



The New Cultural Geology

Author(s): Mark McGurl

Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall/Winter 2011, Vol. 57, No. 3/4,
Postmodernism, Then (Fall/Winter 2011), pp. 380-390

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41698758>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Twentieth Century Literature



The New Cultural Geology

Mark McGurl

Paraphrasing a remark Freud makes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we could say: "In the last resort, what has left its mark on the development of thought must be the history of the earth we live on and its relation to the sun."

—Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (223)

In the early morning darkness of May 3, 2003 the New Hampshire geological formation known as the Old Man of the Mountain crumbled to the ground. It was an ignominious end to a famously lofty visage, and one I would like to link, however improbably, to the ongoing decay of the "postmodern" as the leading description of the contemporary cultural-historical moment. To do so, as we shall see, is to posit that what enables the perception of the postmodern-as-past is a new cultural geology, by which I mean a range of theoretical and other initiatives that position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern, exposing it to the idea, and maybe even the fact, of its external ontological preconditions, its ground. This is as much to say that there has always been something residually humanist and even "romantic" in the leading formulations of the postmodern; and that the ongoing advent of *post-post-modern* has something to do with the profound challenge that cultural geological thinking poses to that residual humanism. But it is also to admit up front that this challenge is already as it were *there* as a latency in the postmodern, in fact already there in the discourse of the "modern," whose narrative of the progressive domination of nature by science has long been ironized by the discovery, in that very process, of the bizarrely humiliating length of geologic time, the staggering vastness

The New Cultural Geology

and complexity of the known universe, the relative puniness of the human in the play of fundamental and evolutionary forces.¹ Realism, naturalism, primitivism, literary modernism, and postmodernism—these are some of the cultural formations where that irony has been fitfully recorded, and their accumulation must give one pause before declaring the arrival of something new. The term I would apply to this not-newness, the exomodern, positions itself strategically *outside of* rather than *after* the modern and postmodern, displacing postmodernism's notorious pillaging of past historical styles by trying to imagine what lies beyond or alongside style. A projection of posthumanist thinking into the cultural realm, exomodernism is however not so much a period or school of artistic endeavor as a name for the glimpses we hallucinate, in various cultural works, of the unincorporated remainder of the work of all periods and schools. Even more than in Eliot's symbolic compression of thousands of years into the moment of *The Waste Land* (1922), the "now" of the exomodern is perforce a long now, a now whose duration is hard to measure but which is unquestionably eventful.

Seen from the right angle and distance, the jutting slabs of granite near Franconia Notch had suggested a human head seen in profile against the sky, heavy-browed, as though (it was said) pondering infinity. It was an enormous and enormously appealing profile, and what it looked upon (or so it seemed to those below) was a reassuring—a romantic—infinity. Noticed by some surveyors in the area, the Old Man had entered the historical record in 1805, and was made famous when it was observed, in a paean attributed to the statesman Daniel Webster, that

men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades;
shoe makers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers a monster watch,
and the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but up in the Mountains
of New Hampshire, God Almighty has hung out a sign to show
that there He makes men. (qtd. in Miner 478)

Having secured its renown as a kind of commercial advertisement for the human beings of the region, the formation's meaning shifted somewhat when it was featured as a prophetic image of yeoman wisdom in Hawthorne's 1849 story, "The Great Stone Face." In this version it is not men in general who are advertised but a single man, a figure of moral and political redemption who will rise in autochthonous virtue from the ground beneath the Old Man's gaze. By 1945, by which time the struc-

Mark McGurl

tural fragility of the formation was already cause for concern, the Old Man had been made the official emblem of the State of New Hampshire and had been reproduced on an array of coins, mugs, postcards, and refrigerator magnets. At once ethereal and weighty, it had come into its own as Transcendentalist kitsch.

