

"Heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery": Assemblages, Ethics and Affect in W. G. Sebald's Orford Ness

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Abstract



This essay explores aspects of the 'material turn' in contemporary thought and their incorporation into the emergent field of material ecocriticism. I tentatively suggest that although the 'new materialisms' have provided both posthumanism and ecocriticism with invaluable tools for decentring the 'human' and disrupting anthropocentric world views, they have at times deflected attention too far from the specificity of the human animal. I argue that while material ecocriticism has fruitfully engaged with concepts of material interrelatedness and its *effects* on bodies and environments, and begun to explore the ethical implications of such entanglements, it has, as yet, been less forthcoming on the subject of *affect*. Drawing on recent formulations of 'affect theory' that characterise affect as operating within the context of material immersion and processes of becoming, as well as being potentially instrumental in the recalibration of ethical positions, I contend that there are significant parallels with material ecocriticism that signal the potential for further exploration of what we might call *material affect*.

These arguments are explored further through a reading of W.G. Sebald's account in *The Rings of Saturn* of a visit to the defunct military weapons-testing base at Orford Ness. I highlight Sebald's evocation of the darkly disturbing, vitally affective power of the landscape's assemblage of "scrap metal and defunct machinery" (237), which triggers a response in the narrator-figure that is integrally bound up with aspects of memory, conscience, and, ultimately, ethics. In the light of this reading, I argue for the need for an ongoing humanism within posthumanist ecocriticism that combines an understanding of our immersion in and dependence upon the nonhuman world with a continuing and specific investigation of the human animal and its affective sensorium, focused in particular on the way in which affect may play into the generation of ethical aspiration.

Keywords: new materialisms, posthumanism, material ecocriticism, assemblages, ethics, affect theory.

Resumen

Este ensayo explora aspectos del "giro materialista" en el pensamiento actual y su incorporación en el campo emergente de la ecocrítica materialista. Sugiero provisionalmente que aunque los "nuevos materialismos" han proporcionado tanto al posthumanismo como a la ecocrítica herramientas inestimables para descentrar "lo humano" y alterar las visiones antropocéntricas del mundo, a veces han desviado la atención demasiado lejos de la especificidad del animal humano. Sostengo que mientras que la ecocrítica materialista se ha dedicado fructíferamente a conceptos de interrelación material y sus *efectos* en los cuerpos y entornos, y ha empezado a explicar las implicaciones éticas de dichas relaciones, ha sido menos cooperativa, de momento, en el tema del *afecto*. Recurriendo a las formulaciones recientes de la "teoría del afecto" que caracterizan éste en la medida que funciona dentro del contexto de la inmersión materialista y de los procesos de llegar a ser, así como siendo potencialmente fundamental en la recalibración de posiciones éticas, afirmo que existen paralelismos significativos con la ecocrítica materialista que señalan la posibilidad de una exploración más a fondo de lo que podríamos llamar *afecto materialista*.

Estos argumentos es exploran en detalle por medio de una lectura de la narración de W.G. Sebald

en *The Rings of Saturn* sobre una visita a una obsoleta base militar de pruebas de armamento en Orford Ness. Destaco la evocación de Sebald del poder del paisaje oscuramente perturbador y vitalmente afectivo de la colección de "restos de chatarra y maquinaria obsoleta" (237), que desencadena una respuesta en la figura del narrador que está integralmente unida con aspectos de la memoria, la conciencia y, por último, la ética. En base a esta lectura, defiendo la necesidad de un humanismo en desarrollo dentro de la ecocrítica posthumanista que combina la comprensión de nuestra inmersión en y dependencia del mundo no humano con una investigación continua y específica del animal humano y su *sensorium* afectivo, centrándose en particular en la manera en que el afecto puede influir en la creación de aspiración ética.

Palabras clave: nuevos materialismos; posthumanismo, ecocrítica materialista, ensamblajes, ética, teoría del afecto.

Prelude

*You are a human animal,
You are a very special breed,
For you are the only animal
Who can think, who can reason, who can read.*

*The cow goes moo, and the dog goes ruff,
The cat meows, the horse kicks up his hoofs,
And so the only human animal is you, you, you.
(Jimmie Dodd, "You (Are a Human Animal)")¹*

