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Infinity for Marxists

Christopher Nealon

... this is paradise

not for *people*
but paradise
regardless.¹

In this short essay I'll try to identify some of the impulses guiding a recent turn to thinking about vastness in the critical-theoretical wing of the humanities, and to assess whether it might be put in dialogue with contemporary Marxist criticism. As readers of *Mediations* are no doubt aware, a wide variety of scholars in philosophy, literary criticism, and political theory are engaged in projects that re-scale their enterprise to suit what they take to be a larger world than the one we were able to study in the days of the linguistic turn. Two things in particular interest me about this interdisciplinary body of thinking: first, that its critique of "the human" is all but interchangeable with a critique of textual interpretation; and second, that this critique seems to replace a critique of capitalism. The intellectual center of gravity for this critique is in antihumanist strains of contemporary philosophy, but I am less interested in a "philosophical" critique of this infinity-discourse than I am in giving it just a touch of intellectual history, and in thinking about the very human perplexities and worries that may have led to its current allure.

The backdrop of this turn to the infinite is generally acknowledged to be the challenges posed by climate change, though many of the intellectual projects I have in mind express this only indirectly. More than a focus on climate or ecology as subject matter — though certainly some of this work does do that — the new infinity-scholarship shares across the disciplines an anti-humanism that is expressed as impatience with interpretation and with "texts" — that is to say, an impatience with the residues of poststructuralism, which in its universalization of critique as "reading" was the last great transdisciplinary paradigm shift.

This scholarly situation has led me to structure my thoughts here in something of a round-robin fashion, or at least a set of relays. What I'll be suggesting, below, is that this new anti-interpretive stance mistakenly equates Marxism with the deconstruction that critiqued it, rejects deconstruction while frequently repeating its key gestures, and swaps in ontology for epistemology in Christian language whose history it will not or cannot acknowledge. And it proposes as a method of (ana-) interpretation a stance toward reality that, in its insistence on the radical "autonomy" of non-human objects and relationships, delivers a critique, not of capitalism, or anti-democracy, but of scholarly self-absorption. Against this presumptuousness, which it links to overinvestment in texts, it proposes a limpid, un-rhetorical poetry of the world, which, when expressed as text, takes the form of litanies and lists that pale in comparison to the best actual poetry. So in what follows I'll be tracing how the new infinity-language both critiques poststructuralism in the language that poststructuralism used to critique Marxism, and implicitly repeats a second critique of Marxism also deployed by the poststructuralists, which worked by pitting Marxism against a certain idea of poetry. Then I'll turn to a poem that makes this opposition look shabby on both Marxist and poetic grounds. How this all plays out in the current idiom of infinity will take a little while to explain.

We might begin with its extent: this new language of the vast and the wide-open has touched several subfields, as we will see, but it is most immediately evident in literary ecocriticism. As the critic Cristin Ellis has pointed out, contemporary ecocritics have a strong anti-textualist bent. Ellis notes an overlap between critics as different as Lawrence Buell, who argues in his *Environmental Imagination* that theory served to "efface the world," and Ursula Heise, who contends in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* that environmentalist discourse has overdeveloped a tendency to "think locally," to the point where the latest ecocritics see their predecessors as having licensed what Ellis calls a "parochial presumptuousness."² The mark of this presumptuous parochialism is the environmentalist subject's projection of simple correspondences between herself and the wider world, which are made at the cost of investigating the alien variety of relations that are the wider world's moving parts.

More than any other contemporary ecocritic, Timothy Morton responds to this sense of literary theory's narrow gaze with a rhetoric of infinity. His 2010 book *The Ecological Thought* begins with a chapter called "Thinking Big," which concludes with an enthusiastic gloss on the mathematics of Georg Cantor, who conceived the concept of the "transfinite" — a number bigger than we can count, though it is only the hem of the garment of infinity "itself."³ The epigraph to the volume, from Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, frames Morton's argument in Cantorian terms: "Infinity overflows the thought which thinks it."

