

## Towards A Deconstructive Environmental Criticism

Timothy Clark

‘The future enters into us in order to transform itself in us long before it happens’

(R.M. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Aug. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1904).

This paper explores the hypothesis of a literary and cultural criticism open to the deconstructive force of the environmental crisis. It also seeks to deploy it on a short story by the contemporary London writer Will Self, ‘Waiting’ (1991),<sup>1</sup> which is in part on the issue of traffic congestion.

### **‘We live in the age of unintended consequences’<sup>2</sup>**

One of the most significant features of the early twentieth-first century has been a growing awareness of a deep and systematic injustice in the workings of contemporary government, political thinking, and many modes of thought and analysis in the universities and daily life. The injustice is incalculable in its extent, possibly catastrophic, but also so foreign to currently dominant modes of thought and practice as to seem bizarre or even nonsensical when first described. This injustice is the lack of political representation of future generations.<sup>3</sup>

The context here, of course, is that terrifying yet now routine litany of unfolding and predicted environmental disasters, already so numbly familiar that details can be consigned to an endnote.<sup>4</sup> At no time before has the future condition of the physical world been so assiduously studied and mapped out, to the point, ironically, of neutralising the horror of the probable scenarios. Yet the unborn remain unrepresented in governments that enact laws and pursue policies already well understood as very likely drastically to degrade or even ruin their lives, or effectively to deny life in the first place. According to current theories of deliberative democracy,

collectively binding decisions can only be regarded as just or ethically justifiable if they result from a

process of thorough and reasoned deliberation where all affected parties or their representatives have had the opportunity to participate... From this standpoint, the present organisation of political and legal institutions in constitutional democracies is problematic or unjust.<sup>5</sup>

But how could they be there? The unborn person has a peculiar hovering status, between being an evident non-issue – someone who does not exist can obviously have no rights – and being the latest and strangest form of the victim, being utterly without power.

The unborn have become a strange figure of protest, one stifled daily by measures that sustain economic, political and social systems that have long been demonstrated as their probable ruin. These spectral multitudes of human and innumerable non-human creatures silently undermine the legitimacy of the governments of the present, including most of their rhetoric of ‘sustainability.’ Confronting this, Kristian Ekeli proposes that measures representing the claims of future generations be incorporated into the constitutional bases of states. Thus in many cases ‘courts should have the competence to appoint guardians for future people, and these guardians should be empowered to initiate legal proceedings on behalf of posterity on the basis of the [proposed] posterity provision [in national constitutions].’<sup>6</sup> Alan Carter, however, argues that the injustice to future generations is now so serious and the environmentally destructive syndromes of world politics and economics so deeply entrenched that civil disobedience is a duty: ‘the environmental crises are so pressing that we do not have time to wait.’<sup>7</sup>

The environmental crisis is inherently deconstructive, viciously so, of current modes of thought in politics, economics and cultural and literary theory. At the same time, the lack of engagement with environmentalism in deconstructive thinking seems increasingly damaging. If, in Simon Critchley’s words, ‘Deconstruction is the practice of reading as the *discomfort* of a heritage,’<sup>8</sup> endlessly asking again who or what we are through new readings of that heritage, then one cannot evade the kinds of future calculable from out of that heritage. These projected futures are not incalculable or unknown: they are thus, already, a peculiar part of the heritage. Here, to talk with Jacques Derrida of a responsible interpretation or politics as one that

says 'come' to some unanticipatable future 'event' may seem a little portentous and not obviously relevant.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is nevertheless unusual in offering a concept of justice in intergenerational terms. Political identities and controversies are no longer seen as a matter of struggles between given identities each defined by their social position or group membership. They are rather to be understood in relation to the always debateable nature of that inheritance in which they find themselves and the question of modes of responsibility to variously envisaged futures.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, environmental issues also effect a drastic shift in the distinction between the political and non-political in ways that seem alien even to Derrida's criticisms of the liberal rights-based justice tradition. Ulrich Beck takes up the sheer tragic-comic oddness of the metamorphosis undergone by the political in a crowded but finite world dominated by means of production that demand continuous economic expansion:

Class conflicts or revolutions change power relations and exchange elites, but they hold fast to the goals of techno-economic progress and clash over mutually recognized civil rights. The double face of 'self-annihilating progress,' however, produces conflicts that cast doubt on the social basis of rationality – science, law, democracy. In that way, society is placed under permanent pressure to negotiate foundations without a foundation. It experiences an institutional destabilization, in which all decisions – from local government policy on speed limits and 'parking lots' to the manufacturing details of industrial goods to the fundamental issues of energy supply, law, and technological development – can suddenly be sucked into fundamental political conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

Bill McKibben captured something of the Alice-in-the-Looking-Glass quality of environmental issues when he took up the threat of CFC gases to the ozone layer and wrote of the nation consigning itself to oblivion through the use of underarm deodorants.<sup>12</sup> Many environmental issues seem like this, bizarrely linking the intensifying devastation of the world with such things as a person's day to day

driving, shopping or eating habits. 'Ecological damage by rich nations,' we read, 'is costing poor nations more than their combined foreign debt.'<sup>13</sup> This crisis rarely involves those tense or inventive intercultural encounters that invite the insights or virtuosity of postcolonial critics, with their accounts of hybridity, 'subversion of dominant representations,' and so on. It is more to do with things like cheap furniture or the contents of a supermarket salad. It may seem like global catastrophe as scripted by Monty Python.

