

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# **An Icarus by Nightfall:**

## Annihilations and Resurrections in The Chicago Landscape

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO .....	0
<i>Preface</i> .....	2
<i>I. Icarus</i> .....	3
<i>II. Blowout</i> .....	5
<i>III. Cadmus</i> .....	8
<i>IV. Dust</i> .....	12
<i>V. Progress</i> .....	14
<i>VI. Melville</i> .....	17
<i>VII. Falls</i> .....	20
<i>VIII. Ghosts</i> .....	23
<i>IX. Phoenix</i> .....	30
<i>X. Infinity</i> .....	32
<i>XI. Nightfall</i> .....	38
<i>XII. Pity</i> .....	44
<i>XIII. Austerlitz</i> .....	49
<i>XIV. Fossil</i> .....	55
<i>XV. Shore</i> .....	58
<i>XVI. Daedalus</i> .....	59

## *Preface*

*The starting point for this thesis is that there is something urgently and fundamentally inexpressible at the heart of the climate change era.*

*I have chosen to write about a global tragedy using Chicago. This is a choice made because this city and its landscapes have in my estimation have a kind of proposition of vanishment. It contains and has contained things which disappear both from the physical world and the recalling powers of history, poetry, or depiction. As such, I believe they have something to say about the enigmatic qualities of the Anthropocene which have been heretofore missed.*

*How to respond to the unwritable aspects of the Anthropocene is an open question this project wrestles with, knowledgeable of the fact that such an enterprise cannot necessarily succeed, but rather must try to fail **usefully**. For this reason, I have chosen to depart from a traditional scholarly paper in several key ways.*

*The first is that I draw heavily on literary conventions found in creative nonfiction materials—above all drawing from the interrogative practices of W.G. Sebald, whose approach took landscapes and texts as a richly layered web of conceptual interrelations and historical affinities. The fact that this strategy takes as an a priori the fact that the inexpressible can be located and described through the probing of these indirect and often esoteric connections makes such a method an ideal model for the work I am seeking to do.*

*This brings me to my second departure from the traditional model of a scholarly work. Namely, I refrain in the final analysis from offering up a direct answer to the questions my attention is focused upon. In this, my intention is not neutrality. Rather, I am intensely concerned with experimenting with a kind of historiographical practice similar to what Sebald and other scholars of tragedy—namely the Holocaust and the Second World War—accomplishes when applied to the dimensions of climate change which seem to similarly resist traditional historical or descriptive approaches.*

*Sebald died in a car crash in 2001, before climate change had entered the cultural mainstream to the degree it has today. My suspicion is that it would have been a subject that not only would have caught his attention, but that the world would have benefited from the application of his approach. As such, my goal in this project is to attempt to carry forward the work he left unfinished, and attempt to write out, by way of indirect approach, a morally attentive and scholarly robust writing of the unwritten.*

*As an object to be read, I will venture this project requires a shift of mentality from the research mindset. Rather, I would suggest a reading with a flexible and open mind, allowing above all your own further associations with your personal resonances with the Chicago landscape and your own internal bibliography. The project's path in my writing it has been a process of wandering, and I hope that in reading it, you too may find ample space for perambulation through the dusty archives and lonely ruins of unspeakable age.*

*All images are secondary photographs taken by the author. They depict images which are either out of print or public domain.*

*The collapse of the stellar universe will occur – like creation – in grandiose splendor.*

***Attributed apocryphally to Blaise Pascal***

*My husband shrugs when I say so, my husband shrugs at everything.  
The lakes where his factory has poisoned everything are as beautiful as Breughel.*

***Anne Carson, Decreation***

### ***I. Icarus***

One could perish in front of Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* with no difficulty or trace at all. While the ploughman is toiling in the field in the foreground, the shepherd idles just behind, his attention is directed upward and away from the bay, where an angler holds steady his line and a warship glides past some ruined island, sails full of wind. As the sun sinks beneath the ocean, and one must imagine an astrolabe raised to the stars to begin navigating in darkness. Amid this, far beyond these scenes of import, the leg of the fallen Icarus rises from the water into which he has fallen, as if but single finger raised to pause an unstoppable sentence.

*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is notable as well for the problematics of its inclusion in the archives of provenance and catalogue. Its composition is attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, bearing as it does undeniable similarities to the master's other works. Yet, *Icarus* is an oil painting on canvas where Breughel painted his on panel and his canvas paintings in tempera.

Moreover, details which are rendered exquisitely in other Breughel scenes muddle and blend here, casting further doubt on the surety with which one might attribute it to the Dutch master. Rather, it is the prevailing theory that this work is the product of a talented imitator reproducing a lost original, a theory bolstered by the later discovery of another, later piece with minor differences and an even more amateurish execution.

And yet, something is wrong. One particularly haunted scholar, channeling Kafka and Borges, suggests the archivally uncomfortable possibility that this forgery is *itself* perhaps without an original at all; it might be the rendering of a landscape as some nameless admirer of Breughel *imagined* that the master might have conceived it. Added to this is the fact that among the countless landscapes painted by Breughel, *Icarus* is alone in its denomination of a landscape conceived as fully mythical. Lacking as it does an existing counterpart, it is *itself* an immaterial region—a forgery of landscape, succeeding no original and clarifying no existing topography.

It is, in other words, what one scholar has sought to call a “wound” or “contested point” inflicted upon “the archive of Breughel,”<sup>1</sup> an aperture through which nonexistent material is allowed to seep into history and image. From *Icarus*, there is planted in our mind the curious thought that reading of an archive is a lesson in the decipherment of those objects and landscapes which are absent from it. For this reason, to an archive by its losses—for their *Icaruses*—cuts to the core of the historical enterprise; for some entries into the underworld of archive are not born of a desire to locate what was written and stored there, but instead to search for the histories of what is *absent* from written history. Therefore, stood before a forgery, we are made to be attentive to

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<sup>1</sup> Najafi, *Wounds of Archive*.

the fact the *failure to write history* is itself a tool of the historian standing before the overwhelming tragic.

Perhaps this is the only way to write the unwritable.



## ***II. Blowout***

One of the most characteristic features of life on the foredunes and lakeshore stretches is recurrent disappearance from the surface by burial in sand. Thus, the vanishment by extinction enforced by human encroachment upon the Indiana Dunes surrounding Lake Michigan presents itself in some senses as a parodic inverse of the long-standing phenomenon which are taken to be the constituent force of history. Moreover, the oceanic feelings and sense of personal disappearance into the dunes is matched by the disturbing phenomenon of physical and spatial losses of people and places to insensate breakdown of forms, where an expanding universe seems to show itself as hopelessly fraying.

Frank Dudley, painter, creator of the model, and the “seer of the Dunes” viewed the landscapes of the Indiana dunes as charged with some irresistible message, which by their sheer moral force drove him to “create canvases great enough to be worthy to carry the message of the spirit of the dunes to the world.” The fact that, as he worded it, the Dunes were “possibly too new a subject—a type of landscape almost unknown and perhaps without seeing, hard to understand,” only invested his portrayals with a kind of catastrophic urgency, a desire to bear out depictive fidelity to something which already seemed to be on the verge of disappearance.<sup>2</sup>

A painting of Dudley’s, entitled *The Dune Vineyard*, depicts a smattering of vines in the Duneland. Dudley’s own elaboration of the subject matter invoked a cycle of burial and reburial; “as the dune moves along and covers and kills the trees, the vines survive” and though during winter and spring may be covered “but by midsummer... will be back again.”<sup>3</sup> Such dynamics were known to Dudley likely due to the work of Henry Chandler Cowles—whose study of the dunes earned him the title of “the father of ecology”—proposed in his 1899 monograph on dune succession, that a modern view of ecology must treat the land as a “panorama, never alike twice.”<sup>4</sup>

The blowout phenomenon is a catastrophic destabilization; the patient and howling wind begins to tear into weak spots in the surface of the dune—above all in places where its vegetative exoskeleton has been gouged by some destructive event, sometimes long ago in the past. In the Century of Progress’s Hall of Geology, this phenomenon was demonstrated through an artificial

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<sup>2</sup> Engel, *Sacred Sands*, 145

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gaskins, *ArtSmart*.

<sup>4</sup> Engel, *Sacred Sands*, 143

model of a dune wrought at life-size scale, which would have pieces torn off of it, to the awe of assembled fairgoers at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair.

Even as he identified in his studies the tendency for the sands to bury the past and offer recurrently, Cowles observed that the dunes appeared to offer plants a space to enact minute conquests. The ephemerality of such victories, always wiped clean for new cycles of birth and death, allowed Cowles to demarcate into separate stages a dune lifecycle marked by unmaking and remaking; embryonic dunes arise, accumulating sand anchored by perennials, until the sand rises to such heights as to be torn down by the elements, sloping into windswept asymmetry, until they and these plants come to be buried themselves. As the dunes begin to wander at the behest of the elements, they move on average slowly inland according to age, and as they do, one plant community succeeds another, tending to slowly stabilize the oldest dunes, to a theorized point of fixity that Cowles was never himself entirely sure of, and which he refrained from describing in absolute terms.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, as one moves across the dunes from the lakeshore inland, one finds as Cowles did that one is not only moving in space, but as well time; the movements of the dunes through sequential processes of succession play out across the spatial as well as temporal topography seeming to alternate with ambivalence between upward progress and cyclical destruction. Henry Cowles, for his part remarked that “no other dunes than ours show such bewildering displays of sun movement and struggle for existence, such labyrinths of motion, form, and life.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Engel, *Sacred Sands*, 145

<sup>6</sup> Engel, *Sacred Sands*, 157

The blowout, by contrast is referred to by an alternate name, called the “graveyard” of the dunes. In such spaces, where the wind tears rents in the surface of the sand, forest of trees, fields of bone, and relics of vanished societies are buried and unburied without reason, promoting many photographers to term shots of trees in turn as “resurrections.”<sup>7</sup> Such incomplete burials and resurrections therefore suggest an addendum to any gradualist interpretation of dune succession, revealing not the upward march towards stability, but history as marked by the intrusions of the dead, manifesting as open fractures in time, as the frantic spiral of natural-historical progress appears to contort inward.

Moreover, Cowles observed in his following 1901 monograph on the dunes, that such chaotic unmakings and regressions were evidence that the hypothetical stable climax towards which the dunes were ostensibly advancing may not exist at all, and instead that “we have a variable approaching a variable rather than a constant.”<sup>8</sup> Cowles closed his third paper by observing that “influence from man, almost without exception, is retrogressive.”<sup>9</sup>

### *III. Cadmus*

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte’s army invaded Egypt, returning with many treasures including large numbers of Sacred Ibis corpses, millions of whom had been mummified by the ancient Egyptians, revering the animal as the earthly representative of the god Thoth, who presided over the scribal and historical arts as well as the ultimate judgment of the numberless masses of the dead.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 131

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 149

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 131

This Napoleonic scavenging was not an isolated occurrence. Another such conveyance saw one-hundred and fifty crates of looted artifacts, fossils, and plant specimens arrive at the French National Museum of Natural History.<sup>10</sup> Receiving a great portion of these artifacts was Georges Cuvier, a zoologist and anatomist at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, and it was amid these items that Cuvier found a Rosetta Stone; the skull of a Ceylon elephant which after study and comparison to elephantine bone fragments already in the possession of the museum, proved to the anatomist that not only were Asian elephants distinct from African ones, but that there existed a third category of *annihilated* elephants.