Gestures like these have placed Morton in alliance with the loosely-affiliated group of philosophers who have taken to calling themselves, at times, "speculative realists." Several of these philosophers practice what has come to be known as "object-oriented

ontology,” or OOO: a theory of being that, like Heise’s “sense of planet,” is organized by the imagination of a set of relations among entities that do not place the human being at their center. The best-known of these philosophers, Quentin Meillassoux, though he rejects affiliation with so-called OOO, nonetheless refers in his 2008 volume *After Finitude* to a “great outdoors” in which the mind is at last able to free itself from the philosophical equivalent to the parochialism Ellis sees ecocritics rejecting.⁴ The word the speculative realists have come up with for that parochialism is “correlationism,” by which they mean a narrowing-down of the project of philosophy to endless iterations of the subject-object problem. For the speculative realists, Kant is the great enemy: by focusing on epistemological questions, he shackled philosophy to what subjects could know, leaving us ill-equipped to grapple with the kind of mind-bending ontological problems we must confront if we wish to understand globalization, the cosmos, environmental damage, or the deep time of the planet.

Not only ecocritics and young-turk philosophers, but literary critics and political theorists have made gestures that imply a vastness beyond textual analysis and after critical theory. Leah Price, in her recent *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain*, opens by suggesting that “the transactions that enlist the books stretch far beyond the literary, or even the linguistic,” moving on to lambast recent critics of material culture for never getting down to the actual vastness of real books, and for clinging instead to “theory” at the cost of a posture both overweening and far too cramped: “the hermeneutics of suspicion has given way to a poetics of deflation...in the process, scholars change from the freest of associators into the most slavish of idiots savants.”⁵ For the speculative realists, meanwhile, that hermeneutics is still a problem; praising the philosopher Alphonso Lingis, Graham Harman compares him favorably to what he takes to be the ongoing dominance of 1980s-style theory: “where [Lingis] is engaged with the flesh and pulp of the universe, contemporary fashions have turned primarily to the interpretation and deconstruction of texts.”⁶

Not infrequently, these declarations of the outmodedness of deconstruction either encode or modulate into a similar claim about Marxism: Marx may have been able to explain the class formations and the methods of accumulation that emerged in the industrial era, the argument goes, but he could not have foreseen the planetary consequences of what capital unleashed, which extend far beyond what his original categories could grasp. There are more and less subtle versions of this argument; among the most clear-eyed is to be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2008 essay “The Climate of History,” which adopts a pose of gratitude for how the “hermeneutics of suspicion” allowed postcolonial theorists to critique universality, then moves on to suggest that it is exactly universality that climate change obliges us to conceptualize.⁷ Equating the post-structuralist “hermeneutics of suspicion” with the critique of capital, he writes:

Climate change, refracted through global capital, will no doubt accentuate the logic of inequality that runs through the rule of capital; some people will no doubt gain temporarily at the expense of others. But the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California).⁸

The problem here, of course, is that Marx's understanding of capitalism did not presume that the rich were immune to its effects. But the impulse to see Marxism as an outmoded vocabulary is too strong: so Chakrabarty goes on to reinvent the wheel of the dialectic, as it were, suggesting that because humanity cannot conceptualize itself as a species, at least not yet, we are at "the limits of historical understanding" and must make recourse to a "negative universal history."⁹ The footnote in which Chakrabarty explains this coinage points right back to Adorno and Benjamin.

If the narrative of the obsolescence of Marxism is one side of the contemporary turn to deep time and infinity, then its other side is an anti-capitalism that has been entirely re-routed through philosophy. Speculative-realist thinkers like Reza Negarestani and Nick Srnicek have specifically thought through the question of whether contemporary philosophy might provide grounds for resisting or overcoming capital. But though Negarestani refers to capitalism as "the most recurring politico-economic figure of speculative thought," and Srnicek has written about it, they conceive of it in philosophical terms, as the great engine of "correlationsist" thinking: the problem with capitalism, for these thinkers, is that it creates an echo chamber that makes our minds small.¹⁰ The capitalist problem that speculative realism seems best equipped to address, in other words, is not an actual dynamic of accumulation and exploitation, but the epistemological problem of capitalism's reduction of all phenomena to its own image. However revolutionary it may be in philosophical terms that these thinkers respond to capitalist epistemology not with a counter-epistemology but with an ontology, and however enthusiastically they may imagine subjects who think (or exist) entirely differently than the ones we know today, their anti-philosophical and anti-hermeneutic gestures are just that: anti-philosophical and anti-hermeneutic, not anti-capitalist.

