**COMMUNICATING THE OUTSIDE**

**NATURE, THE OUTSIDE, AND ROMANTICISM**

L’art respire volontiers l’air irrespirable. Supprimer cela, c’est fermer la communication avec l’infini. La pensée du poète doit être de plain-pied avec l’horizon extra-humain

(Art willingly breathes unbreathable air. Stopping this is to end the communication with the infinite. The poet’s thought must be on the same level as the extra-human horizon).

Victor Hugo, *The Promontory of the Dream*

There is no outside—this is the main watchword of our time; the second one is that there is no nature.[[1]](#endnote-1) My hypothesis is that there is a secret complicity between the foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) of the outside, which causes a psychopolitical illness that I call *exophobia* (the fear of the outside), and the rejection of nature, the *anaturalism* constituting the technophilic basis of the Anthropocene and its geo-engineering fantasies. Romanticism could be used as a cure for both exophobia and anaturalism.

Leaning on a genealogy that extends from Heraclitus and the Greek atomists to Friedrich Nietzsche, I first want to offer a metaphysical explanation of the healthful rejection, by the philosophies of immanence, of the idea of a transcendent outside. Devoted to this ontological rejection, the first section of my essay will especially focus on the way Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels tied the rejection of the outside to the disappearance of nature, a rejection and a disappearance that could not be understood without considering the rise of capitalism and its social, industrial anthropization of nature. In the second section, I will shed some light on a crucial difference between thinkers of the first post-structuralist wave (amongst others: Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray) and those who belong to the second post-structuralist one (Bruno Latour and Antonio Negri)—a difference that is, to me, not underlined enough in contemporary debates striving to evaluate post-structuralism in order to go beyond it and to develop a new kind of theory, be it under the name of new materialism, object-oriented philosophy, speculative realism, or the anthropology of ontological turn. The thinkers of the first post-structuralist wave strengthened and developed the calling into question of the great divides (between nature and culture, male and female, and so on) and the rejection of any kind of transcendent Outside, a rejection and a questioning that was initiated by thinkers of immanence (as we will have seen in the first section of my essay). The second poststructuralist wave, on the other hand, put things this way: 1) Yes, there is no transcendent Outside, and *consequently* there is no outside at all[[2]](#endnote-2); 2) Yes, nature and society are indistinguishable, and *consequently* nature does not exist any longer.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In the three last sections of my essay, I will object to these two problematic consequences that, I argue, underpin the Anthropocene and its disastrous environmental consequences. To support my philosophical objection, I will devote the third section to an explanation of what I call the *field of existential differences*, a concept leaning on the following thesis: indeed, there is no *absolute* Outside, but there is an *infinity of outsides* as innumerable as there are singular existences. Each outside opens itself inside each existing being—“chose inouïe, c’est au-dedans de soi qu’il faut regarder le dehors” (surprisingly, it is inside yourself that you can look at the outside), argues Victor Hugo (*Préface* 699).[[4]](#endnote-4) This internal outside is the condition of the possibility of relationality or more accurately of communication: existing beings can communicate thanks to their internal openness. Communication occurs between different beings—that is to say, beings defined by their existential difference; furthermore, each existential difference (each existing being) reveals a field to which it belongs. This field is not a preexisting substance but an ontological domain transformed by the appearance of new forms of existence.

Once my existentialist proposition is explained, I will be able to revisit the concept of nature. Instead of liquidating nature—killing it; turning it into asubstantial, fungible resources for human “progress”—I will lean on several Romantic writers to describe, in the fourth and fifth sections, nature as a field of existential differences. As a form of thought, Romanticism was always subject to several metaphysical oscillations: between the natural and the supernatural, between revolutionary stances and reactionary retractions, and between a militant optimism (Percy Shelley’s “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” in his “Ode to the West Wind”) and a dark pessimism (Lord Byron’s “better not to be” at the end of “Euthanasie”). Instead of too quickly favoring only one dimension of Romantic thought, I’d rather argue in this essay that these oscillations draw a space of fundamental polarities that still help us to understand our contemporary situation. Romanticism is of course historically datable, and we can track its origins, its forerunners, and its acme; but Romanticism also constitutes an event, à la Alain Badiou, that is to say, a figure of truth that is still available, a “surviving Romanticism”—to borrow from Sara Guyer (18–20)—that we can still solicit for our present.

In this sense, I agree with Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre when they define Romanticism as a transhistorical vision having as its center “a reaction against the way of life in capitalist societies” (17)—a reaction giving rise to revolutionary statements *and* to Gérard de Nerval’s “black sun of Melancholia.” We thus must not forget that, insofar as society is still capitalist, Romanticism is still topical. For Löwy and Sayre, “Far from conveying an outsiders’ view, far from being a critique rooted in some elsewhere, the Romantic view constitutes modernity’s self-criticism” (21). Yet I claim that it’s only because Romanticism reveals or produces outsides *from within* that Romanticism can—still—constitute an alternative to capitalism. When the present is too compact, too immanent, too anthropomorphized, too enclosed in itself, we need thinkers and activists risking an elsewhere—revealing, building, and, in the end, communicating an outside to everyone, at least potentially. My hypothesis is that it’s possible to save the concept of nature, not as a stable transcendent entity on which racist and sexist politics could be built but as an element of disruption. Leaning on Victor Hugo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I will define nature as 1) something that can neither be reduced to a transcendent part nor to an immediate and visible aspect and 2) a plural mediation enabling a political critique of society. Nature is plural, but this plurality does not lead to considering the world as a collection of ontologically equivalent entities; rather, natures are profoundly different, sometimes contradictory, always deceiving our expectations along with our unfortunate attempt to reduce them to something or to nothing. Natures disrupt both the human/nonhuman divide and the attempt to erase it in a peaceful liberal world that a Parliament of humans and/or things could govern. If we want to prevent the Anthropocene from becoming cosmophagic—from eating, swallowing, destroying the nonhuman universe—and in the end from becoming anthropophagic for lack of otherness, then we must leave a place for an updated concept of nature that could foster an anti-Anthropocenic politics.

