which acceptable alternatives seem not yet conceivable. This is to re-
enact the condition of closure. To describe ecocriticism as engaged
in a simulative politics in this context is not to deny that individual
readings — of representations of the nonhuman, environmental racism
or of bioregional ideals etc — are often valuable and desirable, like
efforts to preserve ecosystems or reform energy infrastructures, but
only to acknowledge the inadequacy of their scope in relation to
national and global contexts whose practices so overwhelmingly negate
them.

   At the moment it seems still the more practicable gesture to turn
back on inherited modes of thought in view of their closure, their
strategies of evasion or containment. To draw a fuller map of the cul
de sac we are in may also be one step towards escaping the longer-term
threats, not only of environmental degradation, but also that of eco-
fascism.

Strategies of evasion and containment
1. *Scale Framing.* Environmental or eco-criticism evolved in the
tradition of romantic humanism primarily to address local and easily
identifiable outrages and injustices, the destruction of wilderness, the
effects of aggressive systems of agriculture on a bioregion and its
inhabitants, etc. . . Climate change thus challenges some green critics
with the fact that while they have been inventing ways to think and
act in relation to their national cultures and histories, they seem — like

almost everyone else — still a long way short of thinking in the way and on the scale demanded by an issue both so global and multiplicitous.

Habitual modes of thought, interpretation and action may emerge now as constituted by a kind of now anachronistic 'scale framing.' Hilda E. Kurtz writes: 'Scale frames are the discursive practices that construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically resolved.'[25] To this should be added the additional point that to frame the scale at which one thinks a problem is also sometimes a way of evading it — e.g. thinking of private vehicle use solely in terms of individual right.[26] An eco-critic going through the familiar moves of praising Wendell Berry or Jane Brox as writers engaged with an ethics of non-exploitative local dwelling and conceptions of personal identity sensitive to requirements of other species, is, perhaps necessarily, blocking off simultaneous consideration of how such work is effectively nullified by the effects of atmospheric emissions on the other side of the world, including even by numerous charcoal fires from the poor in India and the far east. As Emma Hughes writes of another example of scale framing in relation to GM crops in Britain, 'by giving people a boundary you are installing a sense of agency or control; a discursive reconstruction of certainty is provided.'[27]

Scale framing is a major issue in literary depictions of climate change. The time scales at issue may challenge forms of narrative geared to an easily identifiable section of lived human time. Kim Stanley Robinson's climate change trilogy, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005) and *Sixty Days and Counting* (2007),[28] deals with the issues of representation by depicting specific extreme weather events in Washington DC as they impinge upon the personal, professional and political lives of selected scientists and politicians. In other words, the daunting scale and elusive agency of the issue is framed by a focus, at the human scale, on moments of seeming policy decisions among some people addressing the question of what is happening and what to do. Such framing risks the bizarre effect that climate change is some sort of misadministration, to be exposed, addressed — or evaded — by the characters whose social conscience and morality is thereby put to the test. It is in danger of becoming a disaster-as-test-of-character scenario, a US-centric fantasy affirming familiar 'human' values.

Ursula K. Heise writes, attacking the fixation in environmental politics on the supposedly restorative function of the 'local':

> Like other processes of global systemic transformation, climate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individual, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales. . . . task of such magnitude that few writers and filmmakers have attempted it so far.[29]

Literary texts or films have tended to fall back on the tired formulae of urban disasters and apocalyptic scenarios (an impersonal variety of the alien invasion), often with simplistic characterisation and an evasively black and white morality involving conspiracy theories, evil industrialists, maverick scientists or — like the film *The Day After Tomorrow* — with plots that turn on acts of individual decision or heroism that reinforce a culture of narcissistic individualism already implicated in consumer democracy and environmental danger.[30]

With its multiple scales, more or less invisibility, global scope, unpredictability and alarming menace, climate change seems more germane to modes of representation that involve unfamiliar non human agencies, multiple and perhaps elliptical plots. The situation invites a writing that might be a form of secularised magic realism, in which seemingly rational procedures and modes of thought and representation interact with bizarre and counter-intuitive non-human agencies, kinds of action-at-a-distance, with plural conventions of characterisation, symbolisation and plotting. Heise suggests David Brin's *Earth* (1991)[31] as an instance of the kind of structures of literary representation that might be adequate to global environmental dangers and quandaries.[32] It does not actually concern climate change *per se* but offers a science fiction plot of global disaster (the earth being consumed by a black hole from within) conveyed through a multiplication of fragmented narrative viewpoints and through various generic modes — myth, epic and allegory — techniques that is, previously associated with the urban novel of literary modernism (James Joyce, John Dos Passos).