To think dialectically, it seems, is not to think hugely enough, or infinitely enough. So how must we think, if we are to grapple with these unprecedented species-problems? As it turns out, in one way or another, the undialectical way we are urged to think, in this discourse, is *poetically* — but in a very particular sense, the sense that Archibald MacLeish was after in 1926 when he suggested a poem "should not mean but be."

In her recent *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett champions the sheer alienness of the life of things: in their unknowability, especially in their unknowable relations to

each other and not to humanity, things point to a universe wider that we can ever grasp.¹¹ Bennett refers to this unknowability as the “recalcitrance” of the object world; her language quite closely recalls what speculative realists and object-ontologists like Graham Harman and Ray Brassier refer to as the “autonomy” of phenomena (including those it would be hard to call “objects”). This recalcitrance is poetic for Bennett — it leads her to include, along the course of her argument, short lists and parenthetical asides that function as a “poetry” that instances what she’s after:

one man’s large black plastic work glove
 one dense mat of oak pollen
 one unblemished dead rat
 one white plastic bottle cap
 one smooth stick of wood¹²

Bennett calls these lists “contingent tableaux” or “assemblages”: she shies away from calling them “poems” straight out, I think, because that would suggest that they *mean* something, and the contemporary language of infinitude depends on a critique of “meaning.” The tone in which this critique is delivered varies considerably: Morton affably turns to evolutionary theory for examples of non-teleological, non-adaptive features of animal life to argue on behalf of a big, raucous, non-meaning-intensive world.¹³ He also turns to our experience of reading, which he suggests involves us assembling meaning out of patternless flux: as he puts it, “meaning depends on unmeaning.” By the end of the passage in which he makes this claim, encountering texts has become like encountering people, and the unknowability and meaninglessness of encountering others is not hell, as Sartre had it, but endlessness. “The stranger is infinity,” he writes: not meaning-bearing per se, but not quite meaningless, either.¹⁴

Brassier, for his part, critiques “meaning” in more Nietzschean terms. “Philosophers would do well to desist,” he writes in the preface to his *Nihil Unbound*,

from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. Philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem.¹⁵

For Brassier, whose *Nihil Unbound* is subtitled *Enlightenment and Extinction*, the relentless auto-critique of philosophical Enlightenment has disenchanting the world to the point where we may finally be able to absorb the traumatic knowledge of our individual deaths as well as the inevitable extinction of humanity. As with Morton and Bennett, in Brassier’s work the trap of “meaning” in the sense of “meaningfulness” is a result of a fixation on the human as the center and the limit of our sense of scale.¹⁶

Given the Nietzschean aggressivity of language like Brassier’s it should perhaps

come as no surprise to discover that the new infinity-rhetoric frequently expresses itself in theological terms, particularly as (anti-)Christologies of one kind or another. Brassier, for his part, is a champion of the philosopher François Laruelle, whose 2011 volume *Future Christ* bears a strong resemblance to most accounts of Meillassoux's soon-to-be-translated *Divine Inexistence*.¹⁷ In Harman's gloss on the French edition of Meillassoux's book, he suggests that Meillassoux develops an unprecedented attitude toward God, to be distinguished from agnosticism, atheism, and so on. This position, as Harman renders it, is "believing in God because he does not exist." The key, it turns out, is that God does not exist...yet. This is the insight that Meillassoux claims to have uncovered in Stéphane Mallarmé's 1897 poem, *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard*.¹⁸

But even if we agree with this reading of Mallarmé's poem as encoding a secret Christology, we needn't see it as unprecedented: there have been Future-Christos for a very long time. Just restricting ourselves to the modern era, we can find this stance in Schelling's idea of the "third age" of the world, the spiritual age, which describes a future dispensation in which a personalized "Christ" will no longer suffice as the vehicle for the unfolding of the spirit of Christianity on earth, which will one day demand a post-personal, spiritualized "Christ."¹⁹ Meillassoux's famous critique of Hume reads this way, too, as an effacement of religious arguments that predate his own: for Meillassoux, the failure of Hume's critique of causality is to back away from sheer "factuality" (the possibility that anything could follow on anything else), which leads him to a watered-down probabilism.²⁰ But the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, Hume's contemporary, got there long ago: read "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and you'll see that his exhortation to his congregants is based on dispelling their probabilistic sense of the likelihood of grace by recourse to arguments and figures whose force is to suggest that God could do *anything* next, at any moment. Take that, probabilists!