**End of the Outside, End of Nature**

Here is my opening question: what has motivated the radical reconsideration of any figure of otherworldliness or outer-worldliness? With such a question, the name of Friedrich Nietzsche comes to mind. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he showed “how the ‘true world’ finally became a fable” (17). This Nietzschean detonation tends to extinguish not only the Christian religion but also Plato, insofar as Christianity, Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, was nothing more than a “Platonism for the people” (3). If this destruction affects both God and the so-called platonic intelligible world, our investigation should on the one hand look for the historical, religious, and philosophical sources of the theme of the Death of God, and on the other hand grasp the way in which many thinkers kept trying to avoid the ontological separation between the here-below and the beyond that Plato is said to have opened.

Regarding the topic of the Death of God, I will note that this is already present in many authors before Nietzsche. Jean Paul writes in 1796: “‘Christ, is there no God?’ And he answered: ‘There is none!’” (336). In fact, the death of God was only a nightmare, not a reality, for this early German Romantic; but this bad dream will haunt Romanticism— as I will explain again at the end of my essay— and beyond it all of German Idealism.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The question of ontological separation would require an investigation that cannot be completed in this essay: I would have to show how Baruch Spinoza defines substance as “indivisible,” how Denis Diderot argues that everything is “sentient,” shifting without discontinuity from inertia to living bodies, and how Heraclitus, Epicurus, and Lucretius argue that everything flows.[[6]](#endnote-6) All these authors, from Heraclitus and the Greek atomists to the Nietzsche of the *Gay Science*, produced an ontology of nature—or an ontology of life— rejecting the idea of a transcendent Outside. Yet it’s only with Marx and Engels that the world was, for the first time, defined as *practically* and *historically* one, enclosed on itself. The diagnosis of these two authors still determines our contemporary relation with nature and the outside, which is why I want to shed some light on their theoretical matrix.

Indeed, starting with the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx argued that nature and society are concretely indistinguishable: Nature, he wrote, is inserted into the “self-generation” of Humanity (356). In other words, Nature is “man’s *inorganic body*,” that is to say not only “a direct means of life” but first and foremost “the matter, the object and the tool of his life activity” (328). In *The German Ideology*, which was written in the wake of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx and Engels explain that the transformation of Nature is the effect of a global industrial process: capitalism is but a megamachine turning the whole world into a gigantic Marketplace, reducing nature to a mere product. During this process, Nature lost any kind of exteriority:

Of course, in all this the priority of external nature remains unassailed, and all this has no application to the original men produced by *generatio aequivoca* [spontaneous generation]; but this differentiation has meaning only insofar as man is considered to be distinct from nature. For that matter, nature, the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin). (*The German Ideology* 63)

*Capital* will show how, with the reign of commodities, every terrestrial reality loses its singularity and becomes an element of a specific immanence: the equivalence of everything with everything, which is not so far away, according to Alexander Galloway, from the world flat ontologies—and object-oriented philosophies that strive to go beyond the post-structuralist mode of thinking—describe. In 1863, in a famous unpublished chapter of *Capital*, Marx proposes two important concepts for our inquiry: “formal subsumption” of labor to capital (when capital subordinates preexisting productive forces) and “real subsumption” (when capital becomes able to produce its own means, its own machines and methods of production, reshaping everything on the basis of its own requirements) (128–36). Real subsumption is the capitalist name for the end of the outside, the process through which capitalism reconfigures everything on Earth—in other words, the beginning of geo-capitalism and its anthropocenic effects.

In this regard, we could say that the (celebrated or wished-for) end of the Great divides between nature and society/culture/technology, the disappearance of the Outside, and the melting of nature into anthropogenic activities, are not new ideas coming from twentieth-century constructivist thinkers or Actor-Network Theory promoters but from Marx and Engels, 150 years ago. Like Nietzsche, Spinoza, and Epicurus, Marx and Engels were thinkers of immanence who fought against transcendence (of God, of “Man,” of commodities and their fetishism, etc.) and against the divisions opened up by transcendence. However, unlike Democritus, Diderot, Spinoza, or Nietzsche, Marx and Engels no longer needed an ontology of nature to destroy the great divides and absolute transcendence. Instead of ontology, they appealed to economics: they wanted to grasp the *nomos* of our capitalist *oikos*, the rules of an industrial globalization in the process of swallowing the Earth, regurgitating it as *partes extra partes* commodities. Since the advent of modernity and its geo-capitalist scaffolding, we could say, parodying Wittgenstein, if nature could talk, only commodities would understand it.

**Divides, Cleavages, and Differences**

From cybernetics to object-oriented philosophies through post-structuralism, a theoretical challenge has been advanced: who will be able to definitively erase the difference between living and nonliving beings, nature and artifacts, organisms and machines? What will be—please, forgive my irony—the best theory to justify in ontological terms what capitalism already began to perform in the nineteenth century? During the last 30 years, sociologist Ulrich Beck, meta-sociologist Bruno Latour, and cyber-feminist Donna Haraway— authors who belong to what I call the second post-structuralist wave—have blurred the theoretical division between nature and society, human beings, animals, and artificial beings.[[7]](#endnote-7) French anthropologist Philippe Descola—a proponent of what I have called in the introduction the anthropology of ontological turn, which aims to replace the concept of structure inherited from Claude Levi-Strauss with ontological propositions about cultures—has recently shown that we have to think “beyond nature and culture.” And so? Is there anything here that is theoretically objectionable?

