

# Scalar Derangements: Teaching Evelyn Reilly's *Styrofoam*

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## Abstract

This essay argues that one of the key objectives of teaching Anthropocene literature is an appreciation of the irreducible complexity of our planetary condition. Somewhat counterintuitively, it is poetry, rather than narrative literature, that holds a lot of promise for conveying such an appreciation to students. Drawing on an MA course on American literatures of the Anthropocene taught in a comparative literature program, this essay develops a reading of Evelyn Reilly's 2009 collection *Styrofoam* to illustrate how it affords classroom discussion of different forms of complexity and difficulty. A work of ecopoetics, *Styrofoam* showcases many kinds of intertextual and formal complexity that lend themselves quite well to elaboration in the classroom. Especially salient is the dimension of scale. One of the most discussed topics in the study of Anthropocene literature, scale is often invoked as central to human experience in an age of planetary derangement. The sustained focus on the minutiae of language that difficult works of poetry demand, this essay argues, adds a dimension of scalar complexity that is less easily activated in the narrative forms which most Anthropocene literary studies privilege.

Keywords: difficulty; ecopoetics; hyperobjects; pedagogy; poetry; scale

One of the more striking forms of climate activism in recent years has been (as of the writing of this essay in the Summer of 2024) the now seemingly obsolete tendency to 'attack' works of art: in October 2022, two Just Stop Oil activists splattered a can of tomato soup across a Van Gogh painting in the National Gallery in London; in November of that year, two protesters affiliated with the Austrian Letzte Generation ('last generation') group projected a black substance on Gustav Klimt's painting *Death and Life* in Vienna; one of them then went on to glue himself to the glass protecting the painting. Overall, there have been dozens of such

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interventions. These acts are not adequately thought of as destructive acts of vandalism; they typically leave the original work and frame intact and, far from consisting in material destruction, they merely generate some grumbling among the cleaning staff tasked with cleaning up the mess. Nor is it quite clear what kind of message—about art, about the world, about human life—these actions convey, as the puzzled and often irritated media reactions testify. Do these activists see celebrated works of art as fatally implicated in the status quo that climate activism wants to abolish—as emblems of a now obsolete way of life? Or is it precisely the opposite, that they *assume* the timeless value of art in order to underline, through their actions, that *even these* human achievements are not safe in a drowning and burning world? Or do they indicate that the celebration of particular masterworks as highlights of human achievement threatens to obscure the very survival of the humanity whose achievement is being celebrated? If the activist assaults on art do not resolve these issues or, it seems, have had any notable real-world impact, they at least have the merit of underlining the urgency of addressing the question of the value of art in the context of climate change and the Anthropocene, the latter the current name for the increasing and indelible impact of human actions on the chemical and geological make-up of the planet.

This question of literary value is front and center in discussions on the teaching of literature in the Anthropocene. Indeed, what is the value of literature in light of planetary crisis? In the first sentence of her introduction to an MLA volume on teaching the literature of climate change, Debra Rosenthal (2024) mentions an ‘ethical imperative’ to teach literary texts that help ‘readers grasp the existential threat to place, identity, and culture’ that climate change heralds (1). For her, ‘the literary imagination’ is linked to ‘the moral imagination’, to ‘courage and discernment to bring about cultural transformation that values humanity over profits and utility’ (1–2). In a recent volume on climate change literacy, Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and Jens Martin Gurr (2023) maintain that ‘literature can and ought to be a key element of climate education and action’ (2); it ‘has a crucial role to play in linking and exploring the scientific and social dimensions of anthropogenic climate change’ (3). Both of these fairly representative positions affirm the value of literary environmental writing in teaching environmental awareness and cultivating sustainability. Emphasizing ‘cultural transformation’ and ‘climate ... action’, they position the value of literature in its contribution

to an environmentally attuned citizenship. Given the institutional contexts in which literature is taught today, this emphasis on literature's contribution to values external to it is understandable as an effort to legitimize our lingering attachment to literature—as readers, as teachers, as researchers—in the face of powers that are less convinced of its worth. Yet as the bewildering response to activist assaults on works of art intimates, the question of the relation between literature and art on the one hand and climate change or the Anthropocene on the other is not exhausted by instrumentalizing one for the promotion of actions addressing the other.