(2) *Multi-disciplinarity*. If criticism and politics seem unable to confront climate change it is perhaps because there is no simple or

unitary object *directly* to confront or delimit, let alone to 'fix' as such. There is no 'it', only a kind of dissolve into innumerable issues. So it may be that ecocriticism has been unable to deal with climate change as a sustained and direct object of analysis because the issue is one that refuses to stay put, dispersing as soon as you look at to it into multiple questions, disciplines and topics, most of them at once outside the sphere of literary studies, others outside the humanities altogether, and many of them (e.g. family size,) only counting as 'environmental' at all through variously hypothetical contextual and scale effects. In effect, coming into contact with the issues of climate change, ecocriticism considered as a distinct field or practice or reading may be as likely to dissolve as a cube of sugar in warm water.

(3) *The outmoded quest for a 'liberatory' method.* Environmental questions are plural, cross-disciplinary, contentious and often mutually contradictory. The defining terms 'environment' or 'environmentalism' seem less coherent concepts than loose containers for all kinds of issues that do not fit given modes of politics. It is perhaps not surprising then that the desire for some intellectual certainty in their stance has led to many ecocritics reaching for familiar modernist categories. Greg Garrard describes the general stance of twenty-first ecocriticism as tending towards 'social ecology,'[33] that is, towards arguments that human violence against the natural world is ultimately a product of oppressive structures of hierarchy in the human species.[34] In effect, environmental issues can be held to be addressed by engaging questions of equity among human beings. Thus it is today that, while some environmental thinkers confront directly the difficult question of clashes between specific environmental issues and the ideals and norms of inherited thought (e.g. in liberalism), the majority of eco-critical arguments now draw primarily on models of thinking taken from oppositional politics in the modern, progressive/enlightenment tradition. This general stance has been accompanied with an increased attention to questions of environmental justice, 'the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment,'[35] raising such important issues as environmental racism, the elitism of the mainstream environmental politics, and environmental health as a matter of social justice.

The environmental justice movement invokes visions of a just society linked in part to the impetus of American civil rights

struggle. Picking up this agenda in the late 1990s, ecocriticism gained rhetorical appeal by seeming to extend the terms of that movement to environmental concerns. Mapping environmental politics onto the more familiar human justice agenda has also had some short term intellectual advantages: critics can also bring to bear all the well-used tools of mainstream cultural criticism, following its familiar method of focusing on competing social 'constructions' of an issue in terms of various interests and exclusions. A distinction of green criticism becomes simply that it is competing constructions of the environment that are being gauged. Ecocriticism thus rebutted earlier accusations of a romantic anti-intellectualism and of the sacralisation of 'wilderness' to gain more immediate political relevance, at least in relation to specifically human, local grievances.

Climate change, however, may mark the closure or exhaustion of modes of environmental politics embedded in the modernist, liberal tradition. Val Plumwood writes that 'the green movement still lacks a coherent liberatory theory,'[36] but the blockage may be perhaps to posit such a simplistic theoretical goal in the first place. As a possible global catastrophe arising from innumerable mostly trivial or innocent individual actions, including some which seem politically taboo, such as increased material prosperity, an expanding population or increased longevity, climate change does not present any one easily identifiable antagonist. Its causes are diffuse, partly unpredictable and separated from their effects by huge gaps in space and time. Climate change entangles itself with other environmental problems that seem to present no acceptable solution — the demands, for instance, of an expanding population for new and safely inhabitable space as against the claims to preservation of the habitats of increasingly scarce animals or plants. Can western eco-critics comfortably inhabit a stance from which to engage the environmental degradation latent in the hopes of millions of people in the Far East planning to buy a first car? James Garvey writes: 'In a more than token sense, a campaign of civic disobedience undertaken for meaningful action on climate change is nothing other than campaign by us, against us.'[37]

Another danger is that the tendency to voice environmental justice in the usual terms of a demand for equitable 'inclusion' is effectively to legitimise the centre from which people claim to be excluded, i.e. not to offer an alternative account of the social good but only to second

demands for a fairer distribution of the spoils ('the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment'). Whatever its strength in addressing local grievances, eco-criticism thus becomes the covert legitimation of consumer democracy.

In sum, in relation to climate change ecocriticism, for all its emerging promise, remains a simulative politics, a mode of closure in self-denial. As a deconstructive force, intellectually inspiring despite its horror, climate change still works to resist and open up the deep assumptions, pious enclosures and disciplinary parochialisms of current intellectual life, even as its pervasive irony mocks the destructive complacencies of consumer democracy, trapped as it is in 'the evident contradiction between late modern society's acknowledgment that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable' (Blühdorn).[38] For criticism, there seems no off-the shelf oppositional stance ready to be used or adapted, only a great deal of new work to be done.