Certainly not. The critique of the Great divides was necessary because these divisions were based on the concept of a transcendent Outside. This Outside, as I explained, was demolished by the attacks of Lucretius, Spinoza, Diderot, Nietzsche, and Marx. Besides, I find incredibly thoughtful and generous the way Donna Haraway thinks, the relations she produces between split domains of thought and the capacity that she has to follow and tie different scientific, social, philosophical, political threads together. I still learn a lot from her, from her last theorizations about what she calls the “Chthulucene” (an Anthropocene conceptually reconfigured from a nonhuman, non-Western, nonphallocentric perspective), and I enjoy translating her work.[[8]](#endnote-8) But many contemporary thinkers belonging to the second post-structuralist wave drew these two very problematic conclusions. First, if there is no absolute Outside, then there is no outside at all. Let us listen to Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s voices, in *Commonwealth*: “One primary effect of globalization is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no ‘outside’” (vii). Second, if nature and society are indistinguishable, then nature does not exist any longer. “Thank God, nature is going to die,” Bruno Latour writes in *Politics of Nature* (25): “There is no rupture” between the world of the so-called “things ‘as they are’ and human ‘representations’ of these things” (12). This lack of rupture was theorized by Ulrich Beck in *Risk Society* (the French edition of this book being prefaced by Latour). Like Marx and Engels, Beck speaks about “the end of the antithesis between nature and society”: nature is “a historical product,” a “second nature” (80–81).

What is wrong here? The fact that the theorists I have just quoted have melted two distinct concepts: cleavage (split, *Spaltung*) and difference. Thinkers of the first post-structuralist wave, like Derrida, Deleuze, or Irigaray, were thinkers of difference: they fought against cleavages, that is to say, *absolute* separationswhose goal is to avoid any real relation between the considered terms. An *absolute* difference is nothing but the denial of difference itself, the denial of the relation that a difference is itself able to produce, even through its repetition, as Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*. Actually, a cleavage is always an attempt to shape and preserve, as I will explain in the next section, an identity, an imaginary “pure” identity, and not a difference. To shed some light on my last statement, let’s focus on philosopher and feminist Luce Irigaray’s 1977 influential book *This Sex Which is Not One*, where she develops her radical approach to sexuality and male/female “difference.” The phallocentric cleavage poses, on the one hand, the only existing sex, the male One-sex, its identity and its norms (to be active, to not cry, to master nature, etc.), and on the other hand a sex “which is not one,” the female sex that is *un sexe qui n’en est pas un*, to reestablish the French original text and its main meaning: *this sex that is not a sex*, that is to say, this sex that does not really *exist*. In other words, the phallocentric cleavage produces the absolute gap between a (male) identity=1 and a (female) nonidentity=0. In this respect, the fight against phallocentrism consists less in overcoming a Great divide—between two (id)entities—than in uncovering the Great annihilation of a difference (the female one) in favor of the only recognized identity (the male one).

We see the same logics of annihilation in the way modernity sets the (non)relation between nature and culture/technology/human society: if we want to understand this (non)relation, that is to say, this cleavage, we have to begin our investigation not with Romanticism and its so-called idealization of nature (I will question this weak idea in the fourth section) but with the fact that nature was reduced, since the seventeenth century, to nothingness. It is because René Descartes at first said that nature is not a “deity” but a mathematizable area that we can use nature— or the Earth— at will, digitalizing, reprogramming, and printing it in 3D: “By ‘Nature’ here, Descartes wrote in 1630’s, I do not mean some deity or other sort of imaginary power. Rather, I use the word to signify matter itself” (25). Since nature is nothing by itself—according to Descartes, but we could add Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei—it is a mere quantity without qualities and can therefore be turned into anything humans want.[[9]](#endnote-9) The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century paved the way to the enchanted world of commodities—that we studied with Marx and Engels—and its anaturalist basis. In this modern world, only technologies, sciences, cultures, and human values are considered as real, active, and capable of giving an identity—*their* identity—to the rest of the world. To sum up: Humans = identity = 1; nature = nonidentity = 0.

Yet it is not the same thing to say that two things are *separated* as opposed to saying that two things are *split*. The difference produced by a separation does not prevent a relation—quite the contrary. I argue that separation is the condition of possibility for relation. Separation precedes communication, an ontological statement that Romanticism exemplifies as I will show below. In this respect, I argue that exophobia—the fear of the outside—is an effect of a misunderstanding of what it means to connect, a misunderstanding that I attribute to the second wave of post-structuralism. It was believed that in order to render relations possible one had to ward off the outside; my argument is that in warding off the infinity of outsides, one renders relations impossible—one merely overexposes everything to an oppressive light under which relations become irons. Let us develop this point.

**The Field of Existential Differences**

The lesson of the former section is the following: let us think twice when we plan on ending the Great divides as they may hide Great annihilations—the first ones need to be contested in light of the second ones. Along with contemporary philosopher Catherine Malabou, I argue that it is necessary nowadays to “change difference” in the name of a radical existentialism able to challenge the Great annihilations and the divides underpinning them. Strategically, the goal of the existentialism I propose is to insert a sort of retroactive bifurcation between the first and the second post-structuralist waves to avoid the mere proliferation of theories—like OOO—that, under the cover of an ontological equality that erases the Great divides, maintains the social, political, and environmental inexistence that these dominant systems produce. In doing so, I will avoid the ontological indifferentiationthat follows from the rejection of differences and separations in the name of the abolition of cleavages.

