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Victorian Studies in the Anthropocene: An Interview with Claire Colebrook

Peter Adkins, Wendy Parkins, and Claire Colebrook

The Anthropocene, as is now beginning to be widely acknowledged, arrives as something of a crisis within the humanities. If we are only now discovering the ecological consequences of certain human actions and realizing for the first time the implications of past decisions, how should we reassess or revise our understanding of history? How does it change how we perceive literary history? How do we read texts that once seemed to have very little to say about the environment but are now revealed to be bound up with the history of planetary exploitation? Within Victorian studies such questions seem especially pertinent, not least since its object of study is the period which saw rapid industrialization, a modern understanding of the planet, and a growing sense of alarm at environmental degradation. Yet the Anthropocene poses not only a historical, but a theoretical challenge to the humanities. If the Anthropocene is named after that species which blithely polluted its habitat to the point of it becoming increasingly uninhabitable, to what extent does the Anthropocene necessitate that we revise the critical tools upon which we have long relied to make sense of history, culture, and politics?

In recent years, Claire Colebrook has emerged as one of the most prominent figures examining these and other questions around the implications of the Anthropocene. Holding the chair of Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English, Philosophy, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Pennsylvania State University, Colebrook's background and training is as a literary scholar specializing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature.¹ Yet Colebrook is not a critic whose work can easily be categorized. A prolific writer of more than a dozen books and countless articles, the late 1990s saw Colebrook establish herself as one of the leading critics working at the interstices of literature, feminism, and philosophy, while a series of books on the philosophy and legacy of Gilles Deleuze established her as one of the foremost Deleuzian critics writing today.² At a

¹ Colebrook wrote her doctoral thesis on Milton, Blake, and the history of individualism. See Claire Colebrook, *Milton, Evil and Literary History* (London: Continuum, 2008); and *Blake, Deleuzian Aesthetics, and the Digital* (London: Continuum, 2012).

² For Colebrook's work on literature, feminism, and philosophy, see *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); *Ethics and Representation: From Kant to Post-Structuralism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); *Gender* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Mac-

point at which many in literary studies were declaring the death of theory, Colebrook's work succeeded in revitalizing the relationship between literature and post-structuralism, especially the ways in which the writings of Deleuze, Derrida, and Paul de Man (among others) continue to pose fundamental challenges to how we read, write, and think within the humanities.³ Against the tide of narrow periodization, Colebrook's interest in the potential for radical thought inherent to both philosophy and literature has seen her develop a reputation as a critic whose work encompasses an impressive breadth of subjects and an ability to forge connections across periods. Indeed, our interview with Colebrook stands testament to this, ranging across Victorian literature, continental philosophy, Romanticism, and even Hollywood blockbusters.

More recently, Colebrook's work has focused on the ecological and geological ruptures of the Anthropocene, including phenomena such as global warming, population displacement, and mass extinction, examining how these challenge the fundamental modes of thinking upon which we have come to rely in the humanities. With Tom Cohen she edited *Critical Climate Change*, a book series published by the open access Open Humanities Press and through which she also published two volumes of *Essays on Extinction* and *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* (co-written with Cohen and J. Hillis Miller).⁴ Spring 2018 saw the launch of the successor to this book series, *CCC2 Irreversibility*, that addresses 'the second phase of "the Anthropocene" which occurs as the tipping points speculated over in "Anthropocene 1.0" click into place to retire the speculative bubble or phase'.⁵ At stake in such an intellectual project is nothing less than the figure of the human itself. As Colebrook writes in *Death of the PostHuman*, the Anthropocene epoch makes it clear that 'the human *species* is now

millan, 2004); and *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004). For her work on Deleuze, see *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Claire Colebrook and Ian Buchanan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002); *Understanding Deleuze* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002); *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006); and *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life* (London: Continuum, 2009).

³ For Colebrook on the death of theory, see 'Extinct Theory', in *Theory after 'Theory'*, ed. by Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 62–71; and Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller, *Theory and the Disappearing Future: On de Man, On Benjamin* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

⁴ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.3998/ohp.12329362.0001.001>>; *Sex after Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.3998/ohp.12329363.0001.001>>; Claire Colebrook, Tom Cohen, and J. Hillis Miller, *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2016) <http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Cohen-Colebrook-Miller_2016_Twilight-of-the-Anthropocene-Idols.pdf> [accessed 6 June 2018].

