The environmental ethics emerging from the Anthropocene entails thinking on scales of space and time often considerably greater than usual. Critics such as Morton or Mitchell Thomashow\(^1\) devote considerable thought to projects and modes of art and literature that can convey environmental realities which stretch our mundane sense of space and time. These projects define much that is exciting and set to become more so in contemporary art and literature. They support the ecocritical agenda of inducing a green cultural shift, against the kinds of short-term thinking and expectations that can accept long-term environmental damage for short-term convenience. However, resistance to this kind of culture shift may come from sources deeper than cultural or social-political factors.

‘When we observe the environment, we necessarily do so on only a limited range of scales, therefore our perception of events provides us with only a low-dimensional slice through a high-dimensional cake’ (Simon A. Levin).\(^2\) However, one scale forms a kind of norm for us, the usually taken-for-granted scale of our day-to-day existence and perception. We experience phenomena at a (mostly) fairly stable and consistent speed – too slow and our perception would give us an almost static world in which nothing happened – too fast, and everything would blur into indistinctness.
We understand distance, height and breadth in terms of the given dimensionality of our embodied existence. A particular human scale is inherent to the intelligibility of the Earth around us. This is not a merely cultural matter, susceptible of change by cultural means, but a given, unavoidable mode of reading things, imbued with an obviousness and authority that it takes effort to override – one or two cold winters in Britain and millions of people are deriding the very notion of global warming.

The Anthropocene entails the realization of how deeply this scale may be misleading, underling how (worryingly) our ‘normal’ scales of space and time must be understood as contingent projections of a biology which may be relatively inexorable. This is now manifest in the disjunctions between the scale of planetary environmental realities and of those things that seem immediately to matter to human engagement from one day to another. It also demands consideration of what we mean when we talk about humanity ‘changing the Earth’ or of our need to realize the finitude of the ‘Earth’. The Earth is obviously implicit and assumed in our existence in any conceivable respect, including how we talk and think. It is all-pervasive, assumed but unthematized. The question of the meaning of the Earth is latent even in the simple pervasive confusion about the words ‘earth’ and ‘world’. Does the term name the physical planet or the universe? When we speak of ‘the world’, the referent is almost always to the specific planet (as in ‘the deepest seas in the world’), yet to speak of a person’s ‘world view’ is to imply a view of the cosmos in the broad sense. The idiom, ‘what on earth?’ seems to hover between one sense and the other, as if they made no difference. Yet, why is the conflation of the terms ‘earth’ and ‘world’ so prevalent and so hard to avoid?

Since late 1968 one defining icon of modernity has been the Apollo photographs of the whole Earth seen from space. The image has already become the obvious emblem of the Anthropocene. Ironically, however, one can argue that it is the very plurality, contradictoriness and evasiveness of interpretations of the image that make it appropriate for this purpose. It has been read as an icon of life’s almost unbearable fragility; as the achievement through technology of the age-old dream of a god’s-eye view; an instance of the contingent privilege of vision in the human sense of what something ‘really’ is (‘. . . but what does it look like?’); a terrifying view of its target from a weapons platform. Questions
arise. Does the image convey a new sense of place, or a radical sense of displacement? Why do the photos almost always deploy a conventional sense of up and down? Is this a representation of ‘nature’ or of ‘culture’? Why is the Earth so hypnotically beautiful?

The sight of the Earth was of course anticipated, but it remained and still remains an inexhaustible surprise, an event, like the arrival of even an expected child (‘the child that arrives is always unforeseen. It speaks of itself from the origin of a different world or from a different origin of this one’ (Jacques Derrida)). The sight of the whole Earth has been received in heterogeneous ways. Always mediated in image or discourse, its eventhood is always being neutralized – for instance, even the phrase I have used above, ‘defining icon of modernity’, already suggests the complacent metalanguage of a would-be panoramic cultural history. A new reading must try to respond to, and keep open, that peculiar eventhood, its challenge to the seemingly absolute reality of the ‘normal’ human scale.

