**A Huge Thing**

Sarah Wood

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I want to talk about the new Centre for Creative and Critical Thought, and I am all in a whirl, there is so much to say about that, and about the Fiction of the World, those pages of Derrida’s, and what they are about. But of course a Centre for Creative and Critical Thought should go into things deeply, should go under and behind. And I have been reading a recent translation by Suzanne Dow of a fiction by Cixous, *The Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang*, and, with you in mind, I was struck there by the phrase ‘under the carpet of the world.’[[1]](#endnote-1) A Centre for Creative and Critical Thought should definitely head down there, because the world’s a huge thing and contains everything, including ignorance, and denial, and naivety and complacency, and it is pretty much covered in carpet of one kind or another.

How to get under it? Into it? – The world may itself be the carpet. The carpet-world may be a well-nigh impenetrable denial. Or as Timothy Clark puts it in his contribution to this volume of OLR the world may be ‘‘orl,-nigh impenetrable denial, ' ': a well-nigh impenetrable deniala "ble non-human agency.'a “world” ... constituted in the denial of a realm of irreconcilable conflicts, scalar disjunctions, and imponderable non-human agency.’[[2]](#endnote-2) One way would be to pierce the carpet by descending into it. Centre, the word ‘centre’, comes from Greek κέντρον, *kentron*, meaning a sharp point, or a sting. The word features in Plato, for example when Socrates addresses his followers shortly before his death in the *Phaedo*, warning them to:

give little thought to Socrates and much more to the truth; and if you think what I say is true, agree to it, and if not, oppose me with every argument you can muster, that I may not in my eagerness [προθυμίας, *prothumias*] deceive myself and you alike and go away, like a bee, leaving my sting [κέντρον, *kentron*] sticking in you.[[3]](#endnote-3)

English translations of προθυμίας vary: eagerness, zeal, enthusiasm, willingness, desire. Today I prefer ‘eagerness,’ which is in Latin and English a kind of keen sharpness, like that of an auger, an instrument for boring holes. It makes a hole, like the standing leg of a pair of compasses. It makes a pinprick or a wound. Socrates says he wants to avoid leaving his sting, his particular signature, sticking in his followers. He is more interested in truth, and he wants to teach those he leaves behind to care for it also, although he doesn’t claim to know what it is and has to ask his friends to continue to think and judge. He respects argument and the philosophical frame of mind. But a Centre for Creative and Critical Thought can, its name suggests, make a way in, and a way down from the surface by other means than dialectical argument. Perhaps surprisingly, its name tells us that the interest of such a Centre would be as much in the sting, the mark, the mortal trace left by the eagerness of a desire to believe and convince, as in the kind of philosophical or critical truth that can be uncovered by argument. Such a Centre, with its emphasis on creative and critical writing would be a place to explore the troubling thought that ‘Perhaps there is an incompatibility (rather than a dialectical contradiction) between the teaching and the signature, a schoolmaster [*magister*] and a signer.’[[4]](#endnote-4) And because, as Derrida says, following Husserl, in his remarks on the fiction of the world, ‘nothing is less certain than the world itself, that there is perhaps no longer a world and no doubt there never was one as totality of anything at all, habitable and co-habitable world,’[[5]](#endnote-5) we who make up this Centre, can perhaps allow ourselves to feel the pull of what lies under the carpet, and may even feel able to continue to descend from there. This new Centre would be a Centre for poetic descent – even before it would become a place for dissent, which Socrates wants his followers not to be afraid of, and which usually follows when people start poking about under carpets, or worse, making holes in them.

When Derrida talks about the world and the need to somehow carry you, ‘to fly or swim not from one island to another in the world, but from a non-shore to a non-shore’ (*The Beast*, p. 268) it resonates with his description of experience as a voyage.[[6]](#endnote-6) And I find myself, as so often when I want to set out and range in this huge thing the world, pinging back to where I was a moment before, on a sort of insistent writing-elastic, back to the phrase from Cixous, to the undomesticated household of reading. I fly or swim towards this non-place she locates under the carpet of the world. Hélène Cixous. Visiting Professor. Deconstruction is just visiting ... I wanted to say that in her fiction, she ... But whose is that fiction, I mean, who is that ‘she’? Does the pronoun refer to a creator, to a created character, to a critical commentator, or is it rather that some crisis, where our daylight distinctions are shaken, is occurring in her work? It is as if she were a cosmonautical time-explorer uniquely attracted to becoming and dying. Her writing is capable of going towards, or back to, a place before all the places and kinds of places in the world. Before the world, under it, where in Plato’s or Socrates’ words, there is ‘no homogeneity or balance in the forces,’ where ‘no part is in equilibrium’ and the ‘nurse of becoming,’ Khōra, sways unevenly under the impact of the motion of forces, and in turn communicates its motion to them.[[7]](#endnote-7) Her writing shakes, it is shaken and shaking, like the sieve at the beginning of the cosmos. But it also spaces. It is a strange crib. We will continue to crib from it and be cradled by it for a long time, I feel. Perhaps this is her own relation to writing also. The French word *crible*, sieve or filter, that translates Greek σειομευα, *seiomena*, shows an affinity that this shaking has with radical dissemination, writing, scribbling, *écriture*. and indicates the inextricable closeness of the critical processes of trial and selection, discrimination, to the most violent and stinging transfer of agitations in a mixed movement combining chance and the arrival of proportion and measure. As Derrida comments in his writing on khōra: ‘we are perhaps already in a site [*lieu*]where the law of the proper no longer has any meaning.’[[8]](#endnote-8)

