

Returning from Afar.

***Returns in slight delay on La part inconstructible de la Terre*¹**

by FRÉDÉRIC NEYRAT

(translated by Jean-Sébastien Laberge)

I think... I think says the brain...
But the little spire with the eyes of ecstasy
On the brain's dome is the life,
No thinking anything,
But flaming...

Robinson Jeffers, 'Doors to peace'.

To introduce my book, *La part inconstructible de la Terre* [*The Unconstructible Part of the Earth*], I wish to reverse the order in which it was exposed, beginning with the end. The third part was devoted to a philosophy of nature – a philosophy oriented by the necessity to think the earthly nature and status of human beings in their relationship with planet Earth. Indeed, I maintain that a philosophy of nature can help to clarify in counterpoint what is denied in our era. This philosophy of nature first includes the persistence of a power [*puissance*] of natural alterity, the creative power [*puissance*] of the data of sensibility, and second an obscure and inaccessible counter-power [*contre-puissance*] which constitutes the reverse of the vitality of the world, an unapparent anti-world which accompanies every existent from even before its conception until after its disappearance. What our world tends to stifle is, to put it in one word, the wild – one would have to say wildernessity [*sauvagèreté*] or perhaps the wild state, except that it is precisely not a state – understood at the same time as the anarchic profusion of the sensible and the absence of foundation of this profusion, a process at work which traverses the constructions and the unconstructible condition of these. When everything becomes the same, identical and *ready-to-hand*, the wild is what, at its greatest peril,

¹ This text was read, with a few corrections and additions, to the symposium 'Earth 2.0: How not to eat the Earth?', Organised by Christophe Bonneuil and Frédéric Neyrat, which was held in Paris on 9th June 2016 as part of a E.H.E.S.S programme. The orality of this intervention is maintained here. *La part inconstructible de la Terre* was published in 2016 by Éditions du Seuil. For a reception of this book, visit <https://atoposophie.wordpress.com/2016/05/23/autour-de-linconstructible/>

comes back from afar. Returning from afar, he defeats the law of the same, and promises the unusual, the extra-terrestriality that lies in await in the heart of earthly life.

Philosophy of Nature. To illuminate these overly complicated introductory formulas, and to give space for the return, I must unfold what is meant by nature. Nature can be expressed in three ways. First, one can say natural what is the product of nature, this fruit for example, or this plant – imagine it, if you wish, before the appearance of human cultures. But the product of nature is incomprehensible without taking into consideration the production as such, which is at the origin of this fruit and this plant, this is nature as process. Here we find a distinction that dates back at least to the 13th century, but whose provenance is undeniably Aristotelian, between a nature that will be called natured, *natura naturata*, that is to say a nature-object, a nature-product, limited, even completed, and a natureing nature, a *natura naturans*, that is to say a nature-subject, a nature-production which is in principle ontologically unlimited (Weijers 1978; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Δ 4, 13-15; Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, 193b12-20). By nature-subject, it is not necessarily necessary to hear anything of the order of a personification of nature – even if the personification of it, in the form of a prodigal Mother or the Gaia hypothesis, can rely on this one – but rather a principle and a cause which not only gives place, space and time to a certain product of nature, but goes beyond it upstream and downstream, in the manner in which the tree is more than fruit. As René Char writes in ‘Leaflets of Hypnos’: ‘The fruit is blind. It’s the tree that sees’ (Char 1973: §165).

I believe, however, that it is necessary to add a third dimension to this bipartition which seems to organise most of the approaches of nature, which I call a denaturing nature, a *natura denaturans*, which is not reduced to a product or a production, but is an anti-production. Schelling has been my reference in founding this notion: if there were only productive flux, there would be nothing but natureing nature at infinite speed, nothing but flux; there must therefore be a ‘hindrance’ to this flow, Schelling tells us, a slowing down which allows for the existence of the object, knowing that this obstacle must itself be refuted in order for the process of the naturant to be maintained (Schelling 2004). An additional speculative turn makes it possible to think of this hindrance as originating, not posterior to production but prior to it. Anterior to production is a moment of contraction – to use a Schelling term again – preceding a moment of expression, a negative, obscure moment that precedes the positive moment of coming to light, the anti-production from before all production. But what does that mean? How can we illustrate this anti-production?