These lyrics, sung by the Disney character Jiminy Cricket, originally featured in a 1955 Mickey Mouse Club animation. I first came across the song in a seemingly quite incongruous context; it was until recently used as the theme music for Michael Silverblatt's American radio show "Bookworm," a programme which explores a range of literature via interviews with the writers, and I heard it when I listened to an archived recording of Silverblatt's 2001 interview with the German-born author W.G. Sebald. My first reaction was one of ironic amusement—I was at the time in the midst of reading works of posthumanist philosophy, and this seemed a dated and comical example of humanist boosterism. I assumed that the song must have been chosen for the show in an ironic and knowing spirit—because of its obvious reference to reading but possibly also, more subtly, because of the questions it begged in its apparent vaunting of the qualities which raise us humans above the other animals that inhabit this planet. Later, having researched the song a little further, and having encountered web-based discussion criticising the lyrics for their suggestion that humans are animals rather than "men and women made in God's image" (Adask n.p.), I began to feel that the song, even such as it is, may have unexpectedly radical potential in its naming of the human *animal*, both historically and in the ongoing creationist wranglings of the 21st century. I also began to feel that it might have a point—that there might be some value in continuing to explore the *human animal*, if not as a 'special' then at least as a specific breed. I realised, as I listened to the interview with Sebald, how the song might in that sense be an apt choice

¹ "You (Are A Human Animal)." From Walt Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Words and Music by Jimmie Dodd (c) 1955 Walt Disney Music Company. Copyright Renewed. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission. Reprinted by Permission of Hal Leonard Corporation.

when it came to discussion of his work, given what an intensely *humane* thinker he was, how preoccupied with conscience, memory, ethics, and affect, and how willing to engage with the specificities of the human animal, not from a vantage point high up in the Great Chain of Being but from a deep reservoir of abjection and guilt.

Introduction

This essay is divided into two sections. In the first I explore aspects of the 'material turn' in contemporary thought, discussing its incorporation into posthumanist ecological perspectives, its theorisation within the emergent field of material ecocriticism, and its implications for the development of new ethical positions. The insights of these 'new materialisms' have undoubtedly provided both posthumanism and ecocriticism with invaluable tools for decentring the 'human' and disrupting anthropocentric world views. However, while material ecocriticism has fruitfully engaged with the notion of material interrelatedness and its *effects* on bodies and environments, and begun to explore the ethical implications of such entanglements, I would suggest that it has, as yet, been less forthcoming on the subject of *affect*—that dimension of bodily immersion that involves the interplay between the senses and registers of emotional experience. This is perhaps because, in its association with complex and contested concepts such as consciousness, subjectivity, conscience and memory, an exploration of affect might be seen as bringing attention back to the human self in a manner that sits uneasily with the broadly posthumanist remit of material ecocriticism. And yet one of the ways in which the vitality of matter manifests itself is in the powerful affective reverberations and resonances it co-creates in the human mind, and to step back from an investigation of the kind of subjectivities and interiorities which may come into play when considering affect both limits a full investigation of vital materiality and misses the opportunity to explore the potential of affective states for generating ethical development. Drawing on recent formulations of 'affect theory' that characterise affect as operating in the context of material immersion and involved in ongoing processes of becoming, as well as being potentially instrumental in the recalibration of ethical positions, I contend that there are some significant parallels with new materialist perspectives, and argue for the further ecocritical exploration of what we might call *material affect*.

In the second part of the essay I explore the applicability of a material ecocritical reading to a short passage from W.G. Sebald's 1995 work *The Rings of Saturn* in which the narrator-figure describes his experience of a visit to the almost-island of Orford Ness, the site of a now defunct military weapons-testing base. In highlighting the significance of Sebald's evocation of the darkly disturbing, vitally affective power of the landscape's collection of "scrap metal and defunct machinery" (237), which triggers a response in the narrator-figure that is, though hinted at rather than explicitly stated, integrally bound up with aspects of memory, conscience, and, ultimately, ethics, I argue for the need for an ongoing humanism within ecocriticism that incorporates an understanding of our immersion in and dependence upon the nonhuman world (a model

Serenella Iovino proposes in her essay "Material Ecocriticism: Matter, Text, and Posthuman Ethics"), but also reserves a place for the continuing and specific investigation of the human animal and its affective sensorium. Following Elspeth Probyn's lead, I also suggest that the literary exploration and articulation of affect might "generate new ways of thinking about how we are related to history and how we wish to live in the present" (Probyn 89), in other words, might contribute to the development of the new ethical positions called for by the new materialisms and material ecocriticism.