But the radical existentialism I offer also needs to avoid a second danger (which is symmetrical to ontological indifferentiation): a bad reaction against the necessary fight against the Great divides, a reaction I call *the morals of symbolic identities*. Let us think about the way some French psychoanalysts and anthropologists have used the notion of the symbolic order, which they have reshaped through a very restrictive reading of Jacques Lacan and Claude Levi-Strauss, in order to justify rigid sexual identities, the prohibition of gay marriage, and the refusal of the adoption of children by nonheterosexual parents.[[10]](#endnote-10) These thinkers, who participated in the building of a reactionary discourse that is nowadays well established in France, use the concept of a fixed symbolic order in order to legitimate the worst reactionary splits (between, for example, the good symbolic-born parents and the bad natural ones). In order to avoid ontological indifferentiation and the morals of symbolic identities, I argue in favor of a field of existential differences that will beable to describe what links singularities without obliterating their separation, their reciprocal extraterritoriality.

Let us briefly discuss what constitutes the field of existential differences. First, a field is not a substance: asubstantial, invisible, “potential,” the field only reveals itself after bodies have emerged. Only existing beings can attest to the ontological field: before they exist, there is no difference between the field and nothingness, and in this sense—against any sort of ontological turn trying to reestablish, in contemporary anthropology and philosophy, the preeminence of a metaphysics *a priori* uttering what should be said on cultures, politics, and aesthetics—there is no possible ontology prior to any existentialism, understood as what gives priority to the emergence as such of entities. Yet when object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman argues, on the basis of his reading of Latour, that there are only “actants” and no “potential,” no “virtual,” no “pre-individual” reality, he actually erases the dynamic difference between existences and the ontological field that we need to recognize retrospectively—that is, only after the fact of existence.[[11]](#endnote-11) This erasure could lead to the idea of a “flat” immanent world that, I argue, denies existence and its depth of field. Flatness or depth: this is the crucial philosophical alternative of our time.

Second, coming into existence is only possible through an internal separation leading to polarities (left/right, high/low, inside/outside, but also visible/invisible, light/dark, etc.) that are not initially splits but rather constitute a depth of field wherein a subject experiments with her or his reason or senses. In this regard, a subject can be defined as an instance of mediation, as a moment of communication, the last term signifying, à la Bataille, the excess through which polarities reveal their unfathomable difference.

At the core of the existentialism that I argue for lies the term “existence.” Etymologically, *ek-sistere* means to be outside or more precisely to constitute oneself from the outside. The outside—each outside—acts as a fundamental disjuncture, something that we might call, with Lucretius, a *clinamen*.[[12]](#endnote-12) A clinamen is a deviation vis-à-vis straight lines, social norms, ethograms (that is to say, the inventory of all behaviors or actions exhibited by an animal), or thermodynamic equilibriums. At the beginning of the universe, as of each thing, was the clinamen. A clinamen is the opening onto an outside—a break, an empty space, a nonfunctional element, all the existential spacings that can appear, for instance, in the form of a nonsignifying signifier in a poem, in an act of political resistance, or in André Breton’s “amour fou,” etc. The outside is the mark of the singularity of each crucial experience, each notable artistic or political event, and, in the end, each existing being. Any ordinary life is the singular way through which an existing being experiences her own depth of field.

The outside also explains why philosophy is always disoriented, displaced by the contingency of the clinamen. For an existence-disoriented philosophy, there is no Outside; but there is an infinity of outsides, as innumerable as there are singular existences. Each outside opens itself inside each existing being, and this internal exteriority is the condition of possibility for relations. Existing beings can communicate thanks to their internal openness. Conversely, if immanence were compact, full, and substantial, there would be no gap, no separation between existing beings, and consequently no relations. Relations require separation—an idea that Bataille kept repeating: we communicate, we really communicate not because we are connected but first and foremost because we are “*discontinuous* beings,” that is, because of the impossibility of an absolute fusion of what would be the definitive erasure of differences (12).[[13]](#endnote-13) In the event of such fusion, there would not be any communication but a magmatic lack of relation and of difference in favor of an identity preventing any possible singularization from happening.

To sum up, the field of existential differences is activated by the presence of existing beings that are opened up by their internal outside, which is neither a subtracted substance nor an object hidden behind its expressions but the contingent effect of an event.

**Nature, Supernature, and Natures**

In the two final parts of my essay, I want to examine what I said about nature and the field of existential differences in relation to Romanticism. For many contemporary thinkers who attempt to get rid of the concept of nature and to create an ecology without or against nature, Romanticism is the target. Let us take the example of contemporary thinker Timothy Morton who argues that, in our “ecological age,” “we are realizing that absolutely everything is absolutely connected to absolutely everything else” (“Ecology after Capitalism” 47). Morton argues that nature is an “ideological construct”: “What if, finally, Nature as such, the idea of a radical outside to the social system, was a capitalist fantasy, even precisely *the* capitalist fantasy?” (57).

