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**FORTY-FOUR THINGS RECOVERED FROM THE
RUINS OF A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY**

Simon Robb

Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies
University of South Australia
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Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies
University of South Australia
St Bernards Road
Magill
South Australia 5072
Australia
www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute

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FORTY-FOUR THINGS RECOVERED FROM THE RUINS OF A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

Simon Robb*

Time, and anxiety about time: sustainability cannot be thought through without it.

There's a necessary time when subject and community fall apart, become nothing. Sustainability needs that time when destruction appears.

Futures destroyed, or the possibility of future destruction: they seem to be both real and unreal monsters.

Sustainability and horror: they go hand in hand and there is, it could be said, a horror lurking, living side by side with sustainability, latent at every turn.

It's the stability of the sentence that holds the time of sustainability in place, flowing chronologically, one idea to the next, in forward motion, not returning in an uncanny way.

The ground of meaning and the time of meaning become unstuck when the latent thing returns, and that is the horror: the return of that thing that sustainability wants to forget.

When Freud tries to evoke the presence of the uncanny he often returns to the image of someone trying to find their way in a dark room, of someone losing their eyes, of having one's eyes plucked out, trying to see in the dark and returning again to the same object.¹

Sustainability trapped in fearful and useless repetition. That's where the monster enters, emerging yet again as something unwanted recalled. Something destructive recalled by uttering its name, the name of sustainability uttered backwards.

There's failure here, present alongside sustainability, a failure that writes with fear.

Writing that failure to sustain writing. Destruction, in darkness and in light, or in both, in the shadows, of darkness and of light, as in the play of light and dark in the paintings of Caravaggio.

* Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Hawke Research Institute.

1 N Royale, *The uncanny*, Routledge, New York, 2003, p 108.

2 SIMON ROBB

The collapse of time. There it is again: the return of the thing that grounds down time, the spectre haunting progress.

Thinking in cycles. There is no future in this.

The desire for endings, at least the desire for there to be a future without end. Sustainability cannot be thought without it.

The end of time; that's the sentence completed, the sentence that required a time with a beginning, middle and end. Sustainability is located somewhere in time and in language, located on a grid that is only imaginary at best, and at worst has turned inwards, becoming ambiguous.

Sustainability is, in its double manifestation, within the grasp of the present and entirely beyond it.

Sustainability is menacing those who cannot think through it. There is a feeling of a responsibility here, not towards sustainability, but against its tyranny.

Sustainability needs exhaustion. Exhaustion, the idea of a depletion that cannot be recovered, a fatal exhaustion: this kind of depletion seems already present here, in the sense of a blandness, a lack of any vitality, a lack of ambiguity and complexity that is the hallmark of a word that has life, of a word that sustains.

Sustainability is justice exhausted in the future.

Thinking about returning and going on, forever the obligations of writing, repetition and new event, of what was just, what is just, and what will be just. There's a desire for justice, the ever present scepticism that Derrida accords to Marx. It will always return, unbidden, even in the hour of its most manifest defeat. Derrida speaks about ghosts in the name of justice, or rather the desire for justice, the desire to ask the question 'what is just?' Derrida writes that deconstruction has always pointed to the *undeconstructability of a certain idea of justice*.² And to answer this question (of what is just) there's a need to link that question to what has gone before and what will come in the future, *beyond therefore the living present in general*.³ There's a responsibility to the past and to the future when writing of justice, to those lives lost and to come, not just of this embodied, material time.

2 J Derrida 1994, *Spectres of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international* (trans P Kamuf), Routledge, New York, 1994, p 90.

3 Ibid, p xx.

There's a need to learn to live *neither in life nor death alone*⁴ but in all lives lived and to be lived. The question of justice, of how to live: this is pursued not just in being (presence, ontology, the study of being) but also in its other, the non-material presence, the presence that is not wholly present, the shimmering of things past or to come.

When speaking of sustainable societies, someone is speaking of the groundless society of a never-ending critique. This groundless process of critique, this never-ending justice: sustainability cannot live long without it.