Alongside these Christologies, meanwhile, is an array of other gestures in this contemporary current that have Catholic resonance. In the conclusion to *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett writes that she would like to end with a "litany, a kind of Nicene Creed" (the text of the "creed" runs, "I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things").²¹ The videogame theorist Ian Bogost, too, is fond of the form of the litany, which like Bennett he owes to the work of Bruno Latour: in his recent *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost describes writing a computer program that will generate what he calls "Latour litanies" — arrays of what we are asked to take as incommensurably different things (weather patterns, cleaning products, theories of history, hair gel) that, he thinks, have a mind-expanding effect on the too-humanistic, text-centered reader.²² And though he does not frame them as litanies, per se, Graham Harman, too, imagines the list of incommensurables to have strong anti-hermeneutic power. In a recent essay, he frames one such list in a way that's meant as a kind of encrypted defense of the theological language to which he and his fellow travellers make recourse:

making human experience the homeland of all relations is no less outlandish than importing a theological concept of God into a philosophical sphere where faith no longer suffices as proof. In short, human experience has become the Almighty God of mainstream philosophy. Overmining has become the central dogma of our time: everything is relations, or language, or appearance to the mind. This dogma cannot be countered with an undermining theory that views the world as a partless, rumbling depth. What is missed in both cases is the autonomous reality of individual objects: dogs, trees, flames, monuments, societies, ghosts, gods, pirates, coins...²³

There are a few sleights of hand worth noting in this passage. One is the way a rhetorical equivalence — two equally “outlandish” things, making God or humans the center of everything — is treated as a philosophical equivalence, as if the relationship between secular humanism and deism is that they are “opposites” in some formal sense, rather than positions with histories.

The second sleight of hand is related to the first: Harman reduces philosophy’s relationship to the question of “meaning” to two tidily opposed positions, which he calls “overmining” and “undermining” (roughly overinterpretation on one hand, and a monist insistence on miasmatic, predifferentiated arche-materiality on the other), and then, having performed this reduction, produces a Third Way — not “overmining” or “undermining,” but the “autonomous reality of individual objects.” But in order to enjoy the clarity and radicality of this third option, we’ve had to switch from a critique of “meaning” to a celebration of “autonomy” — that is, to a different question and vocabulary altogether. That switch elides the question of whether there might be “meaning” in or around that radical autonomy. That the answer is “yes” — and that therefore Harman has failed to get away from even the artificially narrow scheme he thinks he’s demolished — that the answer is “yes” is clear from his list. It is a kind of poetry, in which words don’t distract us too much with meaning-play, but radiate, instead, both their own actuality and the actuality of the things they represent.

This anti-hermeneutic sense of poetry is old — perhaps as old as rhetoric. But for my purposes, it’s worth noticing not its oldness but its lability: reading Price’s testy denunciation of literary critics today as hidebound deconstructionists, obsessed with meaning and the critique of meaning, is not unlike reading the Derrida of “From Restricted to General Economy,” and watching him mock the Hegelianism of his day by characterizing it as a huffing, puffing bourgeois habit of thought of assigning historical meaning to everything under the sun — a habit which he and virtually every other poststructuralist felt needed not the actuality of a Marxism but the unbearable lightness of a Mallarmé, to banish it from the scene.²⁴ So the insurgent anti-hermeneuticists of the 1960s have now become the navel-gazing hermeneutists of the new millennium, and along the way, the critique of capital has been replaced

with a critique of *arrogance*. The poetry called forth to rectify the problem is still Mallarmé's (he is as beloved and exemplary for the speculative realists as he was for the poststructuralists they denounce): the poetry of being, not meaning; the poetry built out of words and not ideas; the poetry that limpidly presents us with an actuality, and spares us rhetoric, hermeneutics, and "grand theory."