Not that instrumentality itself is the problem. As Caroline Levine (2023) has noted, the value of art and literature's assumed 'anti-instrumentality' has for too long subtended dominant approaches in literary studies in a way that has disabled mobilizing literature for sustainability (xiv). Instead, Levine calls for an 'affirmative instrumentality' (12), an approach that sees the work of art and literature as 'instrumental and popular and pragmatic', as 'comforting and functional and quite deliberately mundane' (21). Levine's intervention is less groundbreaking than she claims (and given her pragmatic orientation and her desire to reorient the humanities in a more pragmatic direction, this is an observation she should welcome). The scholarship on the pedagogy of teaching literature in the Anthropocene, as I have suggested, is fully on board with her affirmative instrumentality, yet what her book underplays is that such an affirmative instrumentality not only requires an affirmation of shared values—sustainability, equity, shared flourishing—but also an affirmation of literature itself as a vulnerable, threatened, and idiosyncratic phenomenon. What remains implicit in Levine and the pedagogical publications I quoted is something raised by activist assaults on art: that environmental awareness and an appreciation of art and literature to a large extent constitute overlapping agendas.

In pedagogical practice, I argue, this overlapping agenda means that an insistence on the *literariness* of literary texts—their formal specificity, their non-transparency, even their stubborn difficulty—is not an obstacle for environmental awareness but instead one of literature's less obvious affordances. This in its turn means that teaching Anthropocene literature need not shy away from avowedly difficult texts. For Levine (2023), literary texts that contribute to activism are functional and mundane (21), for Rosenthal (2024), it is the 'literary imagination' that helps students along to a better understanding of the stakes of climate change activism

(1), while for Hoydis et al. (2024), it is pointedly 'literary fiction' that has a role to play in climate change literacy (3).

Without disputing the value of these forms, this essay reports on a class taught in a master's program in comparative literature at the University of Leuven, Belgium, on an unabashedly difficult work of contemporary poetry, to show how its formal difficulty is not only teachable but is even teachable in a way conducive to an understanding of the intricacies of the Anthropocene. In this way, it joins a recent trend in scholarship that directly addresses the juncture of poetry, climate change, and the classroom (Kleppe and Sorby 2022; Ede, Kleppe and Sorby 2024). More specifically, I show how a classroom discussion of Evelyn Reilly's 2009 collection *Styrofoam* can center one particular topic in discussions of the Anthropocene: the issue of scale. I argue that one thing that this work of complex poetry can contribute to environmental awareness in an eminently teachable way is, precisely, the way the Anthropocene, as many critics have argued (Chakrabarty 2012; Ghosh 2016), brings on a derangement of scale—a need to think of human life in relation to the larger scales of geological (rather than human) history and of planetary (rather than regional or national) space—but also, as we will see, the infinitesimal scale of the atom. As these dimensions only become apparent when attending to the formal specificity of the poems' language, to the elements that are *not* mundane, functional, imaginative, or fictional, I believe that teaching *Styrofoam* can also affirm the value of the literary as such.

### *Scale and difficulty*

The question of scale has been central to discussions of the relation between literature and the Anthropocene, which is a more inclusive term for the different dimensions of planetary crisis than climate change, and one I prefer in my teaching. If initial scholarship on literature and the Anthropocene followed Amitav Ghosh's (2016) influential argument that the vast scales of planetary derangement constituted a challenge to the customary scope and rhythm of the genre of the novel, more recent criticism has shifted its focus from the *failure* of form to the *affordances* that do allow literature (and especially narrative) to capture scalar complexity (Bartosch 2019; Bond et al. 2017; Caracciolo 2021; Vermeulen 2020). Two non-trivial insights are central to this scholarship and help it move beyond the decidedly banal insight that the Anthropocene