He carries her at times by speaking to her. A Centre for Creative and Critical Thought would be capable of addressing new or hitherto unacknowledged entities. Whoever can be a ‘she’ is also capable of being addressed as ‘you.’ Like the You conjured in Celan’s line ‘*Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen* [The world is gone, I must carry you]’[[9]](#endnote-9) and taken up by Derrida in various places, *Khōra* being one, *The Beast and the Sovereign* passage on the fiction of the world being another. This is a strange You: human because nowhere but where You are, but then again a You-not-identifiable, You on another scale, negligibly small as well as huge, finite, elastic with its own elasticity, its own breaking-points. A You felt with the intimacy of love, fear and resistance. It’s also animal, and non-living. A You-becoming means a You-going-away, like Socrates who does not want to ‘go away, like a bee, leaving my sting sticking in you,’ and like the world that Derrida says is ‘going away, that will go away – which, before even going to go away, is going going away, leaving no trace, a world that has forever been going to leave and has just left, going away with no trace, the trace becoming trace only by being able to erase itself’ (*The Beast* p. 268).

But to return, Cixous compares what she is recounting to Homer’s voyages, saying:

I envy the so clearly ordered structure of *The Odyssey*: for each locality an episode, and vice versa. Such a pleasant narrative navigation. A real sea voyage. That is what makes odysseys, however ferociously beaten by the elements they may be, as elegant as a whale – they follow the map. Whereas with me, I can see that what I am relating is overwhelmed by the irresistible attraction of the maelstrom that is hidden in the middle of the theatre, or thereabouts, under the carpet of the world ... (*Double Oblivion*, p. 42)

It becomes as clear as moonlight. Her writing is like the moonlight in Poe’s tale ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom.’ Can you see where we are going? She shows us the way down. Poe says of that moon: ‘she lit up everything about us with the greatest distinctness but what – oh God – what a scene it was to light up.’[[10]](#endnote-10) Her clarity can see, and name, what is happening in and to her story:

I can see that what I am relating is overwhelmed by the irresistible attraction of the maelstrom that is hidden in the middle of the theatre, or thereabouts, under the carpet of the world: the episodes – and there are episodes – are snatched up by a monstrous force of attraction, they are borne along towards the abyss, suddenly some escape the mouth of the storm, though no one knows why and not for long.

I’d like to cribbingly nickname the new Centre ‘Maelstrom.’ It has the whirlpool shape made by a sting withdrawn, it is a hole, a wound, an entrance without exit. Chambers Dictionary calls a maelstrom ‘a confused and disordered state of affairs; any resistless, overpowering influence for destruction.’ There is no creation, no fiction of the world, perhaps no truth without maelstrom. ‘Maelstrom’ would perhaps be another name for the panic Derrida talks about in *The Beast and the Sovereign* II, the ‘panic (that of a baby who would be born without coming into the world)’ and the ‘infantile but infinite anxiety of the fact that *there is not the world*’ (p.266). The maelstrom is also an earthly phenomenon, a kind of whirlpool, a turning, spinning, circling in the sea that appears for a time. It is itself shaped like the whirligig of time. You might as well throw away your watch. ‘I dragged my watch from its fob. It was not going. I glanced at its face in the moonlight, and then burst into tears as I flung it far away into the ocean’ (Poe, p. 466). The whirlpool draws everything in, all kinds of object and debris, each descending, going into ‘the embrace of the whirl’ (Poe, p. 469). It is in this promiscuous movement that a kind of delirious curiosity sets in. ‘I now began to watch, with a strange interest, the numerous things that floated in our company.’