Part I: The New Materialisms, Ecological Posthumanism, Material Ecocriticism, Affect Theory

The material turn in areas such as feminist science studies, politics, and philosophy has inspired significant developments in the field of ecocriticism. The new materialisms emerging from these disciplines emphasise the shared materiality of the human and the nonhuman: "We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed of matter" (Coole and Frost 1). They also foreground the agentic potential of all matter—its inherent "thing-power" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 4)—which enables it to "make things happen, to produce effects" (5) as it participates in "intra-actions" (Barad 28) and "choreographies of becoming" (Coole and Frost 10). Within this framework, nature and culture are seen as "co-dependent and co-evolving," (Wheeler 41) inextricably combined as "naturecultures" (Haraway 1) that reveal the entanglement of areas previously deemed separate such as the biological and the social, the natural and the political. Diverse phenomena combine in "assemblages" (Deleuze and Guattari 4), groupings that "force us to abandon the subject-object dichotomy" (Latour 180) since all of the component parts, both human and nonhuman—the "actants" (180)—"are in the process of exchanging competencies, offering one another new goals, new possibilities, new functions" (182)

In this sense of the human as materially immersed in a world replete with nonhuman agencies and potentialities, the new materialisms have contributed to the posthumanist project of decentring the 'human'. They have also added impetus to specifically ecological perspectives. The revelation of the agentic potential of all matter not only disrupts our sense of the autonomous human subject but also disturbs "the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature" (Coole and Frost 10), as well as bringing sharply to our attention the folly of continuing to adhere to binary human/nature distinctions. Stacy Alaimo, pursuing "a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments," ("States of Suspension" 476) has developed the concepts of "trans-corporeality" ("Trans-corporeal" 238) and "deviant agencies," (*Bodily Natures* 139) to articulate the way in which matter—sometimes highly toxic matter—crosses indiscriminately into environments and bodies.

The incorporation of these perspectives into the emergent field of material ecocriticism has similarly foregrounded the importance of the new materialisms to posthumanist and ecological perspectives. Serenella Iovino takes up Karen Barad's

notion of "posthumanist performativity," (Barad 801) describing this as an effect whereby 'posthuman' "replaces the human/nonhuman dualism and overcomes it in a more dialectic and complex dimension" (Iovino, "Stories" 459). In this posthuman performativity the agentic contributions of the human and the nonhuman cannot be distinguished from each other, thus limiting our hubristic sense that we are in some way controlling the course of events. Serpil Oppermann, drawing parallels between the new materialisms and postmodern perspectives, also hints at their potential for providing "conceptual and practical tools of emancipation from anthropocentric thought" (36). Taken as a whole, the contemporary material turn has given us, as Iovino argues, the opportunity to develop an "ecological horizontalism and an extended moral imagination" ("Material Ecocriticism" 52).

The mention of a 'moral imagination' here suggests that the insights of the new materialisms might enable the development of new ethical positions. Jane Bennett hopes that the "onto-story" of matter and the "monism of vibrant bodies" (*Vibrant Matter* 3, 121) "will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology" (4), and Alaimo suggests that

Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world, [...] allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late-twentieth-century/early-twenty-first-century realities in which "human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate. ("Trans-corporeal" 238)

Likewise, Iovino argues that the ecological horizontalism she invokes might encourage the development of a "material ethics" ("Material Ecocriticism" 64) based on the "co-extensive materiality" (64) of human and nonhuman. Recognising a possible tension between the notion of human ethics and the posthumanist drive to dismantle the human subject, Iovino posits the necessity for an ongoing "welcoming humanism" (66) within posthumanism—one that implies "agential kinships" (66) and "moral horizontality" (64), and involves both an understanding of "the inescapable role of the nonhuman in the making of the human, but also the impossibility of being, acting, and thinking in isolation from the nonhuman" (66).

As already noted, however, notwithstanding this ongoing strand of humanism and its calls for ethical recalibrations, the focus of material ecocriticism on nonhuman agency combined with its broadly posthumanist leanings, has perhaps circumscribed the amount of attention as yet devoted to exploring the implications of the affective dimension of our receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds us. While Bennett puts forward the notion of 'enchantment' as a catalyst for both ethical aspiration and enactment in her 2001 work *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, writing of the need for, among other factors which influence the formation of ethics, "a distinctive assemblage of affective propulsions" (3), in the more recent *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, she turns her focus from the 'alter-tale' of enchantment to the 'onto-tale' of matter. And although she identifies a possible "performative contradiction" (*Vibrant Matter* 120) in vital materialism in its reluctance to engage with the human subject—"Is it not, after all,

a self-conscious, language-wielding human who is articulating this philosophy of vibrant matter?" (120)—for her, any attempt to interrogate the human in terms of its specificity leads back to hierarchy, and so she resists going any further in that direction. Instead she suggests that we try to elide the question of the human:

Postpone for a while the topics of subjectivity or the nature of human interiority, or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the animal, plant and thing. Sooner or later, these topics will lead down the anthropocentric garden path, will insinuate a hierarchy of subjects over objects, and obstruct freethinking about what agency really entails." (120)

But one of the central insights of the new materialisms is the conviction that *everything* in the cosmos is material, including those phenomena such as human subjectivity that we might have previously considered—at least from a Cartesian dualist perspective—as 'immaterial' and thus separate from and transcending the world of matter. Coole and Frost's 'choreographies of becoming,' involve a material continuum of

objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environments in ways which are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardedly and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes (10)

and they state definitively that "In this monolithic but multiply-tiered ontology there is no definitive break between sentient and non-sentient entities or between material and spiritual phenomena" (10). While they are not explicit at this point about what constitute 'spiritual phenomena', earlier in their introduction to *New Materialisms* they discuss the way in which materialists have contested the supposed 'immateriality' (and also the privileging over matter) of phenomena such as "language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul; also imagination, emotions, value, meaning and so on" (2), suggesting that these may be some of the 'spiritual' phenomena they have in mind.