reality is simply *larger and vaster* than what customary narratives contain—a few days or years; a handful of locations; a manageable set of characters. First, the shift from one scale domain (say, the individual) to another (say, humanity as a whole) involves frictions and distortions—to the extent that, for instance, my individual decision to adopt a vegan diet cannot simply be upscaled to a general solution to global crisis. Scale, Derek Woods (2018) has noted, ‘is not a linear or zoom-like shift from big to small’ (502). Woods refers to this as a matter of ‘scale variance’, while Timothy Clark (2015) discusses it under the rubric of ‘scale effects’. Second, human life is not simply a discrete scale domain between the infinitely large and the infinitesimally small. It instead participates in different scale domains at once, those of microbes as well as those of geological change. The Anthropocene, that is, makes visible the human as what Zach Horton (2017) has called ‘a trans-scalar entity’ (35); it compels us to ‘think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales *at once*’ (Chakrabarty 2012: 1; my emphasis).

Scale, then, is a multiple and shifty reality. And while it is easy enough to convey these conceptual points to students, it is much harder to teach them in a productive way. Still, the classroom context brings the issue of scale into play in ways that can usefully be mobilized for learning. As all teachers of literature know, pedagogical contexts put a particular kind of pressure on high-flowing conceptual work—it forces us, teachers, to ground and illustrate, to streamline and exemplify. This is particularly true of the question of scale. If in Anthropocene scholarship, scale is primarily a matter of the relation between human and nonhuman lives, in teaching contexts, scale becomes a much more concrete challenge: it raises the question of the *amount* of reading that can be done, the limited *time* for teaching texts, the relative *scarcity* of attention we can expect from students or ourselves. This very mundane question of scale—the limitations of scale imposed by the classroom—has always been a key dimension in literature pedagogy. It is the reason why, in the middle of the twentieth century, under the influence of the New Criticism, the lyrical poem became the privileged object of literary education in US literature classrooms, as a relatively short poem could bring the whole class group *on the same page*, literally, and allowed teaching to abstract from the unwieldy historical, cultural, and social contexts that went into the making of the literary text; such knowledge was relevant for scholars, not for students (Sagner Buurma and Heffernan 2021). A short poem could

disconnect the act of literary pedagogy from historical and social contexts that would complicate pedagogy beyond teachability. Scale is also the reason why, for instance, creative writing pedagogy focuses so much on the genre of the short story—as there is only so much time and attention that can be paid in a writing workshop (McGurl 2009).

So, the challenge of teaching the unwieldy scales of the Anthropocene—the immeasurable greatness of what Timothy Morton (2011) has famously called ‘the hyperobject’ (167) of climate change—on the reduced scale of the classroom. While the course on American literature in the Anthropocene I have taught three times primarily focuses on contemporary *novels*, I devote the first two sessions to shorter forms in order to train students’ ability to connect the (far from easy) conceptual apparatus that has developed around the notion of the Anthropocene to the changes and challenges of literary form. I let students listen to some short narrative forms, in the shape of the first two episodes in John Green’s podcast series ‘The Anthropocene Reviewed’—episodes that deal with the topics of Canada Geese and Diet Dr Pepper. The first in a very helpful way introduces the topic of extinction and the insight that what may look to us like ‘wild’ nature is in fact always shaped by human efforts at conservation. The second teasingly explores a reality that is purely humanly made: a drink in which no ingredient is not artificially designed and which is in that way an emblem for the age of the human—for the Anthropocene. These stories are accessible and smart and they set the scene for the students’ first confrontation with formal difficulty, in order to teach how such difficult and intransigence is a key strategy for literature to contribute to a thinking of the Anthropocene.

Evelyn Reilly’s 2009 poetry collection *Styrofoam* may initially seem like the kind of poetry that is too difficult to teach. In practice, and because of time constraints, I only teach its first poem, which takes up five pages. As the layout of the first pages show it may strike readers as a kind of *condensed difficulty*.<sup>1</sup> This condensation is of course what makes it teachable at all, while in my experience, its difficulty is the rare kind of difficulty that is somehow pedagogically productive. *Styrofoam* is a work of so-called *ecopoetics*, an experimental and sobered-up brand of nature writing directly addressing environmental crisis that emerged in the 1990s

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<sup>1</sup> The first pages are reproduced online at <https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/poster/hence-mystical-cosmetic-over-sunset-landfill>.