‘The Descent into the Maelstrom’ proceeds by way of middles and horrible inner edges. ‘We careered round and round for perhaps an hour,’ says the narrator, ‘flying rather than floating, getting gradually more and more into the middle of the surge, and then nearer and nearer to its horrible inner edge’ (Poe, p. 467). Here in the university, in the Lecture Theatre or the Theatre of Reading, I particularly like to introduce this notion of careering. Poe’s story supplies continuing professional development for descenders into the centre. He offers us a new kind of downward advancement. One written by feminine moonlight, in the grip of the whirl, and having at times the action of a boat:

‘When a boat is well built,’ he says, properly trimmed, and not deep laden, the waves in a strong gale, when she is going large, seem always to slip from beneath her – which appears strange to a landsman – and this is what is called *riding*, in sea-phrase.’ (Poe p. 466)

*Riding* in American is of course, writing. It is making as if a boat, feminine like the moon, so that the gigantic seas that might engulf you seem always to slip from beneath you, in ways that are incomprehensible to those who do not voyage in this way. Riding is how we are able to communicate untold mysteries that we live, while knowing very well it is impossible to survive them. Poe’s narrator has a strange feeling as he approaches the descent:

After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see. (Poe, p. 467)

You will have noticed he frequently calls the place he is being drawn into ‘the whirl.’ The precondition of telling a story worth telling is the sense that it cannot be done, that there is no place for it, no rationale and no proof of its truth.

A Centre, if it is truly to be a place capable of maelstrom and sustained curiosity about the depths of the whirl, requires moons and boats, whose light and whose writing can show where the word ‘world’ would be nothing more than ‘an artificial effect’ (*The Beast*, p.265). I’m quoting our text for today again, Derrida again, back to him, the stretchy one: ‘an artificial effect, a cobbled together verbal and terminological construction’ destined to mask our panic at ‘being born without coming into the world’ (*The Beast*, p. 265-6). We need to know when fear has blinded us.

Awareness of fear and dangers, a proneness to panic and anxiety are things that make deconstruction child-like. Another is its capacity for play. A Centre might make room for play, at least for a time. It would not be founded to protect us from our panic, nor to conceal ‘the fact that there is not the world,’ but it might act as a ‘certain *presumed, anticipated* unity of the world’ (*The Beast*, p.265) – making it more possible to ride and write the deeps. Play depends on the power of the scene it conjures, and the unity of a play, in the theatrical sense, offers room for worlds to pass before our eyes, never adding up to just one thing. Today, July 11th 2012, we are also celebrating the publication of a ‘Derrida and Shakespeare’ issue of OLR, edited by Nicholas Royle. Shakespeare gave me the title for this paper. In *Othello* Emilia says to Desdemona: ‘The world’s a huge thing.’[[11]](#endnote-11) They are having a conversation, these two women, where the word ‘world’ gets bandied about and taken very seriously, bandied about in order to be taken more seriously. As is the word ‘thing.’ You can’t not hear the sexual innuendo in the remark that the world’s a huge thing. It sticks out a mile. But what does one do with it? Sublimate it? Nicholas Royle has asked, while reading *Hamlet* and the colossal sting of the Shakespearean signature-effect: ‘What will Shakespeare’s thing have been?’[[12]](#endnote-12) And he concludes, if you can call it that:

One might say the ear, or Hamlet, or with Hamlet that ‘The play’s the thing’ [...] or again ‘The King is a thing’ [...]; one might say woman, the Ghost, Oedipus complex, objective correlative, memory, mourning, and so on. Any or all of these would only be a way of seeming to bring close the impossible, the inaudible-unspeakable, the unnamably other.

I’m calling another meeting with the unnamably other. Reading, we happen to one another, where this ‘we’ inevitably stretches to what Timothy Clark calls ‘imponderable non-human agency.’ A ‘thing’ is already a meeting: originally it was a word for a meeting in a particular stretch of time. The word shares roots with words like ‘tension,’ ‘extension,’ ‘attention,’ ‘tendering’ and ‘tenderness,’ all from the Indo-European word ‘*\*tenk*’ which means to ‘draw out or draw together,’ related to OE *thennan*, to ‘thin’ in the sense of stretching out. The word ‘thing’ is somewhat elastic, and seems to have a lot to do with the kind of thing that might or might not go on in a Centre for Creative and Critical Thought.

But to return. In *Othello*, Desdemona asks Emilia about adultery: ‘Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?’ (4.iii.66). If, in the absence of a sharable world it is imperative that I carry you, look after you and abide with you, then could this thought extend beyond the human, beyond human scale, or the notion of ‘world’ as a fiction of a continuous, sharable world, to the earth itself? How would this carrying best be done, given that we cannot pocket the world but it is not infinite either, not a background or a stage. Emilia revives Desdemona’s sincere but hackneyed expression ‘for all the world’ and playfully takes it more seriously: ‘The world’s a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice,’ and this soon takes her to an economical way of thinking that would repay more extended attention, perhaps in terms of Derrida’s thinking of restricted and general economy: ‘Why, the wrong is but a wrong i’ th’ world, and having the world for your labour, ‘tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right’ (4.iii.79-81).