It is perhaps unsurprising that such bleached bones and monster's teeth from which Cuvier recalled the shades of long-ago annihilated beings whispered to him of destruction; such objects were soaked in the blood of the Napoleonic wars. Spoils from the kingdom of the dead came and went from soldiers' hands with such constancy as to impress on one 19-year-old grenadier—the only one of 60 from his hometown to survive Napoleon's campaigns—the belief that “if Bonaparte had reigned longer, he would have murdered all the world, then made war on the animals”.<sup>11</sup>

From the looted ibises, Cuvier went on to argue that because he could find no measurable differences between mummified Sacred Ibis and contemporary specimens of ibis, there existed a “fixity of species”<sup>12</sup> seeming to disprove the gradualist changes proposed by Lamarck and his contemporaries. Rather than changing and evolving, the world of the past stood still before it abruptly passed into nothing. If species did not change, then those species whose fossils been excavated without finding a living analogue were not proof of some heretofore unfound living

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<sup>10</sup> Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time*. 361

<sup>11</sup> Schama, *Simon Schama on Napoleon, the Horticultural Strategist*.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis, Millar, and Lambert, *The Sacred Ibis Debate*.

creature, but “beings whose place has been filled by those that exist today, which will perhaps one day find themselves likewise destroyed and replaced by others.”<sup>13</sup>

Geology is a science which perhaps more than any other, astronomy excepted, construes time from spatial relation and distribution,<sup>14</sup> and indeed, Cuvier’s ambitions aligned him with the astronomers of his day; “(w)e admire the power by which the human spirit has measured the movements of the globes, which nature seemed to have concealed forever from our view; genius and science have burst the limits of space,” he writes. “Would there not also be some glory for man to know how to burst the limits of time?”<sup>15</sup>

Plunging into the depths of the unrecovered “history of the world and the succession of events that preceded the birth of the human species,”<sup>16</sup> Cuvier regarded himself as not performing simple natural history, but an act of decipherment placing him within a lively and ongoing antiquarian tradition. Cuvier’s contemporaries in the natural and ancient histories were laboring with great intensity to decipher the cryptic languages found on looted fragments; indeed, Cuvier would regularly correspond with those seeking to uncover the hidden logics which bound together the scripts of the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians, finding special interest in the work of Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion to decipher the language of the ancient Egyptians.

Cuvier’s desire for answers indeed evinces great similarity to an act of decipherment. “What was this nature that was not subject to man’s dominion? And what revolution was able to wipe it out, to the point of leaving no trace of it except some half-decomposed bones?”<sup>17</sup> Cuvier’s ambition

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Rudwick and Cuvier, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes*. 24

<sup>14</sup> Fabian and Bunzl, *Time and the Other* 188

<sup>15</sup> Cuvier *The Revolutions of the Globe* In Rudwick and Cuvier, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes*. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

married that of astronomers and colonial Egyptologists—each of whom imagined their subject to be in some core way profoundly resistant to the regular procession of time. Pointedly, Cuvier’s project was not strictly one of archaeological or paleontological nature, but rather a seeking of a new kind of language to unleash the *imaginative* faculty of the human mind which would allow it to fathom infinity.

The legend claiming that Cuvier could respeak the name of an unknown species from a single bony syllable is therefore made even more curious when one considers that the collective truths gleaned from these lost and cryptic scripts reentered the world not as bare fact, but what might be said to resemble poetry: as remarks one character in Balzac’s *La Peau de Chagrin*, Cuvier was a master whose command of language outstripped Bryon. Cuvier was the “great poet,” who “has reconstructed past worlds from a few bleached bones; has rebuilt cities, like Cadmus, with monsters' teeth; has animated forests with all the secrets of zoology gleaned from a piece of coal,” calling up with the language of the dead “nothingness before you without the phrases of a charlatan”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, a further function of Cuvier’s work, which captured the attention not only of scientists, but as well cast a shadow over the historians of the day, was the realization that the depths of natural history plunged to such vertiginous fathoms as to be unimaginable to the human mind, yet was at the same time hopelessly *finite*, with beginning and end and saturated with wave after wave of sheer death and eradication.<sup>19</sup> Living organisms without number had

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<sup>18</sup> Balzac, *Honoré de Balzac in Twenty-Five Volumes*. 31

<sup>19</sup> Though Cuvier was not the first to theorize extinction, it was Cuvier’s work that made extinction an accepted fact of earth history. (see Şengör, “What Is the Use of the History of Geology to a Practicing Geologist?”)

vanished from the Earth and were visible only out of the sheer exertions of imaginations to reanimate the meanest traces of those things which human eyes never witnessed.

And yet, what is the price of witness? We must remember, after all, that the curious object around which Balzac's comments on Cuvier revolve is an asses' skin, endowed with the power to grant wishes, yet shrinking with every granted desire.



#### ***IV. Dust***

If Cuvier's triumph was above all the introduction of extinction to the annals of natural history, this was a formulation which, perhaps inevitably, diffused outward from the annals of natural history into the dusty archives of *human* history.

Recalling Caesar's dream of innumerable weeping legions of the shrouded dead, which drove the general to rebuild the ruined cities of Corinth and Carthage, so the historian Jules Michelet viewed his seeking to restore by oil lamplight the lives of "men of a hundred years, nations of two-thousand years, infants who died when nursing," who cry out "that they hardly lived, that they barely began" as granting such spirits "but the time to understand themselves and their places in the world, (so) they would allow the reclosure of their urns and the rebinding of their haunted dreams."<sup>20</sup>

And yet, in seeking these invisible subjects, it was the case that Michelet could locate them only through the extispicy of his very lungs, believing himself to be *literally* inhaling in dust the very matter of dead souls haunting crumbling archives, now disintegrating into yet another form of material anonymity. Such a practice installed within him a deep fear and longing, seeking to unravel the ambivalence with which the depositions of chronological history seemed to possess both the cryptic key for restoring the dead to life, while simultaneously declaring the anonymous fate of all life as it passes into such timeless materials as dust, ash, oil, or sand. Michelet himself discloses directly his fears in an 1840 journal entry, describing his watching as his children "gathered flowers, made them into posies and then discarded them," haunting the historian with fears that this "is how nature is too... [s]he entertains herself making vital compositions, arranging harmonies of existences. Then she discards them by the wayside. But first she snaps the stems and tears the blooms apart."<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, Michelet's feverish devotion to archival pursuits may be read as a fearful scrambling to unearth some force opposing this vision of a meaningless welter of creation

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<sup>20</sup> Steedman, *Dust*. 71

<sup>21</sup> Michelet, *Journal*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and Claude Digeon (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-76), 4 vols., 1:329, 12 June 1840.

defined only by inevitable destruction and the dissolution of forms. Wading amidst death, Michelet persisted in his personal search for the secret the source of all life and nature, seeking to grant rest to those human lives he believed had been thrown into the roiling and dark sea of history, just below the surface of which he could glimpse the receding form of his late child, to whom he had given the name Lazare—"resurrection."

Two years of frantic reading and writing after the infant's death would redouble his commitment to such a proposition: "I have recovered far more in the catacombs than Cuvier ever found in his fossils: I have recovered souls. I will restore souls of gold which, without me, would have perished, ceased to exist."<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, Michelet appears to have arrived at some measure of surety, for by 1861 he writes in *La Mer*: "Who is truly dead?" The answer: "no one."<sup>23</sup>

#### ***V. Progress***

"The dunes," writes an observer, "have an almost mythical capacity for taking to their bosoms the transitory activities of living creatures and preserving traces of them."<sup>24</sup>

In his natural histories, Georges Cuvier observed that because they were found in the deep ocean, species of cetaceans submitted themselves for observation only in the most fleeting of circumstances, or else appeared stranded on beaches dead or dying, already deformed by putrefaction and their own weight. It was therefore largely impossible to know such creatures in terms of their true physiognomies, and as such, they arrived in death as species of one. The best one could do was to document each individual specimen as they washed ashore, as Cuvier does

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<sup>22</sup> *Lettres inedites*, 186, letter to Alfred Dumesnil, undated (between 21 September and 18 October 1852).

<sup>23</sup> Michelet, *La Mer*, ed. Jean Borie (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). 143

<sup>24</sup> *Hammond Times*, December 29, 1957

in his presentation of a list of historical strandings on the beaches of England, France, and Holland between the 16th and the 18th centuries.<sup>25</sup>

The gruesome decadence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whale fisheries as they hunted the lifeblood of their industry to vanishment was of such magnitude that the language by which the sudden disappearance of whales could be described was not the slow and nearly imperceptible waning of a species in the gradualist Darwinian sense. Rather, the poetics of such a destruction was a tragedy in the *Cuvierian* key—an annihilation of catastrophic suddenness, “the largest cull of any animal—in terms of total biomass—in human history.”<sup>26</sup>

As annihilation begets annihilation, the desperation of whaling ships to capture their dwindling prey led many ships to the brink of destruction in ever more remote waters. The height of such rapaciousness came in 1871, in what would ultimately be one of two events sounding the death knell of the industry.

A fleet of whaleships had chased their quarry in the Bering Sea, where the few remaining north American sperm whales had fled. As the ice receded, the desperate whales swam inland, followed by the fleet into an ever-narrowing channel. Passing by cyclopean glaciers, Willie Williams, son of one of the ships’ captains recalled that “I fear I cannot give you a comprehensive description of (the scene), as it seems to be one of those indescribable things.” To his eyes, they represented “ages of accumulation...within (them) a power which cannot be expressed and can only be partially comprehended.”<sup>27</sup> Such power would be made catastrophically manifest: expanding ice crushed and mangled vessel after vessel before the

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<sup>25</sup> Cuvier. — *De l’histoire naturelle des cétacés, ou recueil et examen des faits dont se compose l’histoire naturelle de ces animaux.*

<sup>26</sup> Cressey, *World’s Whaling Slaughter Tallied at 3 Million.*

<sup>27</sup> Pease, *History of New Bedford.* 65

1,219 seamen and their families escaped. The Williams family made it — barely but safely — onto the whaleship *Progress*, along with nearly 200 other escapees.

The consequences of the disaster on the already ailing industry were profound, and the impact of the loss on the town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, was likened to the devastation of the Great Chicago Fire earlier that same year.<sup>28</sup> Together with the discovery of oil at Edward Drake’s Well in Pennsylvania, the age of whale oil had suffered its extinction events.