The Apollo images have usually been read in terms of humanity’s conception of itself, as if the planet were no more than a gigantic mirror in which the human could study its own features. Denis Cosgrove highlights one dominant form of such appropriation. First, there is what he terms ‘one earth’ discourse, that is, arguments that affirm the image in terms of humanist ideals of the unity of humanity. The image of the whole globe becomes the icon of a supposed or desired cultural unity, a symbol of modernity’s ideal of a common humanity (in effect, this usually means Western humanism in triumphal mode). Against this, what Cosgrove calls ‘whole earth’ discourse highlights the seeming fragility and isolation of the planet itself, an environmentalist awareness of the increasingly destructive power of human technologies. In this respect, Cosgrove’s argument ties in with hopes that the Anthropocene represents the possibility of a new, potentially redemptive, form of human identity, based on self-recognition as a species.

Both readings assimilate in given cultural terms (conceptions of a shared humanity, or of the human as the Earth’s failing steward and manager) an image whose initial force is to dislocate given frames of meaning-making and scale, something at work for instance in the fact that no immediately obvious trace of humanity
appears in the image, beyond the fact itself of the image having been made.

This is even more the case with another famous whole Earth image, that of a minuscule ‘pale blue dot’ barely discernible within the glare of its star. Writer and astronomer Carl Sagan requested that this image of the very distant Earth be taken, for its cultural value, from a very distant robotic spacecraft turned back towards the sun on a trajectory now carrying it out of the solar system. Sagan writes:

We succeeded in taking that picture [from deep space], and, if you look at it, you see a dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives... on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam.5

This is the planet as the human archive, foundation of all cultural memory, the fragile material matrix of all inscription, self-relation and commemoration. Again, the Earth is read solely as an index of the human (‘That’s us’), but one now collapsed towards an impossible experience of overload, in which we are forced to imagine everything about human life at once and at the one site – the myriad incommensurable horizons shrinking down upon each other to a point, like water down a plughole.

So the distant planet also becomes a memento mori, for images of the whole Earth almost always lead to preaching (‘To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits... it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another’).6

Serres’s The Natural Contract (1990), anticipating some of the questions of the Anthropocene, ends with a rhapsodic, meditative section concerning images of the Earth from space. The Earth appears as:

The largest apple. The most beautiful sphere or turbulent ball. The most ravishing boat, our caravel new and eternal. The fastest shuttle. The most gigantic rocket. The greatest spaceship. The densest forest. The most enormous rock. The most comfortable refuge. The most mobile statue. The complete clod of earth open at our feet, steaming. (121)
Yet it is as if, despite himself, Serres were confirming Yaakov Jerome Garb’s point that it is a ‘fantasy that we can somehow contain the Earth within our imagination’. In Serres’s prose, a summary overview disintegrates into a disjunctive series of exclamatory images, each supplementing the others. His claim that these whole Earth photographs show, for the first time, ‘the world as it really is’ is surely problematic. All Serres’s images celebrating the appearance of the Earth from outside derive their entire representability and conceivability from a specifically human existence on the Earth’s surface. In fact, can anyone describe the Earth as a whole and not use terms, concepts and images derived from the specific categories of life on its surface (apple, forest, blue dot)? Of course not. The Earth is not ‘one’ in the sense of an entity we can see, understand or read as a whole. No matter from how far away or ‘high up’ it is perceived or imagined, or in what different contexts – of cosmology or physics – it is always something we remain ‘inside’ and cannot genuinely perceive from elsewhere. It is a transcendental of human existence, and its final determinations are undecidable. The image of the whole Earth opens upon ‘abyssal dimensions to which we can never suitably bear witness’ (David Wood). Terrestriality, defined as that ‘normal’ prereflective sense of scale inherent to embodied human life on the Earth’s surface, forms a kind of transcendental, one that both underlies and exceeds any view that it is merely our social context that determines our understanding of ourselves. Our being-of-the-earth may be something unvordenklich (‘un-prethinkable’) in H.-G. Gadamer’s sense, that is that outside of whose terms one cannot think. Consider, for instance, the case of trying to hypothesize an extra-terrestrial philosophy or science: we are at once confronted with the problem of not being able to tell how much of it would be already anthropomorphic and thus terrestrial. Michael A. G. Michaud highlights one unresolved dilemma:

If mathematics is universal and eternal, claim the Platonists, aliens will understand concepts like prime numbers and pi. The anti-Platonists dismiss this idea as anthropomorphic; alien brains, responding to different environments, would have radically different mathematics.