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and was later consolidated around poet and critic Jonathan Skinner's experimental journal named *ecopoetics*. In *ecopoetics*, there is no lyrical celebration of nature; instead, environmental crisis is captured as a crisis of representation, as a context that makes traditional modes of nature poetry unavailable. Crisis asserts itself on the page as what critic Margaret Ronda (2014) has called 'incommensurabilities and violent estrangements' (105). For Juliana Spahr (2011), a poet affiliated with this development, *ecopoetics* differs from traditional nature poetry in that, as she phrased it in a memorable formulation, it not only presents 'the birds and the plants and the animals' but also 'the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat' (69). It is *because* *ecopoetics* so explicitly distorts customary lyrical protocols that it becomes teachable—especially to students who, in their bachelor's coursework, have gained some familiarity with the lyrical tradition—students who have read some Wordsworth and Coleridge.

### *Teaching scale*

I want to highlight four teachable aspects of the Anthropocene that the first pages of Reilly's collection raise.

(1) Scale. The first aspect is that these pages *thematically* situate human life on different scales, including scales that transcend the span of human life, while they also *formally* convey that human life is affected by differently scaled nonhuman realities. *Styrofoam* opens with the lines 'Answer: Styrofoam deathlessness / Question: How long does it take?' This is an answer-question sequence that begs the question why the answer precedes the question? To what question is 'Styrofoam deathlessness' the answer? Once students know that Styrofoam is a brand name for the polystyrene of which coffee cups, egg cartons, plastic cutlery and so on are made, they can also see that 'deathlessness' points to the nonbiodegradability of the thermoplastics that are gradually crowding out animal and plant life in the world's ocean, especially the Atlantic and the North Pacific. Thermoplastics *deathlessly* reach beyond biological time into geological time and will be part of the environment much longer than our civilization will be around; they reach beyond local experience to planetary scales. The answer/question-inversion underlines that this is now a *fact* that can no longer be evaded, that needs to be reckoned with—a point the poem makes explicit on its second page: 'Answer: It is a misconception that materials / biodegrade in a meaningful timeframe //

Answer: Thought to be composters landfills / are actually vast mummifiers // of waste // and waste's companions // still stunning all-color // heap-like & manifold.of // foam.' Here, there is only an answer; no question even follows. The poem's elision of the question underlines that human considerations about meaning and about time are beside the point, and that Anthropocene poetry needs new ways to reflect a denatured world. There is also a literary historical point to be made here: if traditional lyrical nature poetry couched human concerns in the soothing rhythms of the cycle of natural regeneration, in the Anthropocene, human concerns are crushed by the indifference of the nonhuman world—a world of plastic rather than pastoral consolation. In my experience, these initial steps in the discussion of the poem need to be initiated through direct instruction, but once students appreciate that this poem can be approached as a kind of literary *riddle* that encodes cultural as well as scientific knowledge, they are typically very responsive and even proactive in the rest of the discussion of the poem.

Plastic, in fact, offers a good way to discuss the Anthropocene—inevitably, the alternative label of the 'Plasticine' has already been coined (Reed 2015). Cheap to produce and available for many uses, plastic became the key substrate for consumer capitalism as it developed after the Second World War. This period has customarily been called that of the 'Great Acceleration', and has been identified as the proper beginning of the Anthropocene, as it much more than, for instance, the First Industrial Revolution or the colonization of the Americas, has left an indelible imprint in the geological record. As critic Heather Davis (2015) explains, plastic embodied 'the promise of sealed, perfected, clean, smooth abundance' (349). Plastic's shiny surfaces fostered the fantasy that human life could disconnect from the recalcitrant, amorphous, and inconvenient demands of the natural environment and seal itself off in a self-contained bubble. One way to understand the Anthropocene is as the bankruptcy of that illusion of disconnection—as the insight that human and nonhuman entities are irrevocably entangled.