At first glance, the literal “loss of the referent” for these civic symbols and mass-produced souvenirs in 2003 might seem to tell a familiar story about the postmodern as we have it from Jean Baudrillard—that is, as the condition of *simulacrum*, a world of copies without originals. In this weightless world, humanity has been walled in by its representations, and its romantic self-projection into and onto the non-human landscape does not even need a durable geological support. But this does not really describe the aftermath of the collapse of the Old Man of the Mountain, whose downfall was simply a downer. Without a geological reality to refer to, the power of the reproduced image has mostly been lost, and no new and heretofore unprecedented mass proliferation of miniature Old Men has surged forth to fill the void. The idea of rebuilding the formation was dismissed almost immediately as too hard and impractical, too expensive for something purely symbolic, without the economic implications of a bridge or dam. Instead, a modest memorial is being built the base of the mountain, and fixed viewfinders have been installed to show, for as long as anyone cares to see it, the empty outline of what once was. Like pictures of the still-standing World Trade Center, stock images of the profile are now irremediably marked as images of the past—or better yet of the prophetically *gone*, the pre-obliterated, though crucially without any of the ghostly foreknowledge of spectacular political violence that now suffuses images of the Towers.

Here, indeed, the message (non-message, really) would seem to be one of the blank indifference of geological nature to human cultural-political representation. The parts of nature we decide, in the manner of the Old Man, to humanize in one way or another are destined to fail us, destined as we say to *let us down*, whether by force of gravity or something else. This is true of all artifacts and all technologies, including certainly our natural born socially constructed selves. Life is short, and art only sometimes somewhat longer. “Sustainability” is a terminally relative, if no doubt worthwhile, concept. Who knows when, but eventually the Towers would have come down on their own, wouldn’t they, even without the aid of fuel-filled airplanes? By contrast, “nature” as a simple name for

The New Cultural Geology

necessity—for the force of gravity and the entropic passage of time—will last forever, as far as we’re concerned. Of course, the fall of the Old Man wasn’t the first case of the eventual intersection of historical with geologic time, nor anywhere near the most tragic, overwhelmed in this regard by city-toppling earthquakes and globe-darkening volcanoes. Indeed, although the locals might disagree, there is something in the broadest sense comic about it, something of the pratfall writ large. But there is something in it, too, that seems particularly emblematic, not least because the event in question involved the loss of an emblem whose appeal had had much to do with its apparent transcendence of historical time; or, rather, its ability to ground historical representation meaningfully in geologic time.

What I’m calling the new cultural geology is a frankly heterogeneous enterprise, an obvious critical construction on my part, a way of drilling into the large body of contemporary posthumanist thinking to draw to the surface certain markers of the transition from the postmodern to the post-postmodern, or exomodern. The most important of these, no doubt, is the recent nomination of the geological present as the “Anthropocene.” This is an epoch when, according to chemist Paul Crutzen and others, human beings must be considered prime actors in the natural history of the planet Earth, altering its chemical composition and climate. Appropriately, it comes with considerable temporal ambiguity attached: proposed by Crutzen in the year 2002, and only very recently widely recognized in the mainstream media, the term was nonetheless meant to apply retroactively to the state of the earth since the Industrial Revolution—that is, to a significant segment of what we still sometimes refer to as the modern world. No surprise, then, if in one respect the appearance of such a term seems perfectly “postmodern” in the Baudrillardian sense. Trading the warm bath of simulacral mediation for warmth of a more literal climatic kind, it seems yet another statement of the pan-humanized, artificial environment of contemporary human life, the *denaturing* of that life. And yet, as we shall see, the Anthropocene differs starkly from anti-realist postmodern constructions in the way it points toward a forced ecological confrontation with the “desert of the real,” that place where representation simply fails. More specifically, and with complex implications for the politics of the exomodern, it exacerbates and magnifies the dilemma of human agency, locating the blowback of the waste products of modernization on the blurry line between intention and accident.