### **The End of Externality.**

To search for general principles of some mode of reading that could situate texts or events in relation to the issue of injustice to the unborn is to find little to go on. An exception is the work of David Wood, a still rare voice calling for deconstructive thinking to engage with environmentalism. Wood writes of one facet of current globalisation as the *loss of externality*. By this he means:

Now there is no outside, no space for expansion, no more *terra nullius*, no *Lebensraum*, no slack, no 'out' or 'away' as when we throw something 'out' or 'away'. . . . Yet so much of our making sense, let alone the intelligibility of our actions, still rests on being able to export, exclude, externalise what we do not want to consider. When that externality is no longer available, we are in trouble.<sup>14</sup>

Several such externalities have been the sea, the atmosphere, people outside the 'developed countries' and, above all, the future. The end of 'externality' means that the consequences of human action do not go away any more. They build up with destructive effects in the air and in the street. '[T]he refusal to consider such consequences makes sense when the future is elsewhere, a world away. But in a finite world, many more futures will catch up with us, and the luxury of kicking the ball into the long grass is no longer available.'<sup>15</sup> The primary human reality is becoming more and more a realm of inherited and accumulating accidents, after-effects and long term repercussions. To live in a space in which illusions of externality have dissolved is to see the slow erosion of the distinction between the distant waste dump and the housing estate, between the air and a sewer, between the open road and a car

park, and between the self-satisfied affluence of a London suburb and a drowning village in Bangladesh. Is it any coincidence that the society in which the destructive syndrome of wealth and waste production has been at its most self-righteously intense, the United States, is also one whose cultural self-image was formed against the space of the frontier as a seemingly unlimited externality? Internalised, such 'externality' also gives space or impetus to certain temporary freedoms, the cult of individual opportunity, mobility and 'self-creation,' yet the 'ideological promotion of the individual consumer may have as its unintended consequence the destruction of the world.'<sup>16</sup>

Wood's formula, 'end of externality,' is primarily an empirical and historical point – that inherited modes of thought and practice in the West have been dominated by presuppositions that the natural world was an endless resource, that the cost of, say, iron ore or water was solely the human labour involved in its extraction but that nature itself came 'free.'<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the issue is also those primarily Western structures of thinking whose seeming coherence is a function of the way they deploy categories of internal and external. As well as dominant systems of market economics unable even to register environmental destruction as a cost, this might include a certain dogmatic 'objectivism' in the culture of experimental science and technology since Francis Bacon, an objectivism that has emerged as insufficiently objective in its false belief 'that one could act upon the world without oneself being acted upon.'<sup>18</sup> Here, the environmental crisis asserts itself as an effective deconstruction of such modes of thinking, their internal collapse under the weight of their own logic. What Derrida once called 'Western metaphysics' is now also a dust cloud of eroded top-soil, a dying forest and what may now be the largest man-made feature detectable from space, the vast floating island of plastic debris that spans a large part of the Pacific ocean.<sup>19</sup>

Ecological thinking strives to understand how waste dumped into the sea or the atmosphere does not conveniently disappear but sets off an unpredictable sequence of consequences. An analogous kind of thinking in cultural politics and criticism more broadly would need to incorporate a futural dimension as a space of both responsibility and contestation. For instance, work in environmental ethics has underlined the alarming clash between the assumptions of mainstream liberalism and the demands of environmental – i.e. long term – issues.

Wilson Carey McWilliams's study, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* already argued in 1973 that the central plank of liberal thought is inherently destructive of the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Its foundational assumption is that that a human being is essentially a private, atomistic and apolitical individual striving to maximise personal wealth and advantage. Politics is held to arise because the relative scarcity of natural resources compels such individuals to form compacts of mutual recognition and respect, rights, in order not to come into conflict. In other words, a liberal political tradition, looking back to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, sees politics as essentially a compact between individuals for the better mastery of 'nature' (which may also include, in the past, other human beings). Michael Zimmerman is especially severe on the provenance of contemporary notions of right in Western notions of property, ownership and identity that are already deeply implicated in environmental crisis. Its doctrine is

*androcentric* because its conception of persons is based on a masculinist experience that excludes (and implicitly negates) female experience; *hierarchical* because it gives precedence to male experience, and also because it portrays humans as radically more important than anything else; *dualistic* because of its distinction between human (rational, intrinsically valuable, rights-possessing) and non-human (nonrational, instrumental, lacking in rights); *atomistic* because it portrays humans as isolated social units; and *abstract* because conflicts about rights are settled by rationalistic, impersonal debates that ignore both the feelings and the particular needs/traits of the individuals involved.<sup>21</sup>

These simple observations may have drastic implications. The need to find effective notions of value outside the individualistic liberal rights tradition (to affirm, say, the intrinsic value of a creature or place) also puts one at odds with the intellectual and legal bases of the US and other modern nation states. As Catherine L. Albanese writes: 'the checks and balances of [the American] constitutional system [are], for

liberals, part of a competitive process conceived as the best means to subdue nature while yet controlling human combat.<sup>22</sup> Is it then any wonder that environmentalist politics so often finds itself pushed from a reformist agenda towards a more revolutionary and anarchist one?