What, then, distinguishes contemplation of the image of the whole Earth from the impact of a crash course in philosophy or some
powerful reminder of the contingency of being alive (‘Gosh, why are we here?’)? One answer would be that the terrestriality of one’s own sensorium is implicated in the effect of the image in profound and inextricable ways. Language about the sight of the Earth as a planet forms a singular kind of catachresis, that is, a knowingly inadequate simile or metaphor used to convey something for which no literal or as yet accepted term exists, stretching to breaking point language derived from the seeming coherence of the world of immediate consciousness. In this respect, the language used by the Apollo astronauts, looking back at the planet as whole, becomes peculiarly interesting. Neil Armstrong wrote: ‘It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth.’11 Or this is William Anders, who took the famous ‘Earthrise’ photographs from lunar orbit at Christmas 1968:

The Earth looked so tiny in the heavens that there were times during the Apollo 8 mission when I had trouble finding it. If you can imagine yourself in a darkened room with only one visible object, a small blue-green sphere about the size of a Christmas-tree ornament, then you begin to grasp what the Earth looks like from space. I think that all of us subconsciously think that the Earth is flat or at least almost infinite. Let me assure you that, rather than a massive giant, it should be thought of as the fragile Christmas-tree ball, which we should handle with care.12

There are multiple disjunctions and invaginations of scale here, rendering the speaker and implicitly the reader both very large and very small. The Earth is ‘a Christmas-tree ball which we should handle with care’, as if we were huge gods holding it in our hands – but standing on what? For the Earth, now as a kind of transcendental, is yet the basis for all that is imagined or perceived in Anders’s account, even the slightly archaic phrase ‘the heavens’, with its evocations of a pre-Copernican cosmos, or the Christmas imagery linking the sight of the Earth with a providential nativity. The Earth is both an object in the picture, but also the frame and the ground of picturability. To think of the planet as either a ‘massive giant’ or a fragile Christmas-tree ball is an exercise in comparative size and scale that derives its intelligibility from our own terrestriality, even as Anders’s account must now ironize
the phenomenological ‘life-world’ in profoundly destabilizing ways. The terrestrial measure constitutive of my world becomes defamiliarized and even deranged when the Earth as a whole is viewed as an object in that world. In Anders’s account, a family living room at Christmas, with its tree and decorations, becomes in a sense immediately ‘bigger’ than the planet in the window of a space capsule, even as, simultaneously, that room and its Christmas-tree ball have never been smaller. When the Earth seems bigger inside than out, then, ultimately, the very notion of size becomes opaque.

In the opening section of *The Infinite Conversation* (1969) Maurice Blanchot writes of how texts for conveying knowledge have, since Aristotle, almost always been committed to a continuity of form in presentation, that is, one thing leading smoothly to or developing from another within a homogenous element of thinkability. The deep presupposition at issue is that reality itself is ‘continuous’ in that way, that being can admit of synthesis in some overarching conceptual unity, a ‘world’ as at least a regulative idea. In Armstrong’s, Anders’s and Serres’s accounts of the planetary Earth, all the catachreses paper over a discontinuity of perception,
language and understanding between referents on the surface of
the Earth and the planet considered as a whole. Each image leaps
over vast disjunctions in scale.

**Implications**

What implications emerge here for trying to think the Anthropocene,
whose emblem might indeed be the whole Earth image?

For one thing, the image highlights just how far human
perception and thinking are bound to the ‘normal’ scale of embodied
experience on the Earth’s surface, and that we live with no intuitive
or significantly internalized sense of the Earth as a planet. Take the
simple sentence, ‘Every spring our planet is transformed’. This is the
opening statement of a BBC documentary on the nature of soil. Of
course the statement is nonsense: spring somewhere is always
autumn somewhere else, as the tilt of the planet’s axis continually
inclines different parts of the globe sunwards in its orbit, while in
the tropics the language of the temperate seasons does not apply.
The careless statement is an instance of psychic terrestriality at its
most parochial.