Mark McGurl

Other movements within the new cultural geology are much less impressed by the agency of the human than is geology proper. Most important among them are various philosophical initiatives, associated with names like Manuel De Landa, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Iain Hamilton Grant, which have emerged under various labels including “assemblage theory,” “object-oriented ontology,” and “speculative realism.” Debates about the exact meaning and appropriateness of these labels are ongoing, and the figures associated with them have been known to violently object to having them affixed to their work. The central idea, however, is a relatively simple and starkly *post-post-modernist* one: it is to take non-human objects as seriously as possible, refusing the philosophical privileges long accorded to the human and to human representation and consciousness in particular. In its long-limbed, humanoid verticality, the tree has made a perfect poster child for “nature” in the discourse of liberal environmentalism. Here one instead finds the obdurate rock, the dead-cold stone taking center stage as an image of the non-human thing, the thing that simply does not care, and has been not-caring for longer than anyone can remember—in fact, longer than there has been such a thing as memory. And yet for Iain Hamilton Grant, the “geology lesson” waiting to be learned by contemporary philosophy is that “objects or substantial forms depend on an anteriority always more extensive than them, and that such anteriority is always the domain of production” (45). In other words, what we call the “ground” is no ground at all but the result of a process whose own ground is another, antecedent process extending backward in time.

For the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, whose *After Finitude* (2004) is perhaps the single key text of speculative realism, objects like stones are examples of what he calls the “arche-fossil” (10), pointing to the physical evidence, in the present, of the time before life on earth, when there existed no entity to which the stone could possibly have been “given” as an object of consciousness. His intent in invoking the arche-fossil is to force a confrontation between philosophy and some of the more profoundly disturbing discoveries of modern geology and astrophysics, avoiding the naïve realism that guides daily scientific practice but insisting on a kind of realism all the same, a *speculative* realism: “The question that interests us here is then the following: what is it exactly that astrophysicists, geologists, or paleontologists are talking about when they discuss the age of the universe?” (9). The intensity of his impatience with what he calls “cor-

The New Cultural Geology

relationism” (5) is palpable, and characteristic of the new cultural geology in general. Since they describe a state of affairs that long predated human consciousness, it will not do, he argues, to relativize scientific statements about the profoundly nonhuman past as products most fundamentally of the correlation between mind and matter, as modern philosophers have been wont to do. Of course, the language in which they are spoken as well as the units of measure by which they proceed could only be human, but the “primary” qualities of the universe they express in mathematical form can claim an objectivity that none of an object’s secondary qualities ever could—the ones, like hotness and goodness, that are unthinkable except as products of a human relation to them. These are opposed to, say, a mathematical representation of temperature, which he (most obviously a student of Alain Badiou in this respect) believes can count as the valid scientific statement of a primary quality of the object.

Now, if this position seems patently absurd to most of us, it is no doubt in part because the entire project of post-Kantian phenomenology, including every species of poststructuralist or postmodern epistemological constructivism one can think of, has been to deny that we have any access to “primary” qualities that could be distinguished from “secondary” ones. We have access only to secondary qualities, which for us must count as primary qualities. Indeed, the distinction is not even useful, and it hasn’t been for hundreds of years. But for Meillassoux this has all been an elaborately reactionary ruse. While it presents itself as a form of epistemological modesty, a way of relinquishing arrogant claims to know the thing-in-itself, it has in fact been a way of putting humanity back at the center of the universe from which Copernican science threatened to displace it. Under its spell, philosophy is sanctioned in its obsession with how things appear to humans, and encouraged to forget how radically contingent (and thus changeable, or even extinguishable) human existence is. In short, “*the Copernico-Galilean decentering carried out by modern science gave rise to a Ptolemaic counter-revolution in philosophy*” (118). In diverse ways, and not without some risk of arguing itself out of a job, the new cultural geology attempts to complete this Copernico-Galilean decentering within the humanities themselves.

Do arguments like these take place wholly outside the parameters of what has been theorized as the “postmodern”? Perhaps not, perhaps not even in Baudrillard’s version, let alone Fredric Jameson’s or Jean-Francois Lyotard’s or David Harvey’s or any of the other accounts of the postmodern one might examine. For starters, one could easily imagine Jameson