To foreground the question of justice to the unborn also disrupts some of the current norms of literary and cultural criticism. Much modern literary criticism is itself determined by the predominantly liberal progressive tradition. Work in the humanities often concerns itself with questions of justice and social exclusion for which notions of rights and infringed right are a crucial assumption. Even in work where the foreground arguments are more sophisticated, the rhetoric of liberalism often predominates ('free ourselves from x,' 'hemmed in by y,' 'imprisoned by z,' 'resists its marginalization,' 'strives for autonomy' etc). Yet, if, as Andrew Vincent concludes: 'it is the very values and practices of liberalism which now constitute the supreme environmental danger,'<sup>23</sup> then the liberal norm itself, with its associated lure of unsustainable affluence, needs to become the issue. The case needs to be answered that the liberal property and rights-holding subject can no longer function as a justifiable norm because its condition was an era of colonial expansion and invention that seemed to provide a boundless externality – a condition summed up by Tom Stoppard's satirical motto in *Jumpers* (1972), 'No problem is insoluble given a big enough plastic bag.'<sup>24</sup> A modern Walt Whitman celebrating symbolic rebirth as a poet on the edge of the great ocean, as in 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' would now be tripping over piles of plastic detritus.<sup>25</sup> Equivalent to the debris would be the acerbic taste of critical readings of his 'Song of Myself' that measured its American ideology of unlimited personal development and opportunity against some of its destructive consequences.<sup>26</sup> The Dickens who wrote *David Copperfield* would not now find it so easy to shift its variously deserving but anomalous characters, such as the 'fallen' Emily or the feckless Mr Micawber, to a conveniently appropriated colony called 'Australia' where they could suddenly flourish while the book rounds itself off with the achieved image of Copperfield as a model of bourgeois success.

Environmental criticism must be awkwardly circumspect of readings whose implicit or explicit principle is essentially that the status of the individualistic rights-and-property bearing subject should simply become available to all. For instance, Jackie Stacey gives an account

of how identification with images of female Hollywood stars offered women in 1950s Britain a mode of resistance to oppressive gender roles but does not trace how the understandable attraction of images of 'autonomy,' 'individuality' and 'independence' also feed into a liberal agenda that must finally complicate them as norms.<sup>27</sup>

Contemporary work on kinds of contestation for cultural power and recognition is too often, as Wendy Brown argues, 'tethered to a formulation of justice that reinscribes a bourgeois (masculinist) ideal as its measure.'<sup>28</sup> Worse, it reinforces the liberal norm by its way of protestation of exclusion from it. One of the failings of recent criticism on environmental justice is that it still sometimes turns on the issues of inclusion/exclusion in relation to this norm, instead of engaging with 'post-materialist' values, the defence of alternative modes of life.<sup>29</sup> Yet there have been no convincing rebuttals of E.O Wilson's argument that for everyone to have the material 'standard of living' of the average American would require the additional resources of three more planets the size of the earth.<sup>30</sup> Does this not also mean that readings of modern literature and social exclusion that endorse a just world as one in which everyone could, for example, own a car are not cogent, for such a world would have already consumed its own future?

The addition of a futural perspective breaks down received distinctions of the political and non-political in ways that currently find no outlet in the categories of given cultural or literary criticism. The fact that a critic's being a motorist, flying to conferences, eating beefsteak or even buying a particular kind of banana may ultimately be of more real significance than his or her professed political stance must destabilise modern criticism in bizarre and uncomfortable ways. Its often vociferous liberalism may come to look like an evasion of that other imponderable 'politics' inherent in undiscussed assumptions about personal affluence and lifestyle, conceptions of professional success and mobility and distinctions between the public and the private. At present, however, there seem few ways of conceptualising issues such as excessive material affluence that do not slide towards being an off-putting kind of green moralism.

### **'Waiting'**

Some of these issues play themselves out in suggestive ways in Will Self's short story of 1991, 'Waiting.' Summarily speaking, the text



is a case study of the breakdown of received categories of sense and coherence brought about by the psychic stress of traffic congestion. This text invites a kind of environmental criticism that does not rest on an anachronistic appeal to some supposedly lost relation to 'nature' but which traces the structures of the auto-interruption, auto-paralysis or auto-immunity of the heritage of consumerist liberalism.

An initial reading of 'Waiting' might see it as a study of individual and environment. Jim Stonehouse, a copy-editor, is a sort of amateur cultural critic fond of making slick observations on modern society. The narrative opens with a car scene on an approach road to London, late on a Sunday evening. Despite the time, the traffic builds up, and eventually almost stops. The frustration of being stalled in endless ugly lines of cars finally leads Jim to run off into the night shouting "I can't stand this any more, I'm getting out of here" (p. 173), abandoning both his car and its passenger (the narrator). His deepening obsession with congestion in London leads to a peculiar personal religion in which 'waiting' becomes the hidden key to everything: traffic wardens are "the Secret Police of Waiting" (p. 197); the long lunch queues and crowded pavements of central London enact a universal condition of 'waiting' and Jim even tends to speak in rhetorical questions, that is, questions that need not wait for an answer. This all culminates in his interest in the impending millennium: "Everyone is convinced that something is going to happen, but they don't know what it is". Jim takes the narrator to hear a lecture by one Professor Stein on how the forthcoming millennium will compare with the religious fanaticism and terror ascribed to people in the year one thousand. Stein's conclusion – subsequently borne out by events – is pastiche J.G. Ballard: "The end of this current era will be met with at worst indifference and at best with some quite good television retrospectives" ('Waiting,' p. 186). Jim, of course vehemently disagrees and denounces Stein: "... people are desperately waiting for something – anything to happen" (p. 187).

The story of Jim's seeming breakdown through an obsession with traffic congestion correlates well with humanist attacks on the psychic and social effects of an environment dominated by the private car. 'Waiting' compares closely, for instance, with the discourse of the 'Campaign for Better Transport' (formerly 'Transport 2000') or with Lynn Sloman's *Car Sick* (2006) a book whose provenance

lies in continuing British campaigns against road building and the domination of civic space by private vehicles. Sloman writes:

Our car-oriented culture makes individuals feel that they have a right to enjoy the immediately obvious benefits of car use, while ignoring or denying the longer-term disadvantages to themselves and other people. We are offered instant satisfaction, and we feel we are entitled to grab it.<sup>31</sup>

The car intensifies a psychology of enclosed individualism but then enacts the familiar paradox of technology taking over its supposed users. 'Cars have come to control us, rather than the other way around' (Sloman),<sup>32</sup> or, as Self writes in a later context, cars 'con their autopilots with the illusion of freedom.'<sup>33</sup> Sloman, like other transport campaigners, uses images of addiction to depict 'car dependency' as a mildly pathological condition. Her book's subtitle is *Solutions for our Car-addicted Culture*.