The return of the *laissez-place*. A possible illustration of this category of anti-production could be drawn from the field of artistic creation, as explained by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is philosophy?*:

In a violently poetic text, Lawrence describes what produces poetry: people are constantly putting up an umbrella that shelters them and on the underside of which they draw a firmament and write their conventions and opinions. But poets, artists, make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision that appears through the rent-Wordsworth's spring or Cezanne's apple, the silhouettes of Macbeth or Ahab. Then come the crowd of imitators who repair the umbrella with something vaguely resembling the vision, and the crowd of commentators who patch over the rent with opinions: communication. Other artists are always needed to make other slits, to carry out necessary and perhaps ever-greater destructions, thereby restoring to their predecessors the incommunicable novelty that we could no longer see. This is to say that artists struggle less against chaos (that, in a certain manner, all their wishes summon forth) than against the "clichés" of opinion. The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page or canvas is already so covered with pre-existing, pre-established clichés that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 203-204)

From this long quotation, I retain the idea of a 'necessary destruction', in other words the need to leave room for 'free and windy chaos', 'a breath of air from the chaos'. By this description it can be understood that to leave space is not to *make* space, not to *build* it, but to deconstruct it or undo it. The question is not, in a first instance, about hybridising, putting together or lining up human and non-human, but of decomposing what it is that fixes them in a programmed being or becoming. Against this being and against this becoming, we need the return of the *laissez-place* (literally: leave space).

This subtraction that leave space, I see at work, or rather – to refer to Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) – I see it inoperative at the heart of all relationships. In my book, I insisted that no relationship can be imagined without prior separation, but here I would like to give the separation a more dynamic content, in order to explain, in my own way, what Sophie Gosselin calls a 'gap-of-contact' (Gosselin 2015). What is it that allows me to communicate with someone, if by communication we do not hear the exchange of information between two individuals monadically closed on themselves, nor the absolute confusion between the speakers at stake? To communicate, in the most just and profound sense, is to hear this: outside oneself, to meet the other outside herself. To communicate implies a reciprocal movement of exit that exiles the beings out of themselves, and from then on a spiral with curved strands which, however close they may be, do not identify, but deviate due to a difference, leaving something be desired. The exiting of oneself, the ecstasy prior, is – to return to the text of Deleuze and Guattari – the stage which consists in destroying the clichés and opening to the wind of the night. To put it in a less metaphorical way, this means finding a way to cross the threshold of the image of the ego and the image of the other, which is most often only the surface on which I project either my own self, or that part of me that I did not want to recognise.

In this respect, the *laissez-place* is the condition of possibility of any trans-personal individuation. Indeed, denaturation is undoubtedly not far removed from the 'dedifferentiation' of which Simondon speaks, this becoming-incompatible with oneself which is a refusal to adapt to what is, to the reality become clichéd (Simondon 1989: 55-59). For Simondon, individuation starts not from the individual, but from the non-individual, from the un-actualised field, from the unresolved potential: the pre-individual, writes Simondon (1989: 196), is 'nature', *apeiron* (that which is not limited), the 'reality of the possible' as the 'first phase of being'. But access to the *apeiron*, to this reservoir of active form in me that goes beyond me and allows me to participate in a subject greater than myself, requires a rupture of the self, a cracking of the same that makes it stand out the crack of which Deleuze and Guattari speak, the fault of the ego; for it is first of all, for the human being, through the fault of the ego, that the possibility of a new form can be engendered.

Aphysia. The philosophy of nature which I have just outlined is doubtless hardly audible today, and I should like, the second point of my piece, to explain succinctly why that is. How, indeed, could such a philosophy be of any help in the era of the Anthropocene when it is said precisely that humanity leaves no room for nature? When one of the most profound paradigms of the human and social sciences binds us not to separate the natural from the cultural, the social, the history, or the technology? Furthermore, how can such a philosophy help us solve environmental problems? Should we not limit ourselves to the contributions of history, political science and economics?

First of all, my book does not neglect history or economics, especially in its first two parts; and I thought it useful to open the philosophical inquiry of empirical analysis up to ontological abstraction. Today, a certain kind of suspicion reigns now as to the very idea of an ontological approach with nature as the field of investigation – and this suspicion must be analysed in itself: to put it in Schelling's words, the statement 'nature does not exist' is 'common to all modern philosophy' (Schelling in Grant 2006: 20). As Iain Grant Hamilton showed in *Philosophies of nature after Schelling*, it is all or most contemporary philosophy that revolves around a refusal of nature. As such, the eco-constructivist declaration that nature is dead, far from being original, confirms the diagnosis of Carl Gustav Carus, a naturalist of the 19th century: an 'aphysia' (Grant 2006: ix, 61).