Mark McGurl

dismissing the entirety of the new cultural geology as a *symptom* of the postmodern—of its dysfunctional historical imagination, which here performs a kind of hyper-regression into geologic time. Even beyond this, if one looks closely enough, aren't most accounts of the postmodern pocked with evidence of the impermanence, if not the evanescence, of the condition they describe? One could point to Michel Foucault's famous admonition, at the end of *The Order of Things*, that "as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date" and "one perhaps nearing its end" (422)—but then we would have to decide whether Foucault can meaningfully be called a theorist of the postmodern. Easier simply to offer into evidence Lyotard's "Postmodern Fable" (1993), his experimental essay on the fate of humanity after the predictable explosion of the sun two billion years from now. No doubt the solar catastrophe, when it occurs, will be a much more serious event for anyone around to see it than the eclipse of "master narratives" whose announcement made Lyotard famous as an exponent of the postmodern. Or again there is that resonant "lateness" waiting to be re-discovered in Jameson's formulation of postmodernism as the "cultural logic of *late* capitalism," which term he borrows from Ernest Mandel. Does that lateness, as Gopal Balakrishnan intimates, predict an imminent end to the regime of cultural forms he so brilliantly describes?

Still, given the magnitude of the technical challenges involved, Lyotard's fable can seem remarkably sanguine about the prospects for human life outside our solar system, remarkably optimistic that humans will find a way to survive the death of the sun. (Will they even survive this century?) Similarly, one could be forgiven for reading Jameson's original account of the postmodern as an account of a done deal, a kind of sealing off of postmodern subjectivity by the "prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm," an idea "substantively quite consistent with the . . . diagnosis of a society of the image or the simulacrum and the transformation of the 'real' into so many pseudo-events" (*Postmodernism* 48). This makes even the appearance of incessant change seem a form of stasis, and announces a world in which the "*other* of our society is . . . no longer Nature at all," but technology, or dead labor (Jameson, *Seeds* 35).² As Perry Anderson summarizes it, for Jameson "Postmodernism is the cultural logic of a capitalism not embattled, but complacent beyond precedent" (118), without any serious ideological competitors to worry about. Roughly a quarter century after Jameson's seminal theorization,

The New Cultural Geology

capitalism is no doubt still “complacent” in many respects, including about the condition of the jobless and poor. And yet the fundamental weakness of the global economy in the new millennium has obviously tinged this complacency with some fear even among the agents of financialization. Has this model of capitalism—the regime of neoliberal “flexible accumulation” (124) described by Harvey—reached the end of its line? And will that end announce, perforce, the advent of a *post*-postmodernism? And this before one has even registered the abundant evidence of ecological degradation, disaster, and climate change the corporate political right pays so much to discredit and deny.

And in fact the new cultural geology, while it is often sympathetic to the political left, sharing its enthusiasm for the idea of comprehensive change, essentially lets go of the primacy of the economic sphere in its account of that change, heavily supplementing Marxian contradictions with ecological ones. From its perspective, what stood revealed in the empty New Hampshire sky on that morning in 2003 was the residual romanticism of the postmodern, which, in the giddy proliferation of images and commodities, sometimes proceeded as though simulacra were in fact exempt from the laws of nature; as though the weightlessness of the video game character has a bearing on the physical experience of embodied human beings; as though the machine that runs the video game couldn't simply be unplugged; as though the power plant that generates the energy necessary to run that machine is impervious to melting down. Whereas romanticism (to speak broadly) presumed the comfortable fit of humanity in the bosom of nature, “postmodernism” in its hyper-humanizing aspect acts as though the nature can be comfortably accommodated in the domain of human artifice and representation, as long as it is given its own cable TV channel. Turning random rocks into a commercial advertisement for men, Nathaniel Webster's quaintly mercantile unconscious makes the Old Man seem a simultaneously a romantic and a proto-postmodern image. Thus it is tempting, in violation of the protocols of historicism, to try to see the two period concepts blending there in an extended present. In this commodious present (where I imagine time is kept on Webster's “monster watch”) the proceedings are mostly harmonious, if ominously out of scale. The sharp spine of Mont Blanc may have called forth the terror of the romantic sublime for European romanticism, but back in the US the Old Man was figuring a more kindly, more moderately paternal figure. Converted into literature, it spoke to the potential grounding of

Mark McGurl

human authority in nature, which is God. Perched on the mountain, the Old Man was a mediating figure: *he* and not his beholder was staring into infinity, and if he therefore set a worthy example of “taking the long view” he also made a wall against its terrors.³