Yet this statement raises two difficulties. First, it is, unfortunately, possible to reverse Morton’s statement: what if, finally, the lack of a radical outside to the capitalist system was precisely *the* capitalist fantasy, the technological-capitalist program informing the financial sphere? Second, I am not at all sure that the main strategy of romanticism was to turn nature into a transcendental principle. The fact, quoting Morton, that nature “wavers between the divine and the material,” between “essence” and “substance,” has to be understood not as a theoretical weakness or a dead end, as Morton thinks but as a problem(*Ecology without Nature* 14, 16); etymologically speaking, what is thrown (*ballein*) before (*pro*) us is what we have to deal with. Maybe the reduction of nature to a pure material product or to the supernatural, namely the divine, represents two bad solutions to this problem; maybe nature is a milieu encompassing these two extreme existential states. In order to highlight my approach, I would like to focus on two figures of Romanticism: Victor Hugo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Hugo’s works illustrate my definition of romanticism as a space of fundamental polarities: the last lines that the poet wrote were “c’est ici le combat du jour et de la nuit” (here is the struggle between day and night)—“here” being a place such as the Earth or Hugo himself (*Essential* 464–65).[[14]](#endnote-14) All of Hugo’s poetry is the affirmation of an infinite darkness, redeemed in extremis by the superior infinity of God: we are “lost in the deep unfathomable night;” but “fleetingly,” we can “glimpse, lit up by some flare of light, / The glass pane of Eternity” (E 271). In a text titled “Préface philosophique,” Hugo situates humankind as a milieu between two forms of darkness: the “impenetrable” Earth and the “immeasurable” sky. Yet darkness also constitutes humankind’s interiority and, in this sense, humankind is a “microcosmos” (*Œuvres Complètes* 340, 370).[[15]](#endnote-15) In the dark universe through which rare illuminations persist, everything is continuous, “immanent” (a term Hugo keeps repeating); there is no gap between life and death: “Everything, even rot, is mixed with vitality . . . Nothing comes to an end; everything that ends one thing sketches another one; all the dead give birth” (OC 346). Yet the following lines disrupt this feeling of continuity:

Nothing amalgamates, everything is balanced . . . the interstice is the law of being; more or less density, that’s the whole difference between the stone and the cloud; granite is a fog; the ax that cuts a head is a vapor; between two atoms, as between two universes, there is space; and the interval is as impassable from the molecule to the molecule in the infinite from below as from the sun to the sun in the infinite from above. Explaining is not more possible than denying (OC 346).

This is Hugo’s ontology: 1) Everything communicates, immanence reigns, in a fundamentally dark form. 2) Yet communication is not fusion: a spacing—recall the terms “space,” “intervals,” or “interstices”—prevents entities from melting into an indistinct magma. 3) In this regard, what is communicated is not a common substance but a common interval. As with everything else—the Earth, the ocean, or the sky—nature is subjected to a form of polarization through which a nonmelting communication occurs, that is to say, the communication of darkness, of the immeasurable. In a text entitled “Préface de mes œuvres et post-scriptum de ma vie”(Preface of my Works and Post-Scriptum of my Life), Hugo argues that nature

exists alone and contains everything. Everything is. There is the part of nature that we perceive, and there is the part of nature that we do not perceive. Pan has one visible side and one invisible side. Because on this invisible side, you contemptuously throw the word *supernaturalism*, will this invisible part less exist? X remains X. The Unknown withstands your vocabulary. To deny is not to destroy. Supernaturalism is immanent. (PO 703)

Thus even supernaturalism is natural, immanent, the opposite of transcendent—“Le surnaturalisme, c’est la nature trop loin,” that is to say, supernaturalism is nature too far away (PO 699). Hugo enables us to understand that there are two bad ways to deal with nature: the first one is to detach a transcendent part; the second one is to reduce nature to its immediate and visible aspect. To explain the effect of such a reduction, Hugo uses a marvelous formula: “Vous n’avez pas voulu voir le visage de l’Inconnu; vous verrez son masque”(you refused to see the face of the Unknown; you will see its mask) (PO, 704). A too quick reading might make us think that here Hugo opposes nature (the face) and the mask as man-made in the same way that Romantic writers are supposed to oppose “here” (where we are) and “elsewhere” (another world). However, Hugo actually says something very different: he argues that the mask is still an emanation of nature but in the guise of the denial of its invisible part. A mask is not *absolutely* detached from nature, in the sense that a communication between them is still possible. That is why Hugo writes, in his poem *Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre* (What the Mouth of Darkness Says): “le dedans du masque est encore la figure”(the inside of the mask is still a figure) (*Les Contemplations* 365).[[16]](#endnote-16)

Of course, it would be easy to show that Hugo’s writing is haunted by the desire to surpass nature. In “Magnitudo Parvi,” the poet defines contemplation as a way to detach oneself from matter: “contempler les choses, / c’est finir par ne plus les voir. La matière tombe détruite” (to contemplate things, / it is eventually to see them no longer. Matter falls apart) (LC 183). But the poem does not finish on these words and Hugo writes: “La matière tombe détruite / devant l’esprit aux yeux de lynx” (matter falls apart / before the spirit with the eyes of a lynx). Spirit, Hugo tells us, needs animal abilities to go beyond matter. In the same line, even if Hugo, in *Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*, associates matter with evil, he adds that a stone is not only a “hideous blind,” but also something “pensif,” pensive, on the verge of thinking (LC 364). “Everything speaks,” Hugo writes, as if the Universe was structured like a language (LC 362). That is why

sous ces épaisseurs de matière et de nuit,

Arbre, bête, pavé, poids que rien ne soulève,

Dans cette profondeur terrible, une âme rêve

(souls of the trees, beasts and cobblestones dream under depths of matter and night). (LC 371)