Whereupon Desdemona replies, going right off Emilia’s point: ‘I do not think there is any such woman’ (4.iii.82). Emilia’s speech has been optimistic in terms of the sexual liberation of women, but it is more troubling in terms of human behaviour in general. It is very like the capitalist approach to climate change – to continue as before, with some bargaining: offsetting, carbon footprint calculations and technological solutions. It is a kind of householder-thinking that has already forgotten that the hugeness of the world does not mitigate its finitude and its capacity to produce maelstroms and sinkholes.

Desdemona is naive, Emilia is complacent. But so are we. The world’s a huge thing. Timothy Clark has written about scale as a critical issue for understanding climate change. He draws attention to the fact that the hugeness of the world is not visible to us as individuals, nor can social and economic policy comprehend it, nor can philosophy make it intelligible. I would add that where the world demonstrably exceeds the categories of the sensible and the intelligible, Plato says we need a logic of a third kind, a ‘bastard logic’ or the kind of thinking found in dreams.[[13]](#endnote-13) According to the *Timaeus* this bastard thought alone would be able to approach khōra, that which contains time, space and sensation, and cannot be understood in terms of these.

Desdemona imagines having to recycle her wedding sheets as her shroud. Neither she nor Emilia recognises what is coming: ‘Good faith, how foolish are our minds!’ (4.iii.22). ‘Come, come, you talk’ (4.iii.24). But it is true that what will happen will happen. Had they had access to a thinking that listens, would they have been able to hear the truth in the foolishness and talk? Would they have been able to save themselves? It is a mad thought. The lost students: Desdemona alive and in this room, all of them, Emilia, Othello, Iago, alive and in this room. But before I completely lose my eagerness to believe, I should remind you that the narrator of ‘The Descent into the Maelstrom’ escaped. He did what he knew was impossible. Then he told the tale and said: ‘I now tell it to you – and I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden’ (Poe, p. 472) That is what true fiction can do.

Timothy Clark says:

For any individual household, motorist, etc., a scale effect in their actions is invisible. It is not present in any phenomenon itself (no eidetic reduction will flush it out) but only in the contingency of how many other such phenomena there are, have been and will be, even at vast distances in space and time. Human agency becomes, as it were, displaced from within by its own act, a kind of demonic iterability’ (‘Scale’ p. 97)

This last sentence about an agency ‘displaced from within by its own act, a kind of demonic iterability’ describes an effect well known to writers and readers of a certain kind. Their practice of resisting denial, of descending, of curiosity and courage – especially in relation to ‘wrong,’ to death, to fear, are especially needed now if we want to be ready for what is coming, or rather, if we follow Derrida’s words concerning the fiction of the world – if we want to be ready for what is going away. Like Socrates, like the bees ...

1. Hélène Cixous, *The Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang*, tr. Suzanne Dow (London: Polity, 2012) p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Timothy Clark, ‘What on World is the Earth? The Anthropocene and Fictions of the World,’ *OLR* 35.1 (June 2013) p. ??? [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Plato, *Phaedo* 91c in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, tr. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1982) p. 315. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, tr. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) p. 1a. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* Volume II, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, tr. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011) p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, tr. David Wills (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Timaeus and Critias*, tr. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) p. 72 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jacques Derrida, ‘Khōra,’ tr. Ian Mcleod, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) p.105. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Paul Celan, ‘*Grosse, Glühende Wölbung* [Vast, Glowing Vault],’ in *Poems of Paul Celan*, tr. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil Press, 1988) 266, 267. I have modified Hamburger’s ‘the world is far’ to ‘the world is gone’ – in line with Bennington’s translation of Derrida’s gloss in *The Beast and the Sovereign* II, p. 268 ‘*fort*, infinitely distant over there.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Edgar Allen Poe, ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom,’ *The Complete Stories* (London: Everyman:,1982) p. 466 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. William Shakespeare, *Othello* (4.iii.68), *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 1998) p. 847. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nicholas Royle, ‘The Distraction of Freud: Shakespeare, Bacon and the Literature Controversy,’ in *Shakespeare and His Authors: Critical Perspectives on the Authorship Question*, ed. William Leahy (London: Continuum, 2010) p. 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Plato, *Timaeus* pp. 71-2. See also Derrida, ‘Khōra’ p. 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)