To contemplate the sight of the whole Earth is to think the
disjunction between individual perception and global reality,
a disjunction that has now become so consequential in the
Anthropocene. The scale at which one speaks of oneself as a person-
with-a-world may be constitutively opaque to understanding
beyond a now dangerously narrow spatial-temporal window.

David Wood writes:

> If my tree is dying, I notice. But the earth slowly dying is not
obvious, not something I can see at a glance out of my window
. . . . There is a gap between what I can see and what may really
be happening. The glance is ripe for education.  

The phenomenal self-evidence of my singular world is itself a scalar
effect unable, so to speak, to see itself as such. So we must take
issue with the work of green thinkers such as David Abram who
try to defend the immediate life-world of embodied perception as a
kind of norm from which we have strayed into forms of destructive
scientism and ‘abstractions’.
One symptom of a now widespread crisis of scale is a derangement of linguistic and intellectual proportion in the way people often talk about the environment, a breakdown of ‘decorum’ in the strict sense. Thus a sentence about the possible collapse of civilization can end, no less solemnly, with the injunction never to leave a TV on standby or forget to recycle a cardboard box. A headline in New Scientist magazine reads ‘To save the planet, chow down on a caterpillar’. An item in the same journal for 3 March 2014 proclaims, ‘Captains of industry, listen up. There is a fortune to be made from saving the planet’ (7). A motorist who occasionally takes a bus prides herself on helping ‘save the planet’. Jonathan Bate claims ‘poetry is the place where we save the earth’.

This ubiquitous phrase, used as shorthand for so many environmentally informed actions (even buying a slightly more efficient fridge) condenses in itself a set of mutually implicated but contradictory notions of the Earth, of humanity, of language and of ethics.

1. First, it is a falsehood. Environmental degradation caused by humanity is most probably not a threat to the Earth itself, whatever that could mean, only to the biosphere in its given form. Sally Weintrobe calls the phrase ‘debased’: it is ‘as if Earth depended on us and not the other way round’. It incorporates a deluded conception of human power, feeding a crude sci-fi scenario by evoking, however fleetingly and in an exciting image of redemptive violence, the human as saviour.

2. The phrase, echoing so many predictable plots from space opera, presents a sense of disaster exaggerated to the pitch of fantasy, encasing anything it touches with a sense of unreality, deadening further what is already a cliché. The term empties itself of reality by being both hyperbolic and fictionalized. (Compare the laughable sentence ‘It’s time to save the sea’, a title in the Durham Wildlife Trust’s magazine for Winter 2012, 21).

3. The emptiness of the phrase is effectively a mode of denial, a denial, for instance, of what the phrase ‘saving the planet’ would refer to if taken seriously, something too traumatic to be genuinely imaginable. The peculiar, almost knowing silliness of this ubiquitous phrase highlights the communal quasi-psychosis, as it were, through which much of the media and public opinion meet the challenges of the Anthropocene.
Diagnostics such as Abram’s highlight a presumed violence and negativity inherent in the workings of calculative reason in techno-science and industrial modes of production. Claire Colebrook offers a darker version of such a diagnosis, seeing the instrumental violence of calculative reason as inherent to theoretical thinking as such:

man is a theoretical animal, a myopically and malevolently self-enclosed machine whose world he will always view as present for his own edification. . . . If it is possible for thought to bracket reality, to suspend the self-evidence of the world, then this both enables philosophy in general, and the ‘man’ of humanism and logic (including ecology) who regards the world as the milieu or environment for his own life. The self-enclosure and myopia of man cannot be considered as an accident.19

So the Anthropocene comes to name a dark moment in humanity’s realization of its own nature. There is another element of its danger, however; one to do less with the violence inherent in reason than with what might be called a kind of transcendental stupidity inherent in embodiment. The supposedly immediate ‘life-world’ of our unreflective perception is far from being the possible foundation of secure theorizing that Abram and others would take it for, idealizing bodily immediacy as some kind of authenticity, ‘re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world’.20 It is merely epiphenomenal and unable to see itself as such. It projects an illusory ground, a surface realm of human possibility, one that is delusory, latentently ecophobic and even sometimes a form of denial. We inhabit distance, height and breadth in terms of the given dimensionality of our embodied, earthly existence. The particular physical scale is inherent to the intelligibility of things around us, imbued with an obviousness and authority which it takes an effort to override.