Let's return to the bottom of the first page of *Styrofoam*: 'Enter: 8,9,13,14,17-ethynyl-13-methyl- / 7,8,9,11,12,14,15,16- octahydro-cyclopenta-diol // (aka environmental sources of hormonal activity / (side effects include tenderness, dizziness / and aberrations of the vision'. Two things stand out. First, while 'tenderness' and 'vision' are traditional attributes of poetic language (as the expression of emotion, or of visionary



rapture), here they are ‘side effects’ of ‘environmental’ sources; in other words, they originate elsewhere—in what students can easily google is the chemical formula for the female sex hormone estrogen. Estrogenic chemicals are also released by thermoplastics. The point of this is that the whole idea of the human subject that underlies traditional poetry is inverted and decentered in the poem. The human interior is no longer the source of meanings and emotions that the subject expresses through language; instead, human feeling is the result of environmental cues that may happen to be humanmade but not in a way that centers humans as originators of meaning. Human emotion—and human language—are merely relays in a more encompassing cycle of chemical transmission.

(2) Syntax and entanglement. A second point pertains to the syntax that gives shape to this open circuit in the poem and that expresses how human and nonhuman realities leak into one another. As the editors of *Poetry and the Global Climate Crisis* write, one of the things that poetry can teach is that not even the safe space of the classroom is ever ‘truly cut off from our shared global environment’, as ‘even in remote parts of the world ... every student’s body is full of toxins and microplastics’ (Ede, Kleppe and Sorby 2024: 233). As we can see, brackets open but never close; there are even brackets within the brackets, but these do not close either. These brackets form a way for the poem to express that human and nonhuman realities leak into one another in open-ended ways that no plastic wrapper can seal us from. If brackets normally serve to install a hierarchical relation between the main sentence and subordinate parts, here brackets express a reality in which all attempts at segmentation, at hierarchy and separation, are doomed to fail. Customarily, the Anthropocene is taken to formulate a double formal challenge to art and literature (Horn and Bergthaller 2020): first, to find new ways of presenting nonhuman scales, which *Styrofoam* does from its initial reference to ‘deathlessness’, which opens up a vast temporal scale, and of course also by being dedicated to a thermoplastic—an omnipresent, fairly featureless substance that is a prime example of what Morton calls a ‘hyperobject’; and second, to show how human and nonhuman worlds are entangled with one another. The poem’s use of brackets expresses the leaky relation between human interiors and nonhuman exteriors. We can express this more theoretically through theorist Stacy Alaimo’s (2010) notion of ‘trans-corporeality’ (2). As Alaimo notes, the human body is always a ‘trans-corporeality’, in which ‘the human is always intermeshed

with the more-than-human world ... "nature" is always as close as one's own skin—perhaps even closer' (2).

(3) Lay-out and infowhelm. Another feature of the poem underlines this enmeshment. There is the unstable (and seemingly almost random) page lay-out; there is the erratic bracketing and punctuation; there is what look like misprints (such as 'heap-like & manifold.of'); there is the agglutination of words ('All this.information / anddeformation'). The effect of this, I think, is that the poem looks and reads like the outcome of copy-and-pasting an image-based PDF as plain, editable text. Many of the poem's stylistic effects are not expressive decisions by the lyrical speaker or the poet but are basically glitches afflicting this format conversion. Poetry, like life, in the Anthropocene is situated in saturated ecologies full of waste and toxic elements—in the case of poetry, a saturated *information* ecology. Indeed, just as Anthropocene life is surrounded by plastic waste, contemporary poetry is situated in the midst of digital flotsam, as the third page of the poem makes explicit: 'Monica T / Soft and satisfying for infant teething if you first freeze. / posted 10/11/2007 at thriftyfun.com / ... All this. information / anddeformation // & barely able to see sea'. The Internet is not only a platform that stimulates the consumption and production of ever more thermoplastics, it also generates an 'infowhelm' in which poetry threatens to drown. The intrusion of so many discourses—from chemistry over cultural history to the everyday banality of customer reviews—in the body of the poem is central to the poem's ambition: it does not, like more pastoral traditional modes of nature poetry, *withdraw* from the confusion and overkill of everyday life, but includes it. In that way, it underscores that Anthropocene life is essentially life on a planet saturated by human waste.