'Waiting' reads as a study of such addiction, its consumerist logic of dependency and vehement demand. Ultimately, the general malaise of waiting is not even for anything specific: it is intransitive, an intensification of itself, like traffic that gets slower and slower the more people use cars to move faster and faster. Self's apocalypse of non-apocalypse is a collapse into each other of imminence and immanence, a kind of universal psychic and social 'congestion' in which the only end or content of waiting is more stressful waiting. Ulrich Beck observes how world reality is set increasingly to become a gigantic artificial and accidental side effect, one evolving according to its own peculiar and unwelcome laws and bearing human motives, desires and aggression with it:

congestion has become a metaphor for the involuntary politicization of modernity. It symbolizes the forced utopia of self-limitation. Congestion means the involuntary sit-down strike of everyone against everyone else, technically imposed mass Buddhism, an egalitarian forced meditation for drivers of all classes of cars. 'You're not caught in the congestion, you are the congestion' is written in large

letters in a tunnel. Thus congestion becomes the quality of an entire culture ... the implacable 'more' and 'faster' of ... modernity collides everywhere with the problems, erosion and obstructions it generates.<sup>34</sup>

'Waiting' seems a study of someone pathologised by traffic conditions to the point of breakdown, with Jim eventually joining the bizarre pseudo-messianic cult of a despatch rider called Carlos who has a unique gift for getting across the congested city. Despatch riders, Jim claims:

'are the real waiters. Waiting is ground into them. Every moment could be an arrival, at a pick-up or drop-off, or the ultimate drop-off, death itself! No wonder they understand what is happening. They exist at the precise juncture between the imminent and the immanent! Carlos has seen their potential. He is a man of extraordinary powers, he understands that the future will belong to those who clearly articulate the Great Wait!' (p. 190)

Jim is finally taken to court after being prosecuted for assault on another motorist, an incident of what would now be called 'road rage.' The court refers him for further psychiatric assessment, but only, it emerges, because there would be a wait for any prison space.

As if she were offering a reading of 'Waiting,' Sloman observes how mass car use helps destroy a sense of cultural cohesiveness and shared responsibility. She cites a US study which "suggests that each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 per cent."<sup>35</sup>

'Waiting' thus reads as a kind of green protest story. Car ownership is part of the ideology of the neo-liberal subject – go where you want when you want, all in your cosy private space. It is the icon and enactment of a narrow notion of individual freedom, with new models advertised yearly in dishonest images of unimpeded speed through vast frontier spaces. The automobile is 'an ideology on four wheels.'<sup>36</sup> Congestion by the private car highlights how a narrow liberal idea of 'freedom' imprisons itself by its own incoherence as a unlimited ideal within a finite world. Jim's story is that of the fabricated rebellion of a

motorist who aims to 'beat the system.' Congestion, with all it stands for, becomes an effective deconstruction of the notion of the liberal individual subjectivity that it enacts. Jim's obsessive pursuit of free road space and his denigration of anyone in the way as a mere 'waiter' asserts a psyche totally structured in desire by the very system it claims to defy and overcome.

### Delayed Action

Self's novel of 2006, *The Book of Dave*,<sup>37</sup> projects the London of a few centuries' time as a space in which a few islands like Hampstead Heath ('Ham') rise above a warm lagoon. England has become an archipelago, less a fantastic fiction than an all too plausible scenario. This posits another context for reading 'Waiting.' The banal egalitarian apocalypse of climate change brings an ironic close to the syndromes of intensified waiting, the queues of traffic and the collapse of the distinction between imminence and immanence. Additionally, the destruction of most of the country suggests, to say the least, a retrospective delegitimation of the assumptions, values and modes of governance dominant in the London of 1991.

Derrida wrote of a destabilising of inherited concepts of sovereignty across the world: distinctions between the foreign and domestic, internal and external, become less and less certain. The likelihood of environmental catastrophe, an issue on which Derrida was uncharacteristically obtuse, adds new weight to this observation. David Wood writes of the explicit quest of certain governing forces in the US for global domination as

a genuinely impossible goal that can be expected to provoke seismic instabilities down the road. This is true politically, but it is just as obviously so environmentally. Even if one state could successfully impose its will on all other states on the planet, nature is not so forgiving. And all the forecasts suggest that as an energy-consumption form of life, the American way of life [or, for that matter, the British] 'has no future.'<sup>38</sup>

The two Will Self texts of 1991 and 2006 exemplify a more difficult general challenge: this is to reread the texts and cultures of

modernity as a heritage which includes a rationally predictable but often extremely alarming future. In practice such work must be both extremely cautious, so as not to lapse into a kind of self-defeating apocalyptic rhetoric, and also be often imponderable. It may require the cultivation of an ecological and scientific literacy as well as a historical and literary one, and would sometimes mean something as near to impossible as anticipating the hindsight of the future, living consciously in that usually oblivious between-space inherent to what Freud called the *nachträglich*,<sup>39</sup> i.e. anticipating now that 'delayed action' whereby something unnoticed or ordinary at one time may later emerge, in retrospect, even after one's death, as traumatic – or as 'having been "traumatic",' for the time of the traumatic event is not locatable on any linear series. Such is already the uncertain space and affliction of environmental awareness. Viewed in terms of the deceptive rationality and scale of day to day life, environmental activists remain condemned 'to get everything out of perspective,' seeming to veer between a general priggishness about trivialities and an empty apocalypticism.