⁵ *CCC2 Irreversibility*, ed. by Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook <<http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/series/ccc2-irreversibility/>> [accessed 6 June 2018].

recognizable as a being that for all its seeming diversity is nevertheless bound into a unity of destructive power' (pp. 9–10, emphasis in original). Yet Colebrook's work also suggests that in the history of literature and philosophy we can trace alternative configurations of the human, configurations which allow us better insight into the anthropocentric delusions and instrumental reason that have got us to where we are today. We spoke to Colebrook in October 2017 to discuss her work on the Anthropocene and the degree to which Victorian literature and culture might enable us to understand the contemporary planetary moment.

Peter Adkins: To begin with, I want to ask at what point you think we entered the Anthropocene or became what could be called Anthropocene humans?

Claire Colebrook: Within what is now called Anthropocene studies that is probably *the* question. It could be argued that it was as recently as the nuclear bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It could also be argued that it was as far back as the beginning of intensive agriculture, when we began transforming the biomass of the planet so that, in some form of geological record, change would be registered. That's the story from within Anthropocene studies.

What I've been thinking about recently is looking at this question in terms of literary studies and asking at what point we get both a conception of humans as a species and as existing within geological time. Now, one answer to that would be Darwin. But I actually don't think that is the right answer. Darwin has a sense of the species and geological time, but he doesn't really have a strong sense of the intersection between the two. Unless we were brought up as creationists, we were brought up with the idea that human history forms one second on the clock of geological time. That's Darwinian and not at all Anthropocene, because you still have this strong distinction between planetary geological time and human time. Within Victorian literature, you find that sense of the puniness of human history in relation to what might start to be hinted at as geological time. In Hardy, Tennyson, or Swinburne, there is this sense of being insignificant.

But I don't think the Anthropocene starts to emerge in literature even within modernism. It is not until the last decade that there has been literature where there is a sense of humans as a planetary force, although you do get the formal anticipation of that in novels that have some form of global consciousness in, for instance, something like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, just to take one example off the top of my head. That is different to the Victorian sense of human narratives as insignificant in geological time and a sense of a broader time that we have no command over; what you get [in Anthropocene literature] is a sense of humans being interconnected with the planet and there being a feedback effect.

PA: You have previously said that as a species ‘we only found out we were destructive once it was too late’.⁶ Do you see Victorian writers registering any awareness of species destructiveness?

CC: To answer your question by going pre-Victorian, as it were, I think one could draw a useful contrast between Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and Percy Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. Even though Mary Shelley’s novel is about the last man and the loss of human history, there’s not a sense of an embedded malevolence to human life. If anything, she is a political optimist with regard to life and consciousness; if we look closely at both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* we find the idea that if we were more mindful about consciousness there could be some politically redemptive future. Whereas if you look at Percy Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*, which doesn’t get finished, there is something about the way in which life is progressing onwards in this frenzied and compulsive manner. It’s *human* life when he talks about the triumph of life, it’s the triumph of a destructive attachment to life. There is a sense that humans have an agential force that has nothing to do with their conscious intentions, that there is something that humans are doing behind their own historical awareness and historical consciousness.

Now there’s not a sense of planetary awareness in that, but there is a sense of a two-tiered notion of life. There’s the life that we have, human life, and then there’s the life force that takes on a destructive, compulsive, almost unstoppable force. I think that gets developed well before Freud articulates the unconscious; I think in this respect Freud is a late Victorian, a late Romantic. But before you get an explicit notion of a life force or an unconscious, before you get something like vitalism in Bergson and D. H. Lawrence, you get the idea of a malevolent substrata of life and I think you can also see that in Victorian poetry and in Hardy’s novels in varying degrees. There’s life and then there’s *life*. There’s the life that we live and then there’s the life that has this propulsive force beyond us. It’s not Darwin’s notion of life creating ever more diverse and wonderful forms, it’s entropic.

Wendy Parkins: Would you see a text like Richard Jefferies’s *After London* fitting in with that description of life?

CC: I would see *After London* as the beginning of what is at fever pitch right now. I would have to think this through more, but in texts like *After London* you don’t get a geological time or a species time, which you get elsewhere in Victorian literature such as in Swinburne and Tennyson. In Tennyson

⁶ Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook, ‘Preface’, in Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller, *Twilight*, pp. 7–19 (p. 8).

even the most pious moments of *In Memoriam* deploy that piety to diminish human time in relation to divine time:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee.⁷

Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine' is exemplary in at once articulating the fragility and contingency of human life and poetry, and yet finding solace only in expressing that finitude and mournfulness. There's a very powerful sense of the nobility of recognizing the parochial nature of one's own end, as there is in Tennyson's constant lament about his own grief.