Even as immanent, even getting out of a transcendent division, nature seems to be theorized by Hugo only on the basis of a dual perspective. Can we imagine a Romanticism going beyond this dualism? What might be a romantic pluralistic nature? This question is especially important in the contemporary context of anthropologists who, aware of the dangerous dead end of anaturalism, claim that, instead of getting rid of nature, we should rather consider its multiplicity: I think here exemplarily to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who invented the term “multinaturalism,” which does not mean a multiplicity of representations of nature but rather multiple natures as variation without a unity (65–75). However, Rousseau’s philosophy might be read as an earlier exemplification of Viveiros de Castro’s multinaturalism, and I will use Rousseau’s approach toward nature to temper Hugo’s excessive ontological polarizations. To understand this approach, it is useful—as a theoretical detour that will help us to identify Rousseau’s originality—to see first how Paul de Man saw Rousseau’s conception of nature. In the first chapter of *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Paul de Man notices in Hölderlin’s, Wordsworth’s, and Rousseau’s writings the same tendency to pass “from a certain type of nature, earthly and material, to another nature which could be mental and celestial” (13). To establish his hypothesis, de Man highlights the fact that, in Letter XXIII of the first part of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau says “nature seems to take pleasure in self-opposition”: “radical contradictions abound in each of the passages” of this letter, de Man adds (14).[[17]](#endnote-17) Here again, as in the case of Hugo’s poetry, an excessive polarization prevails, and we seem far away from any sort of multinaturalism.

Indeed, Rousseau uses the word “contradiction,” but just after he mentions this word he speaks about difference. He says that nature is “différente en un même lieu sous divers aspects” (nature is different in the same place under various aspects) (NH 44). For Rousseau, contradiction is just one possibility amongst others and not the only determination of nature. Just before this paragraph, Rousseau describes a multiplicity of natures: mild nature, cultivated nature, and “un mélange étonnant de la nature sauvage et de la nature cultivée” (a surprising melding of wild nature and cultivated nature) (NH 44)—the sort of inextricable naturecultures (to use the concepts of Latour and Haraway) that postmodern thinkers like to describe. But de Man does not quote this paragraph; he also does not mention the fact that this strange multiplicity of natures interrupts Rousseau’s meditation: “Je voulais rêver, et j’en étais toujours détourné par quelque spectacle inattendu” (I wanted to dream, but I was always diverted by an unexpected spectacle) (NH 44). A spectacle or a “vrai théâtre” (a real drama), as Rousseau says at the end of his description, occurs when natures appear in their multiplicity becoming a sort of weird, natural, man-made scene.

Polarizations, contradictions, differences, a multiplicity, and an interrupting force: are these aspects of nature too different, too irremediably disparate? Should we then get rid of the category of nature?

**Deep Nature**

Getting rid of nature? My aim is quite different. I suggest the following hypothesis: nature is a milieu of communication subjected to its own power of interruption or darkness—the “impenetrable” and the “immeasurable” (Hugo, OC 340, 370)—since it is what relates and separates. To produce the ontological image of nature as a disruptive milieu, let’s try to superimpose Hugo’s perspective on Rousseau’s; let’s draw a diagram of natures, composed of 1) naturecultures, 2) the wild, and 3) technological beings.

In the middle of this image stands an intertwining of nature, culture, and technology, exactly what Donna Haraway calls “naturecultures” (12). Subjected to what Ulrich Beck called its total “societalization,” the nature at stake here is a nature that “can no longer be understood *outside* of society, or society *outside* of nature” (80). Ventriloquizing Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology*, Beck adds that “not a hair or a crumb of [nature] is still ‘natural’, if ‘natural’ means nature being left to itself” (81). As we see, Beck’s risk society looks like what we today call Anthropocenic society; yet what Beck and the constructivist trend are sometimes unable to see, or to highlight, is that the entanglement of nature and culture only defines one aspect, one becoming of nature amongst others.

On the left side of the picture, we can see nature without human intervention. Let us think, for example, about the burning core of the Earth, all the earthquakes that are not caused by hydraulic fracturing, or what speculative realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux calls, in *After Finitude*, the “ancestral” realm: the “Great Outdoors” of the universe that precedes even our appearance on Earth and in this sense has no relation of any kind to us (11–15). However, the problem with Meillassoux’s ancestrality is, to paraphrase Hugo, the following: ancestrality is an outside that is too far away. Wild, “inhuman” (Clark), escaping our attempt to master it, nature’s otherness is also on Earth, in Earth, in every one of its components. Let us call this dimension of nature “the wild”; not wilderness, or what results from the displacement of Native Americans, but the wild as what has been really untouched by human beings (even though such an idea upsets any colonial drive).

On the right side of the picture, we can identify all the machines, all the technology that, from synthetic biology to geo-engineering, strives to master, to replace, and, in the end, to erase nature. But why do I include technology in a diagram of natures? Is it not important to identify technological beings as existentially specific, as forms of being that cannot, or should not, be reduced to nonartificial entities? Certainly yes, but let us remember what I said in the third section about the field of existential differences: any ontological knowledge must only be retroactively constituted after the reality of existing beings has been recognized. In the same manner, it is only retroactively that we can argue that nature is ontologically everywhere, even in a computer or a smartphone. This is possible only retroactively because we first need to acknowledge existential differences. When this acknowledgment is assured, we can speak about a natural field and its ontological continuity (as Spinoza and, these days, the New Materialists do). We can then, but only then, say with Lawrence Buell:

Even if people were to become as “posthuman” as the bionic characters of cyberpunk fiction, they would likely remain physically embodied and permeable to the influences of water cycle, photosynthesis, macroclimate, seismology, bacterial resistance to pharmaceuticals, and the “natural” advantages and disadvantages of regional habitats. (6)

The problem is that sometimes we are not able to recognize nature in commodities, high-tech objects, or cyborgs—nature’s mask seems to have swallowed both flesh and face. However, it is not because we are unable to see something that does not exist. That is why we have to give some depth to the field of differences, which is anything but flat. So, if in our diagram we can see, horizontally, three specific areas—naturecultures in the middle, machines on the right, and wild nature on the left—we also need to acknowledge a vertical dimension severing naturecultures, wild nature, and technological beings from a dark, invisible, unknown nature: what I call *deep nature* is the encounter between the vertical and horizontal dimensions, which reveals a depth of field.