The *Progress* would, for its part, ultimately find itself presented in Chicago prior to and during the 1893 Columbian exhibition, configured to serve as a bizarre hybrid between a curiosities museum and an industrial exhibit by its exhibitor Henry Weaver—a coal baron who had lost the contract to light the Columbian Exposition to Standard Oil. “The purpose of her presence here,” claimed one Chicago newspaper, “is to give the people of Chicago and her visitors the correct exemplification of the whaling industry,” echoing the hope of the New Bedford whalers who had arranged the ship’s transit to the fair.<sup>29</sup>

And yet, if no whaling industry existed to portray, what was the process by which correct exemplification could take place? If “even the most perfect reproduction,” as Walter Benjamin writes, is lacking “its unique existence at the place where it happened to be,”<sup>30</sup> then whither blew the wind in the sails of the *Progress*, the world it sought to portray having already vanished? Where could it take its place in the cavalcade imagined for Fair’s south lagoon, which would depict a succession of maritime transportation from birch bark canoes “managed by Indians” to

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<sup>28</sup> *Loss of the Arctic Fleet*, New York Times, November 7, 1871.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Gifford, *The Last Voyage of the Whaling Bark Progress*, 83-84

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, Arendt, and Zohn, *Illuminations*. 220

“Esquimaux kiacks, Alaskan war canoes, the hooded boats of the Swiss Lakes,” onward to scale replicas of Columbus’s ships that seemed to represent the height of civilization?<sup>31</sup>

Eight years after the Exhibition, the *Progress* had been abandoned as a pulped wreck in the Calumet Harbor, circled by screaming gulls on a beach drenched in oil residues and stockyard viscera, surrounded by derelicts, from a Civil-War cutter to a rotting pleasure schooner. The melancholy fate of the vessel recalls Thoreau’s happening on the remains of a decaying boat on the banks of Walden Pond, compelling him to ask “what Champollion”—the same Champollion whose translations so inspired Cuvier—”will decipher this hieroglyphic for us.”<sup>32</sup> In such a statement can be intuited the quiet doubts of those seeking to compare the practice of both natural and human history; in the writing of both, there is a quiet skepticism attached to language and its ability to articulate the endless and ultimately unprogressive cycles of nature and human designs.

In each case, the seeming mutability of forms is haunted by the utter stillness and sterility of cyclical destruction which seems to inevitably greet them, and so the *Progress* must therefore have appeared to the viewer schooled in natural history as nothing short of a leviathan creature from a doomed age, the ship and its oily grave seeming to mutually disclose in grotesque portmanteau the lineaments of an incomprehensible schematic for the vanishment of both nature and man.

## ***VI. Melville***

Herman Melville’s consideration of “The Fossil Whale” in the eponymous chapter of *Moby Dick* can be read as a function of Melville’s project of enshrouding his subject in “Saturn’s grey

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<sup>31</sup> Wit et al., *Grand Illusions*. 63-64

<sup>32</sup> Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*.

chaos” which is the marker of the historical sublime.<sup>33</sup> Melville, a reader of natural-historical periodicals, would assuredly have had no shortage of sources from which to draw in his sketching a chapter which cements the whale as not merely ancient but ageless. His description of “the almost complete vast skeleton of an extinct monster” first mistaken for a “fallen angel” before being rechristened by the naturalist Sir Richard Owen as “the monster Zeuglodon,” indicate a scrupulous attention to the developments of natural history and paleontology. Indeed, Melville’s own words mirror nearly exactly those delivered by Owen in scientific address; “we cannot hesitate in pronouncing the colossal Zeuglodon to have been one of the most extraordinary of the Mammalia which the revolutions of the globe have blotted out.”<sup>34</sup>

The circumstances of Cetacean death were indeed as intriguing—perhaps even more so—to the poetic and scientific mind of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as its life. Indeed, the death of a whale, not unlike the dying of a star or a natural disaster, invites poetic description. At times, it will grow to enormous size as it swells and bubbles in the furnace of its form until it explodes. Other times, its vast bulk falls into deepest shadow, vanishing into depths untouchable by light.

It is impossible to know with any certainty which, if either, of these fates the zeuglodon suffered at the end of its life so many millions of years ago. Perhaps it washed ashore to lie upon the beach bubbling as it turned to fire, days in the dying. Perhaps, alternatively, it fell slowly through alien waters, picked at by scavengers as it sank like some slow-motion Icarus, until it arrived at the shrouded floor of the primordial ocean. Perhaps it was something else altogether, a catastrophe of some alien dimension with its own postmortem velocities. We are not to know.

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<sup>33</sup> Melville. *Moby Dick* 34

<sup>34</sup> Moore, *Owen’s and Melville’s Fossil Whale*.

What is known is that from 1863 to 1871, a fossilized whale known as the “Great Zeuglodon” was exhibited in Col. Wood’s Curiosities Museum at the north side of Randolph Street east of Clark Street. Of this institution and its extensive collection of oddities, a lithograph states that “Col. Wood, the proprietor, knows he has a good thing, and that he does not hide it in the dark.”<sup>35</sup>

The Zeuglodon’s eventual bathing in the light of an alien age was the work of Albert Koch, a fossil-hunter of some renown, whose relentless searching for skeletal remains dragged him across America. In 1845, Koch had tracked through Alabama in search of fossils, following a trail of enormous scorched “sea serpent” vertebrae which were so common in the region as to form in several cases the charred supports in fireplaces, or else were burned down to ash in hopes of extracting nonexistent lime from them.<sup>36</sup> The shattered fragments would ultimately lead Koch to a desolate field by the Sintabogure River, where bones of a great serpent had been laid out in a vast semicircle, seeming to have been placed by titan hands as a panorama, meant to describe some ancient and inscrutable scene.

By 1845, after compositing parts of at least six such creatures, as well as ammonite shells and other bone fragments, into a 114-foot sea serpent, Koch began touring the United States and Europe, first under billing of “*Hydrargos sillimani*,” then and eventually as *Hydrarchos harlani*. Registering itself in this taxonomic shift was the acknowledgement that Koch’s “sea serpent” was a *Basilosaurus* of the kind described by anatomist Richard Harlan as a “zeuglodon,” and which Cuvierian paleontologist Richard Owen identified in 1839 as not a not a reptile, but indeed

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<sup>35</sup>Chicagology. *Col Wood’s Museum*.

<sup>36</sup> Switek, *Written in Stone*. 147

a primitive cetacean.<sup>37</sup> Koch eventually sold this first *Hydrarchos* mount to the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who exhibited it in Berlin's Royal Museum even amid protests by the museum's paleontologists that the mount was a horrendous forgery, haphazardly pasted into being from the bones of several creatures who could not even be said to have lived contemporaneously.<sup>38</sup>

Following on this success, in 1848 Koch assembled a second, 96-foot long *Hydrarchos*, which, after years of display in the his St. Louis Museum near a series of "cosmoramas" depicting of the Battle of Austerlitz, the French Revolution of 1830, and Bonaparte entering Moscow<sup>39</sup> was sold to Col. Wood's Museum in Chicago, where it was mounted as "*The Great Zeuglodon*" before burning along with the rest of the museum in the Great Fire. The original Koch's *Hydrarchos*, for its part, was ultimately lost during the bombings of Berlin in 1945, save for a few fragments which remain today sealed in the closed collections of the Humboldt Forum.

## ***VII. Falls***

The Mount Baldy dune took shape over four millennia ago, after Lake Michigan's gradual lowering unearthed waves of loosed sand. While originally likely covered in stabilizing vegetation, at an indeterminate point in its history, Baldy was shattered by a catastrophic event of indeterminate nature, which gored it of its flora and denied it a slow succession towards stability.

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013, news outlets reported the breakoff of a "Chicago-sized" fragment of the Pine Island Glacier, the structure stabilizing from breakdown part of the immense West Antarctic Ice Sheet, whose ultimate destruction is portended to catastrophically raise the seas. Almost at

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<sup>37</sup> Montagu and Peterson, *The Earliest Account of the Association of Human Artifacts with Fossil Mammals in North America*. 414

<sup>38</sup> Switek, *Written in Stone*. 152

<sup>39</sup> McDermott, *The Lost Panoramas of the Mississippi*

precisely the same time, a child wandering on Mount Baldy disappears into the sand. When he was extracted from the gullet of Baldy, examination of the excavation site found a pattern of branching voids, without a trace of organic material but nevertheless in an unmissably arboreal shape, suggesting that he had fallen into the negative space left by a rotted-out trunk of a tree itself swallowed by Baldy.<sup>40</sup>

Two vastly different geophysical timescales, having for one brief instant intersected in acts of disappearance, whisper the haunting suggestion that where natural and human history crash together, it becomes possible or probable to tumble precipitously into a void in the shape of a hollowed-out nature. Perhaps this is the dispiriting outcome which occurs when apparent dynamics of stabilizing succession no longer take shape, and instead the landscapes we have been left with wither into sites of vanishment, without hope for reappearance and in which memory can find no purchase.

“Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs” quotes Sebald of Michael Hamburger, “we believe we can remember. But... memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable.”<sup>41</sup> When we speak of history, especially those histories which have been conjoined or subsumed into a landscape be it by erosion, scorching, burial, or flood, it is largely the case that the witnessing which is demanded of the historian is made exponentially more fraught and feeble, and indeed becomes impossible to sift through as one might an archive.

Accordingly, provocations of the groundlessness abound along the coast of Lake Michigan,

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<sup>40</sup> Argyilan et al., *The Origin of Collapse Features Appearing in a Migrating Parabolic Dune along the Southern Coast of Lake Michigan*.

<sup>41</sup> Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 177-178

saturated as it is with the riddling presences of sand, silt, and marsh, prove uniquely vexing to cartography or historiography. As a scholar of Bengali littorals observes, when spaces of silt and sediment emerge into archives, they do so primarily as “as sites of conflict, rather than sites of life” and as “a problem for science to map and solve.”<sup>42</sup> To stand in such a landscape is to observe a world both eternal and utterly *temporary* in its acting to absorb and materialize catastrophes, deranging what seem the essential characteristics of orderly procession of decay, growth, vanishment, and destruction, reproducing in an instant the action of burial which in other contexts might proceed at agonizingly slow paces. Stood amid the shifting sands, one is made fearfully conscious of the fact that the declarations which allow for legibility in maps and histories are written in the softest of italics, and that perhaps it is not simply the case that one is falling into the coldly absent vacuum of a buried tree, but indeed that whole cities, whole *epochs* may be tumbling precipitously into something not yet known.