Of course these phenomena are not necessarily unique to the human. Coole and Frost not only stress the multiplicity of nonhuman agencies, but also emphasise a plurality of 'subjectivities'. In fact, a key insight of at least one strand of the new materialisms is the immanence throughout the nonhuman world of phenomena such as signification, meaning and even 'mind'. The ecophenomenologist David Abram sees human language as a response to an earth already replete with its own forms of speech, arguing that "Mind is a luminous quality of the earth" (*Becoming Animal* 132) in "a terrain filled with imagination" (270). Iovino also draws on these perceptions in her articulation of material ecocriticism, identifying Abram with an area of new materialist thought which stresses "the concrete links between life and language, mind and sensorial perception" and encourages a sense of "kinship between out-side and in-side, the mind and the world" ("Material Ecocriticism" 55). In the predominance of the idea of kinship in this model, it might be seen as manifesting something of a deep ecological response to the notion of material entanglement, highlighting as it does the potential for a profound and rewarding sense of human imbrication in the life of the planet.

However, as Iovino also readily acknowledges, the notion of shared materiality involves more problematic elements—for example, the ontological and epistemological

challenges implied by complex naturalcultural intertwinings such as "electric grids, polluting substances, chemicals, energy, assemblages, scientific apparatuses, cyborgs, waste [...]" ("Material Ecocriticism" 52)—elements that might combine with human subjectivities to create more dissonant affective states that militate against a sense of kinship. Jane Bennett herself makes it clear that the vital materiality she proposes is not one of harmonious interrelationship: "in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, my monism posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit" (*Vibrant Matter* ix). She evokes a complicated range of phenomena in her delineation of 'thing-power', when she describes a collection of objects she encounters one morning in a Baltimore storm-drain that includes a dead rat, a plastic glove, a plastic bottle cap, and a stick of wood. She stresses the way in which these things "commanded attention in [their] own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habit or projects" (4) and though she begins to address the affective power of the assemblage—"It issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter" (4)—she resists privileging her subjective response over the vibrancy of the objects, ultimately reading this response as itself a form of thing-power:

Was the thing-power of the debris I encountered but a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my ideas of these items? Was the real agent of my temporary immobilisation on the street that day *humanity*, that is, the cultural meanings of 'rat,' 'plastic,' and 'wood' in conjunction with my own idiosyncratic biography? It could be. But what if the swarming activity inside my head was *itself* an instance of the vital materiality that also constituted the trash? (10)

Having come to this insight—which reveals the materiality of affect—Bennett then renews her attention to the ongoing material effects of things rather than pursuing the full reverberations of the vital, swarming affective activity, including those feelings of repulsion and dismay, inside her head. Similarly, she uses Robert Sullivan's powerful description of toxic pollutants combining in a New Jersey garbage heap to exemplify the ways in which "a vital materiality can never be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity" (6). The passage quoted from Sullivan ends:

this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid — my fingertip was a bluish caramel colour — and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone." (qtd. in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 6)

We have a clear sense here of the continuing activities of the chemical pollutants as they combine into a toxic stew. But what might it mean to consider the affective agency of the scene for the human who forms part of the assemblage, or indeed for the reader of the text itself? Bennett may displace, as Iovino notes, "the focus of agency from the human to the 'force of things'" ("Material Ecocriticism" 55) but an integral part of that force of things is its impact on what Coole and Frost call 'spiritual phenomena,'

which include those manifested by the human animal. The sensations (and the description of them) that tell us that the stew of pollutants is warm and fresh and that the pool smells of benzene and is populated by a lone bird surely also carry with them further affective resonances including fear; possibly revulsion; perhaps a sense of guilt and responsibility at the pollution of the pool and the danger posed to the mallard—and these resonances may propel us to make ethical adjustments just as much as the conscious knowledge that the pollutants contained in the detritus of human consumerism are agents that have the power to recombine and develop new potentialities. As we have seen, though, the idea of focusing attention on the human sensorium raises the spectres of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism and can be seen as undermining the posthumanist project. Bennett asks: "Why are we so keen to distinguish the human self from the field?" (*Vibrant Matter* 121), fearing that the quest may be motivated by the demand "that humans, above all other things on earth, possess souls that make us eligible for eternal salvation?" (121).