The end of externality enacts a profound crisis of thought and politics, as well as an economic, social and psychological one. Bob Pepperman Taylor writes, 'the ecological facts of life threaten to challenge our most dearly held political values: justice, freedom, and democracy,'<sup>40</sup> a view that might be reformulated less drastically as the need to revise those very notions of 'justice, freedom, and democracy' to embrace the unborn, and even the non human. Drawing on the work of Beck, Wood, Derrida and others perhaps the following summary challenges emerge.

- The realisation that conceptions and practices at the basis of Western thought and commonsense are deeply implicated in the global environmental crisis and that this requires a drastic shift in basic assumptions and in the minutiae of language, thought and criticism.
- The continuing need to extend concepts of politics beyond the borders of the nation state.
- To address the emerging breakdown in the given modes of accountability, responsibility and litigation ('to put it by reference to a single example: the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even all *born yet*' (Beck)).<sup>41</sup>

- To review the prevailing notions, principles and institutions of 'rationality' and psychic health.
- To work through modes of thought adequate to the current crisis in the sense of scale, e.g. the gap between the huge collective consequences of individual actions and the triviality of each action in itself. How do congestion and over-population in themselves transform the very nature of the political?<sup>42</sup>
- To help find ways of addressing the issue of excessive material affluence, without moralism and wary of the looming threat of eco-fascism.

**'London is not in England but England in London.'**

Some of these issues are pertinent to a second look at 'Waiting.' So far, this text has been described as a kind of green protest story. It seems to pursue the logic of traffic congestion, of the private car as the symptom of liberal individualism, to a point of self-paralysis. Implicitly, then, 'Waiting' would seem to call for the tempering of consumerist attitudes by a greater sense of communal responsibility, as in the humanist discourse of transport campaign groups.

Elements of Self's text, however, destabilise all this. To read 'Waiting' as a straightforwardly realist text, a study of breakdown under environmental stress, blocks off what actually happens in the scene with Carlos, the cult despatch rider blessed with seemingly miraculous driving skills. To demonstrate his gifts to the narrator he claims he can make in just forty-five minutes a journey across London that would normally take twice that time (specifically, to drive from Soho Square to the Horniman Museum via Shootup Hill). Carlos enters a kind of trance, then drives off, with the narrator and Jim following behind by car.

I registered all these junctures, but only vaguely. There was an unreal, static sensation to the journey. The long London roads were panoramic scenery that wound back behind us to provide the illusion of movement. The MZ and the Sierra stood still, occupying a different zone.

We reached Shootup Hill in about seventeen minutes. The facility with which Carlos had led us was unnatural. At every juncture where there was an opportunity for a

choice, he took the right one ... Carlos had not only apprehended every road, he had anticipated every alleyway, every mews, every garage forecourt and the position and synchronisation of every traffic light. (pp. 197–8)

What wins out in this disruptive sub-text is that primal fantasy of motoring that seduces Jim and so many others in the first place. It is the fantasy fed by innumerable car chases on film or television where the audience is invited to identify with an exciting, invulnerable dash through the most improbable kind of obstacle course. In such scenarios the body is effectively denied, absorbed into a kind of mentalistic floating through a set of physical objects that can never hurt. Self makes some related points in an interview with Ballard:

W.S.: The interesting thing about the car is that the car windscreen has been more influential in making us all cinéastes than film has itself. The experience of continually driving around confronting a seventy-millimetre frame observing the world like that. ... The way in which we have interiorised the cinematic view has something to do with our dramatic rehearsal of our death, doesn't it? Having internalized the cameraman's perspective, we are then free notionally to annihilate figures on our screen. People of my generation are afflicted with this as if it were a virus; they are not aware of the extent to which their view of their own identity has been compromised by film and the car windscreen.<sup>43</sup>

This episode of miraculous driving does not serve to give sense to the story but to take it away, to destabilise it. Carlos is not after all some delusion from which Jim needs to be reclaimed to life as a responsible citizen. The whole thing moves into a realm of the fantastic where talk of a character's psychic condition, his breakdown or responsibility, begins to seem irrelevant. It as if the text were endorsing Jean Baudrillard's view that we live in a world in which the 'will to spectacle and illusion' is more powerful and enduring than almost anything else.<sup>44</sup>

A similar point applies to the opening text in the same collection, 'The North London Book of the Dead.' Here the narrator describes the painful scenes of his mother's death from cancer, his subsequent denial, grief and a period of gradual acceptance until, one day, he simply meets his mother again, walking towards him down a street in a very ordinary suburb of London. What, then, is death? Death, it turns out, is a meaningless recycling scheme.

I wrung it out of her eventually. It went something like this: when you die you move to another part of London where you resume pretty much the same kind of life you had before you died. There are lots of dead people in London and quite a few dead businesses. When you've been dead for a few years you're encouraged to move to the provinces.<sup>45</sup>

This particular after-life resolves none of the big questions: it merely collapses life and death upon each other as part of the same depthless and insignificant conveyor belt or moving walkway. Both 'Waiting' and 'The North London Book of the Dead' are poised provocatively and uncertainly between being satirical fables and self-contained fantastic worlds. In both cases a scenario that makes no sense asserts itself and will not be rationalised away. In 'Waiting' the narcissistic fantasy of a motoring utopia is too powerful to be fully eclipsed by a more rational tale of individual breakdown. In 'The North London Book of the Dead' the realm of the cultural becomes all that there is or ever will be. Death is no longer nature's ultimate intervention, only a turning point in the ceaseless proliferation of indistinguishably dead/alive people. Resurrection is banalised in this story as thoroughly as apocalypse is banalised in 'Waiting.'