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<sup>42</sup> Bhattacharyya, *A River Is Not a Pendulum*. 1



### *VIII. Ghosts*

An article ran in a British newspaper dryly reported in 1888 on a “bizarre building” in Chicago’s downtown which was decorated with what the newspaper quotes as “life-sized” gryphons. “In no other city in the world” they remark, “would an architect profess to know what is ‘life sized’ for an imaginary creature which never lived.”<sup>43</sup> Chicago, so accused of being a meeting place for those things which never found form, is therefore as a curious city in which to recover, as Michelet phrased it, those souls who weep that “they hardly lived,

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<sup>43</sup> Editorial, “[Yankee newspaper criticism].” *British Architect* 29 (20 January 1888): 42 quot. in Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*.

that they barely began.” Indeed, European visitors to Chicago in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century often trafficked in such statements of uncanny appearances and disappearances. The Viennese travel writer Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg alleged that the smoke-wreathed buildings of Chicago’s downtown bore an uncanny resemblance to “the thickly populated catacombs excavated by titans” or “the elephant catacombs of Ceylon”—the very same from which hailed the skull which started Cuvier down the path to his articulation of extinction.<sup>44</sup>

Such darkened spaces invariably recall the domains of the dead, who pass anonymously from place to place, unknown to the living, save for some unplaceable familiarity surrounding them felt by those yet to pass into oblivion. One English traveler relates a tale of coming face to face in the mists of Chicago with a man who seemed to recall as a wraith would some lost acquaintance from his distant past: “we stood fully two minutes staring as each other in perfect silence, which is a long time in Chicago.”<sup>45</sup>

Such stories of Chicago’s ghostliness are almost exclusively attributed to the interferences of smoke, dust, and ash. Such mutable objects are unlike discarded objects of refuse, for they attest to no individual life or material process but are instead without place or space or time; everywhere and nowhere. Indeed, such a characterization alludes to the larger disruptions Chicago seemed to pose to historiography in general. English artist Frederick Villers, visiting the city for the Columbian Exposition, describes his bemused viewing of the burned-out shell of one of the “instant hotels” which had sprung up on the edges of the 1893 World’s Fair, into which scores of firemen were carrying charcoal out of the rear at

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<sup>44</sup> Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 32

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 75

the same time the upholsterers were carrying the carpets in the front, as if both the new and old were some undifferentiated mass, equally constitutive of Chicago's topography.<sup>46</sup>

"The world," Chicago architect Dankmar Adler observed in 1891, "increases, not all at once... according to the mechanical and regulated evolution" proposed by gradualist interpretations of natural history, but "by numberless absolute beginnings and upspringings not to be foreseen."<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, the landscape of the smoke and ash-ridden city would seem to present the material world at its most *immaterial*, a state where past and future and natural and human history interact only to falsify each other's progress, and which the shambling amalgam of the two shudders ever further towards each's mutual nullification.

Such scenes as described by Villiers impressed upon those visitors familiar with European notions of a past leaving tangible deposits and developing from stage to stage, that Chicago was, as the editor of *Berliner Tageblatt* put it, a city "full of splendid starts" with "nothing finished" which at no point "offers a full, a total satisfaction" of completeness or historical progression.<sup>48</sup> Instead, futures seemed to materialize out of the smoke with as much ease as they dissipated, vexing Enlightenment notions of an arrow of progress which moved in a linear fashion from the preliterate ages of the natural world, up through man's accumulation of knowledge and mastery of his own history.

Instead, to outside witnesses, Chicago seemed to exemplify an endless and catastrophic alternation between the explosive prowess of modernity and some prehistoric age of natural disaster played beneath the impassive gaze of skyscrapers. The French novelist Paul

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<sup>46</sup> Villiers, *4th Meeting*. 51

<sup>47</sup> Adler quoted in Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 96-97

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 83

Bourget observed of Chicago's smoke wreathed edifices that the city seemed "some impersonal power, irresistible, unconscious, like a force of nature, in the service of which man has been but a docile instrument." Such an expression, he continues, seemed to impart in the "expression of the overpowering immensity of modern commerce" the city with "something of tragedy, and to my feeling, a poetry."<sup>49</sup>

It is the case in such spaces that time becomes far less a physical thing and much more a kind of accusation— things which were never there, or things which should be here or now which have yet to arrive, are all lost amid the labyrinthine "tangle of gas pipes, steam pipes, water pipes, telegraph wires, electric lighting wires, electric motor wires and grip-cables; all without a plan, but make-shifts...to evade the fundamental mistake of having such a city at all."<sup>50</sup>

### ***IX. Saturn***

Just behind the Columbian Fountain stood the 1893 World's Fair's Administration Building, housing its executive and administrative offices, while also presenting lavish artistic embellishments to those visitors entering the White City's Court of Honor. At each entrance stood a monumental dyad of sculptures, each thirty-four feet in height and representing allegories of the four natural elements. On one was the element in its raw, "uncontrolled" state; on the other was the "controlled" element, represented in service to modern man. Earth in its raw state is portrayed as a figure of ancient yet undiminished power, an aging man with craggy features and mountainous brawn, before whom sits a man atop a shattered-tusk mammoth, staring uncomprehendingly at a monkey plucking fruit from a nearby woman. In Earth Controlled, a Ceres-like figure raises a crown and precious stones, while beneath her is a man tensing as he

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Bourget, quot. in Bognerud, 16

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 40

strikes a boulder for ore. At the woman's right hand is a boy, carrying a basket overflowing with fruit and grain.<sup>51</sup>

Surrounding each of the statues, the façade of the building—and indeed all the buildings of the fair—gleamed a timeless white, as if the white of the facades were likewise some elemental force now bent to the will of man. And yet, financial considerations had forced the building's architects to employ a form of counterfeit marble—a mixture of jute fiber and plaster known as “staff,” which seemed to attest to ancientness, but would indeed last no more than a year in the elements.

The eyes of visitors, tasked as they were with verification of such seeming impossibilities as the reappearance of all the cities of antiquity at once, could cope only barely with the strain of upholding the weight of all of history. Friedrich Dernburg admitted he could scarcely close his eyes, fearing that when he opened them “all will disappear as in a dream.”<sup>52</sup> And yet the white buildings, blazing in the summer sun, reflected with such intensity that visitors simultaneously complained of their inability to look anywhere at all, even the waters of the lake and lagoons reflecting only endless depths of meaningless white.<sup>53</sup>

Chicago itself, however, was called the “Black city” to distinguish its smog-darkened forms from the radiant “White City” of the Fair.<sup>54</sup> Like bones at the lightless floor of the ocean, the imagined city was figured against its real counterpart as radiant white against infinite dark, creating an imagined panorama eerily recalling the memento mori paintings popular at the time, as if at any moment the entire landscape could leer out of ash into a jagged toothed skull.

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<sup>51</sup> Leja, “Progress and Evolution at the U. S. World's Fairs, 1893–1915.”

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 179

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow*. 179

<sup>54</sup> Wit et al., *Grand Illusions*. 71.

Such white likewise recalls the words of Melville on the color. “Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?” That the classical shells contained mere steel frame warehouses of goods brings equally so the mind Melville’s wondering that “whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color...a dumb blankness, full of meaning, (proving) that all other earthly hues...cover nothing but the charnel-house within.”<sup>55</sup>

The whiteness, the mad colorlessness upon whose surface Melville charts cosmic torment and which covers both his whale and the universe in its vast light-punctured darkness, would seem to mirror in some unspeakable way the unbearable blankness of the Court of Honor’s assemblage of buildings, which so moved a preacher, his name lost to history, to incarnate the Court as the Door of Heaven and its buildings the beasts which sit beside the throne of God beyond the hereafter’s threshold.<sup>56</sup> And yet, how could the eyes of heaven gaze down to determine the day of reckoning, when so many viewers were made sick by the sight of White City where “Time is lost?”<sup>57</sup>

“Here was a breach of continuity—a rupture in historical sequence,” intones Henry Adams, observing that the fate of “one’s personal universe” hung on whether one viewed this rupture as real or illusory<sup>58</sup>. On the steps before the Administration Building, Adams would have been in full view of the Columbian Fountain in the form of a hulking model barge upon which was enthroned Columbia, and at whose stern stood Saturn, his scythe bit into the mechanism of the

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<sup>55</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick; or the Whale*. 225-226.

<sup>56</sup> *The Court of Honor*, speech, or sermon, given by an unknown author. From the Daniel H. Burnham Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago, Accession nr. 1943.1, Series VI, Box 60, Folder 60.67, (quoted in Bognerud 2012)

<sup>57</sup> Quot. in Bognerud. 74

<sup>58</sup> Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*.

helm whereby this vessel was apparently steered. Perhaps it was while gazing at such an improvised mode of navigation, Adams arrived at the conclusion he would later commit to writing, that the American people, not knowing their ultimate fate, might nevertheless be drifting rudderless towards some inscrutable point of finality, precisely akin to how “their solar system was said to be drifting towards some point in space,” suggesting that perhaps, if a coordinate system could only be devised from the passing stars, this point might come to be fixed.<sup>59</sup>

And would then Saturn at last engage his mighty scythe to navigate?



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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## ***IX. Phoenix***

“Petroleum,” observed Brecht, “resists the five-act form.”<sup>60</sup>

Not a ten-minute walk from the site upon which the *Progress* rested is the grave of Andreas von Zirngibl. Born in Bavaria on March 30, 1797, von Zirngibl fought at Waterloo in the regiment of Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, a commander whose relentlessness earned him the moniker Marschall Vorwärts—Marshal Forward. Von Zirngibl’s grave marks the smallest cemetery in Chicago, a minor dot in the marshy ground outside the shack he built on the banks of the Calumet, on a plot which is now a scrapyards under ownership of the Sims Metal Management. The grave, curiously, seems lost in time; the headstone for an unknown reason declares the Battle of Waterloo as occurring in the wrong year.

This edge of the shoreline between Lake and Dunes where *Progress* was dynamited on a grey morning in 1902, is perhaps where the endless transfiguration of the sun’s energy from corpse to devoured corpse is most readily realized. Crashing waters prevent the seeds of even the hardiest plant life from taking root, and instead, the wash zone is a haphazard and ever-shifting graveyard of that which has been claimed by the lake—fish, muskrat, dog, cat, bird, and human; an accumulation which in turn lures to the shore skunks, sandpipers, gulls, toads, tiger beetles, blowflies, spiders.<sup>61</sup>

Following the final moments of the whaleship *Progress*, it would have been possible to turn from the destroyed wreck and walk along reeking sands southwards to arrive at the refinery before midday.

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<sup>60</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*. 30.

<sup>61</sup> Greenberg, *A Natural History of the Chicago Region*. 247

In 1886, Standard Oil began construction on its Solar Refinery in Lima, Ohio. The principal product of this refinery was kerosene, by this time eclipsing whale oil as the most widespread means of fueling lamps. To fuel the increasingly crazed demand from the industries of Chicago, Standard Oil began to plan a refinery to be located in southern Chicago's Fleming Park, before an unexplained event in January of 1889 ruptured one of the tanks to let loose a "gliding rush, a snake-like movement over the swampy ground."<sup>62</sup> All that prevented the crude from flowing into Lake Michigan was a large bank of dunes by the waters' edge.

The oil served to render the land itself inflammable in the extreme, with nearly twenty acres saturated in oil, and around which guards were posted so as to ward off by force a dropped cigar that might cause a Second Great Fire. By May of 1889, the Chicago Tribune reported that Standard Oil had abandoned Fleming Park in favor of "a quantity of the sand land of Whiting, Ind" where "it intends to build the biggest refinery in the world... so near Chicago as to be practically a part of the city."<sup>63</sup>

It was precisely this nearness which allowed the refinery's fueling of the "White City's magnificent lighting displays," powered by one great 2000-horsepower Allis Chalmers engine and hosts of 1000-horsepower engines, all fueled with petroleum from the Standard Oil company. Such industrial might was marshalled towards the singular purpose of rewriting the features of the Chicago of actuality: "the White City would have no smoky pall,"<sup>64</sup> such that, as visitors mounted the Ferris Wheel, they would observe the cities of the present and future rotate cyclically, as the viewers were themselves rotating within a vast panorama; "the horizon grew; the great blue lake, the White City in dazzling whiteness, moved into view and then sank

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Hmurovic, "Fleming Park Accident."