But where is this poetry? It's not clear to me that we can find it in Mallarmé. Even if we could, his is only one location in a universe of brilliant twentieth-century poetry, much of which has struggled, not to replace thinking about some mere human bungle of capitalism with matters anterior to it, or more ontological, but to make poetry in and through the conditions the century gave us, not least the conditions of life under capital. Reading the postwar archive of anti-humanist thought, one wearies of the gestures opposing an arrogant, myopic criticism to a wide-open, ontologically pure poem-world; I find myself wishing for a critique of something other than arrogance, and for accounts of poetry other those concerned to ratify the ontological dignity of the art. This is why, though I fear it will seem abrupt, I want to introduce you to a great poem now.

In the title poem of his 2013 volume *The Crisis of Infinite Worlds*, the Cincinnati-based poet Dana Ward constructs a framework for comparing two distinct modes of infinitude whose significance, he makes clear, is not simply their vastness, but that they have come into play in his poem in a here and now. The poem is framed on one hand by Ward's misremembering the title of a DC Comics series he came across at the mall, a series called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. That twelve-part series, published in 1985, was designed to establish retroactive continuity among the many and contradictory plotlines that had accrued to the heroes and heroines in the DC universe over the decades. Meanwhile, the poem is also structured by its opening address to Krystle Cole, the young Kansas woman who was party to the last days of a massive LSD-producing outfit run by the now-imprisoned chemist William Leonard Pickard. Pickard's facility was built in a revamped missile silo; in a subsequent memoir, *Lysergic*, and in a series of popular YouTube videos, Cole recounts experiences of intense LSD trips in the months before Pickard's November 2000 arrest. So the poem is playfully framed both by reference to the question of how long a "pluriverse" of contradictory plotlines can last, and also by a sympathetic identification with the manner in which Cole describes the trippy, "lysergic" mind-bending which, depending on how the poet takes her tone, she either enjoyed or endured. It begins like this:

Krystle
 Krystle Cole
 you're all I thought about sometimes
 I watched you while our daughter slept
 your Sissy Spacek ways
 your laconic demeanor in relaying

either ecstasy or trauma
 & the un-embittered empathy your voice conveyed
 on YouTube
 which is our loving cup
 the solution of butter
 & DMT you took
 anally that really made you
 freak the fuck out
 & your friends just stood there
 watching you
 as you hurtled alone through mirrored tunnels.²⁵

What follows from this opening, already a richly articulated set of cross-currents of “empathy” and dispassion — devoted YouTube viewing, beloved children sleeping under parents’ gazes, friends looking away when they should attend to each other — is something like a super-compressed journey of the soul, not into Dante’s heaven so much as into the nature-less “universe” with which the ecocritics, object-ontologists, and speculative realists intend to beat back hermeneutics:

It’s that frictionless feeling
 the smooth & vacant course
 that lacks abruption, one wave
 the clinical mania undifferentiated
 whiteness
 contains when cylindrical cloud
 hard & plastic comes to represent
 the mind to the mind
 & thus describe a model
 of terrible momentum
 with unity of purpose
 toward nothing so much
 as cold, radiant nature
 stripped of Eros, of becoming,
 just the mainframe
 & its withering severity
 without any predicate
 of others, save perhaps their
 gazes, no walls,
 no nothing, completely
 white light & your name
 when your consciousness was

splitting time was stopping
you were going always into that.²⁶

Notice that the bare identificatory structure of address has not fallen away—that the poem is still, in the argot of infinity-theory, “correlationist.” The “you,” Cole, has all but stopped being a self in her encounter with this lysergic vastness; but she is still the object of the poet’s address. As we will see, this is not inadvertent, or a falling-away from some purer, more “speculative” form of thought — the project of the poem is emerging specifically as the attempt to think personless infinity *through persons*. Cole is not only his object: as his subject, she leads him to make a further set of comparisons. “You were always going into that,” he says, a little in awe; then

I was going always to the mall
in those months,
the young century’s rainiest
April & May, to walk the
baby & to understand my art.
I didn’t understand.
I would move the stroller
through the halogen, over
grooved tile & across those
smooth marble expanses meant
to simulate floating & gliding
before that pure frictionless
feeling was entire.²⁷

Three time-scales — the centuries’, the months’, the time of reproduction — frame the poet’s quotidian struggle “to understand [his] art.” The problem of that art, it turns out, presents itself as the question of whether and how the “frictionless” feeling of lysergic wildness, its “terrible momentum,” has anything to do with the mall’s simulation of “floating & gliding” and how those pseudo-sensations build into something “entire.” It is tempting to say that the one, the mall, is a kind of bad totality, and the other, the trip, is its counterpart infinity, frightening but freer than that tiled enclosure. But the poem is not relying, as the theorists do, on a Levinasian frame, though infinity and totalization are surely in play. After all, the mall’s enclosure is a refuge, too, an infinity — well, he has more to say on that score.