The personal scale of the human body and of its immediate inherence in things, terrestriality, has seemed to offer a kind of scalar and ethical norm with which to criticize the fantasies of techno-science, or the capitalist commodification of nature. It underlies the localist programmes of much environmentalist thinking. For instance, in the seminal anthology The Ecocriticism Reader (1996), Neil Evernden endorses the seemingly ecological ethics implicit in something Northrop Frye writes about art, ‘that the goal of art is to “recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings”’.21
However, it is now such an absorption in the immediate that becomes an object of suspicion. How could anyone, presented with a modern Western breakfast, intuit that the food miles that went into it may circle the globe? The demand now, baldly expressed, would be to realize that while immersed in my own phenomenal field of significances, I am also effectively on the other side of the world.

In sum, meditation on the whole Earth image highlights one of the greatest obstacles to being able to think the Anthropocene: that the familiar ‘life-world’ that gives us our immediate sense of orientation and of significant context in our lives, and which is even defended by some environmentalist thinkers as a perceptual and cognitive norm to be affirmed against scientism, now becomes epiphenomenal, even a ‘phantasm’ somewhat in Jacques Derrida’s sense. That is, it is something illusory in which one must believe simply by being alive, just as one cannot imagine being dead without, impossibly, also projecting oneself as the imagined witness to that condition. The daily phantasm of the familiar world is both a completely normal experience but also one constituted in an eclipse of the fact that its very familiarity is more truly ‘the inconceivable, the contradictory, the unthinkable, the impossible’.22

Neil Turnbull speculates: ‘Might the planetary earth be the postmodern equivalent of the Cartesian *malin genie* [evil demon] – that which undermines any idea of a fixed and stable “first principle” of knowing and judging?’23 In this respect, the image of the whole Earth, fragile and impossible fully to conceptualize, remains still an event and impetus to thought. The staleness of the cultural icon of the Earth-from-space still does not fully occlude a sense of acultural shock. It is one not to be neutralized by forms of reactive humanism, moralistic appropriation or normative vitalism (‘Gaia’). Its continuing event of surprise is a testimony to our terrestriality, both its scale and its drama of phantasms, something delusory in which one cannot not believe simply by being alive.

**The phantasm of normality:**

**Terrestriality and John Keats’s ‘To Autumn’**

Terrestriality remains a kind of boundary concept, one that defines the elusiveness, intellectual difficulty and counter-intuitive nature of day-to-day life when trying to think the Anthropocene.
What seems as commonsensical as the immediate life-world of our ordinary experience, our given sense of familiarity and even of responsibility, may now be implicated in destructive scenarios we can neither see nor barely calculate. What was once a norm, the ‘natural’, emerges as a biological contingency that is becoming deeply problematic. If consideration of literary and cultural criticism in the Anthropocene involves the need newly to think on differing and conflicting scales, then the default scale of human terrestrial will have to be kept constantly in mind, often now as an object of suspicion.

Such suspicion may re-inflect readings of even very familiar texts. Take John Keats’s ode ‘To Autumn’, written in 1819. This famous text exemplifies what seems a universal human characteristic, that is to perceive familiar natural processes and their seasonal timing as a basic framework of ‘meaning’ for life, a background norm providing a relative sense of stability, comprehensibility and, usually, reliability for all human affairs. In this case the mythic and more-than-human figure of ‘Autumn’ becomes a sensuous representation of seasonal fruition and change.

Readings of ‘To Autumn’ often see it as a ‘poem that seeks to achieve a calm acceptance of time, change, and mortality’, of the ‘soft-dying day’, to quote the poem’s last stanza. Eric Gidal reads Keats’s work in this way and contrasts it with the kinds of enlightenment utopianism espoused by his contemporaries William Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley, for whom a future perfectibility of humanity is imagined in terms of complete control over the climate of the Earth. Jonathan Bate foregrounds the way in which unlike other odes, including those by Keats, ‘To Autumn’ is not centred on a dramatized human consciousness – an ‘I’ that would say, as in the other odes, ‘I hear’ or ‘I see’ and so on –, but depicts a process unfolding without any foregrounding of human figures, even a perceiver. In this way, he argues, the poem’s series of sensuous images can no longer be understood simply as dramatizing changing states of mind or feeling in a central human speaker.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.