But what if the quest has a quite different motivation—one arising not from a desire to exalt the human subject as a uniquely autonomous privileged self, destined for transcendental salvation, but from a belief in the need to continue to investigate the flawed and complex human animal in all its dimensions? This is a question which has already been raised in recent ecocritical literature. Timothy Morton, for example, in *The Ecological Thought*, cites Levinas in his observation that "Posthumanism seems suspiciously keen to delete the paradigm of humanness like a bad draft; yet 'Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human'" (113). He suggests that there are gaps in "posthuman ideological barriers" (113) that ecological thinking might need to slip through. It is perhaps one of these gaps that John Parham identifies when he suggests that, given that one of the insights of posthumanism is the recognition of "the fundamental difference between, and integrity of each and every species," (146) in avoiding the question of "how we think about retaining expressly humanist perspectives and interests," posthumanism "surely neglects the logic of its own position" (147). Similarly, material ecocriticism might risk neglecting the logic of its own position if it resists exploring the affective dimension of material embodiment, particularly its more dissonant aspects, even if that entails something of a re-engagement with the 'human'. Responding to Jane Bennett's work, Iovino writes; "If embodiment is the site where 'vibrant matter' performs its narratives, and if human embodiment is a problematic entanglement of agencies, the body is a privileged subject for material ecocriticism" (58-59). But the body is also the site of the narratives of affect—the entanglements of sense and feeling which occur as vital matter continues to swarm and reconfigure itself. In an ontology in which there is no definitive break between the material and the spiritual, the subjectivities "that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes" (Coole and Frost 10), including those of the human, are surely a site of interest.

In fact, recent conceptualisations of affect resonate with aspects of the new materialisms and suggest that the study of matter and affect may share a good deal of common ground. While Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth note, that "There is no

single, generalizable theory of affect" (3), in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* they offer some broad definitions that characterise affect as intrinsically related to materiality and embodiment. Affect is "found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (1). And, chiming with Coole and Frost's 'choreographies of becoming' and their account of an ontology in which there is no definitive break between material and spiritual phenomena, Gregg and Seigworth's affective process bridges sensation and sensibility, and can be understood as:

A gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to compartments of matter of virtually any and every sort. (2)

This sense of incrementalism also implies that affective forces, like the actants Latour describes, are always involved in "exchanging competencies, offering one another new goals, new possibilities, new functions" (Latour 182), and that their 'becoming' cannot be contained or limited. Thus Gregg and Seigworth comment: "Perhaps one of the surest things that can be said of both affect and its theorization is that they will exceed, always exceed the context of their emergence, as the excess of ongoing process" (5). The idea of affect as bodily, contingent, and incremental allows for a sense of human subjectivity as unstable, fluid, and co-constituted by the nonhuman—a perception that may avoid leading us, as Bennett fears, "down the anthropocentric garden path" (*Vibrant Matter* 120) in our exploration of it, and thus sit more easily with posthumanist interests. At the same time, though, the study of affect does seem to involve discussion of specifically human subjectivities and perspectives. Gregg and Seigworth draw attention to its role in driving the human towards movement and thought (or conversely suspending that movement and thought), as the repetition of the pronoun 'us' and the anthropomorphising of affect in the following passage demonstrates:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (1; emphasis original)

The notion that we might be overwhelmed by the world's apparent 'intractability' also hints at a break in human kinship with the non-human world—producing a sense in which we are both affectively imbricated but also 'other'. It signals that there may be a basis for an ongoing strand of humanism within affect theory. Nigel Thrift, in his 2007 work *Non-Representational Theory: Space / politics / affect*, allies himself with theories of affect that move away from the notion of the human subject, but also confesses: "All of that said, I do wish to retain a certain minimal humanism. Whilst refusing to grant reflexive consciousness and its pretensions to invariance the privilege of occupying the centre of the stage, dropping the human subject entirely seems to me to be a step too

far" (13). Allowing some room for discussion of the human subject, albeit one removed from centre stage, also perhaps opens up the possibility of exploring the potential for affect to generate human ethical aspirations. In her essay "Writing Shame" which discusses the work of T.E. Lawrence and Primo Levi, Elspeth Probyn, while emphasising the bodily impact of affective states, also suggests that "ideas and writing about shame seek to generate new ways of thinking about how we are related to history and how we wish to live in the present" (89).