What starts to happen in Jefferies's *After London*, though, and becomes more the case in the twentieth century, is a notion that to lose our particular world would be the end of *the* world. Our world becomes *the* world, which is what post-apocalyptic literature today really intensifies. Even though it's supposedly concerned with climate change, it's really concerned that climate change might wipe out our particular affluent, urban way of living, not that it's going to affect life *as such*. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* ends like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with the loss of the world allowing for a stepping in to a new world. In contrast, I would start to see a beginning of a form of Anthropocene myopia in *After London*, which I think is becoming particularly worrying in the environmental humanities which seems to have a focus on saving an archive which is *our* archive, saving a world which is *our* world. Oddly, the Anthropocene, even though it is concerned with how humans act at a planetary level, often has less concern for the planetary, the geological, and worlds other than our world.

PA: In the recent book that you co-authored, *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*, you look back to Nietzsche. One of the ways in which Nietzsche continues to cast a shadow on the Anthropocene is in the spectres of nihilism that often seem to enter the discussions on the topic. I know that in the past you have written about questions of extinction and I was wondering if you could elaborate on what it might mean to arrive at an ethics that would not replicate the liberal humanism that arguably produced the Anthropocene in the first place?

CC: I started writing about extinction before I started writing about the Anthropocene. Although the Anthropocene is now well known, it wasn't that long ago that I had to explain what it was. For instance, I was a speaker at a Derrida conference in 2012 and nobody had really heard of it.⁸

⁷ 'In Memoriam A. H. H.', in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 343.

⁸ Colebrook gave a keynote address entitled 'Derrida in the Anthropocene' at the

So, I started writing about extinction and then Anthropocene theory came along, and I thought that it was going to make us think about broader waves of time and not accept that our species has a prima facie value or that all we need to do is somehow slough the bad bits of humanity and find the good bits that have been always waiting to flourish. And I think that what has actually happened is that the Anthropocene has come to cover over or repress a more radical thought of extinction.

If you take just the common narrative of when one teaches or explains the Anthropocene, I guess the most important article in the humanities has been Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'The Climate of History: Four Theses'.⁹ He says (like Bruno Latour in his Gaia lectures) that while we used to separate human history from natural history we can't do that anymore: humans are bound up with the planet.¹⁰ If you want to explain Jane Austen you can't just talk about Britain, you've got to talk about the slave trade, and if you talk about the slave trade you have to talk about damage to the planet, and if you talk about damage to the planet you need to talk about species migrations and human migration. So, the Anthropocene looks as if it is an expansion. But actually, if you look at how it has panned out, what has been removed is that thought of radical temporality that you get in Victorian literature, the utter puniness of human narrative, sense, and temporality you get in Swinburne, where poetry is some sort of therapeutic preliminary mourning in which there's no sense we could inflate ourselves to having cosmic value. You can also see this in George Eliot; that there is something in the art of fiction-making and storytelling that gives us a value for ourselves, but ultimately only for ourselves. It's a story we tell ourselves to constitute ourselves. Yet when you look at what has become of Anthropocene studies and environmental humanities it is a management scenario, in which the narrative is 'now that we know this, what can we do to continue our world in the most sustainable and best way possible?'. It doesn't have that sense of the radical parochialism of humanness that Percy Shelley and, later, Victorian writers had.

So, the disputes within Anthropocene studies about when the Anthropocene began — whether it began, for instance, with nuclear energy, capitalism, industrialism, or colonialism — all those are fables or just-so stories. If it began with capitalism, then we can have the good humanity that is waiting outside of capitalism to take over. It doesn't confront what late nineteenth-century literature looked into, which was nihilism and the

Derrida Today Conference 2012, held at the University of California, Irvine, USA, 11–13 July 2012.

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 197–222.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

idea that there is no intrinsic value to the species. We can't avoid attributing meaning and that is what narrative and poetics does. You wrestle with that parochialism. Other than a few people, no one is struggling with that to the same extent today. If you look at the dominant narrative, the question of the Anthropocene is 'what's *our* viable means of survival' and not taking an alienating or nihilistic view of our own species.