Now the terrors are back. The veil of nature’s concern for the human has fallen away, leaving nothing but an empty sky. But it’s not even as simple as that, for the sky is not really empty. It is now the repository of greenhouse gases, the particulate waste matter of the modern. And so if, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the coming of the Anthropocene occasions the collapse of the “age-old humanist distinction between human history and natural history” (201), the nature of their admixture remains deeply perplexing, especially as regards the question of human agency and intention. For Chakrabarty, as for any self-consciously progressive environmentalist scholar, to speak of the increasing inextricability of human and natural history is meant above all to call humanity to an awareness of its ethical responsibility for that conjunction, and to help direct political will towards the furtherance of life and social justice. And yet it is easy to detect in arguments like his, and in the new cultural geology more broadly, a certain pessimism about the ability of human beings to do anything about the crisis their actions have precipitated. Having dramatically increased the spatial and temporal scale at which human history will be viewed, that is, human agency itself becomes visible as something nested in forces beyond its control. Thus the terror we see in the not-quite empty sky is the terrifying nature of our ethically unconscious selves. We are the terror, but only insofar as “we” are discovered to be “non-human” in precisely the way a stone is—in being careless of the fate of the other. To be non-human in this way is not necessarily to be “inhuman” in the melodramatic moralizing sense, which only redirects the usual assumptions about the efficacy of human intentions, this time toward evil. The exomodern, which has been with us forever, is instead a state of general criminal negligence, the place where agency trails off into unintended consequences. It has been said that to err is human, but it would be better to say that our errors mark the boundary of the human, showing us where the human face we put on our actions is always beginning to crack.

And if the exomodern stopped there, it could perhaps validly be accused (as naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism all have been at various times) of a certain “conservative” pessimism, an unhelpful sense of arrest before the awesome fact of how doomed we are. But the new

The New Cultural Geology

cultural geology is a more dialectical construction than that. For to see just how much of the total energy in the universe lies beyond the grasp of human beings, to see how utterly asymmetrical and relentlessly corrosive the relation of the non-human to the human is, is also to witness the profound contingency and fragility of contemporary social and economic institutions, which are always already falling apart. In the work of the new cultural geology, even in its gloomier modes, there is a widespread sense, if not of hope, then at least of an opening, a breach. Who knows but that what arises from that rubble might not be better than what we have now?—before someday most likely becoming incomparably worse.

Notes

1. On the discovery of geologic time, in particular, see Rudwick.
2. Interestingly, following the lead of its subject, Jameson's early work on Sartre is highly attuned to the radical otherness of objects—or rather “things”—and the way the non-human, for some writers, is “set off against us as a block, where the lifeless is felt to intrude, to constitute a foreign body, in drama which ideally should be nothing but inter-personal” (*Sartre* 68).
3. The purer “postmodern” version of this mediation is visible in the smoothly chiseled faces of Mount Rushmore (1934–39), a conspicuously “historical” and “national” fabrication of geological authority intended from the beginning to attract tourists. Of course they, too, will crumble to the ground some day, or be slowly worn down to nothing, as the intentions of their maker give way inevitably to the accidents of time.

Works cited

- Anderson, Perry. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. New York: Verso, 1998.
- Balakrishnan, Gopal. “The Coming Contradiction: On Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*.” *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 31–53.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, Duke UP: 2010.
- Brassier, Ray. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. New York: Palgrave, 2007.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222.

Mark McGurl

- Crutzen, Paul. "Geology of Mankind" *Nature* 415 (2002): 23.
- De Landa, Manuel. *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 1966. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Grant, Iain Hamilton. "Mining Conditions: A Response to Graham Harman." *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman. Melbourne: re:press, 2011. 41-46.
- Harmon, Graham. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Peru, IL: Open Court, 2005.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- . *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*. 1961. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- . *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "A Postmodern Fable." *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6.1 (1993): 237-47.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum, 2008.
- Miner, Margaret, and Hugh Rawson, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Rudwick, Martin J. S. *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.