(4) Literary history. Scale, entanglement, and infowhelm: these are three key features of the Anthropocene and *Styrofoam* makes it possible to tie these to literary history, the fourth aspect I bring into my teaching of this poem. It is not hard to see how the formal features of the poem disrupt traditional protocols of lyrical nature poetry, but the poem's intertextual references make this disruption more concrete. The poem references Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', a tortured reflection on a sailor's gratuitous killing of an albatross and a keystone of British romantic poetry. In the middle of the poem's third page, Coleridge's doomed line 'For all averred, I had killed the bird' becomes '*for all averred, we had killed the bird* [enter albatross / stand in

of choice' (Reilly 2009: 11). The variations on the original are telling: responsibility, in Reilly's poem, is shared by a collective 'we', and the albatross is eerily interchangeable with other targets of human overreach—with choiceless 'stand in[s] of choice', which are again mentioned in unclosed brackets, as if the extent of possible targets of human menace is infinite. Reilly's intertextual reference invites us to replace the uniqueness of a rarified bird (the albatross) with the many seabirds choking on plastics that have become powerful emblems of the Anthropocene, something that can easily and graphically be demonstrated in classroom slides. Coleridge's 'Rime' evokes how the fallout of the transgression of killing the bird comes to haunt the sailor for the rest of his life; *Styrofoam* shows how the violence of the Anthropocene haunts all of us in an unclosed circuit of guilt and violence.

This is not the only intertextual reference in the poem, but it is the most teachable one—it is, in my experience, more teachable than the poem's quotation of a line from Melville's *Moby-Dick*, more precisely, from that novel's infamously difficult 'The Whiteness of the Whale' chapter. That chapter puts forward a theory that the elusiveness of the color white leads to an increased experience of terror—and interestingly, Melville's (2007) first of many examples is what he calls 'the wondrous bodily whiteness' (210) of Coleridge's albatross. Rather than pursuing this intertextual thread in detail, I typically suffice with noting how *Moby-Dick* is a work that intimated the dangers and violence of planetary profiteering exemplified by the nineteenth-century whaling industry, and with pointing to the obvious similarities between a huge white whale and the so-called Pacific trash vortex that provides an image of environmental violence updated for the Anthropocene, which is again something for which the Internet provides ample graphic classroom material.

For the course I am teaching, there is a double literary historical lesson here. First, it shows that traditional literary forms need to be updated in order for literature to capture the wild and weird derangements of the Anthropocene. Second, the short excursions to Coleridge and Melville show how this new Anthropocene awareness makes it possible to revisit older texts and reread them from a contemporary perspective attuned to environmental violence and, as in the case of Melville's whale, to distortions of scale.

*Conclusion: Pedagogy and the affordances of literature*

I have tried to show how teaching a classroom-scaled (because relatively short) text like *Styrofoam* can bring two central insights that sustain my course throughout the whole term—a term in which students read five Anthropocene novels in dialogue with theoretical and critical texts. As this set-up makes clear, my point is not that the poetic encounter with complexity can *replace* the pedagogical work that long narrative fiction can do, but that it can *complement* that work; by teaching the poetry first, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of the conceptual and formal challenges that the Anthropocene offers to contemporary literature at the beginning of the course which can then be mobilized in the classes on the novels.

First, there is the insight that the Anthropocene names a radical challenge to the concepts and images through which we normally relate to the world—in matters of scale, of entanglement, of information. Second, the session conveys an awareness that literature contributes to an apprehension of the Anthropocene not only through the stories it tells, but also through the form it adopts. If *Styrofoam* initially strikes students as a *formless*, random mess, I try to show them that it is more productive to ask *why* the poem looks the way it does, which is another way of saying that *apparent formlessness is itself a kind of form*, is itself, perhaps, one of the forms through which contemporary literature measures up to the derangements of the Anthropocene.