Contemplating the moment of giving over to the work and also the moment of resistance to the sustainable, to resist the unsustainable condition of doing nothing, which comes about through an abuse of time, that is constituted in an abuse of time and is articulated here, in the turn to ruin, in the failure to sustain a way of writing.

There, in the experience of shame about producing worthless writing, there in the imagined community of its reception, there in the shame and fear experienced in its simulated presence, there is the experience of a community and of the feeling of being expelled from that community.

The rules of community are re-asserting themselves through fear of a certain writing.

In the experience of wasting time on sustainability, and in working with this thing, there are certain feelings, of being appalled and sickened, of aspiring to be not wasteful, of wanting to perform to the rules, of wanting to perform the rules of writing sustainability and the obligation not to waste the time of the community of scholars.

The loss of community, and the work that community does to sustain itself, is always and has always been happening. The value of narrative labour is revealed when it manifests this lost thing, manifests the loss of communion, the retreat from this world of those who intimately know communion. In this nostalgia is the creation of community, rather than community's disappearance being the creation of a loss: *what this community has 'lost' – the immanence and the intimacy of communion – is lost only in the sense that such a 'loss' is constitutive of 'community' itself.*⁵

The existence beyond existence: that is community, the revelation that all mortals share, that others' lives will go on somehow, beyond a single death.

4 Ibid, p xviii.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The inoperative community* (ed Peter Connor, trans Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p 12.

Community is the unknowable presence of the self. It is also that self that never arrives at a state of communion, for it is always separate from the place where it is. *Community is revealed in the death of others.*⁶

Sustainability re-animates, in the style of a gothic pursuit of knowledge, both community and its corpse.

Dead writing appears in the manner of an extinguished sun, collapsing systems, exploding into a thousand million shadows.

There are shadows here, gathering somewhere, where sustainability and destruction intermingle, within the light, the full sun, totally exposed to understanding, and within the darkness, where worms breed and consume and recycle, where the body stands at the point of revulsion and enlightenment.

The modern world is fluid and transient and all its things and its people and its processes and its relationships are built on waste.

Useless expenditure, this necessary pursuit, this endeavour that has no return. Wasting the value of academic time. Wasting the value of academic labour. In a ritualised form. Destroying the wealth of the academic community, the intellectual community, the heritage of the work of scholars. Destroying all this value: this could only come from a utopian desire. An act inspired by the desire to turn gold to shit.

Turn gold to shit. That's a utopian slogan after Sir Thomas More.⁷ That's doing social sustainability.

Waste time and property. Be useless, lazy and brainless. Smash things up. Get totally wasted. That's utopian.

There is in this the anguish of *being* unsustainable, of the unsustainable being, the experience of that, infusing sustainability writing from moment to moment.

There is always a reluctance to sustain writing.

This is the difficult thing in sustainability: the idea of going on.

6 Ibid, p 15.

7 Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516. For a further discussion of the link between gold, shit and *Utopia* see Simon Robb (2005) *A terrorist imagines the king's death in a socially sustainable utopia*, Working Paper No 32, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Magill, South Australia, <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/publications/default.asp>

That's the concern, and indeed it must be: that idea, it must be present in the idea of something sustainable being lived out.

The necessary wasting of sustainability.

There's a transparent way of writing that sustains both the intellectual and practical desire to do something for sustainability. A writing that goes on despite itself, that has no need or desire for selfhood, identity, concreteness or tangibility.

This is not that kind of writing. This is a self-conscious, concrete and mannered way of writing sustainability. A shadowy distant cousin to the intellectually useful and practical one, performing, as it does, the earnest and lost world of an idea embodied.

The idea of sustainability played out as structural problematic of writing.

Here's an archaeological thing, the aesthetic and intellectual waste of sustainability, found at the time of sustainability, and in the darkness of an unsustainable place.

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Telephone +61 8 8302 4371
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- further the development of interdisciplinary research contexts in which knowledge about sustainable societies can be developed and applied;
- contribute to national and international policy on sustainable societies.

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Website: www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute

Hawke Research Institute Director:
Professor Alison Mackinnon
Telephone +61 8 8302 4370
Facsimile +61 8 8302 4776
Email alison.mackinnon@unisa.edu.au