

The Nature-Text. Poetics of Hyperobjects and Post-Apocalyptic Poetry

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Introduction

This is the second of two issues of «Semicerchio» dedicated to two intertwined lines of inquiry: an approach to poetry (particularly contemporary poetry) under the aegis of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (henceforth OOO), and a poetological reflection around post-apocalyptic scenarios in which global warming and human history are two aspects of the same reality. OOO and other contemporary post-human epistemological approaches allow to rethink the poetic text, both on the levels of content and form, as a fabric of complex and mobile relationships, in a state of 'entanglement' with the environment from which it emerges, rather than as a defined product of an authorial subjectivity. We asked our contributors: is it possible to go as far as to think that, from the point of view of poetry, nature (or its possible contemporary terminological redefinitions, such as Timothy Morton's «ecology without nature»¹) is no longer the book of the world to be deciphered, and that the text itself can instead be conceived of as (a manifestation of) nature?² On the other hand, as several contributions published here show, in times of war and climate catastrophe, when poetry deals with environmental issues, it also often prospects apocalyptic scenarios. We therefore proposed our contributors to follow a second line of inquiry as well: is there something like post-apocalyptic poetry? And what are its features, also beyond the environmental problem?

Timothy Morton's notion of *hyperobject*, as it is formulated in their eponymous 2013 book,³ appeared as a possible joining link between these two lines of inquiry. Several contributions to both issues use and explain this concept widely. Here is a summary of it: a 'hyperobject' is an OOO entity in the sense that it describes phenomena and states of things that are independent from the position of human subjects in space-time. It therefore exceeds Kantian «correlationism», that is, the ontological equivalence between being and (human) thought.⁴ Now, the first example given by Morton of a hyperobject is global warming, which is also the phenomenon from which the concept originated.⁵ Global warming leads Morton to describe the features of a hyperobject: it is «viscous»⁶, that is, it is impossible to push away, as it is pervasive and exceeds the contingent position of those who experience it; it is therefore also «nonlocal»⁷, that is, it exceeds the spatio-temporal localisation of its contingent manifestations; it also has other spatio-temporal properties and processes which clearly exceed the lifespan and cognitive position of single organisms (Morton speaks of «temporal undulation» and of higher dimensional states)⁸; and it is interrelated with an irreducible multiplicity of objects («interobjectivity»⁹). Basically, a hyperobject is a philosophical formulation of a complex system, precisely like global warming. An effective description by Morton of a hyperobject is the following:

Hyperobjects [...] occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis. [...] We only see pieces of them at once, like a tsunami or a case of radiation sickness. If an apple were to invade a two-dimensional world, first the stick people would see some dots as the bottom of the apple touched their universe, then a rapid succession of shapes that would appear like an expanding and contracting circular blob, diminishing to a tiny circle, possibly a point, and disappearing.¹⁰

We asked the contributors to think poetry in the terms of such a state of dimensional, spatio-temporal and phenomenal excess, also beyond Morton claims and points of view, which were not acritically assimilated. Some papers, as the reader will notice, introduce alternative epistemic categories and concepts. While proposing to focus on the potentially apocalyptic implications of certain hyperobjects such as global warming itself, we also asked to extend the theme of the apocalypse and its possible 'post-' through studies dedicated not only to the relationship between poetry and climate crisis, but also to historical, psychological and geopolitical implications of post-apocalyptic scenarios in the poetic text. Morton himself uses the term 'apocalyptic' in his work, in the following way:

Hyperobjects are genuinely apocalyptic (from the Greek term *apocaluptō*) in the sense that they *lift the veil* of prejudice – but in so doing they do not catapult us into a beyond. Rather they fix us more firmly to the spot, which is no longer an embeddedness in a world.¹¹

Here 'world' is to be intended as a representation of reality given by an ideologically situated interpretation of it, which is often the case of literature itself. It seems to me that this dossier precisely investigates the question as to whether or not poetic textuality can be conceived of as an emanation of reality without the veil of representation.