Meanwhile, though, Ward is still trying to understand his art: pursuing the question of whether there’s a similarity or possibly an asymptotic relation between the two kinds of frictionlessness he’s describing, he finds himself wanting to cease pursuit. The connections between departments in the Sears he’s wandering through, he writes,

... felt
 besieged or like a mask
 for separation, they felt
 like connection between us
 in life but I didn't
 take my allegory
 further Krystle Cole, into your
 lysergic delirium later redeemed
 by a beautiful discipline
 of spirit & cosmography
 developed for praxis.²⁸

It seems as though the question of likeness, posed as metaphor and metamorphosis — how is one thing like another? when does one space become another? — it's as though this question of likeness fails before the *ars poetica* of Krystle Cole, which is less a tracking of asymptotic mystery than a response to situations. He likes her latest video, “on candy / flipping hard & developing / ESP with friends”; it suggested to him, he writes, that:

... oneness
 was a leavened mix
 of random indiscretion,
 bruising wariness, & bliss
 obtained by synchronizing
 chemical encounter.²⁹

This is the kind of array of “objects” prized by Harman and others, when they make their litanies and lists. But the items in this array are not dignified by “autonomy” from us, or from each other. They are routed *through* each other; they are mediations of each other.

Part of the attraction of the Krystle-method, though, seems to be that it's more than the poet can muster. What he comes up with in the rest of the poem, instead, is a beautifully restless groping after ways to experience infinity and relation at the same time. Not all of them are nice; at least one of them depends on merging with capital.

Krystle,
 there's a made up drug
 I wonder if you'd do it?
 Bradley Cooper, in *Limitless*
 takes this little pill, which
 in its candy dot translucence

looks a lot like a tear plucked
 from the cheek in Man Ray's "Larmes."
 With it, he can utilize
 all of his brain, & so
 he un-riddles the patterning
 hidden in the ceaseless
 flow of capital, structuring its
 chaos in excess of any mortal
 with a terrible momentum
 & unity of purpose toward
 nothing so much as pure profit
 & complete subordination
 of the world.³⁰

I have to say that, when I read critiques of "correlationism" and how pinheaded it's supposedly made us all, how unequipped to think huge thoughts, I'm always reminded of the futurist meme that goes like, what could we become if we could use more of our brains? That the answer might be, "better capitalists!" is the wry implication of this passage, just as it's one of the concerns of a theorist like Catherine Malabou, whose recent *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* keeps in play the possibility — one the speculative realists do not — that "infinity" might be a mixed blessing.

Back at the mall, meanwhile, Ward has moved from the frictionless ease of illimitable surfaces to the junk-sundries of the smaller, less-profitable shops. It's here he encounters the comic book that makes the title of his poem, though, as he notes, he writes it down wrong, substituting "world" for "earth." Wondering what the relation might be between the two forms in the closing mediation of the poem, in which the poet tries once more to settle on whether the figure of the asymptote will serve him — is there a trajectory, he wonders, along which, after a certain point, "earth" becomes "world"? "That same May," he writes,

I had gone to Detroit. I saw
 the most wonderful graffiti, more
 a prayer, written on a wall
 in magic marker, it read —

Two Things:

- 1) That we would grow closer & closer as time progresses.
- 2) That our ships would not crash.³¹

Ever closer, never crashing — a mystical union, and a Zeno's paradox, worthy of Dante. But at the end of the poem, as throughout, it's less infinity as math than as

relation, that reveals itself as the subject of the poem; we can sense this in the way that, turning away from Cole and addressing himself in loneliness, he remarks on the medium in which the graffiti was rendered:

Magic marker on a
 surface doesn't have
 much depth of skin.
 You move it smoothly
 on the wall & it stays smooth
 barely records the softest friction
 of two separate textures meeting.
 The wetness of its onyx
 dries quick or even quicker
 if you blow on it with circled lips,
 like clouds in old maps
 that blew ships across a flat earth
 to an edge I don't exactly
 not idealize.³²