Bate argues that ‘To Autumn’ stands out for its concern with natural or material conditions of life, over and above the usual appropriation of them as symbols or cultural embellishments, for instance, there ‘are “later flowers for the bees”, not bees for the human bee-keepers’. It celebrates the necessary seasonal over-abundance of gnats and swallows.27 This does not, however, make it a celebration of a whole ecosystem in some non-anthropocentric way, for what the poem depicts is a small farm with its central dwelling and outbuildings, a largely cultivated space.28 Rather, it can be shown that what Bate reads as the poem’s effect of benign impersonality is rather part of its seeming to render perceptible the normativity of the seasonal/natural as a reassuring background for human affairs.

It does this through a deft manipulation of temporal scale. As often noted, the poem’s three stanzas depict the progress of the season over a few months, from what is still late summer in the first stanza with its maturing sun, to images of harvest and a cider making in the second and finally, in the third, to the bare fields and darkening skies of incipient winter. The effect of Keats’s poem rests significantly on the device of a shifting of scale that allows the illusion of seeing ‘Autumn’ as a totality, in an assured overview enacted in a speeded time frame and which projects a seeming horizon of significance and purpose for all life within it (what Bate sees as ‘an at-homeness-with-all-living-things’ (109)). Furthermore, in these three stanzas one condensation of dimensions (several months in miniature) is also projected onto another, for the stanzas also move through just one day’s progression of hours, from the mists associated with morning in the first stanza, through the heat of midday in the second to the barred clouds and gnats of evening in the last one. In this way, the slow process of the changing season, an effect of the Earth’s axial tilt, is mapped onto the more immediate day/night cycle. Each depicted process seems
subtly to correspond to and corroborate the other, as if day and year revolved harmoniously within or around each other. The achieved form of the text as a whole, encapsulating a version of months in the reading experience of a minute, gives to these natural processes the neatness of an aesthetic artefact, almost that of an object one might hold in one’s hand. In this way, the motion of these three condensed stanzas is already an implicit analogue of an image of the Earth from space, with life depicted as this circle of hours, day and year. Likewise, autumn’s implicit projection of future death is muted by its imprint in a circular trajectory that also entails renewal.

Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that ‘the intrinsic value of a small-scale model is that it compensates for the renunciation of sensible dimensions by the acquisition of intelligible dimensions’. Much of the criticism of ‘To Autumn’ concerns precisely the ‘intelligible’ content produced by the mode of Keats’s miniaturization or compression of time scale. The conception of the living Earth inherent in this celebration of the seasonal is of a self-renewing circle of self-contained change-in-continuity that gives form, structure and purpose to all life that inhabits it – thus the affirmative pathos of dominant readings of this poem as a piece, almost, of secular or naturalized theology. This is to render the phantasmal terrestriality of human perception and sense of scale at their most beguiling and even consolatory.

Contrast this particular mythicization of the human scale with a text that sets out to derange it, Alfred Tennyson’s dramatic monologue ‘Tithonus’ (1860), the lament of a figure who has been granted immortality in order to live with Eos, goddess of the dawn, but only as a perpetual ageing with no end. Tennyson’s language deploys the simple technique of just speeding things up:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.

This is both one temperate autumn and many such autumns. ‘The woods decay’ may mean not just the leaves but also all the trees, the woods themselves, falling, dying and being replaced. (So the swan, an image of long fidelity in love, also dies.) Unlike in Keats’s
ode, beyond a certain scale the cyclic movement of the seasons turns what would have been perceived as the ‘natural’ into the quasi-mechanical or orbital. As the poem ends, each reappearance of the Goddess of dawn now appears to Tithonus as the repeated working of a cold and vast if beautiful machine:

Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels. (1118)

In shifting from the ‘human/terrestrial’ to the ‘astronomical’, all the cultural aura and sense of moral authority invested in the terms ‘natural’ or ‘seasonal’ shifts into a sense of the contingencies of orbital geometry. The life of trees and humanity becomes but the giddy and repetitive recycling into each other of energy and matter on the surface of a spinning ball. At this speed, as ‘real’ as any other, a human life may look as purposeless as the falling rain: ‘The vapors weep their burthen to the ground / Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath.’ Here, the act of poetic miniaturization – several centuries in the reading experience of seconds – is disconcerting, rather than offering the illusion of a mildly consoling overview as Keats’s ode does.