This also affords an opportunity to defamiliarize students' default understanding of scale. Through popular discourses of 'upscaling' and 'scalability', which indicate the capacity of businesses to grow and manage rising demand, students almost automatically imagine scale as a matter of increasing size, of growing bigger. Most students understand that there is a difference between size and scale: size is absolute, scale is relational. The latter points to the *ratio* between different size domains, yet students often think of scale as something that can be cruised, as in the smooth experience of zooming in and out familiar to all users of Google Earth and Google Maps.

The experience of reading *Styrofoam* together unsettles those two assumptions—of massiveness, of frictionless zooming—in a much more interactive and impactful way than conveying the problems with these assumptions in merely conceptual ways would. There is the paradoxical tension between a short text that deals with the vast if indistinct and fairly

featureless reality of thermoplastics—substances that are everywhere but that are so unremarkable that we hardly notice them. As a hyperobject, thermoplastics are distributed all over the planet. They are vast, but not huge or sublime or impressive the way big things normally are. Nor can we observe them from a safe distance in the way artists could traditionally master the landscape or users of Google Earth can freely zoom in and out of parts of the planet. Thermoplastics, as the references to estrogen and other infinitesimally small chemical substances show, invisibly invade the intimacy of our bodies. They are as much a matter of the invisibly small as of the immeasurably large. Human life then becomes ‘a trans-scalar entity’ (Horton 2017: 35) operating across different scales at once.

The rest of the course on Anthropocene literature I teach is less conceptually hard-hitting; it makes more room for the customary pleasures of literary reading. In the most successful instance of the course so far, we returned to *Styrofoam* in the classroom discussions throughout the term, as it lingered with the students as a touchstone for understanding the enmeshment of human life and nonhuman forces and for the glitchy nature of communication in the Anthropocene. In my class, I formulate the relevance of literature for discussions of the Anthropocene by outlining four affordances, four things that literature makes available, makes possible and that other media or forms of thinking are less good at providing (Vermeulen 2020: 19–29).

First is *narrative*: literature can tell us stories that help us connect past and present and future at a moment when many feel radical rifts between yesterday and tomorrow. The second affordance is *imaginative*: as literature is not bound by the rules of science or even journalism, it can help us imagine what a different world would look like; it can speculate about future worlds or, as in the case of *Styrofoam*, radically defamiliarize the way we look at the present world, including its most mundane objects, such as coffee cups. Third is *affective*: literature can, again in contrast to more fact-based media and discourses, provide an embodied and intimate sense of how the changes we see happening to the world feel. Fourth and finally—and less intuitively—there is also a *reflexive* dimension to what literature does to the Anthropocene: just as the Anthropocene is the story of how human actions leave a trace in the geological record, so writing literature is a matter of leaving a trace on the page; writing *about* the Anthropocene then, in important ways, also participates in the processes that make up the Anthropocene world, and some of the best Anthropocene

writing has used that state of affairs to explore the relation between literature and the Anthropocene in sophisticated ways. We can think here again of how *Styrofoam* makes palpable the way human life in the Anthropocene operates in a sea of waste by showing how poetical language is afflicted by the trash of digital communication.

Narrative, imaginative, affective, and reflexive: not all these four dimensions are exemplified in *Styrofoam*—especially the narrative and affective ones are much easier to teach in relation to the long fiction the students read in the rest of the course. I have no doubt this affective dimension could also be tapped by teaching more traditional or even more directly accessible modes of nature poetry, but that is not the decision I have made; I use poetry to develop what the subtitle to one of the key publications in the field calls ‘creative educational approaches to complex challenges’ (Ede, Kleppe and Sorby 2024), where *Styrofoam* allows me to underline rather than neutralize complexity. Framing the teaching term with a session that invites students to think hard about literary form and conceptual issues, I have found, is one way to assure that teaching Anthropocene literature is more than a matter of stories and vibes. Not that there is anything wrong with plots and vibes—it is just that the value of literature in an age of crisis is not limited to that.

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