PA: Following that description of critiques of capitalism, it might seem that accounts that would want to posit a Capitalocene rather than an Anthropocene fall into that trap of looking to redeem humanity.¹¹ I wonder if you might say how you see Marx fitting into an account of the Anthropocene?

CC: I don't find anything other than moralism in Marx. As long as you have capitalism you have a reason why a bad and somewhat accidental portion of humanity has been violent, destructive, life denying, and, ultimately, self-destructive; in which capitalism is understood as unsustainable and destined to consume itself and that then the true living proportion of humanity will emerge as the *proper* humanity to inherit the earth.

If you look at post-apocalyptic cinema, that is always the form it takes. There's always an evil capitalist, extractive, hyper-consuming force; you can see it in something like *Avatar* where there's an America which is militaristic and hyper-consuming. Then, once you have that, you have an outside where you find the proper humanity. It explains the answer to the question of why if humans are so great we got into this mess: because the wrong humans have held power for so long, but the meek shall inherit the earth.

I think when we have these disputes over the Anthropocene and you have people like Naomi Klein saying, 'this changes everything: capitalism versus the climate', then you have an innocent outside.¹² The climate becomes not just the climate but *us* and if we could just get rid of the capitalists we'd be left to manage the planet sustainably and justly. That really doesn't confront how we embedded destructive climate change behaviour in the 'we' that is giving that story about capitalism. The only reason Marx can write *The Communist Manifesto* is because there is a leisure industry of writing and publishing and letters, which I'm very attached to and you're very attached to by virtue of the fact that we're doing this interview. We're attached to a certain model of academic leisure. I think that the question that gets erased with Marxism is the complicity it has with

¹¹ For the Capitalocene, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 389–96; *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

¹² Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

planetary destruction. I'm not a Walter Benjamin scholar, but I think that the idea that every document of civilization is a document of barbarism suggests that civilization is not just accidentally bound up with things that are destructive but are intrinsic or necessary.¹³ There's not an easy erasure of capitalism.

PA: Does that mean for you the Anthropocene is a better term than the Corporatocene, Plantationocene, or the Capitalocene?¹⁴

CC: If you have the Corporatocene, Plantationocene, or the Capitalocene you absolve what calls itself humanity of a broader blame. The problem with that is when I say that it is not just capitalism, it is also the case that there are forms of human existence that aren't bound up with the Anthropocene. Just to take one example that is fairly obvious, it is probably the case that most indigenous forms of existence didn't have the global reach of what called itself Western humanity, including the portion of Western humanity that attached itself to a Marxist narrative of global social consciousness. That's the problem with saying all humans are involved, because of course they're not. This is important because in looking forward to the future, when we think about the end of *our* world, we have a really impoverished imagination about what other forms of human existence might be viable and which we shouldn't necessarily depict with horror. If you look at every post-apocalyptic narrative, the dystopia is really a form of existence that *we* can't bear. I think it's wrong to call it the Capitalocene or the Corporatocene because that's within our narrative of good and evil. But then, if we say it's the Anthropocene and say it's all of us, we don't really mean *all* of us; we mean those of us who live an affluent, urban, Western lifestyle.

PA: To pursue this idea slightly further, what work do you see 'Anthropos' doing in the name the Anthropocene?

CC: The Anthropos is not the species. It's the portion of the species that thinks of itself as a species. It's the portion of the species that thinks of

¹³ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004–06), iv: 1938–1940, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (2006), pp. 389–411.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the possibility and implications of a Corporatocene, see Tom Cohen, 'Trolling "Anthropos" — Or, Requiem for a Failed Prosopopeia', in Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller, *Twilight*, pp. 20–80; and Claire Colebrook, 'What is the Anthro-Political?', in Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller, *Twilight*, pp. 81–125. Plantationocene is Donna Haraway's term and looks to foreground the plantation as defining humanity's relationship with the planet: see Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 99–103.

itself as humanity. I was giving a talk in London and Adrian Lahoud said to me, ‘do you think indigenous Australians give a moment’s thought to the future of humanity?’. Now, that could sound dismissive, but I actually thought it was really pertinent. This obsession with humanity is part of what I would call Anthropos. There is a portion of species that thinks of itself as human in terms that are definitely not universal or inevitable. The work that Anthropocene does is that it says that it is caused by humanity, but it’s not caused by the species. Those two things need to be marked as different.