It's a textureless texture — “magic,” industrial — that recalls the frictionless floors of the shopping mall. But it can't help but be marked by how it renders: you can blow on it to make it dry faster. Does the image that the blowing generates, an image of the edge of the world, allow the ink to retain a trace of its separateness from us, its ontological “autonomy”? Perhaps. But I think we would misread the poem if we saw that breath as a ratcheting-down from illimitability into myopic human meaning-making. The poem does not split the difference between these two things, autonomy and solipsism, so much as upend the idea that they are the relevant opposition. In the terms it sets up, infinity and relation are not opposites — they are shot through with each other, as much in nausea and “wariness” as in synchrony and bliss. They make and are made by *texture* — by what we might call, in a more academic vocabulary, mediation. This also means, of course, that the activities the poem describes are precisely what we are urged, in this latest post-Marxism, to dismiss as merely “human”: they are dialectical.

This seems to me the great error of the critique of humanism when it conjoins with the critique of hermeneutics: the idea that scrutiny and attention are somehow essentially englobing. This seems a displacement of a critique of the social divisions that separate scholarship from politics onto the mechanics of the scholarship. It is not reductive and parochial to read a poem closely, or to read poems for a living; it is reductive and parochial to do so in a world where that activity is cordoned off from the others that support it. In a world where every professor was also a janitor, would we really find close reading so myopic?

Ward ends his poem with a fragment:

That somewhere
 there's a precipice in this world & tracing
 my finger along those ardent lines
 I'd found the fault of it
 a little, in its boldness far too faint
 & not enough.³³

He's been at the mall, thinking of a girl in a missile silo; he's wanting to find a crack in the world that by way of enclosure separates us and pits us against each other. But the opposition isn't between the mere human world and the vaster universe that teaches us humility by ignoring us; it's between the quality of paradise in the world that is and the hints of paradise in the world that might be. Before the closing lines I cited above, the poet asks Cole a sinuous, twenty-six-line long double question — one so long it doesn't conclude with a question mark. It goes like this:

Krystle, have you ever,
 just standing around,
 noticed someone smoking
 in an older silver Volvo
 & watched the comeback feelings
 of a Tupac Easter Sunday
 steep in their ambivalent features
 until they are more radiant
 than cinematic virgins
 having lost it in the wake
 of Saint Maria Goretti
 whose patronage is lost
 to the brutalized sweetness
 of her charges
 when depicted in the mind
 & reconstructed
 as a low-res simulation
 by scientists the weekend
 Wall Street's occupied & particles
 are found to go
 faster than light
 then weirdly feel like
 this is paradise
 not for *people*
 but paradise
 regardless.³⁴

This virtuosic query is built around a series of dazzling shifts of focus and scale. We begin with the becoming-auratic of a particular, anonymous face, which moves outward from the resurrection-discourse around the remembered person of Tupac Shakur into the traces of holiness in the unnumbered “charges” of the Catholic saint and martyr Maria Goretti (who was raped and murdered in 1902). Then we’re suddenly in a particular weekend, a here and now, in which advances in brain research and particle acceleration collide with the protestors in Zuccotti Park. The wedging of the occupation in between the technical advances seems to serve as a kind of spar: on one hand, sheer variety and juxtaposition propose a paradise, but the middle term in that variety sticks in paradises’s craw. And the “weird” feeling the poet describes comes from a discovery that we are blocked from paradise, not by the way vastness makes us minuscule, but by how our social arrangements make it impossible to explore vastness except on technical terms.³⁵

I’ve taken this time to walk through Ward’s poem — which deserves much closer reading than I’ve provided here — because I think it gives the lie to the anti-hermeneutic anti-humanism on offer in the new discourse of infinity today. One reason for this, as I hope I’ve at least sketched here, is that Ward’s poem does not rely on a false dichotomy between “humanity” and “infinity,” working instead to co-locate life under capital with something like the varieties of infinite experience.

So can Marxists learn from this latest anti-humanist turn? Certainly we’ve had our day with language like this, not least by way of Althusser — whose youthful involvement with the organization Action Catholique, and late desire for an audience with Pope John Paul II, suggests that more research is needed on the relation between secular and religious critiques of humanist presumptuousness.³⁶ And it’s true that Marxist scholars in the humanities lag behind activists, and scholars in the social sciences, in thinking through ways to link environmental crises to the critique of capital without using the either-or vocabulary on offer in the infinity-discourse. The geographers and the sociologists are way out ahead.