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Jonnes, *Empires of Light*, 261

downward,” wrote Hezekiah Butterworth, “the smoky city of Chicago rose, and fell into the shadows.”<sup>65</sup>

The Whiting Refinery which stands today is the center of an invisible network of pipes which sprawl the North American continent. One can return to the site of the White City, now long vanished save the former Fine Arts Building which today hosts the Museum of Science and Industry, to see an emptied landscape where only pale sunlight remains of the glittering city. The magnitude of erasure strikes one with the surreal sense of having watched a glacier calve into nothingness, or with the curious phantom sensations of wandering a blindingly new street in Guernica or Dresden.

And yet it is also the case that even more than a century removed from the destruction by fire of the White City, beneath the levelled ground is the still extant undercity whose tangled lymphatics of sanitation, water, and electrical lines which once animated the more than two-hundred structures of the vanished city.<sup>66</sup> Might it not be that possible that some lonely wire, buried even deeper than the discovered tangle, stretches weakly outward back to some forgotten transmitter in the bowels of the network below the Whiting refinery?

Such traces attest to the impossibility of determining the contours of an object’s exit from the world stage, nor indeed, the script in which its entry may be rewritten. Whiting Refinery, far outliving the city it once powered, remains, surrounded by disappearance and desolation.

### ***X. Infinity***

William T. Stead, upon visiting the fair in its final day, remarked that the palaces of industry, gleaming in the autumn night, recalled for him some lost vision of an “ivory city, beautiful as a

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<sup>65</sup> Butterworth, *Zigzag Journeys in the White City*. 126

<sup>66</sup> Graff, “*The Vanishing City*.”

poet's dream, silent as a city of the dead"<sup>67</sup> Curiously, Stead's words at the close of the fair recall a similar sentiment expressed by the reporter H. C. Bunner during its construction; "when I speak of the silence (of the fair) I mean the effect of the silence...here are seven thousand and odd men at work... but their noise is hardly noticeable among these vast spaces...this army of laborers looks like a mere random scattering of human beings."<sup>68</sup>

"The desert," writes Baudrillard, "is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body...When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely."<sup>69</sup>

The silence of the White City seems to recall powerfully Baudrillardian "seeing emptiness" embodied in the blind staggering from the desert, particularly when read from the perspective of the kind of compulsive remembrance of things lost which Sebald and other scholars of the destructions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would write so movingly on. In the case of the White City, this the seeming annihilation of the structures and the pasts and futures they seemed to conjure assumed a resonance of melancholy which recalled the destruction of the Great Fire and its "instant" appearance of historical ruin. Writes one viewer of the White City after its closure, "(t)he work of destruction goes rapidly on."<sup>70</sup> "We are turning our backs upon the fairest dream of civilization," laments another, "and are about to consign it to the dust."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Cronon, 366 n. 124. Quot. Stead, "*My First Visit to America*"

<sup>68</sup> Opper, *Tales of the Great Lakes*. 382-383

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<sup>70</sup> Schoch, Leonard E. 1893. Leonard E. Schoch letter. World's Columbian Exposition Collection. Chicago: Chicago Historical Society

<sup>71</sup> Barrow, quot. in Higinbotham, Harlow N. 1898. Report of the President to the Board of Directors of the World's Columbian Exposition. Chicago, 1892-1893. Chicago: Rand, McNally

“(E)verything turns away,” writes Auden of Breughel’s *Icarus*, “quite leisurely from the disaster.”<sup>72</sup>

We observe in the words of Auden a trace the fear carried in those soft tissues of poems and history; namely, that such practices of observation and remembrance seem destined to fail us precisely at those moments in which they might be imagined to have waxed into their greatest potency. Moreover, below this welter of yearnings for remembrance, looms darkly half a realization that history may be by its very nature a catalogue of those things which have already passed into darkness and can remain no longer, and so pass from feeble history into nothing, powerless to avert the return of future tragedy to the unsteady Earth.

Moreover, the historian’s desperate fantasy of returning the things which have vanished even from our ability to conjure them by writing confronts what may be a feature of the age we are now entering. Namely, the practice of history now contends against the fact that the mooring posts of vanishing landscapes to be studied are not now presences but *absences*: natures, structures, lives—in their disappeared, they seem to provide the only means of locating oneself in an annihilating panorama already more an unspeakable fiction than a describable reality,

It is a matter of some curiosity that in matters both of fossilization—Balzac’s words of Cuvier—and the numerous comments on the White City’s outstripping the feeble products of the “poetic” mind, allude to poetry’s failure. In some inscrutable manner, poetic power’s of recall seem at once both supremely powerful and freighted with the darkest accusations of history and memory’s ultimate failures in matters of great atrocity or tragedy.

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<sup>72</sup> Auden, “*Musée Des Beaux Arts*.”

The *SS Eastland* was a passenger ship based in Chicago and used for tours. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July, 1915, the ship had been chartered for a company picnic by the Western Electric Company—one of the only sanctioned holidays for the workers. The passengers, many in their finest spring attire, piled into the boat. As the boat filled up to and beyond its capacity of 2,572 passengers, it began to tilt, and finally, quick as a collapsing dune, the ship rolled over onto its side while still tied to a dock in the Chicago River, drowning a total of 844 passengers and crew in what was the largest loss of life from a single shipwreck on the Great Lakes.

In the weeks following the disaster, postcards and photo-cards of the wreck began to circulate, advertised by manufacturers as “keepsakes” of the disaster and depicting with generous visual attention the waterlogged fragments and floating bodies. The postcards are photographs of the disaster at the height of the rescue, forever at the height of the disaster, in which bodies, debris and rescuers are strewn about in the water, beyond reach. The faces of the deceased are whited-out, ostensibly out of respect for the dead, but one cannot help but observe that such an act runs counter to the card’s seeming purpose of personal remembrance—the compulsion to hold some trace of the past, felt by a public compelled to own a keepsake of an indescribable event, or, more personally, share the memory with someone who might not have been able to see, read or hear about event firsthand.<sup>73</sup>

An exception to such practices of veiling the dead in white’s boundless vacancy are the appallingly expressive faces of disaster portraiture of Jun Fujita, a photographer and reporter who documented the frantic rescue efforts that day. Particularly striking is one of Fujita’s photographs depicting an elderly man carrying the drowned body of a young boy out from the river, which to Fujita’s eyes seemed to evoke visage upon which is inscribed not merely the

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<sup>73</sup> For more information see Dial, *Only the River Remains*.

senseless tragedy of the Eastland but indeed all the catastrophes of history: “The horror of the most frightful tragedies in the annals of Chicago, “writes Fujita, “is written on the face of the strong man in this picture,” while “(t)he little, limp figure in his arms express its INFINITE PITY.”<sup>74</sup> Here is yet another glimpse of a hieroglyphic fragment, a piece of history which suggests a deeper poetry of despair which tenuously holds together an increasingly fragmentary ledger of human and natural disaster.

Carl Sandburg’s poetic response (which would remain unpublished until decades later due to his publishers’ fears of controversy) drew parallels between the lightning quick devastation of the disaster and the slower, pervasive corrosion of inclement poverty and industrial blighting. The poet remarked that he saw “a dozen Eastlands/Every morning on my way to work/And a dozen more going home at night.”<sup>75</sup> Three years later Sandburg would write again on the subject of mass death, this time during the First World War: “Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo. / Shovel them under and let me work— / I am the grass; I cover all. / ... Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor: / What place is this? / Where are we now? / I am the grass. / Let me work.”<sup>76</sup>

A picture here begins to emerge of the world which Sandburg understood to have produced not merely the *Eastland*, but the ungovernable industries of war and production which devoured those in both factory and battlefield. That both forms of destruction seemed to have some undeniable affinity with the pace at which a liquidated nature—sand, water, ash, oil—could enact disaster with creeping slowness or blinding speed draws the reader back to the Dunes, which formed a key ontological anchor in Sandburg’s world. “What do we see here in the sand

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Jun Fujita*.

<sup>75</sup> Sandburg, “Eastland.”

<sup>76</sup> Sandburg, *Grass*”

dunes...(a)lone with a picture and a picture coming one after the other of all the dead,” wrote Sandburg in his poem *Dunes*, seeking an emotional language with which to render the unspeakable. Like Michelet, the incomprehensible possibility that nature and man were locked in a slow transit into anonymous dust, ash, and waters was unbearable to Sandburg—*Dunes* closes with the echoing question of what could lay “(o)utside of what the poets cry for and the soldiers drive on headlong and leave their skulls in the sun for.”<sup>77</sup>

The *Eastland* would be converted into a gunboat by the Illinois Naval Reserve. Christened the *USS Wilmette* in 1918, it never saw combat and was used as a training vessel during the First World War, running missions out of the Great Lakes Naval base. Following the conclusion of the war, the *Wilmette* was tasked with the ceremonial sinking into Lake Michigan of *UC-97*, a surrendered German U-boat which had been paraded throughout the United States, finishing its tour in Chicago. The grand event was witnessed by cheering crowds, who watched from the shore as one ghost ship fired on another, as if two kingdoms of the dead locked in war had momentarily returned to Earth, to be cheerfully witnessed by those on dry land.

Jun Fujita, for his part, left Chicago shortly after the *Eastland* disaster, first to the wilderness of North Minnesota, and later to a half-abandoned logging town in the Indiana Dunes, where he photographed the movements of the sand which overtook all but the uppermost branches of the trees. His returns to Chicago grew sparse, though he did reappear at the 1933 World’s Fair to sell his pictures.

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<sup>77</sup> Sandburg,, *Chicago Poems*. 23



### *XI. Nightfall*

“(T)his earth of ours, this planet, on whose existence and on whose activities we depend,” declared Thomas Chamberlain—a close mentor to H.C. Cowles—arguing before congress for the Dunes’ recognition as a national park, “is not a dead planet, passed on to us from the past.” Instead, he asserted, the planet was “a living, active organism, constantly reshaping itself...selecting and assorting its material, and placing that material in a form which shall subserve the well-being of the inhabitants that dwell upon it.”<sup>78</sup>

While any project of resource extraction invariably precipitates its own sprawl of ghost towns, this rule can be seen to have been borne out ruthlessly in Chicago’s hinterlands, such that one

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<sup>78</sup> Service and Mather, *Report on the Proposed Sand Dunes National Park, Indiana*. 32

can shuffle from the unmarked location of one outpost to another, each of which has plainly failed to survive some forgotten extinction event, circumnavigating Lake Michigan until one's melancholy transit arrives at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. Presenting a curious cul-de-sac in this geography of vanishment is the cluster of several since-disappeared lumber mills once constituting the town of Singapore.

The fact that the destruction of Singapore is colloquially referred to as "Michigan's Pompeii" is curious to the degree that, rather than presenting a natural disaster as they are regularly conceived, its destruction demonstrates only the barest lineaments of a nature which has already been annihilated in its dynamics save for its destructive capabilities. Far more, it resembles the paranoia and insanity characterizing the exercise of brute power throughout human history, suggesting in some mad way that the burial of Singapore was an act of war declared by man but prosecuted in the script of nature.