As expected, and even desired, not all contributions are equally tackling both themes (OOO and post-apocalypse), since they are extremely diverse. This second issue is even more diverse than the first one and encompasses analyses of poetry from different periods and parts of the world. The contributions themselves are written in several languages, mirroring

all the remarkable diversity of this dossier. In her masterful essay on Ulrike Draesner's poetry, Camilla Miglio manages to show, in a few pages, how poetry can be conceived of as a unique and very effective cognitive instrument to investigate epistemic complexity, and on the other hand how complexity can be a lens through which we can observe contemporary poetry. Draesner's *Grammar of Ghosts* is an ideal textual playground upon which Miglio tests some of the deepest and more general theoretical implications of the themes of our dossier. Another paper explores German contemporary poetry from a powerfully theoretical point of view: Amelia Valtolina's draws on the conceptual tools proposed by our dossier in order to overcome hermeneutical and metaphorical approaches to Marcel Beyer's oeuvre, that she explores as "a bog-text", that is, as an autonomously functioning landscape and ecosystem. The figure of the landscape as a poetic hyperobject recurs in several other contributions. For instance, in the third paper dedicated to German poetry, Francesco Fiorentino's *War of Landscapes*, on Heiner Müller's poetry. In his study, Fiorentino illustrates the tension between the post-anthropocentric scenarios that are to be discovered in Müller's work, and the necessity of reactivating our relation to human history in order to overcome the hypostatizations of the new materialisms. The landscape also plays an important role in Cinzia Cadamagnani's and Rossella Stalfieri's analysis of Puškin's *The Bronze Horseman*. In their innovative reading of this poem, they show how St. Petersburg's urban and natural landscapes, redefined in Puškin's narrative, can be seen as hyperobjects acting, often unsettlingly, beyond the protagonist's powers and intentions. The tension between hyperobjects and subjective "agency", a term that is used by several contributors to this dossier, is also at the centre of three papers whose aim is to analyse the relation between poetry, history, and the environment in works by aboriginal and indigenous authors from Oceania and Brazil respectively. In her paper, Margherita Zanolletti explores the deep connection between Western colonisation and land exploitation as it is recounted by major modern and contemporary examples of Australian aboriginal poetry. Her contribution also has the merit of underlining the difference between catastrophe and apocalypse, and of compiling an acute and useful articulation of different categories of post-apocalyptic poetry, which can be applied even beyond

her case study. Izabela Leal focuses her analysis on Yanomami's shamanistic tradition and poetry. Her aim is to bring Western readers to experience a completely alternative "cosmoecological" – in her terms – narrative, stemming from the shared thought of this Brazilian indigenous ethnic group, until the very notions of hyperobject and climate apocalypse are themselves redefined through their storytelling. Another very rich insight on Brazil's indigenous poetry is presented by Vera Lucia de Oliveira's paper, who chooses to focus on one contemporary author in particular, Ana Estaregui. Quoting some of Estaregui's beautiful lines, de Oliveira manages to make us feel how much poetry, once freed from the Western lyrical subjective tradition, can be a powerful tool to acknowledge and describe the «intricate» and infinite «becoming» – in her words – of a cosmic environment that is much wider than us. An experience of deviation and subversion, through poetry, of predefined social, cognitive, and semantic codes is described in several ways by all the papers selected for this dossier. Maria Ester Maciel's essay on the Portuguese poet, Maria Gabriela Llansol, proposes a theoretical approach of such deviations from what she calls a «fossil syntax» hiding an equally rigid and dangerous ideology. The role of poetry is to deconstruct (Derrida plays an important role in her paper) the boundaries of language and fixed beliefs, and to expand our notion of subjectivity and feeling. Hence

Maciel's decision to analyse the presence of animals in Llansol's poetry, with crucial consequences for the perception of poetry, language, and humanity itself. Last but not least, Antonella Francini unfolds a deep and detailed study of Jorie Graham's last poetry book, *To 2040*. Both in her essay and in Graham's book the two levels of, on the one hand, complexity and hyperobjects and, on the other, post-apocalyptic scenarios, converge with astonishing intensity. Through Graham's lines and Francini's analysis of them we are reminded that – to quote Graham quoted by Francini – we are «part of something larger than the human experience». The theme of poetry as a language capable of, at once, subverting and reactivating imagination and possibility emerges here too, as in several other papers, and this is perhaps the most important message that we can derive from these two issues of «Semicerchio».

Which brings me to my brief final editor's note: it was an immense joy to coordinate this dossier; joy in the Spinozian sense of experiencing possibility – of thought, of action, of formulation. Something that is even more necessary given the current historical and environmental circumstances. This double issue of «Semicerchio» on hyperobjects and post-apocalyptic poetry ultimately shows, once more, how much poetry, albeit often ignored by the *society of the spectacle* and in spite of – or rather thanks to – its dark sides, is necessary, if not vital, for all of us.

Note

- 1 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Boston, Harvard University Press 2009.
- 2 See Niccolò Scaffai, *L'ombelico della Natura*, in «Doppiozero» (May 8th 2023): <https://www.doppiozero.com/lombelico-della-natura>
- 3 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press 2013.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 5 *Ibid.*, back cover.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 27 f.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 38 f.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 55 f.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 81 f.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 70. Italics by the author.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 144. Italics by the author.