In ‘To Autumn’ the seemingly accepting image of seasonal evanescence is made possible by affirming an idea of nature as some reassuringly continuous backdrop for human life – for the swallows that depart are also set to return another year, and there is even perhaps the consoling effect of a personal identification with the whole middle-scale process of which one’s own extinction will form a part. Yet, as we now realize, this homely sense of permanence, now fragile, was in any case illusory.31

So, against the idealization of this text as ‘ecological’, an antithetical reading is at least equally possible: that the poem’s attraction is, above all, a subtle denial of death. The whole structure, tone and the sensuous imaginary of the poem, especially as Bate recuperates them, also instantiate Maurice Blanchot’s argument that the ultimately illusory raison d’être of human thought and culture has always been to appropriate death as a
source of meaning, whether by reference to its place in a reassuring meaningful ‘nature’ or otherwise. This antithetical reading would be less a matter of disagreeing with Bate’s points about the aesthetic effect of ‘an at-homeness-with-all-living-things’ (109), but to see it as supporting an opposed overall conclusion, with the denial of death as perhaps the keystone of faith in human exceptionalism and fantasies of sovereignty.

There is a thin, undecidable line between acceptance of death and denial of the nature of its reality. Critics tend towards using Keats’s poem to endorse a sense of ‘the ecological’ that is more the latter than the former. However, like our being unable to think straight about death, the poignancy of Keats’s text is the way it hovers between the senses of the ‘natural’ (as a supposedly desirable norm) and that of the merely orbital or astronomical as already described. In Tennyson’s line, ‘Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath’, the sense that human life is cyclical gives no consoling sense of perpetual renewal, only of a cycle as impersonal as the Earth’s orbit or spinning.

Notes


6 Ibid.


10 Contact with Alien Civilizations: Our Hopes and Fears about Encountering Extra-terrestrials (New York: Copernicus Books, 2007), 284.


26 Thus, in Shelley’s *Queen’s Mab* (1813) the orbital tilt of the Earth’s axis is ‘corrected’ to produce conditions of perpetual spring. Against such hubris, Gidal praises Keats’s stance as one ‘in which mortality and redemption are the nurturing materials of the airs, waters, and places in which we make our home’ (“O Happy Earth Reality of Heaven!” Melancholy and Utopia in Romantic Climatography’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8.2 (Fall/Winter 2008), 74–101, 97.

27 ‘The poem not only yokes external and internal marks of biological process (the bending of the apple tree, the swelling of the gourd), it also yokes community and chemistry (bosom-friend and sun), physics and theology (load and bless), biology and aesthetics (a link which we may express through the two halves of the word which describes the closing images of the poem: bird-song’) (Song of the Earth, 107).

28 The area is treed, but it is not the dense forest it would have been before the Neolithic – it is a cultivated space. The plants in the first stanza are domesticated crops, vines, apples, thatch (from wheat), unspecified ‘fruit’, hazel-nuts, and bees which, associated with the ‘o’er-brimmed’, do evoke the making of honey. The autumnal process of the first two stanzas is the making of a human ‘store’, what with the ‘granary, the reaped furrow, cider, and meat’ (‘full-grown-lambs’).

29 *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 24. Lévi-Strauss makes the point that most pictorial artworks are in fact miniatures (and, if one wants to push the point, one can obviously say that so is a long realist novel like *Middlemarch*, condensing all those lives and years into a reading experience of hours).


31 As Nigel Clark writes: ‘We know now that a wildly fluctuating climate was the norm until the geologically recently past, some 10,000 or so years ago.’ Thus Clark goes on: ‘this means that almost all the achievements of humankind with which we are familiar and about which we are knowledgeable are stamped with anomalousness and provisionality’ (‘Volatile Worlds: Confronting Abrupt Climate Change’, *Theory Culture and Society* 27 (2010), 31–53, 38).