While the economies of construction had already annihilated by the time of the Great Fire a great deal of the lakeside forests of white pine—a species which represents countless successions of dune migrations—the coup-de-grace came from the great demand for lumber following the razing of the city. After the engulfment of Chicago in flames, one of the last remaining sources of regional timber was the ring of forest which surrounded Singapore, Michigan. Already a hub for lumber and shipbuilding, ravenous demand from rebuilding efforts depleted with striking rapidity the supply of white pine, which were relentlessly felled and loaded on barges bound for the scorched city. As the torment of empty sky replaced the stately canopy of trees, dust collected where it should not, flooding places where small moments once pooled, until all at once, the dunes become unstuck. As the town resorted to cannibalizing its own structures for lumber, the sand crept forward until Singapore was buried entirely. Like the form of the

shipwreck or the oil spill, the destruction of Singapore therefore presents a material manifestation of the breakdown of the invisible movement of human progress—the gliding warship or the piped crude—across the seemingly unrelated medium of natural history.

One of the few comprehensive archaeological surveys of the Singapore community notes that there remain only a few photographs of the town. Most depict only the aftermath of its ruination, lingering over skeletal remains half-buried in sand. Fewer still show the town as it was in its heyday, milling lumber by the ton and loading it onto barges. No plunge into the archives, no matter how deep, has been able to recover a photograph depicting the residents of the town, who seem to have vanished entirely, save for the few written attestations to the presence of mill workers, bank owners, schoolteachers, and families.<sup>79</sup>

In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's preface to his *Last Days of Pompeii*, he describes “those disinterested remains of an ancient city.” And indeed, “the writer who had before labored, however unworthily, in the art to revive and to create, should feel a keen desire,” declares Bulwer-Lytton, “to people once more those deserted streets, to repair those graceful ruins, to reanimate the bones which were yet spared to his survey, to traverse the gulf of eighteen centuries and to wake to a second existence the City of the Dead!”<sup>80</sup>

Environmentalists speak of blighted places in the region surrounding the Whiting Refinery as “sacrifice zones.” Such places are cursed with the uncanny silences of the natural world, for which words of description fail to take shape. The painter Frank Dudley’s 1922 declaration that the Dunes were “possibly too new a subject,”<sup>81</sup> seems eerily concordant with the sense in which

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<sup>79</sup> Church, Singapore, Michigan, a Buried Coastal Ghost Town.

<sup>80</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, *Last Days of Pompeii*

<sup>81</sup> Dudley, *The Dunes From an Artist's Point of View*. 6

words seem to likewise fail the landscape which has arrived to succeed the dunes. Mountains of petcoke, a carbon byproduct of oil refining, parody the movements of sand in their accumulation and dissolution. The stabilizing of these dark mountains, which at all times threaten to blacken their surroundings in cancerous grains, is accomplished through the use of industrial sprinklers which soak the sprawling piles enough to weigh down their surfaces. At times when the sprinklers fail, the mounds begin to disintegrate, vagrant dust flying off. By night they are illuminated by the dull and dead blossoming of conflagratory patches across their ashen faces.

Even mindful of the staggering exercise of power which constitutes the Whiting Refinery's viscerally apprehensible unmaking of the surrounding landscape, there is also the shifting sensation of unseen and primordial kinetics which assault from below the soul passing through—as if one were standing upon a disintegrating mountain of one's own, the volcanic shakings of which seem to spread cracks across reaches of hissing pipelines which whisper of some unspeakable connection between an age of monsters and the secret origin of oil deposits.

And indeed, before the vast and opaque warehouses around which shuffle ash-streaked workers, it is impossible to shake the terrible impression that one is standing again in some Court of Honor returned to Earth, testifying not of some classical age but of a barbaric prehistory, and in which once again the glimpses of a different hereafter and its incomprehensible creatures might be seen.

Stronger still is the proposition of a conspiratorial vanishment, signaled faintly as a ripple on the water, that some terrible witness must be borne here out of fidelity to the shreds which have heretofore survived erasure. As such, there is no vantage from which the most glaring disappearance of all does not loom and testify to the dredging of the dunes, the infilling of the wetlands the poisoning of the rivers. Nor indeed can one banish from one's sight the industrial

slag and waste which inflicted such incoherence on the land. The frail logic of the individual human must therefore piece together a hazy motive behind scraps of an incongruously fragmented landscape, whose remaining slivers have long since been stripped of any logic or nature beyond the slow knowledge of its debasement and decline. Where the Calumet region was once a habitat of wetlands, dune, and swale of unparalleled vibrancy, its transformation has been affected by highly deliberate processes of heavy industry, one succeeding the other in degradation after degradation. Crude oil floods basements, and petcoke, too toxic to burn, is carted about on trains to nowhere.

And indeed, if such materials are too toxic to burn or bury, is it not the case that there is no longer even the fantasy of regeneration by phoenixlike conflagration? Might it not be that such substances can present only the ultimate refutation of nature's ability to succeed its destructions with new life?

Unlike most light or medium crudes, the tar sands bitumen transported beneath the Great Lakes to the Whiting Refinery is denser than water. For this reason, upon spilling into a body of water, the agent which dilutes it for purposes of mobility may vaporize, leaving the remaining bitumen to sink. Where the standard protocol for an oil spill calls for skimmers, booms and dispersants to scrape it from the surface, sunken bitumen incorporates into the sediment. Following such an event, the only solution is complete dredging.<sup>82</sup> The bitumen throbbing through pipes beneath the Great Lakes is therefore already arrestingly unlocatable, having, for all intents and purposes, disappeared irrevocably from the world, destined either for carboniferous combustion or, in the

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<sup>82</sup> National Academies of Sciences, *Spills of Diluted Bitumen from Pipelines*.

worst case, for spectacular and catastrophic spilling, where it will sink unseen into the largest freshwater body in the world.

Such a disaster has already had a dress rehearsal in the breach of the pipe network's line 6B, which emptied nearly a million gallons of tar-sands bitumen into the Kalamazoo River. The phantoms of Singapore might find some cold comradery with those who had waded in the water into the waters of the Kalamazoo at the height of the disaster to attempt, as many in the midst of disaster do, to repair a catastrophe far beyond their restorative capabilities. The same individuals would later be struck down by their attempts to stand athwart destruction; one worker said, "my cancer is so exotic that I am the living dead."<sup>83</sup>

In describing such disasters, it is no longer a vision of human histories sinking once more into natural history, but rather a collapsing alternation of histories of natural and anthropogenic, which mimics the annihilative action of natural succession while at the same time discarding any potential for the reclamation of emptiness by future species. As such, it is the case that the disasters of nature which now arise do so uncannily in the model of human disaster, compounded with all of history's potential for destruction and forgetting. They are in a word, derangements of natural ekphrasis, which no more restore the vegetation of the dunes or untrouble those sediments drench in crude than the living dead who wandered ashen Chicago could discern how to restore a now vanished city.

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in <https://beltmag.com/my-life-oil-detroit-tar-sands-father/>



## *XII. Pity*

In an essay on death at sea, Valérie Loichot surmises that the “watery realm of unritual graves are nowhere and everywhere at once, absolutely lost and omnipresent.”<sup>84</sup>

It is instructive to recall Rancière's observation, born from his reading of Michelet, that there exists a form of history as signaled by those things which remain—which we readily identify as “history.” Yet there is also “a history because there is an absence,” or alternatively, a mirror image of “history” because there is a *silence*.<sup>85</sup>

As was the case with Singapore before its destruction, no photographs of the Chicago fire have been known to have survived, and indeed, it is possible that none existed in the first place. As

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<sup>84</sup> Loichot, *Water Graves*. 150

<sup>85</sup> Ranciere, *Names Of History*. 63

such, the only photographic record is of the aftermath of a disaster that seems almost to have come and gone invisibly, leaving “only a sense of desolation and ruin, so great and terrible that one can linger no longer, but gropes his way as best he can back to the light, and the homes of men.”<sup>86</sup>

The utter incomprehensibility of such a world can be readily observed in nearly any photograph of the ruin, the gaze of the photographer everywhere finding mooring on the strange and chance survivals of often quotidian objects. A photograph depicting the front façade of the Farwell Building on North Street, for example, has the curious feature of capturing, pasted to the lower portion of the left stair, an advertisement for lead pencils<sup>87</sup>. Everywhere seems to testify to the catastrophic effect of natural and human disaster on the process of history: “there are inscriptions” write historians Sheehan and Upton in the immediate aftermath, “but it is too dark to spell out the names of (those) who tried to secure immortality...In this indefinite light all things are old, and all things are strange.”<sup>88</sup>

In one curious episode of such a strangeness, the I. N. Arnold Home—full of books tended to by the biographer Isaac Arnold—was burned in the conflagration, leaving in ashes its stately gardens once shaded by elms and wreathed in vines of wild grape. All that remained was the cracked and blackened form of the garden’s sundial, measuring neither the growth of the trees nor the shape of the days, yet still proclaiming “Horas non numero nisi serenas”—*I reckon only fair hours.*<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Sheehan and Upton, *The Great Conflagration*. 255-260

<sup>87</sup> Bardwell, *Farwell Building on Washington Street*. Image

<sup>88</sup> Sheehan and Upton, *The Great Conflagration*. 255-260

<sup>89</sup>Smith. *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman, Second Edition*.. 89.

The survival of such objects, transformed from mere trivialities unworthy of being *historical* objects into the curious script of disaster's flotsam, alludes to the fact that the fragmentary words which will remain to speak of this age of man seem fated to tell a story of mounting incoherence. Such wreckage, antagonistic to the writing of any kind of history, threatens therefore to condemn the whole passage of the human race, with all its unredeemed and voiceless souls, to a fate no different than what a wanderer in the ruins in the early morning after the fire told of his fellow dispossessed: "a few persons (who) came and went like specters. They either had nothing to tell, or no time to tell it in." <sup>90</sup>

Writing in 1910, Frederick Francis Cook opens his history with an admission that his project is one which seeks "to realize; rebuild for the mind's eye a vanished city; restore to its streets their varied life; rehabilitate passed types in their proper setting; recall with a due regard for values some of the moving events of a memorable epoch."<sup>91</sup> And yet, Cook discloses his own doubts of performing excavations in a city who had so consciously styled itself as without history; "we, of the earlier time," he writes, "saw the things about us through a tenuous and almost colorless atmosphere — for we lived in a present without a past. Local history was then all in the making."<sup>92</sup>

The entire cacophonous assemblage of barriers to speaking on the events of total annihilation, arises before one seeking to assemble a full view of the Chicago fire as it entered history. Writes Franks Luzerne, one of the "instant historians" of the fire : "(t)he sensations conveyed to the spectator of this unparalleled event, either through the eye, the ear, or other senses at sympathies...cannot be adequately described, and any attempt to do it but shows the poverty of

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<sup>90</sup> Kogan and Cromie, *The Great Fire*. 125

<sup>91</sup> Cook, *Bygone Days in Chicago*. ix.