These fantastic scenarios enact a dimension without externality. In both texts, elements of social satire – of a London crowded with zombies, the self-destruction of the narrow motorist psyche – co-exist with fantastic scenarios that disconnect the plot from plausible material contexts. This gives them something of the status of verbal commodities, seemingly self-contained realms operating according to laws of their own, insulated from external conditions or consequences. The enclosed logic of these texts enacts what Self acknowledges as his more comprehensive topic, the all-appropriating power of the urban



environment: that 'the city was the main – and possibly the only – protagonist.'<sup>46</sup> London itself often functions as the crucial agent of these texts, finding form in the fantastic plot-lines that use human characters as ciphers of an impersonal and non-representational logic. Its space is like that of the famous map of the city's underground train network, 'the tube:'

Some of us ... live more in the diagram of the tube than we do in the physical reality of London. After all, the tube imparts a sense of the city that is not unlike the child's unmitigated vision ... you disappear down a hole in the Mile End Road and the pop out of another one in Chalk Farm. Some people's whole lives must be like that, with no coherent sense of the city's geography; they must find it impossible to circumvent old lovers, evade defunct friendships.<sup>47</sup>

In these short stories bizarre shifts of scale or in perspective deprive the reader of secure modes of reference and norms of judgement, making dubious readings in terms of given notions of consistency or 'depth' of character. It is a kind of fiction in which 'environmental' elements – the city's monotony and vastness, and the logic of traffic and its congestion – turn human characters, psychology and action into epiphenomenal effects. This London does not invite a Baudrillard-type reading celebrating it as the realm of the hyper-real. It emerges as an illusorily self-enclosed physical and psychic space that has blocked off anything external to its own functioning.<sup>48</sup> Thus the city of the 'The North London Book of the Dead' generates its endlessly expanding population – and an endlessly expanding economy, for most of the dead seem to have jobs of some kind. Theories of the emergence of the cultural in the denial of mortality seem fully realised.

Like a nascent bio-regionalist, Self recounts that eerie moment at which he realised, standing one spring day on Hill Street, Mayfair, that he had 'never been to the mouth of the river that ran through the city of my birth.'<sup>49</sup> He uses this to illustrate the enclosed mind-set induced by this urban space:

What would you think of a peasant who had farmed all his life on the banks of a river if he told you he had never been to where that river meets the sea, some thirty miles away? ... There are millions of peasants like that in London; in imagining themselves to be at the very navel of the world, Londoners have forgotten the rest of their anatomy.<sup>50</sup>

A broader account could see the 'London' of these texts enacting that more general and widening human environment of social, economic and psychic spheres that understand themselves entirely and exclusively as cultural entities working according to cultural laws, disregarding anything so entropic as the weather, animals, ill-health or even death except as inputs or outputs for their own procedures.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, such a view would also encompass the culturalist paradigm of a great deal of modern criticism for which every thing of significance is striven to be understood as a 'construction' of some kind (as in 'Blake's construction of angels,' 'Dickens's construction of London,' 'Dickinson's construction of the sea,' 'Faulkner's construction of death'). It is a tellingly productionist metaphor that projects each human psyche as a miniature industrialist and, in varying degrees, a parallel universe in which the nature and intelligibility of any object is exhausted by the human cultural politics onto which it can be mapped.

The seemingly fantastic elements of Self's texts read then as magnifications of that logic of disavowed externality that largely defines the so-called 'developed world.'<sup>52</sup> A similar enclosure underlies two other stories in *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*. These deploy some ideas from the anti-psychiatry movement as satirical tropes. 'Ward 9,'<sup>53</sup> set in North London, is a reworking of Chekhov's 'Ward 6' in which the inmates of a psychiatric unit are not mad but 'meta-mad:' that is, they all find themselves enacting – or being 'constructed' by – the theories of the medical establishment; hence inmates tend to be family relations of the doctors or former therapists themselves. It is a world in which the drive to conform, for existential safety, erodes the distinction between sane and insane except as mutually defining functions of a self-perpetuating institutional machine. 'The Quantity Theory of Insanity'<sup>54</sup> repeats the basic trope of a closed dimension operating according to bizarre internal laws. In this case the 'quantity theory' of the title states that in any social grouping there is only so much sanity to

go round. This 'sanity quotient' will find expression in differing ratios of normal and deviant pathologies existing – or deliberately created – in each respective group. Thus: 'If you decrease the number of social class 2 anorexics you necessarily increase the numbers of valium abusers in social class 4' (p. 127) or '[Australians] lived in a society where constant rates of sanity had been achieved by the creation of a racial underclass which was killing itself with alcoholism' (p. 141).

Self's texts enact in heightened form modes of thinking that define 'developed' life as a realm of disavowed externality. Their characters' identity, desires and reasoning exist as functions of contexts that obey only a fabricated, self-enclosed logic. This satirical principle could also be generalised as a critical one. The only physical context or system that is genuinely self-enclosed in relation to human society is the whole earth itself (barring the currently implausible industrialisation of other bodies). Here, an uncomfortable reformulation of Self's 'sanity quotient' suggests itself, but this time as a real statement of a nightmare difficulty through which the world must somehow pass, even while trying to address current massive inequalities across the globe. The reformulation also describes the structural hypocrisy which compromises liberal criticism: 'The greater the number of consumers with current Western modes of affluence at time A, the greater the number of deprived and desperate people at time B.'

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991; London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 173–211. Further references are incorporated into the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (London: Polity, 1999), 119.