This aphysia or anaturalism can be analysed in different ways. In my book I wanted to show that anaturalism is not merely a modern phenomenon, but a wider reaching symptom, beginning with the pre-Socratic logical abstraction, continuing with the monotheistic condensation whose ontologico-theological operation consists in installing a single God atop the corpse of nature, this operation making the bed of the mechanisation operated by modern science, the latter nourishing itself and being nourished by the deployment of the capitalist economy, its equivalence of everything

with everything, its commodification and its financialisation. To these four deaths of nature described in the book, we must add a fifth: the simulation of nature, its modeling and its digitisation (I thank Christophe Laurens for telling me about the Earth simulation project called *Ultimate Earth Project*). Logical abstraction, monotheism, mechanics, capitalism and simulationism are at the origin of this inability to see nature other than as a devitalised matter or an object under the empire of human thought and praxis.

This aphysia is at the heart of today's dominant ecology: far from being heretical, Latour's position – 'Thank God, nature is going to die' (Latour 2004: 25) – is perfectly in tune with modern thought, and in this sense Latour, contrary to what he believes, is an absolutely classical modern. This modernity defines contemporary geopoer as a project of remaking the Earth as if it were a virgin land without history, without autonomous materiality, and without peoples inhabiting it and having produced cultural alliances with it. This Earth 2.0. is the promise of geo-capitalism, which organises its economic field from total extraction to the absolute recasting of the ecosphere – a recast that is accompanied by melting glaciers, biodiversity, and acceptable odds of survival for the human species.² In the words of Jason W. Moore, geo-capitalism believes in 'inexpensive' nature, *cheap*, that is degraded nature, perverted, as the verb to *cheapen* suggests in English (Moore 2016). It is a fact that an inexpensive nature is a fleshless nature, and thus geopoer is condemned to reign over a field of ruins.

Allo-nature, extra-human and politics. I believe, however, and this will be the third point of my speech, that certain contemporary political struggles succeed in thwarting *anaturalism*. I believe that it is the unconstructible that is at stake in the Zones to Defend, around Notre-Dame-des-Landes or Sivens not so long ago. In each case, it is a question not of making nature talk, in other words of identifying oneself with it without difference, without deviation, or of considering it as an object completely distinct from us or as something with which we should hybridise to form a fusional assemblage, but rather to bring nature and humans out of themselves so that they can meet in a sort of Alterity Zone, an area of the alien where nature is not only peasantry but para-peasantry experience, where humans try to live outside the great cities. Nature and humans, to use the previous image, then make a spiral that maintains the distance between the two, nature being allo-nature, nature-other, and humans extra-human – that is, those which are at the same time *extremely* human and *outside* of the human, inhuman in this sense, but of an inner inhumanity, living and not cold or empty. This distance between allo-nature and the extra-human is what I call the unconstructible, that is to say, a desert full of intensities, the domain of the wild where nothing is predicted in advance, domesticated, where nothing say yet of what could come if not the refusal of what brings the becoming back to what fixes it or prevents it, in the form of a dam or an airport. As I

² On all these points, I refer to the first two parts of *La Part inconstructible de la Terre* (Neyrat 2016: 47-233).

see it, the wild is not a sacred space, but a condition of possibility of a practice by which humans and nature can defend themselves.

I would like to emphasise this point: the unconstructible is a condition of possibility which demands an impossibility. Indeed, in order for there to be something possible, again, it is necessary that the impossible be localised, recognised. In this sense, to oppose a construction means to territorialise a non-taking-place. This not-taking-place can go from the declaration of radical unconstructibility, in other words the defense of a space exempt from any appreciation in value, to the restriction of use, I mean life forms that refuse the primacy of the exchange value and of the concrete. The unconstructible is therefore not necessarily a land devoid of humans, but rather a land that does not allow the human to refuse all that is not him, a land that would go beyond the human/non-human alternative to a reversal of the distant/near, extra-terrestrial/terrestrial, or alien/non-alien type (The Laboratory Planet 2016). Such a reversal presupposes, I would suppose, a truly post-constructivist political ecology capable of bringing back what has been stifled by the geo-anthropo-economic construction of the world.

To this end, I would like to conclude by attempting a formulation whose aim would be to condense my point: the wild, the wild today, is what returns from afar.

To return from afar, the expression tells us that it does not take much before we can no longer return, and that one dies, so that the wild disappears; to return from afar is also a way of referring to what is not ready-to-hand, to what stays and remains foreign, distant.

I do not know what can return from afar today, in other words what could escape the extermination of the Anthropocene as it is shaped by the mode of civilisation of the Far North; but I know that only what returns from afar – the unfinished past, the past to be reinterpreted, distant pasts not only terrestrial but also extra-terrestrial – will allow us to hope not to become the beings that we would have really preferred never to be: beings condemned to themselves.

As a promise and a return from afar, I think of the ‘message of the indigenous cosmopolitans’ which Barbara Glowczewski (2015: 62) retransmits to us, the one that reminds us that ‘all forms of earthly life are interdependent with interstellar life forms’.

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