When the Endeavour, captained by James Cook, floated into Botany Bay in 1770, the Aborigines on the shore apparently paid no attention. So vast and unfamiliar was that 106-foot eighteenth-century ship that it was beyond the comprehension of those whose culture it doomed. Sinister yet invisible, it provoked no interest. Not until a longboat was lowered did they recognize the situation: a small boat meant invasion. Most fled, leaving two brave warriors to face Cook’s musket shots and four or five babies whom the retreating adults could not carry. As this incident shows, the truly alien is often beyond our ken. Cognitive science documents many instances where people quite simply do not see what they cannot comprehend. Radical strangeness on an immense scale can fail to register. Today, the Anthropocene poses a similar dilemma. This new geological epoch, not yet formally adopted by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, designates the transformation of the entire planet. Most recent scientific proposals posit a mid-twentieth-century divide. This new geological epoch, not yet named, marks time’s reversal, not only as victims of climate change but also as agents. Provocatively, Ghosh points out that imperialism may even have slowed climate change, since it was only after the Global South was freed from colonialism and began to pour out greenhouse gases that the situation became truly critical. The beginning of history, he suggests, has become its end, and the ethical valences of forces like imperialism are turned on their heads. Finally, there is politics. Modern societies are wedded to forms and beliefs that prevent us from understanding the scale of our derangement. Treating politics as a moral arena where individual sincerity is of the utmost value, civic life no longer concerns our collective survival. Ghosh characterizes the “political” as “no longer about the commonweal”. His program with the Anthropocene. A professor of English literature at Leeds, Davies has plunged into the earth sciences with more enthusiasm than precision. Instead of locating us in geological time, Davies’s shaggy grasp of the facts produces a form of collusion? Could it be said that the arts and literature of this period are primarily concerned with attitude adjustment? If one insists on “mourning [the Holocene’s] passing it should be done in a critical, even ironic, frame of mind”. In other words, his politics is ultimately personal, illustrating Ghosh’s point that “individual moral awareness” remains our culture’s central concern. Whether irony can open our eyes to the enormity of the Anthropocene is doubtful, though it may allow us to distance ourselves emotionally from the world we are losing.

As both books show in their opposing ways, the radical strangeness of an altered Earth System confounds our tools of cultural analysis. Towards the end of his discussion, Amitav Ghosh asks how the future will look back on our age. Is it possible that the arts and literature of this time will one day be remembered not for their daring, nor for their championing of freedom, but rather because of their complicity in the Great Derangement? Could it be said that the arts and literature of this period are primarily concerned with attitude adjustment? If one insists on “mourning [the Holocene’s] passing it should be done in a critical, even ironic, frame of mind”. In other words, his politics is ultimately personal, illustrating Ghosh’s point that “individual moral awareness” remains our culture’s central concern. Whether irony can open our eyes to the enormity of the Anthropocene is doubtful, though it may allow us to distance ourselves emotionally from the world we are losing.

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