

Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene

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BY SUMMING UP THIRTY YEARS OF PERSONAL research, collective inquiries, and countless publications, Bruno Latour's AIME project, expanding on his 2013 book *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, represents a remarkable attempt to reset modernity in order to reposition our forms of life and categories of understanding more in line with the disquieting demands of the Anthropocene. Its basic—even though antifoundationalist—question is: how are we to communicate between disciplines, between cultures, between human and nonhuman entities, so that what we hold dear in our modern ways of living can be preserved, nurtured, and fostered, while overcoming the epistemological and existential paradigm that has set modernity on a fast track to social and environmental collapse?

How can literary studies fit within such a program? Rita Felski, in her recent work, has already mapped out a few promising directions. Latour's sneaky irreverence toward "the Moderns" has led him to stress the shortcomings of the *critical* attitude that has come to be identified with "literary criticism" for a good number of decades.¹ From the avant-garde denunciation of bourgeois conformism to the demystification of mass-media stereotypes,² from the Sartrean critical intellectual to the Adornian critical theorist, from triumphant deconstruction to postcolonial denunciations, and all the way to emerging ecocriticism, texts have been consistently *read against*—against their author's intent, against their class of origin, against their social effects, against their grain. While, in spite of their apparently negative stance, most of these critical readings have been very positively productive, Latour helps us feel the latent presence of a self-defeating arrogance inherent in the position of superiority taken up by the critic-as-demystifier. Critique is irretrievably modern insofar as it accuses (or suspects) the others naively to "believe" in something the demystifier "knows" to be illusory. When asserting that *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour suggests that we should never be naively critical—even though we can't fully avoid being so.

This critique of critique is not a mere negation of negation, bringing us back to our comfortable critical mode of reading, only one notch higher, more superior and self-confident than ever. It flattens the very structure on which critique and criticism rested in order to unveil *the* (hidden, repressed, underlying, profound) meanings of the texts. As Felski eloquently shows, “postcritical” literary practices debunk the implicit superiority of the critic, putting the interpreter’s tinkering with the text on par with (if not below) the immanent agency of the text itself (via and beyond its author), a text treated as an ever-springing source of new affordance. The point is not exactly, in a Marxian twist, that texts can no longer be merely “interpreted,” but need to be “acted upon” (used, performed, taken to task)—since this had already always been the case under the reign of critique. The point is rather to reorient the interpretive performance of the texts toward a more explicitly constructive use of its affordance. Instead of asking what our interpretation can *undo* (totalitarianism, capitalism, colonialism, sexism, mastery, fundamentalism, etc.), we are invited to ask what it can *make* (a platform of negotiation? a mapping of controversies? a handbook of strategies? a lexicon of sanity?). This same instruction will apply here: what can literary scholars and teachers make with/of Latour’s work? And conversely: what can a Latourian approach make with/of literary skills?

My response will develop along the following lines: literary studies can find inspiration in Latour’s AIME project insofar as it helps them map and locate where and how they can contribute to the debates that will shape our necessary turning away from the suicidal path of capitalist ecocide. In return, AIME can find in literary studies a field of research that will help it overcome its current attentional deficit toward the issues of media agency. Along the way, we will discover that the Humanities may indeed be the most dangerous and reactionary of all disciplines, unknowingly siding with our most intimate enemy in the anthropocenic war (“the Humans”) . . .

Recoloring the Cows [PRE]

We can locate two promising sites in order to initiate a dialogue between Latour’s work and literary studies in his conception of distributed agency and in his notion of attachments, as Felski noted in a recent article.³ From the late 1980s until the early 2000s, Latour developed a highly successful cottage industry under the label of actor-network-theory (or ANT). While most of us envisaged action as performed and authored by a human subject (occasionally helped by various forms of

instruments and assistants), his work taught us to attribute the efficiency of human actions to complex *networks* assembling heterogeneous bits of physical stuff, institutional leverage, symbolic tools, energy sources, intellectual credit, and financial montage. In parallel with Foucault's *dispositifs* and Deleuze's *agencements*, his *hybrids* have unhooked us from our romantic addiction to a heroic, unrealistic, and self-illusory model of personal agency, making us more aware of the distributed nature of human agency. Here again, one never really acts *against* one's environment, but always necessarily with it and through it. More often than not, our networks act through us, with our personal agency operating as a mere relay, no more and no less decisive than the other human and nonhuman elements activated in the network.

After thirtysome years of impressive mileage and increasing returns milked from the ANT farm, Latour attempted to relocate his operations on a slightly different, more discriminating, plane. The massive project devoted to *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, launched years ago but rewritten and completed in the 2010s, was, among other things, an attempt to overcome some shortcomings and abuses in the popular success of ANT, where "everything equally becomes actor-network," with the consequence that, "as denounced by Hegel, all cows become grey. When I realized that, I thought something was wrong: it is very well to make an actor-network, it *unfolds* the associations. But it does not *qualify* them."⁴ The goal of the AIME uplift was precisely to qualify, within a rich and subtle range of twelve categories (each identified by a three-letter acronym standing for the preposition it specifies—PRE), the various modes of existence that give its unique colors to each action-network.