But we’ll catch up. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from the latest turn to infinity is that it would help to understand the need behind the desire to critique humanist hubris and textual interpretation. Is it just the confluence of a long Catholic tradition with the hangover from poststructuralism? Is it a way for Left-leaning liberals, grappling with feelings of powerlessness in the face of environmental destruction, to direct those feelings at themselves, in a masochistic anti-humanist discourse whose structure of feeling is something like species-shame? Or is it an attempt to import the wonder, if not the method, of the sciences into the life of the humanities? It is likely all of these. And as we seize the opportunity of the revival of interest in Marx to learn and to struggle, we could no doubt incorporate a sensitive awareness of this latest turn’s coordinates, even if it’s not to incorporate the terms of that turn itself, which don’t provide what Marxism needs today. No shame; more poetry.

Notes

1. Dana Ward, *The Crisis of Infinite Worlds* (New York: Futurepoem, 2013) 37.
2. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); Cristin Ellis, *Political Ecologies: The Contingency of Nature in American Romantic Thought*. Dissertation (Johns Hopkins University, 2012) 6-12.
3. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010).
4. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008) 7.
5. Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 19-22.
6. Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005) 61.
7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222.
8. Chakrabarty, "Climate" 221.
9. "Climate" 222.
10. Reza Negarestani, "Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy," *The Speculative Turn*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011) 182, and Nick Srnicek, "Capitalism and the Non-Philosophical Subject," *The Speculative Turn* 164-81.
11. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).
12. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 4.
13. Morton, *Ecological Thought* 73.
14. *Ecological Thought* 80.
15. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) xi.
16. In his turn to Freud's notion of the death drive as a conceptual resource for his argument about the unassimilability of the fact our death and extinction, Brassier repeats the work of Leo Bersani, who in 1986 had already argued in *The Freudian Body* that psychoanalysis, in its inability to adequately assimilate the self-shattering aspects of sexuality into discourse, was a kind of "epistemological catastrophe" that, in its attempt to "coerce" the unassimilable "into discourse," keeps us at a remove from "any consciousness of being" (30, 40). Bersani's counterposing of epistemology and ontology, and his attachment of negative and positive values to the two, respectively, does not only predate the key gesture of the speculative turn, but grounds it in what would become a specific, anti-identitarian queer politics.
17. François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London: Continuum, 2010).
18. Meillassoux claims to have uncovered this truth in Mallarmé (he treats it as a truth, not an interpretation) in *The Number and The Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Des* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012).
19. See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *The Ages of The World*, trans. Jason M. Wirth (Binghamton: SUNY P, 2000). Karl Löwith provides a useful medieval back-history to Schelling's dispensational model in the passages on Joachim of Fiore in his *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957). Joachim's sense of dispensational time as subject, moment-to-moment, to utter transformation, also forms part of the history behind Hume and Edwards.

20. Meillassoux, *After Finitude* 82-111.
21. *Vibrant Matter* 122.
22. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2012) 94.
23. Graham Harman, "Realism without Materialism," *SubStance* 40:2 (2011): 71.
24. I make this argument at greater length in *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011).
25. Ward, *Crisis* 32.
26. *Crisis* 32-33.
27. *Crisis* 33.
28. *Crisis* 34.
29. *ibid.*
30. Ward, *Crisis* 34-35.
31. Ward, *Crisis* 37.
32. *ibid.*
33. Ward, *Crisis* 38.
34. Ward, *Crisis* 36-37.
35. The "weird" feeling Ward describes bears some relation to a certain "weirdness" prized by the speculative realists in the work of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, whose writing in pulp venues like *Weird Tales* gave to horror a specifically cosmic dimension: perhaps, many of the tales suggest, the universe is entirely indifferent to humanity. That Ward identifies this feeling, but also feels it differently, suggests that there is no necessary relation between the awareness of that indifference and the implications — generic, tonal, political — one draws from it. See Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Alresford: Zero, 2012), and Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Volume 1* (Alresford: Zero, 2011).
36. See Richard Wolin, *The Wind from The East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 212.