I turn now to the work of W.G. Sebald and to a reading of his account of a visit to the abandoned military base at Orford Ness, which forms a short section of *The Rings of Saturn*. I suggest that a material ecocritical approach to the passage that stops short of an exploration of Sebald's subtle articulation of the affective impact of the naturalcultural assemblage in which the narrator-figure finds himself misses the opportunity to consider the ways in which affective states might encourage us to think about history and how we wish to live now. I hope to show that Sebald's description of the experience, while conveying a sense of material immersion in a vibrantly agentic world and encouraging the notion of a subjectivity emerging "hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes" (Coole and Frost 10), also pushes at the boundaries of the posthumanist/material ecocritical paradigm by signalling the necessity for an ongoing investigation of the specificity of the human animal and highlighting the role of affect in bringing ethical concerns to the fore.

Part II: W. G. Sebald's Orford Ness and the 'Traces of Destruction'

The Rings of Saturn, subtitled in the original German-language edition *An English Pilgrimage*, documents a journey on foot through the East of England, with a narrative delivered by a semi-fictionalised narrator-figure. It was first published in Germany in 1995, with the English translation by Michael Hulse coming out in 1998. Like the Thoreauvian saunterer or the walkers of narrative scholarship, the narrator of the book views his walking tour as holding the promise of psychic restoration. He begins: "In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work" (3). However, even in the course of the very first paragraph those expectations are quashed and we are given a sense of misalignment and discord. Though at first he feels carefree as he moves through the landscape, the narrator almost immediately finds his joyful spirit dissipating: "At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place" (3). In fact, a year to the day after beginning this walking tour, the narrator/Sebald (it is difficult to distinguish with any certainty between the two) is hospitalised, immobilised by his reaction to that horror. And nowhere are those 'traces of destruction' more evident than when he reaches the

'almost-island' of Orford Ness, an episode he describes briefly towards the end of the book.

Orford Ness is a shingle spit joined to the English Suffolk coast at Aldeburgh, but then separated from the mainland by the river Alde as it makes its way to the sea. For much of the 20th century the Ness was a site for secret military research, including the development and testing of atomic weapons. Though it is now owned by the National Trust and is open to visitors, the area is still littered with the remnants of its military history, including strange earth mounds, and buildings known, because of their uncanny resemblance to the religious buildings of Eastern Asia, as the 'pagodas'. It is a place which seems to hold a particular fascination for Sebald, a fascination located at least in part in the geological genesis of the island; it has an "extra-territorial quality" (233), perhaps generated by the way in which it has been gradually shape-shifting over a period of millennia, moving "down from the north across the mouth of the River Alde, in such a way that the tidal lower reaches, known as the Ore, run for some twelve miles just inside the present coastline before flowing into the sea" (233).

It is perhaps this extra-territorial quality, and the sense that it is a landmass constantly in (slow) motion, which set the scene for the intense experience of dislocation and disorientation that follows. The state of the narrator as he steps onto the island is one of utter blankness: "I had not a single thought in my head. With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound" (234). However, when he startles a hare hiding in the grass beside him the episode remains etched into his mind, a moment in which animal and human become disorientatingly indistinguishable:

I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (235)

The mounds and pagodas have a similarly disorientating effect. At first they suggest to the narrator pre-historic burials or some ancient religious function, but soon develop for him into "the image of the remains of our civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe" (237), and lead him to imagine the landscape being walked by a future visitor for whom, as for the narrator, the nature of the long-departed inhabitants of the place is a mystery:

To me too, as for some latter-day stranger ignorant of the nature of our society wandering about among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery, the beings who had once lived and worked here were an enigma, as was the purpose of the primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers, the iron rails under the ceilings, the hooks on the still partially tiled walls, the showerheads the size of plates, the ramps and the soakaways. (237)

This sense of temporal dislocation and inability to fathom the nature of the beings responsible for the scraps of metal and defunct machinery leaves the narrator utterly disorientated: "Where and in what time I was that day at Orford Ness I cannot say" (237). As he watches the sun set, the tide advancing up the river, and listens to the

"scarcely audible hum" (237) of the radio masts above the marshes, he feels utterly displaced. Unlike Thoreau's saunterers who are at home everywhere, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* finds that he is no longer at home anywhere. Looking back at the town of Orford he thinks, "There [...] I was once at home" (237).