<sup>3</sup> A list of relevant papers and books would include Avner de-Shalit, *Why Posterity Matters: Environmental Policies and Future Generations* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ernest Partridge, ed. *Responsibilities to Future Generations: Environmental Ethics* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1981); Frederick E. Emery, 'Methodological Premises of Social Forecasting,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1974, pp. 97–115; Bertram Bandman, 'Do Future Generations have the Right to Breath Clean Air? A Note,' *Political Theory*, 10. 1 (Feb. 1982), pp. 95–102; Patrick Brantlinger, 'Apocalypse 2001, Or, What Happens after Posthistory?', *Cultural Critique*, 39 (Spring 1998), pp. 59–83; Lawrence E. Johnson, 'Future Generations and Contemporary Ethics', *Environmental Values*, 12 (2003), 471–87; Roy W. Perrett, 'Future Generations

and the Metaphysics of the Self: Western and Indian Philosophical Perspectives,' *Asian Philosophy* 13 (2003), pp. 29–37; Jan J. Boersema, 'How to Prepare for the Unknown? On the Significance of Future Generations and Future Studies in Environmental Policy,' *Environmental Values*, 10 (2001), pp. 35–58; Tae-Change Kim and Ross Harrison, eds., *Self and Future Generations: An Intercultural Conversation* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1999); Sallie Westwood, 'Re-Branding Britain: Sociology, Futures and Futurology,' *Sociology*, 34 (2000), pp. 185–202; Lothar Gundling, 'Our Responsibility to Future Generations,' *The American Journal of International Law*, 84 (1990), pp. 207–12. Several writers here refer to the now platitudinous concept of 'sustainable development'. See Julie Davidson, 'Sustainable Development: Business as Usual or a New Way of Living?', *Environmental Ethics* 22 (2000) pp. 25–42; Timothy W. Luke, *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 75–94, 109–14.

<sup>4</sup> 'There is "visible and unequivocal" evidence of the impacts of climate change

Many farming systems have reached their limits of production

Warmer temperatures and ocean acidification threaten food supplies

1.8 billion people face water shortages by 2025

Three-quarters of marine fisheries exploited to or beyond their limits

Exposure to pollutants causes 20% of disease in developing nations

Pollution being "exported" to developing world

About 60% of "ecosystem services" are degraded,'

BBC website 'Bypassing the blockage of nations', Richard Black (15/1/08).

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7187985.stm>

<sup>5</sup> Kristian Skagen Ekeli, 'Green Constitutionalism: The Constitutional Protection of Future Generations', *Ratio Juris* 20 (2007), pp. 378–401, 397–8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>7</sup> 'In Defence of Radical Disobedience', *Journal of the Society of Applied Philosophy* 15, 1 (1998), pp. 29–47, 43.

<sup>8</sup> 'Derrida: the Reader', in Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone, eds., *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1–11, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Just how much these environmental issues do not fit the terms of Derrida's thinking becomes clear in the recent posthumously published collections, on Derrida, two of them explicitly on the future importance of his work, *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, and *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, ed. Madeleine Fagan et al (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). The environmental crisis is not mentioned. Given the prominence of this issue since the UN Earth Summit in Rio of 1992, its absence from both Derrida's work and that of his commentators

suggests an inherent resistance in the very terms of Derrida's thinking. A third book has an introduction briefly mentioning 'the devastation to be wrought by irreversible climate change' as an issue for which there is as yet 'no theoretical vocabulary' (Martin McQuillan, 'Introduction: The Day after Tomorrow . . . Or, The Deconstruction of the Future', in McQuillan ed. *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 4).

<sup>10</sup> *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Geoffrey Bennington stresses the intergenerational emphasis of Derrida's thinking here when he writes: 'The out-of-jointness of the time dislocates it across its responsibility towards the past in the form of the inheritance it cannot simply accept and the concomitant futural task which, however, commits it here and now' (*Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 140).

<sup>11</sup> *World Risk Society*, pp. 65–6.

<sup>12</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature: Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural World* (1990; London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> 'Poor Nation's Burden', *New Scientist*, 26 January 2008, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 172–3. See also Wood's 'On Being Haunted by the Future', *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006), pp. 274–98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> Wood writes of the need to recognise 'the earth as a finite material totality. Practices that "work" under the conditions of moving on, opening up new spaces, etc., no longer work under conditions of closure' (*ibid.*, p. 184).

<sup>18</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, 'Searching for Common Ground,' in *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, ed. Michael E. Soule and Gary Lease (Washington DC: Island Press, 1995), pp. 47–63, 56. The caricature of 'deconstruction' in environmentalist thinking, as a kind of reduction of everything to cultural signifiers, is now becoming less common.

<sup>19</sup> 'Charles Moore is the American sailor who broke the news to the world in 1997 that there are now hundreds of miles of floating plastic rubbish in the Pacific Ocean. The Eastern Garbage Patch as it's become known is a popular feeding place for albatrosses and sea turtles. Thousands of them die each year after mistakenly consuming plastic or feeding it to their young.' [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/costingtheearth\\_20061208.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/costingtheearth_20061208.shtml)

<sup>20</sup> *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973). Daniel P. Thero gives an overview of various attempts to reconcile