<sup>92</sup> Cook, *Bygone Days in Chicago*. ix-x

language.”<sup>93</sup> Writes another: “(a)ll intelligent persons that witnessed the burning of Chicago are prepared to testify that nothing is more indescribable than a great conflagration... (i)t is a spectacle that forces into activity all the emotions of the heart, but benumbs judgement and disconcerts action.”<sup>94</sup>

It is the *Chicago Times* which attests most forcefully to the claims of indescribability by destruction’s anonymizing force on objects and space, which seemed to petrify them into unrecognizable fossils: “(w)here is there the artist-writer ... who can go below these material facts (of the fire) and comprehend and estimate the mass of hopes... shriveled and consumed by this fire like bits of tissue paper flung into a thrice-heated furnace?”<sup>95</sup>

It might be recalled that Cuvier was described as a poet whose own art surpassed that of Byron, and that the ephemeral White City was likewise lavished with praise as surpassing the poetic arts. However, in such commentary, one must also intuit a kind of fear of what may or indeed, already has, disappeared from the world, lost in the stalemate between things as they were, and the unspeakableness of the events which erased them.

Pointedly, despite being couched in the language of the natural disaster reminiscent of the cataclysmic “revolutions” of Cuvier, the example of the Great Fire nevertheless shows a key departure from Cuvier’s confidence that a whole could be summoned up from its meanest skeletal fragments. The meeting point of natural and human disaster seemed to present a compound disaster, which for a moment seemed to reveal a grievous absence of regenerative power. One survivor, as if in direct refutation of Cuvier, wrote, “All the characteristics of chaos

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<sup>93</sup> Colbert and Chamberlin, *Chicago and the Great Conflagration*, 211

<sup>94</sup> Luzerne, *The Lost City!* 65

<sup>95</sup> Chicago Times 18 October 1871, quoted in Smith, *Disorder*. 290

and destruction seemed present, and none failed to present themselves as a reward for patient and extended study.”<sup>96</sup>

That this moment was nearly immediately buried by the notion of a “phoenix-like” reconstruction of the city is also curious, for alone among the legendary beasts, the phoenix is unable to leave a fossil trace of its existence, condemned to the living death of endless passage into and out of ash as if it were all at once both the original and pale forgery. Such acts of repetition cannot but make us conscious of our duty to the vanished dead, as well as underline our impotent bystandership to annihilation. Ekphrasis is in its way then a literary and historical haunting which proceeds directly from this sorrow, compelling the poet first to description, then to forgery, and ultimately to failure.

Perhaps such feelings account in some way for our fascination with Breughel’s *Icarus*. Even as we do not appear to turn away—we alone among the ploughman, shepherd, and fisherman seek to bear witness—it is nevertheless the case we are already too late. The opportunity for repair is past. The panorama has already turned away from *us*, for the landscape as it was has already vanished along with Icarus, and even the painting itself is mere illusion. Though it may seem to disclose evidence of a fall, there is already everywhere a landscape which attests to time having moved on. All that remains is a lone and incomprehensible foot, a testament to the impossibility of re-membering—of the repair of the body of the past. And so, staring numbly at the forgery of Breughel’s lost original, we in turn stare at nothing at all, for we have *already* failed the past, will always fail it, because remembrance is a poor substitute for existence, and we know what the dead want, yet not to how to provide it to their impoverished souls.

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<sup>96</sup> Cassius Milton Wicker, quoted in Smith, *Disorder*, 319

### *XIII. Austerlitz*

Arcturus, brightest star in the northern hemisphere. What arrives at the Earth thirty-six years later is an attenuated pulse, fainter than the rays of a single burning candle. Estimations made in the earlier portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century held forth a miscalculated distance of forty years—a total seized upon by the organizers of Chicago’s 1933 Century of Progress Fair to engineer the spectacle of a lighting of the fair by the candlelight whisper of the star, which they believed to have been emitted forty years ago, in 1893, at the opening of the Columbian Exhibition. From the Yerkes observatory, the star’s beam was “harnessed,” its energy converted into an electrical current streamed to power a literal beacon, thus seeming to use the starlight from 1893 to illuminate the grounds at the 1933 Century of progress.

Where the Sun’s far more local energy is enough to in a fraction of a second radiate enough energy to drive the totality of the life process on Earth and assemble the successions of carbon which upon death and time become petroleum, the star Arcturus likewise radiates more energy than the sum total of power used by humanity over the course of the entirety of its history, scorching the empty void around it, only to arrive as a pale wisp of light in the night sky. On Earth, the ghoulis fluorescence of Arcturus endows nothing with life, yet by nature of its use in navigation, it still has the effect of guiding the precise movements of objects over two-hundred trillion miles distant, as if it were some impossible precursor to the forces of fossil energy which now perform the rites of combustion to reshuffle the devices of man across the face of the Earth.

French Astronomer Camille Flammarion suggested in 1894 that, from of science’s recent discovery of light’s finite speed, “a surprising transformation of the past into the present” could take place. “What we believe we see now in the stars is already past; and what is now being

accomplished we do not yet see.”<sup>97</sup> Above the petty devices of man, Flammarion envisioned vast voids of space which served as infinite archive of lost images, and dreamed of a distant planet with a photosensitive surface—“an imperishable column on which the events of terrestrial history engrave and enroll themselves.”<sup>98</sup> Lovers separated by time or circumstance could replay “the dear scenes they enjoyed together on earth,” criminals would find themselves incapable of eluding justice, because each of their misdeeds would “transmit itself eternally into infinity.” Death would lose its finality, Flammarion suggested, for if we so desired, we could watch the Battle of Waterloo in reverse, “a Waterloo of the afterlife.”<sup>99</sup>

Such an imagining evokes a vision of a jury of cosmic dead, before which we believe we can render fair testimony. Yet so furiously does “Saturn’s grey chaos” oppress our vision that, as a speaker at the 1893 Congress of Representative Women, held with the Columbian Exposition, said of Flammarion’s theory, “the spirit, overcome with fatigue, would be arrested in its flight at the very entrance of the portals of infinite space as though it had not advanced a single step,” the infinity of space” opposing “the infinity of time.”<sup>100</sup> At the center of all this wreckage, Flammarion’s column grinds in such frenzy that the dead or living of Waterloo and Austerlitz and, indeed, Chicago and the world, stand up and fall down again in endless confusion, unable to discern if they are history or not. It is as if they too had been laid beneath the lonely Calumet gravestone of Andreas von Zirngibl—the one-armed veteran of the Napoleonic Wars whose gravestone proudly proclaims his participation in the battle of Waterloo with wrong date for the battle.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Flammarion, *Stories of Infinity*.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Proctor, “Poetry of the Stars.” 301-304.

Flammarion's concept of the remote column upon which the cacophonous history of great and shameful acts played out was inspired by the cyclorama. The cyclorama as a technology sought its distinction from the simpler scrolling panoramas by using elaborate and ambitious atmospheric effects – dust, fog, and in the case of the Chicago Fire production, curtains of crimson-tinged smoke.<sup>101</sup> One of the preeminent practitioners of such presentations, Steele Mackaye, sought to enlist these new forces of depiction to perform a great drama portraying the world-finding of Columbus amid a Fair whose White City had already been called a “success of illusion” which realized “a painter’s dream of Roman architecture.”<sup>102</sup>

The technical prowess underpinning the cyclorama was in MacKaye's eyes aimed at one singular purpose: “History, with its supreme struggles, its awful sufferings, its sublime endurances, its exalted aspirations, its heroic endeavors, and its mad but instructive mistakes,” he wrote, was “utterly wasted” if future generations could not be made to contemplate the past with “a just and heartfelt appreciation of the character it reveals.”<sup>103</sup>

In his singular fascination with presenting history as it happened, MacKaye was notably drawn to the project of perfectly reproducing the mercurial properties of light in its ever-shifting declensions and luminosities, an obsession likely born in part from his early studies with American landscape painter William Morris Hunt which perhaps formed the kernel of MacKaye's painterly drive to produce a kind of light sufficient to erase the boundary between viewing a scene and *witnessing* it.<sup>104</sup> Pursuit of this required replication of “the optical phenomena produced (by) the passage of time,” wrote MacKaye, “from night, through the early

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<sup>101</sup> Rundquist, *Pyre*, 47

<sup>102</sup> Wit et al., *Grand Illusions*, 69

<sup>103</sup> Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism*, 184

<sup>104</sup> Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism*, 225

dawn, the rising of the sun, through all the hours of the day with their changing shadows, to the setting of the sun, followed by all the tints of the twilight, and the gradual appearance of the constellations.”<sup>105</sup> MacKaye even sought to reproduce the relative intensities of the stars, from the brightest to the dimmest; the effect was the same as if one were a Champollion standing again in the cyclorama of the Egyptian temple of Dendera, reconfigured for a sky of new names, where *mnit*—“the mooring post”—is inexplicably mistaken for a star called Arcturus.<sup>106</sup>

An early display of these spectacular creations was credited by the *Chicago Times* as being so arresting as to be “so realistic it could be confused with reality,” yet at the same time so unbelievable as to be “a suspension of reality”<sup>107</sup> That such cycloramas and panoramas were first exhibited alongside curiosity museums is likewise a testament to the unreality of tragic history “as it happened” which by nature pierces the barrier between the real and unreal; the written and the unwritten.

Numerous authors had likened the scene of Chicago aflame to a battlefield—a favorite subject of cycloramas—*precisely* in terms of its incomprehensibility and indescribability. “Nobody could see all—no more than one man could see the whole of the Battle of Gettysburg,” *Chicago Tribune* editor Horace White recalled. “It was too vast, too swift, too full of smoke, too full of danger, for anybody to see it all.” The thought was echoed by Samuel S. Greeley’s observation in book *Memories of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871* that “The final report of a great battle does not consist of the official report of the commanding general of what he saw and what he did: it is a statement, more or less carefully compiled of what a great number of soldiers saw and did.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism*. 223-224

<sup>106</sup> See Lull and Belmonte, *The Constellations of Ancient Egypt*. 162 for possible translations of the Dendera zodiac

<sup>107</sup> *Chicago Times*, December 2, 1883, quot. in “Chicago’s Cycloramas.”

<sup>108</sup> Greeley, *Memories of the Great Chicago Fire of October, 1871*. 1

It is therefore of little surprise that the Chicago Fire Cyclorama was configured as an un-witnessable scene in the model of the war panorama. The cyclorama can in this sense be understood as a small breach of the silence which mass destruction imposes, wherein the awed viewer could seek entry to another archive, one which seemed to catalog all those things which writing could not hope to convey, an impression bolstered by the breathless advertisements that, “(n)o words can describe the matchless grandeur of the scene!”<sup>109</sup> or that “(t)he great canvas, with its superb setting, tells the immortal story of the burning of Chicago more faithfully, eloquently, and truthfully than could be done by a whole library of books.”<sup>110</sup>

The cyclorama, as a visual medium, acts to reproduce a scene superficially through *trompe l'oeil*. But as a *temporal* medium, it seeks to reproduce the vertiginous nature of passing time through the presentation of a scene which fatigues the recall of the mind's eye with the sheer impossibility of witnessing in the space of a moment every detail. As such, the scenes of Austerlitz or the Chicago Fire move not from any locomotion of their own, but instead act out their scenes because the viewer must always be seeking to compensate for his failures of witness. The eye is constantly seeking what it does not yet see, what is already disappearing from his vision as he turns his weary head, tricks of light and scale dissolving one scene into another. Indeed, just as the “archive-fevered”<sup>111</sup> historian wavers sickly in facing the task of imposing some semblance of human emotion on a bare chronology ruled by laws of battle and carnage, so too did the panoramic experience become at times so intense that spectators became disoriented

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<sup>109</sup> *Chicago Fire Cyclorama ticket*, collection of the Chicago Historical Society, quot. in Rundquist, 57.

