Of Prehistoric Futures

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When St Augustine found a fossilised dinosaur's tooth whilst walking along the beach at Utica in the early 5th century, he saw in it the image of biblical prehistory: that time before the flood when giants were said to roam the Earth. When we discover traces of the prehistoric past and ask for their meaning, we do so from within stories that run deeply in our blood. How does one 'see' an epoch? Is it possible to imagine deep history? To trace the imprint of geological time? With the birth of a new imagination called Anthropocene, we have been asked to think ourselves into processes we once thought were unthinkable: not only the vast stretches of earth's history before us, but also the possibility of vast futures ahead that humans will not inhabit. How does one do it? There is resistance, no doubt, to the idea of a story that does not contain us, just as there was resistance amongst our eminent scientists before the tools of geology and the discovery of deep time, to the stories within fossils that spoke of eons before our arrival. Perhaps this is mirrored in our troubled vision of the far future – a world without us, perhaps without even the trace of our passing.

Is this what is going on when we enquire into the traces, survivals and irreversible futures of the Anthropocene? A discourse that must confront the imagination of planetary eras and the trace of our actions upon them, flirts with this idea of the everlasting imprint, the archive. Scientists continue to debate the beginning of the Anthropocene to know what is the distinctive, identifiable, new thing that we humans made and left. We read the results with a sense of horror (is it the nuclear, the plastic, the extinctions, the carbon, the deforestation? What is it that starts the Anthropocene clock?) but is there not also a horror at the patterns that earth will make *without us at all?* A disquiet mixed with awe at this beauty that continues without the eye of the beholder. A sublime, arresting vision. We can imagine the systems of making and unmaking churning below the earth, materials coming together and falling apart. Lime, peat, rock, soil, carbon, water, the materials that preserve, transform and destroy, slowly repairing the damage we've done. Extraordinary and terrifying the way that nature pulls together temporary worlds, snatching fragments from our continuum, holding onto them for a while, and letting them go. It has no interest in legacy, in narrative and symbolism. Our memorial will cohere without such notions and valuations, a collection of things blown apart and absorbed, or else preserved as strange artificial relics, in accordance with the earth's immense logic of destruction and renewal.

In this way our brief but invasive time here will be recorded through the ceaseless pressures and flows of nature. Compressed and bound together, fragments of our existence will form constellations under the earth. Perhaps one day they will be discovered by some other civilisation, reordered and given meaning according to categories similar to or perhaps altogether different from our own: deep time, prehistoric time, historical time, ahistorical time. On the surface, they will see the deep scars made by our ambition and greed. If they dig deeper they will find the twisted ruins of industry, poisoned pockets of waste. Our stories may be lost, but new narratives and interpretations will grow up around what remains of our bodies and artefacts. Like the fossils released from limestone after millennia, delicate details and textures will emerge. They will be used to explain our extinction and shed light on the circumstances of our final days and hours. Lessons will be learned, but not by us.

References:

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