Notes

[1] 'Deconstruction and Ethics', in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, edited by Nicholas Royle (Palgrave, 2000), 64–82, 77.

[2] For one approach see Tom Cohen's paper in this issue of *OLR*.

[3] *Postmodern Climate Change* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

[4] For an overview see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 59–106.

[5] *Glas*, translated by J.P. Leavy Jr. and R. Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 162a.

[6] See Derrida's 'Economies of the Crisis' [1983], translated by Peggy Kamuf, in Derrida *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001,* edited and translated by Elizabeth Rothenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[7] *The Beast and the Sovereign* vol. 1, edited by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 76.

[8] Marcel Wissenburg's *Green Liberalism: The Free and the Green Society* (London: UCL Press, 1998) is an attempt to reconcile liberalism and environmental politics. For a critique see Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), Chapter 4.

9   See William Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics: The Tragedy of the Enlightenment and the Challenge of the New Millennium* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 169–74. For detailed analysis of the decisive interrelationships in the United States between urban sprawl, the interests of oil companies, urban planning, the culture of induced automobile use, and capitalist imperialism, see George A. Gonzalez *Urban Sprawl, Global Warming, and the Empire of Capital* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

10 See, for example, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority''', translated by Gil Anjdar in *Acts of Religion* edited by Gil Anjdar (London: Routledge, 2002), 230–98, 255.

11 See the paper by Gert Goeminne and Karen François in this issue of *OLR*.

12 'An Introduction to the Problem of Boundaries in Ecological Theory and Practice', in *Natures' Edge: Boundary Explorations in Ecological Theory and Practice*, edited by Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), ix–xvi, ix.

13 *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak corrected edition (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

14 Ingolfur Blühdorn and Ian Welsh, 'Eco-Politics beyond the Paradigm of Sustainability: A Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda', *Environmental Politics* 16 (2007), 185–205, 192.

15 Jens Newig, "Symbolic Environmental Legislation and Societal Self-Deception," *Environmental Politics* 16 (2007), 276–96, 283.

16 Ibid, 290.

17 *Of Grammatology*, 4.

18 'Renaissance Literature and Our Contemporary Attitude toward Global Warning,' *ISLE* 16 (2009), 429–441.

19 *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: WileyBlackwell, 2005), 130.

20 Introduction, in *Writing the Environment*, edited by Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), 6.

21 Andrew Dobson observes in green politics generally a 'tension between the radical nature of the social and political change that it seeks, and the reliance on traditional liberal-democratic means of bringing it about' (*Green Political Thought* 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 16–17).

22 *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 120.

23 'Environmental Ethics and Political Theory', *Polity* 23 (1991), 567–83, 567, 570.

24 'Post-Ecologism and the Politics of Simulation', Paper presented at the ECPR Joints Sessions of Workshops, 22–27 March 2002, Workshop 10: *The End of*

Environmentalism http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/turin/ws10/bluhdorn.pdf.

[25] Hilda E. Kurtz's 'Scale frames and counter-scale frames: constructing the problem of environmental injustice', *Political Geography* 22 (2003), 887–916, 894.

[26] For an example see Becky Mansfield and Johanna Haas, 'Scale Framing of Scientific Uncertainty in Controversy over the Endangered Steller Sea Lion', *Environmental Politics* 15 (2006), 78–94.

[27] 'Dissolving the Nation: Self-deception and Symbolic Inversion in the GM Debate', *Environmental Politics* 16 (2007), 318–336, 324.

[28] All three novels published in New York by Random House.

[29] *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 205–6.

[30] Directed by Roland Emmerich, Twentieth-Century Fox, Beverly Hills CA., 2004.

[31] *Earth* (New York: Bantam, 1991).

[32] *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 207–9, also 80–85, 88–90.

[33] *Ecocriticism*, New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2004), 128.

[34] 'Social ecology', drawing on the work of Murray Bookchin, arguing that violence against the natural world is a side-effect of violent structures of hierarchy and exploitation among human beings, results, rather too conveniently, in a stance in which some familiar moves in human oppositional politics can be immediately presented as environmental arguments.

[35] Introduction to *Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy*, edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 4.

[36] *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

[37] *The Ethics of Climate Change: Right and Wrong in a Warming World* (London: continuum, 2008), 152.

[38] 'Sustaining the Unsustainable: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation', *Environmental Politics* 16 (2007), 251–75, 272.