The Orford Ness passage as a whole, and this collection of 'things' in particular, holds elements that might be seen to speak to several of the new materialist, posthumanist and material ecocritical concepts discussed above. It is brimming with the kind of vibrant materiality Jane Bennett evokes in her description of the things she finds in the Baltimore storm-drain, with each element, including every individual blade of grass, manifesting the ability to command attention. The fraught encounter with the hare gives a sense of the blurring of boundaries between human and animal, conjuring a kind of human/nonhuman kinship, and at the same time suggesting the existence of nonhuman subjectivities in the landscape. The collection of 'things' Sebald details—particularly the scrap metal and the bewildering contraptions at the centre of the description—is also foregrounded in the text to imply some kind of ongoing vitality and significance. The human, the hare, the tarmac, the grass, the decaying buildings and their fittings, the setting sun, the rising tide, and the humming radio mast together comprise a powerful assemblage involving a host of different processes of becoming. But their treatment in the text also pushes at the boundaries of a materialist reading that stops short of addressing the affective dimension of their vitality. The passage clearly chimes with some of the accounts of affect given by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. The whole episode is replete with a sense of "intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Gregg and Seigworth 1). The sense of kinship between the human and the hare rests above all in a kind of trans-corporeal affect as they mirror each other's terror and disorientation in an affective intensity that registers viscerally and circulates between the two bodies. When it comes to the collective agencies of the assemblage, Sebald's text shows their affective impact developing incrementally and swarming within the narrator's mind, exceeding the context of their emergence and involving him in imaginative processes that range across past and future timescales. What is perhaps most striking about the scene is the affective power of the material objects to conjure, as they intra-act with the sensorium of the human animal, a sense of phenomena that are not actually present, calling up from the unconscious fragments of historical memory and potentially calling forth feelings of guilt and shame. This affective power works "beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing" (Gregg and Seigworth 1). On my first reading of the Orford Ness passage, the "primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers, the iron rails under the ceilings, the hooks on the still partially tiled walls, the showerheads the size of plates, the ramps and the soakaways" (237) inexorably conjured images of the Holocaust in my mind, just as I believe they did for Sebald—an affective impact he conveys subtly through the narrator's account of his Orford Ness experience.

This idea of an affective force that exceeds its initial context is one that comes into play in Sebald's own account of his writing. In the radio interview mentioned in the

prelude to this essay, the host Michael Silverblatt questioned him about certain themes in his writing that are never made explicit yet are powerfully present. He says of Sebald's later work *Austerlitz* that the text seems to have an "invisible referent", and that, as the narrative progresses, "the missing term is the concentration camp, and that always circling is this silent presence being left out but always gestured toward. Is that correct?" ("Interview" n.p.). Sebald responds in the affirmative, elaborating, "I've always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt well-nigh achieved to eradicate a whole people" but suggesting that the horror of this subject is so great that it can only be approached tangentially. Nevertheless "you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something that is on your mind [...]. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience." Sebald describes this invisible referent as an "undeclared concern," giving as a further example a piece of writing by Virginia Woolf, ostensibly about the death of a moth on a window pane in Sussex, but which actually evokes the writer's concerns about the battles of the First World War. The passage, Sebald suggests, demonstrates that Woolf "was greatly perturbed by the first world war and by its aftermath, by the damage it did to peoples' souls" ("Interview" n.p.).

One of the undeclared concerns in the Orford Ness passage certainly seems to be the concentration camp, and, more broadly the damage done to human souls by war. But while Sebald might, as a writer, be deliberately trying to provoke an affective response in the reader by hinting at these concerns, the phenomena that drive this impulse and bring these concerns to his mind are the material 'traces of destruction' he finds in the landscape. He does not seem to be suggesting that *humanity* is the real agent in the Orford Ness assemblage, nor does he promote the idea of the kind of self-reflexive, invariant human self. The narrator is very much acted upon *as* vital matter and *by* vital matter, with an identity that seems uncertain and contingent throughout—one that is initially blank, almost waiting to be co-created through intra-action with its environment. Mark McCulloh suggests that Sebald's world view is a kind of monism: "Everything—body and soul, mind and matter, present and past—belongs to one continuum" (20). This has much in common with Bennett's onto-tale of matter, but it is one that allows for the "subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 10) that Bennett identifies as a function of vital materiality but chooses not to explore further. The power of the Orford Ness assemblage for Sebald, and for a reader alert to its undeclared concern, lies not only in its vitality as a collection of things with ongoing material effects in the environment but in an affective force which builds incrementally through the continuum of body/soul, mind/matter, present/past, powerfully raising questions of 'conscience'. This mention of conscience, of course, leads us back to expressly human concepts and concerns. However it does not seem to be motivated by a desire to exalt the human soul, but rather to put it under close scrutiny. The narrator's palpable inability to comprehend the 'beings' with their 'primitive contraptions' who lived and worked at Orford Ness, and his feeling of extreme temporal distance from them (when in fact less than a decade had passed between the

departure of the last service personnel² and the publication of *The Rings of Saturn*) suggest that Sebald might side with Levinas in believing that humanism is not yet 'sufficiently human'. It can also be seen as signalling a need to investigate the human dimension of material affect, particularly since it seems to be here that considerations of responsibility and ethics arise.