In the diagram of natures, the function of depth is to host the invisible, the unknown, the frightening darkness that Jean Paul has identified as the “empty, bottomless socket” of God (337), a metaphor that strongly influenced the French romantic tradition. In “Magnitudo Parvi,” Hugo exclaims: “L’oeil est crevé!” (the eye (of God) is punctured!)—a gruesome deed that he attributes to Spinoza and Lucretius, those atheists who refuse to see God also in the “abyss,” in what—for Hugo—falsely appears as devoid of the divine (169). A few years after Hugo’s poem, Nerval writes in “Christ at Gethsemane”:

Seeking the eye of God, I’ve only seen a pit,

Huge, bottomless, black, from whence eternal night

Streams out over the world and ever deepens. (229)

All this distress should not conceal what Hugo completely understood: bottomless darkness is also the condition of possibility for freedom, that is to say, for an ontological chance. F. W. J. Schelling—who was maybe the decisive German Romantic philosopher—explains this point in his *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*. In God, Schelling writes, there is an “inner ground” that is not God but “precedes” his existence. Schelling also calls this ground “nature” (27–28). If creatures can exist as such, different from God, it is thanks to the inner ground that, in God, is not God. In other words, the inner ground is what ontologically differentiates God from himself. Freedom thus comes from this interval, this separation between God and what Schelling also calls “the original ground” or the “non-ground,” in the sense that the inner ground does not exist, since it is what precedes any existence. In my terms, this inner ground is a pure field. The non-groundcan be interpreted as a principle of ontological anarchy, an absolute freedom that, for Hugo, Satan represents. In “The Plume of Satan,” God calls “freedom” the feather of Satan’s wings that did not fall (*Selected Poems* 104).[[18]](#endnote-18) This leather is “au bord du gouffre ténébreux” (on the edge of the dark abyss) (SP 102), “près du puits de la chute infinite” (near the well of the infinite fall) (SP 104), that is to say, in between, in the interval.

To sum up, natures constitute a plurality, a field in which we can pass from technology to naturecultures and from naturecultures to the wild and from the wild to technology. Every time an entity as such appears, be it a machine or a tree, a distinction retroactively appears in the field, a difference that any existing being traces. The condition of possibility of any existence is the darkness, the non-ground thanks to which the universe is not compact, deadly, or immanent. Bottomless, deep nature keeps composing an existential myriad that no ontology could have calculated *a priori*.

**A Political Communication of the Outside**

If the universe coming from deep nature is a deep field of existential differences, then we can think anew the relation between nature and the outside; we can escape the enclosed world of the Anthropocene and its real subsumption of nature; we can cure exophobia. Instead of fearing nature or trying to erase it, we can leave it a place—or several places. This is the condition of possibility of an anti-Anthropocenic politics. Of course, this expression seems ridiculous since the Anthropocene is supposed to last for millennia: is it not too late to be anti-Anthropocenic? Is it even still possible to speak in terms of political ecology? My answer is that we have no choice: yes, an anti-Anthropocenic ecopolitics is impossible, but it is exactly the impossible that we need to make happen as soon as possible if we want to avoid being swept away by global ecocide and its geotechnological ally. So, let us attempt to ascertain how the diagram of natures I sketched out can offer some philosophical help to imagine an anti-Anthropocenic ecopolitics.

First, the diagram of natures that I propose enables the possibility of thinking of nature as a form of otherness—not a mother or a father, not Gaia or Ouranos, but a foreign agent. Indeed, one of the fundamental dangers of the Anthropocene is to irremediably close humanity in upon itself. In the end, the anthropogenic eating of nature cannot but become anthropophagy. *Soylent Green*—Richard Fleischer’s famous 1973 environmental film—does not show the apocalypse that follows the collapse of the global civilization. Rather, it reveals that this collapse leans on the previous short-circuit of humankind that eats itself. Anthropophagy is not a postapocalyptic practice. Rather, it defines the supreme condition of a civilization that ate—destroyed—the whole nonhuman world. If *Soylent Green’s* opening montage puts together standardization and the industrial revolution, it is less to insist on the problem of overpopulation than on the disappearance of nonhuman forms of life that I call cosmophagy.[[19]](#endnote-19) In other words, anthropophagy is the last step of cosmophagy. At this point, when the Anthropos has swallowed the Earth, when nature is performatively said to no longer exist, when human beings and every form of life merge with one another, the face—to use Hugo’s words—is nothing but the mask.

In this regard, to speak about the Unknown, à la Hugo, might be a way to leave some play between the mask and the face in order to leave a place to other forms of existence. I will not resist the temptation to say that the more we refuse the face of the unknown, the more we risk several more Fukushimas. Here the unknown is not the “asylum of ignorance,” to quote Spinoza, but on the contrary an aware knowledge of the unpredictable. It does not dismiss engineers, companies, and political leaders from their responsibilities vis-à-vis ecological disasters like Katrina or Fukushima, rather it engages another relation with what is not us. Concerning the last point, I am not sure that the word *nonhuman* is good enough to deal with the unknown because *nonhuman* is an adjective that leaves unscathed the notion of human centrality through its negation. If we do not really and deeply take into account the Unknown, then the following alternative end to *The Novices of Saïs*, written by Novalis in 1798, might be our predictable fate: “One person succeeded—he lifted the veil of the goddess at Saïs—But what did he see? He saw—nightmare of nightmares—himself” (76).