PA: In the past you have raised the paradox that ‘if there had not been industrialism [...] women would not have been liberated from domestic labour and granted access to the forms of planet-exploitative luxuries that have generated personhood in its modern Western liberal sense’. You conclude that essay by emphasizing that the Anthropocene cannot entail a return to the kind of ecofeminism which ‘claims that [woman] alone can offer a proper, connected, natural, and attuned relation to the earth’. As someone whose background is in feminist theory, how do you see the Anthropocene in relation to questions of sex and gender?¹⁵

CC: That’s a good question. You could read that quotation as meaning that because you could only have feminism and the liberation of the individual after a history of a) planetary destruction and b) human-on-human destruction, it is literally the case that Mary Wollstonecraft is able to write and be an abolitionist because she is benefitting from the leisure and ease that comes from slavery and planetary destruction. That’s also implied in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work on the Anthropocene, where he suggests that slavery would have been worse if we hadn’t learned to extract resources from the planet. Now, there is a ‘bad’ reading of the quotation that one would want to avoid, in which one concludes that, well, feminism and abolitionism are bound up with ecological destruction, so let’s go back to having slaves and [subjugated] women, because the more that women work the fewer microwaves and fridges we’ll have! That’s not where I am going, I hope! But it is an obvious reading of what you read out to me. Feminism is not innocent, it’s bound up with planetary destruction. And I would also say it’s true of abolitionism: it allowed human freedom once it was able to keep its own pace of leisure while also objecting to slavery. However, just because the emergence of social awareness has a necessarily contaminated history, I wouldn’t want to erase that awareness and put it back into a box even if such a thing were possible, which it isn’t.

¹⁵ Claire Colebrook, ‘We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual’, in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 1–20 (pp. 8, 19).

What I think the Anthropocene forces us to do is question the types of individual liberation that were attached to the history of feminist and liberal theory. A certain model of the autonomous, freethinking, self-making subject that is at the heart of *some* feminist theory needs to be questioned because that form of life is not sustainable. And that raises the question of the kind of ecofeminism that wants to live off the grid and be more in tune with the earth. That ecofeminist image of ecology, in which women are Wordsworthian animals if you like, is an invented nature. It comes out in *Mad Max: Fury Road*: if we could just step outside imperialism there would be these indigenous women in the desert waiting to save us, so that we can keep going but in just a more hippy form. It's phantasmatic. The forms of radical feminism we're not allowed to read any more, such as Shulamith Firestone, are often rejected for their utopian appeal to a radical outside to patriarchy. Those early ecofeminisms are far more radical than their current domestication, which we see in films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* or *Avatar*. But that is the way ideas work: they get articulated in a problematic way and then are popularized in a palatable form that then has a lot more power.

WP: In the preface to *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* you talk about the way in which 'the figure of the sublime had inhabited, recuperated, diverted, or implicitly doomed the Euro-anthropocentric traditions of Western writings from which it derived' (p. 14). I wondered if you could say something about how you see the sublime within Anthropocene studies?

CC: *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols* is the second volume in a project in which Hillis Miller, Cohen, and I were looking back to Paul de Man and his manuscripts on Benjamin. What interested me at the time was this notion in de Man of the recuperative sublime. I'll give some examples from Anthropocene studies: Bruno Latour uses the concept of the sublime and says that we used to think of nature as all-powerful and beyond human intentionality, and now that is no longer the case, which is simply a reversal (*Facing Gaia*). You can also think of work like Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobjects, where he describes climate change as something 'there', which can't be represented and which you only see as raindrops rather than climate change itself.¹⁶ That to me is also an example of the recuperative sublime because it's an intimation of the infinite from where we are and which elevates our thoughts, and maybe our politics, in thinking about it. I think that it is also present in a devalued form in a lot of post-apocalyptic culture where one plays out what it might be like to lose humanity and in which it's always given some familial recuperative narrative form that gestures towards disaster, but never arrives.

¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013).

What is interesting in de Man's work is the notion of a material sublime, where, going back to the relationship between extinction and the Anthropocene, one looks at nature not as home or dwelling, but as matter.¹⁷ It's no longer seeing trees as part of an ecosystem that allows the bees and the birds to flourish and be interconnected. Instead, it's a breakdown of sense, meaning, and world. In de Man that is what reading is. For me, the poet that comes closest to that is Swinburne. All you have is the sound and the materiality of language that will give some form and music to the world. As in Tennyson's 'The Lotus Eaters', there's a musicality to the world that is not the world itself. For all that we want to grasp that matter, any attempt to do so is a recuperation.