<sup>110</sup> Swing, *A Story of the Chicago Fire*. 29

<sup>111</sup> See Steedman, *Dust*

and fevered by the seeming movement of a still image, a condition known as *sehkrankheit* or “see-sickness.”<sup>112</sup>

Even the “matchless grandeur” of perfect expression would not persist. The cyclorama was shredded in 1913 and sold for scrap at the price of two dollars. All that would remain were a series of oil painting studies, left discarded and uncatalogued in the Chicago History Museum archives.<sup>113</sup> The studies, curiously, had been made to one-tenth scale, as if the wish to recall the world as it once was had shrunk the very canvas, the recession of tragedy being borne out even in the very material upon which it seemed indelibly recorded.

In the late 1990s, employees at a Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago plant in Des Plaines, alerted by an acrid stench emanating from the basement, discovered a trove of rotting film negatives melting into a reeking chemical mass. Near the rotting film were 128 crates of pristine numbered glass-plate negatives, whose chronological arrangement yielded only a hieroglyphic smattering of sites without seeming order or decipherable meaning. The etched number and date on each plate, when combined with the small field books left behind by the photographers and the mile markers on the Chicago River, revealed that the trove contained the meticulous and years-long documentation of the reversal of the river.

As if moved by supernatural will across the séance table, shattered images of a looming farm or half of a creek bed thus cohered into arresting panoramas of erased vistas—as if the vanished worlds of prairie and wetlands were forming once more into an echo of their destroyed originals, tempting one with the possibility that if one could just complete the trivial rearrangement of all such simple fragments, the heavens would wheel backward and Pleistocene stars would shine

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<sup>112</sup> Wallach, *Making a Picture of the View from Mount Holyoke*. 83

<sup>113</sup> “Chicago’s Cycloramas.”

once more upon unbroken dunes as wide as the eye could see, and the Chicago River would add no more to the growing zone in the Gulf of Mexico which is as devoid of life as it is vast.<sup>114</sup>

#### *XIV. Fossil*

To know or speak about oil is to traffic in its economy of ruin. It is to take death into oneself to a degree Michelet could scarcely have imagined; for what are the dead of human history compared to the innumerable creatures which have lived and died beneath the endless revolutions of the sun?

The landscape vastness of natural forms through which Chicago built its industrial might is of course the sole result of eons of sunshine stored and accumulated by numberless creatures living and dying in one place, converted into the powerful but unliving energy by which the industry of Chicago proceeds. It is little wonder that Arcturus with its dim and unliving light would be the star ascendant over such a cursed formulation of resources, chosen to spark the vast network of illumination at the 1933 fair and consecrate the age of fossil fuels and the unstoppable march of an economy no longer even imagined to be nature's.

The modern era's "progress of things communicates its incessant mobility," writes in 1859 Barbey d'Aurevilly—a great admirer of Cuvier—necessitated that a chronicler "be quick about describing," the epoch's "transitional forms," for "soon they will be no more, given this progress which sweeps everything away." Accordingly, "(t)here does not exist, nor will there ever exist a Cuvier to piece back together lost nuances of (today's) social behavior which, unlike buried animals, leave no bones behind."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Briscoe, *There's a Giant Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico — Thanks in Large Part to Pollution from Chicago*.

<sup>115</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, quot. in *The Poetics of Restored Time: Balzac, His Age and the Figure of Cuvier* in: Biological Time, Historical Time.

Oil, like dust or ash, is steeped in historical resonances and potentialities, yet in the final analysis discloses only a history without events, characters, or narrative, defined only by its formless infinitude. If it may be said that the structural remnants of the Whiting refinery may remain long after the extinction of man like monstrous skeletons half buried in sand, there will be by the same token no Cuvier to call up its jet-black lifeblood—the instrument of its damage will have vanished in fire, as if some invisible army of the dead had been called to march across the Earth, only to disappear the moment following completion of its grim campaign.

When we turn our own poetry to such a world, we glimpse a nature which cannot reproduce its bounties in ever greater numbers and stabilities, but instead struggles articulate itself with naught but those unspeaking wreckages which portend only the oblivion which they will leave in their wake, perfecting only a landscape of absences with trees as chasms and dotted with burning heaps of coal.

“Every organized creature,” wrote Cuvier, “forms a whole, a unique and closed system, whose parts mutually correspond to one another.” In a circular fashion, “the form of the tooth leads to the form of the condyle, that of the scapula to that of the nails, just as an equation of a curve implies all of its properties.”<sup>116</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, whose architectural text *Lectures* became available precisely at the moment in which Chicago of was contemplating its rebuilding, applies to architecture a similar conceptualization as Cuvier’s: “In every specimen of mason-work each piece taken separately in the case of dressed stone, or each section in concrete works, should

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<sup>116</sup> Zimmer, C. *The equation of a whale*: 78-84.

clearly indicate its function. We ought to be able to analyze a building, as we take a puzzle to pieces, so that the place and function of each of the parts cannot be mistaken.”<sup>117</sup>

Fossils of course are echoes of things we have never seen, whose silent remnants deny us witness to intimate lives save for their moment of destruction, in what may be taken to be an utter rebuke of personal history. Turning away, we can scarcely bear to see, assailed by the fact that the act of remembering or rebuilding is the impossible reversal of innumerable butcheries of some untouchable thing dredged from the water, far from the shore and blackened by flies as numberless as the stars.

It therefore matters that poetry and history are regarded even by its practitioners as species of failure, as a thing from which the souls of dead must be extracted before they too become dust, that they must follow the example of Cuvier, and desperately seek to “burst the limits of time.” Of such a history, it can only be said that it presents an ideal scheme for disappearance, as if we were again upon Mount Baldy before a great chasm in the shape of a nature which no longer is, or at the center of a mad cyclorama, desperately seeking clarity from distant stars to which the past has already fled.

Colbert and Chamberlin describe one of the more intriguing episodes of the fire, describing the crowd of the undone which flowed past the dazed bibliophile I.N. Arnold, his library and sundial ablaze behind him, fleeing as one panicked mass through the cemeteries lining Lincoln Park, where a great number of the stone crypts had crumbled in the heat to reveal into brilliant light their interred bones.<sup>118</sup> To those passing by, it must have been as if the dead had been raised by

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<sup>117</sup> EE Viollet-le-Duc, *Lectures on Architecture*, trans B Bucknall (1877, 1881), Dover Publications (New York), 1987; Vol 2, p 33. See Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, Volume II. 8 for a treatment of this topic.

<sup>118</sup> Colbert and Chamberlin, *Chicago and the Great Conflagration*. 287

some sinister paleontology, too early for Judgement Day and before they had learned all they sought to learn, and therefore rose from the grave with nothing on their lips but the same babble as the crazed drunkards who staggered in the fire-lit streets shouting to the frantic passerby:

*chickey chickey craney crow! I went to the well to wash my toe!*<sup>119</sup>

### ***XV. Shore***

Flammarion's 1888 *L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire*, depicts a desert anchorite in search of Eden, who discovers a certain point at the end of the world where Earth and sky met, and near which was a narrow gap where the two had come undone. By stooping his shoulders, the pilgrim could extend his head beneath the firmament to glimpse the wheels of Heaven grinding pitilessly to move the canopy of the sky in endless rotation. This vision, a keen eye will note, is greatly reminiscent—and indeed may be a direct copy of— woodcut illustrations of similar scenes, dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. A keener still eye will note that it recalls the 20<sup>th</sup> century Parisian celestial cycloramas which Flammarion likely had witnessed, and which perhaps served as an inspiration for Steele MacKaye.<sup>120</sup>

In his essay “Reflections on the Seventh Art,” film theorist Ricciotto Canudo relates the strange anecdote wherein an aged Flammarion, “having witnessed a screening of a film illustrating a soul's survival after death... once again expressed his faith in spiritism, adding to his new enthusiasm for cinema”.<sup>121</sup> Neither the nature of the film—nor, it should be said, the veracity of this episode—is clear. What is indisputable is that Cammile Flammarion, a lifelong spiritualist,

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<sup>119</sup> Kogan, *Chicago*. 118

<sup>120</sup> Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism*. 227

<sup>121</sup> Quot. in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*.

was guided both in his personal affinities and scholarly conclusions, by the unshakeable belief that nothing was truly dead or lost.

Perhaps this hope for life after death motivated not simply Flammarion's preoccupation with the abiding light of history, but as well his choice to bind, according to rumor, a manuscript of his with human skin. In most widely accepted version, a young woman faced an early death from tuberculosis, and in order to express adequately her unrequited love for Flammarion, she had him sent a strip of skin from her with the request that he use it to bind the first book published by him after her death. True to her wishes, Flammarion bound his *Terres du ciel* in the skin.<sup>122</sup> Asked to comment on the tale, Flammarion himself confirmed the broad strokes, and noted that "this fragment of a beautiful body is all that survives of it today, and it can endure for centuries in a perfect state of respectful preservation."<sup>123</sup>

As late as 1925, *Terres du ciel* was still in the library at Juvisy, where it cannot be doubted that no shortage of nameless readers wandered through its contents, including the close of *Livre III*, in which Flammarion, meandering upon a shore of rocks containing "a thousand remains of fossil species which have succeeded each other during the long centuries of geological periods," takes the "path of the dunes," only to raise his eyes to Arcturus, straining to peer at the unknown seas of the silent planets orbiting the distant star.<sup>124</sup>

### ***XVI. Daedalus***

Nestled amid the glut of mass-produced "instant histories" of the Great Fire are the minute genre of scrapbooks pasting together cut-out newspapers and other scraps, which were at times

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<sup>122</sup> Thompson, *Tanned Human Skin*.

<sup>123</sup> E. Leclerc, "Reliures en peau humaine," *Papyrus*, VIII (1927), 742; quoted in Thompson, "Tanned Human Skin."

<sup>124</sup> Flammarion, *Les terres du ciel*. 387

assembled out of order and with an intent knowable only to the author, who remains silent amid his annihilation and reconstruction of descriptions, anecdotes, and images.

Perhaps these alone, among all other items, may in their tired and tattered materiality disclose by some cryptic grammar the faintest glimmer of a statement directed towards unutterable catastrophe, as if even as they refuse to speak, they alone could sketch the fall of a thing already vanished. And yet—

Writes in 1893 the unnamed author<sup>125</sup> of one of the innumerable pamphlets purporting to tell the story as it happened:

*The fire is already within a block of the telegraph office, where this dispatch is written, and sweeping onward.*



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<sup>125</sup> *The Ruined City; or the Horrors of Chicago*, (New York: Ornum & Co., 1871), 19.

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