To be honest, I have made a small change in this quotation: instead of “nightmare of nightmares,” Novalis wrote: “wonder of wonders.” This friendly update leads to the political dimension of the deep field of existential differences. Such a field does not prevent the possibility of contradictions, understood as the extreme state of differences. When Rousseau, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s Letter XXIII, uses the quasi-magic, supernatural nature that he feels in the high mountains as a means to contest a modern society consumed with greed, business, and earnings and as a way to envisage what an egalitarian society should look like, this contradiction does not turn nature into a transcendental principle that we should save from reality but rather uses nature as a necessary exterior able to engage a radical critique of society and call for a change in reality. “Once the social compact is violated,” that is to say, when a “master” deprives the people of its sovereignty, Rousseau explains in *On the Social Contract*, “each person then regains his first rights and resumes his natural liberty, while losing the conventional liberty for which he renounced it” (*Basic Poltical Writings* 140). In other words, “The very moment there is a master, there no longer is a sovereign, and thenceforward the body politic is destroyed” (*Basic Poltical Writings* 154). Nature is therefore, for Rousseau’s politics, the outside that can be generated and regenerated when the social order becomes its own negation, that is, when the “social contract”—which is the event thanks to which a people is constituted as a people—is broken. Nature is the Trojan horse able to blow a revolutionary wind into the core of the polis.

This romantic revolutionary wind communicates the outside.[[20]](#endnote-20) As I explained in this essay, the outside is not an object far away from us; it constitutes us. To *ek-sist*, as I said, means, literally, to stand out, to be outside, or, better, to *be* the outside. Thanks to Romantic poetry, the “immeasurable” of the sky and the “impenetrable” of the Earth is expressed as what is the most intimate share of the human, its inhuman core. With words, but also music and paintings, the outside can be communicated as a reminder of the interval from which everything came into being—each thing, and the universe itself, that rose up less from a Big Bang than from a Big Spacing. Not only is communicating the outside communicating the darkness or the unground—thanks to which singularities can appear—but this communication can also stay hidden and preserved. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2019, I heard Anna Tsing explain how, in Indonesia, she saw some animals unable to hide any longer, forced to be visible, because of the deforestation caused by the settlement of plantations. These animals have lost the existential and vital experience to be hidden in forests.

I was struck by Tsing’s powerful illustration of the global situation of overexposure— a situation touching all species, including the human. What must nowadays be preserved is as much biodiversity as psychodiversity. In a time of digital overexposure, when data mining reigns, when the empty eye of God is filled with FAANG’s marketing intrusions, it is crucial to be able to preserve the opacity of that which exists. Needless to say, Facebook should be deserted. That is the paradox of our time: to communicate the outside, we need to disconnect from the inside, to create what Deleuze called “vacuoles of non-communication” (175). We need to encrypt what we say in the same way that “phusis kruptestai philein” (nature loves to hide) (Heraclitus).

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1. Concerning the outside, there is one exception to its rejection: Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Recently, Latour gave a performance lecture in New York entitled “Inside” (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/755>). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Henceforth cited as (PO). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Formerly, the infinite grief existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed in the feeling that ‘God Himself is dead.’” (G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* 190). I read the persistent nightmare of God’s death as the “return of the repressed”: Christianity is founded on the death of God as son, despite his resurrection and his supposed return at the end of times. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. That is why, for Heraclitus, “One cannot step twice into the same river” (*The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* 53). Concerning Spinoza, cf. *Ethics* 227. Concerning Diderot, cf. (for example) “Spinozist.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Here post-structuralism becomes posthumanism. Consider two books of Donna Haraway’s: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, in which we can find her famous “Cyborg Manifesto,” and *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. I agree with Haraway’s approach, I just question one of its consequences. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See my translation of her fabulous “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2016-4-page-75.htm?contenu=resume>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hence the “death of nature” (Merchant). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a critique of this misreading of Levi-Strauss, see Patrice Maniglier’s “L’humanisme interminable de Lévi-Strauss.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Harman writes: “Recall that there is no such thing for Latour as a ‘becoming’ that would exceed individual actors. Nor is there any ‘virtuality’ that exceeds them, just as potentiality does not exceed them. The much-discussed difference between potential and virtual, so often wielded like a billy club in our time by Deleuzian hooligans, is irrelevant here—both terms fail Latour’s standard for concreteness in exactly the same way” (*Prince of Networks* 101). Elsewhere, he notes, “In short, I reject both the potential *and* the virtual in favor solely of the actual” (“on disappointing realisms”). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I have devoted a book to these questions: *Clinamen. Flux, Absolu et Loi Spirale*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For Bataille, death, that which interrupts any life, appears to the eyes of discontinuous beings as “continuity” itself, that is to say, what makes possible a form of communication (13). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Henceforth cited as (E). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Henceforth cited as (OC). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Henceforth cited as (LC). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Henceforth cited as (NH). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Henceforth cited as (SP). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I explore the concept of cosmophagy and its relations with the eco-apocalyptical cinema in “Cosmophagie. Cinéma éco-apocalyptique, anthropocène et anthropophagie.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. On the relation between Romanticism and revolution, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Esprits de feu: Figures du Romantisme anti-capitaliste*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)