When you look at the way in which notions of materiality are used in theories of materialism, like new materialism, it is always recuperative; there is this stuff that subtends us and is fleeting and out of reach but also living and vibrant, as in Jane Bennett's work.¹⁸ What can't be confronted in this recuperation, and what I do think you get at the end of Romanticism, in texts such as Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, and later in Deleuze, is a matter that is not living. A matter that is not the substrata of *our* world. It is something that when looked at blankly, with a blank eye, would diminish the human sense we give to the world. It's counter-anthropic, anti-anthropic, nihilistic. That is where I would take that notion of the sublime. The other person who uses that notion of the sublime is Jean-François Lyotard, where it's matter itself, which is always then recuperated.¹⁹

WP: Why should Victorianists pay attention to Anthropocene studies and what might it bring to our field of interest?

CC: I would seriously reverse that question, and the reason I say seriously is because something you're always supposed to do is reverse the question. It's not that everyone in Victorian studies should start reading the journal of *Anthropocene Studies* and then spot the Anthropocene in Victorian literature. I do genuinely think that there has been a tendency towards literal mindedness in what has come to be called the environmental humanities and Anthropocene studies. There is within late-Victorian and Romantic poetry at least — I am less familiar with the novels but those too probably — a sense of geological time that would render human life meaningless and puny that has got lost in the Anthropocene. That comes out most clearly in

¹⁷ Paul de Man, 'Kant's Materialism', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. by Andrzej Warminski, Theory and History of Literature, 65 (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), pp. 119–28.

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

the notion of the Good Anthropocene, which is ‘well, if we have changed the planet we can change it back again through geoengineering’. What is lost is a sense of the incredibly ambivalent and ungraspable notion of human agency and intentionality that you get in Victorian literature.

There’s an irony to human history in that there is what it wants to do and there is what it does. Going back to Marxism, in Marxism there is an irony between what human history thinks it is doing and what it is actually doing. But then Marx claims to grasp real narrative and what is actually going on. And Freud also says ‘here is what is really going on’ in his description of the operations of the unconscious. Whereas I think in Victorian poetry that notion of recuperating the ungraspable force of human intentionality at a geological level doesn’t occur.

That is why I think it [the question] should be the other way around: to read the texts that are so important to the Anthropocene, which would include Marx, would require a broad scope and would see the moment where we are now as a late moment in geological planetary consciousness, something which Victorian studies would be capable of doing. This would complicate the narrative that the Anthropocene was discovered in the twenty-first century by Paul Crutzen.²⁰ The idea that whatever we do at an individual level is part of a broader story was not discovered in the twenty-first century. So I would say it behoves Victorianists to enter the conversation for the sake of the conversation, not for their own sake necessarily.

PA: Finally, do you see the Anthropocene as a useful concept for the humanities in the long run, or do you think it will inevitably be replaced by different ways of thinking about anthropogenic planetary change?

CC: I think it will be replaced only if the Anthropocene gets too closely tied to what is considered the human within the humanities. I think this is a really confronting question, since it is easy for me to say from my leisured, tenured position late in my career within the humanities that what counts as the human in the humanities and the *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene needs to be devalued. The only world we can think of as being valuable is one in which there are people like us: people reading closely and intensively, living the lives of books, and enjoying a form of individual introspection.

The humanities are complicit with what calls itself the Anthropocene in two ways. Firstly, technically and materially you don’t have what we’re doing without a long history of destruction of the earth and other humans. But also, looking forward, either there is some magic trick that is done with planetary resources and what we do does get disseminated around the rest

²⁰ Paul J. Crutzen, “The “Anthropocene””, in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene: Emerging Issues and Problems*, ed. by Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (Berlin: Springer, 2006), pp. 13–18.

of the world and everyone starts living the life of Rousseau; or, one starts to question the prima facie value of the humanities and the humanity that has called itself Anthropos. I would refer to the philosopher Tim Mulgan's great work on having to explain our current moment to our future students in the way that we explain Ancient Greece to them now: 'you might think this is odd, but there was this time when people thought everyone could lead a liberal, individualist existence and they didn't have survival lotteries!'²¹ Do I think the Anthropocene will be replaced? Only insofar as one also might want to replace the concept of the humanities and the humanity that is embedded in the humanities.

²¹ Tim Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World: Imagining Philosophy after Catastrophe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).