- the work of John Rawls with environmental values, finding them all wanting, 'Rawls and Environmental Ethics: A Critical Examination of the Literature', *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995), pp. 93–106. For a more favourable reading of elements of the liberal tradition in relation to environmental issues see Kathleen M. Squadrito, 'Locke's View of Dominion', *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979), pp. 255–62; William Chaloupka, 'John Dewey's Social Aesthetics as a Precedent for Environmental Thought', *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987), pp. 243–60.
- <sup>21</sup> *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 241.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Having Nature All Ways: Liberal and Transcendental Perspectives on American Environmentalism', *The Journal of Religion* 77, 1 (Jan. 1997), pp. 20–43, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Liberalism and the Environment', *Environmental Values* 7 (1998), pp. 443–59, 456.
- <sup>24</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 31.
- <sup>25</sup> The Long Island/'Paumanok' shore of Whitman's poem often consists now of land reclaimed through landfill sites. William Rathje and Cullen Murphy observe that 'The present contours of virtually every portion of New York City and the neighbouring parts of New Jersey and Long Island have all been shaped by [land]fill, much of it garbage' (*Rubbish: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 90).
- <sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Gary Snyder, 'Walt Whitman's Old "New World"', in *A Place in Space: New and Selected Prose* (New York: Counterpoint, 1995), pp. 214–18.
- <sup>27</sup> John Storey, *Cultural Studies & the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 68, 74.
- <sup>28</sup> *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 59. Robert J. C. Young's observations in the mid 1990s on the dilemma of progressive criticism in relation to totalitarian regimes now read like a prediction of much of the world of 2008: 'the introduction of human rights, political choice, and freedom also functions as the steady vanguard, the necessary requisite . . . to produce the identificatory needs of consumer capitalism' *Torn Halves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 4.
- <sup>29</sup> In addition, such arguments cast 'the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure' (*States of Injury*, p. 27), an environmentally disastrous stance when it is to large degree the policies of competing nation states that are consuming the future and its inhabitants.
- <sup>30</sup> E. O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (London: Little Brown Books, 2002), p. 23.
- <sup>31</sup> *Car Sick: Solutions for our Car-addicted Culture* (Totnes: Green Books, 2006), p. 43.

- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 16.
- <sup>33</sup> *Psycho Geography*, with pictures by Ralph Steadman (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 70.
- <sup>34</sup> *World Risk Society*, p. 130.
- <sup>35</sup> *Car Sick*, p. 26.
- <sup>36</sup> Remark of George Ball in support of the opening of a Fiat plant in the then USSR, quoted in Benjamin R. Barber, 'Three Scenarios for the Future of Technology and Strong Democracy', *Political Science Quarterly* 113. 4 (Winter 1998–1999), pp. 573–89, 575.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Book of Dave* (London: Penguin, 2006).
- <sup>38</sup> 'On Being Haunted by the Future', p. 294. Wood recalls how Derrida only added environmental disaster to his list of threats to the world as an afterthought, on Wood's own prompting (p. 287).
- <sup>39</sup> See J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), pp. 111–14.
- <sup>40</sup> Bob Pepperman Taylor, 'Environmental Ethics and Political Theory', *Polity* 23 (1991), pp. 567–83, 581.
- <sup>41</sup> *World Risk Society*, 77.
- <sup>42</sup> At issue here is also the disheartening fact, intensified by modern individualism, that people tend to respond more forcefully to individual tragedy than they do to mass murder. Stalin is reported to have said, 'One's man's death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic.' See Paul Slovic, 'When Compassion Fails', *New Scientist*, 7 April 2007, p. 18.
- <sup>43</sup> In *Junk Mail* (1995: London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 329–371, 370.
- <sup>44</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, ed. Jim Fleming, tr. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (New York; Pluto. London, 1986), p. 99.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, pp. 1–15, 11. The van driver whom Jim assaults in 'Waiting' seems to be the dead or resurrected Christos, a Cypriot grocer named as one of the dead mother's new friends.
- <sup>46</sup> *Feeding Frenzy* (London: Viking/Penguin, 2001), p. 41.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 39.
- <sup>48</sup> Self's fantastic scenarios realise a literalised version of the way urban planners, sociologists and geographers describe or anthropomorphise the city as a single entity with its own peculiar laws of development. Compare Hebert Girardet's account of 'the metabolism of cities:'

Like other organisms, cities have a definable metabolism. The *metabolism* of most 'modern' cities is essentially linear, with resources flowing through the urban system without much concern about their origin and

about the destination of wastes; inputs and outputs are considered as largely unrelated. Raw materials are extracted, combined and processed into consumer goods that end up as rubbish which can't be beneficially reabsorbed into living nature. Fossil fuels are extracted from rock strata, refined and burned; their fumes are discharged into the atmosphere. ('Sustainable Cities: A Contradiction in Terms?', in *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Cities*, ed. David Satterthwaite (Earthscan Publications: London, 1999), pp. 413–25, 417).

<sup>49</sup> *Feeding Frenzy*, p. 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Girardet recalls observing a meeting of Indonesian businessmen in London, hoping to raise there the millions needed to finance the destruction of a rainforest and the building of a paper mill: 'In essence, the rainforest may be geographically located in the Far East, but, financially [and decisively] it might as well be located in London's Square Mile' ('Sustainable Cities: A Contradiction in Terms?', p. 416).

<sup>52</sup> Such a logic arguably includes people's most basic sense of themselves through certain demarcations of the internal and external, with conceptions of the mature psyche as 'culturally defined as fully individuated and possessing intact, absolute, decisive, and divisive boundaries' (Laura Sewall, 'The Skill of Ecological Perception', in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth: Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak et al. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), pp. 201–15, 203.) Yet Joanna Macy writes of the despair induced by environmental work and knowledge: therapists tend to regard feelings of despair for our planet as manifestations of some private neurosis. Once, when I told a psychotherapist of my outrage over the destruction of old-growth forests, she informed me that the bulldozers represented my libido and that my distress sprang from my fear of my own sexuality ('Working through Environmental Despair,' in *Ecopsychology*, pp. 240–59, 244).

<sup>53</sup> *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, pp. 16–68.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95–150.