Sebald has already been identified as a writer who is "informed by a profound ethical and political seriousness" (Long and Whitehead 4), and I would argue that the Orford Ness passage, through its complex and subtle engagement with the landscape's affective powers offers a greater potential for the consideration of "how we wish to live" (Probyn 89) than an approach more focused on material effect. In order to demonstrate this greater potential I look now at the 2013 "Episode 7" of the British wildlife documentary programme, *Springwatch*, set on Orford Ness. The tenor of the narrative is a celebration the re-encroachment of 'nature' on the site, and it exemplifies to me the danger of any version of events that forgets its human history and that embraces material vitality without deep reflection about the implications of the contribution of the human animal to that vitalism. The military history of the Ness is outlined, with the presenter talking of its involvement in design and engineering, and of the nuclear bombs "that were born here" but whose threat has now dissipated: "Tested, stressed, pushed and pounded, designing the end of the world—now they've gone. The buildings fade into the land, replaced by nature and its accidental designs of evolution". The narrative clearly expresses a sense of ongoing material processes but it also displays an almost wilful neutralisation of human responsibility. The idea of bombs being 'born' on the site has the effect of naturalising their existence. The description concludes:

so many new and different lives in a landscape that plotted to take life away. Just as nature is rising here so the buildings of Orford Ness are falling [...] leaving a question for our nation. Renovate this unique landscape - an emblem of British design - or forget it? Allow continued ruination, a redesign by nature.

The complacency of this statement and the manipulation of its grammatical subject speak volumes. The *landscape* plotted to take life away, but the apocalypse never happened and so the necessity of exploring the species that actually made the plans for the end of the world has dissipated. The sinister buildings and contraptions of Sebald's Ness are neutralised, either to be renovated as (apparently) positive emblem of design, or left to material processes of decay.

To some this optimism may seem a positive development, particularly in the context of environmentalism, which sometimes suffers from an almost crippling sense of doom. Timothy Morton states:

Environmentalism is often apocalyptic. It warns of, and wards off, the end of the world. [...] But things aren't like that: the end of the world has already happened. We sprayed the DDT. We exploded the nuclear bombs. We changed the climate. This is what it looks like after the end of the world. Today is not the end of history. We're living at the beginning of history. (98)

² According to the National Trust website page for Orford Ness, the last military service personnel left Orford Ness in 1987.

For Morton, the end of the world has already happened and we must think forward from this point. For Sebald, past and future co-exist—his monism encapsulates them. We live in the midst of the flow of history backwards and forwards, and the potential apocalypse—the 'future catastrophe'—symbolised by the contraptions at Orford Ness resides within us at all times. Standing in stark contrast to the blithe optimism of *Springwatch* are the figures cited by Stuart Parkinson, the executive director of Scientists for Global Responsibility, in a recent blog entry. According to Parkinson, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change calculates annual global spending on climate change mitigation and adaptations at 364 billion US dollars. By contrast the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) figure for global military spending in 2013 is an astonishing 1.75 trillion US dollars. The figures suggest that we are still, in various ways, designing the end of the world. In this context it seems that Sebald's preoccupation with affect, memory and ethics is well-founded. For a species that can carry out the "attempt well-nigh achieved to eradicate a whole people" or wage war on a 'world' scale, the domination of nature even to the brink of ecocide and beyond is entirely possible. It suggests that a remorseless enquiry into the specificity of such a species and an investigation of the means by which ethical changes might be triggered is highly necessary in the context of ecological and environmental thought.

Conclusion

Sebald ends *The Rings of Saturn* with a powerful evocation of mortality and loss. He says that in the Holland of Sir Thomas Browne's time

it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever. (296)

A world in which humanity discards its history along with the bad draft of humanness will endlessly be lost to us spiritually and perhaps also ecologically. In conclusion, I return to the song with which I began the essay and its assertion that we are a "very special breed". The insights of the new materialisms and posthumanism have shown us to be a materially less discrete, and certainly less 'special' breed. However, we are the only breed to have used its technicity to 'design the end of the world', and perhaps the only one to have attempted to eradicate a whole racial component of our species. While quite rightly removing us from the privileged place we have appropriated for ourselves in the mesh of being, posthumanism cannot yet afford to drape black ribbons over all the mirrors which might reflect us back to ourselves and which give the human soul a glimpse of the land we run the risk of losing for ever. Timothy Morton, argues that in developing ecological thinking we should continue to allow "a special place for the 'subject' — the mind, the person, even the soul" (113). Ecocriticism needs to continue to puzzle over those enigmatic beings who constructed the mysterious buildings in Sebald's assemblage, and to reserve a place in its theorisations for affect, human

subjectivity, and even the troubled human soul, particularly when it comes to the question of developing new ethical positions. Sebald, or at least his narrator figure, might be overcome by paralysing horror at the traces of destruction in the landscape, might, as Gregg and Seigworth suggest, be "overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability" (1), however, his exploration of material affect, at the very least, raises important ethical questions about how we might wish to live.

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