Brutally summarized for those who may have missed this latest episode, the AIME recoloring of the ANT cows went somewhat like this (if you've read the book, fast forward to the next section; if you haven't, fasten your seat belt!).⁵

The ANTIities composing our common universe are perceived as agents insofar as they enter into networks [NET] allowing them to reproduce their existence [REP], metamorphose their identity [MET], and develop habits [HAB] that tend to concatenate chains of heterogeneous operations into units of action. At this first, basic level, these ANTIities demonstrate both a capacity to persevere in their own being (comparable to Spinoza's *conatus*) and a propensity to (self-)plasticity, which allows them to adapt to constantly changing environments.

In the course of this adaptation, they elicit the apparition of three types of "quasi-objects." Through the zigzagging invention of technical objects [TEC], they devise short-circuits allowing them to fold long series of operations into speedy and seemingly effortless tricks. With

the help of fictions [FIC], they sustain worlds capable of living off of their own coherent (self-induced but not autonomous) systems of resonance. Thanks to more or less rigid procedures of reference [REF], they elaborate cognitive constructions allowing them to secure access to phenomena and causalities far removed in space and time. This second level provides the ANTIities with various types of extensions of themselves, folding time, space, and agency along ever more complex lines and dynamics.

Such foldings generate three types of “quasi-subjects” that, in their turn, further the development of yet more unpredictable extensions of self-plasticity. Through politics [POL], the ANTIities circularly convince each other about what ought to be the best common course of actions, speaking obliquely again and again about the same topics: always to be reconsidered under a slightly different light, never really agreeing, but producing along the way larger ANTIities in which a collection of “I” tends to cohere in a collective assertion of “we.” Through law [LAW], the ANTIities devise (and conform to) certain means of enunciation meant to validate proper forms of translation through various domains of action, originally heterogeneous to each other. Through religion [REL], the ANTIities feel called to be something else (or more?) than ephemeral networks; they gain in subjective consistency by being addressed as “persons,” expected to respond for the purposes and implications of their actions, well beyond their brief individual existence on earth. At this third level, [POL], [LAW], and [REL] together invest the ANTIities’ agency with experiences of subjectivation, which provides them with a very relative, very dubious, but nevertheless very necessary sense of autonomy within the multiple levels of intra-actions constitutive of our multiverse.

In order to articulate more finely and more strongly quasi-objects with quasi-subjects, a fourth level of analysis focuses on the links that tie them together—with the explicit goal of providing an alternative to the operation devoted to the “economic science” at the turn of the twenty-first century. In spite of their necessary sense of relative individual autonomy, quasi-subjects cannot help but experience attachments [ATT] to countless other forms of beings: their emotions, passions, desires, needs, and interests constantly remind them how dependent they are on each other, as well as on a wide variety of other means of subsistence, comfort, and pleasure. [ATT] accounts for *an economy of (often unequal) interdependencies*. The management of such complex forms of attachments requires a great deal of organization [ORG]: quasi-subjects devise stacks upon stacks of ingenious scripts, in order to ensure that the appropriate elements of their environment will be at the right place at the right time

to meet their desires, needs, and interests. All scripts, however, were not born equal. Some are broader, more intense, more commanding, more powerful than others: macroscripts absorb microscripts within vertical and entangled trees of inclusion, integration, and subordination. [ORG] accounts for *an economics of hierarchical management*. There seems to be an irreducible gap, delay, and *différance* between the ever more clever devices invented to manage the organization of our attachments and our intuitive perception of balance and fairness in the exchanges of goods, services, and favors. Morality [MOR] manifests itself through the nagging scruple that a transaction may have left one of the parties short-changed, while other parties gained more than their fair share. The face-value of procedural justice constantly needs to be readjusted to the fair value of a more substantive perception of justice, attentive to the singularity and relative weight of the contracting parties. [MOR] questions the dominant accounting procedures in the name of *a moral economy*.

AIME attempts to emancipate these twelve modes of existence (REP, MET, HAB; TEC, FIC, REF; POL, LAW, REL; ATT, ORG, MOR) from their current suppression under the collapsing weight of the economic ideology. This impressive project is guided by (at least) two highly ambitious goals. The first, *diplomatic* goal consists in producing a document that our Western modern culture could bring to the negotiation tables where the different inhabitants of planet Earth are already bound, willy-nilly, to discuss the way in which (as well as the values according to which) they are willing to share and, more urgently, to protect our common assets. The second, *anthropological* goal aims toward reversing, or bifurcating, the evolution that, under the domination of Western modernity, has led to the tyrannical and suicidal rule of one undifferentiated science—"economics." AIME analyzes the dismal science as an unstable, indiscriminate, and inconsistent mash-up of [ATT] and [ORG], pretending to have set itself free from [MOR], thanks to a supposedly value-neutral use of [REF], and imposing its totalitarian criterion of accounting onto areas of concern that, in reality, require other, very different and much more specific criteria of evaluation. Both in order to put on the negotiation table an explicit description of our Western values distilled through the modern period, and in order to open up the noose of the "economic rationality" currently strangling our sociopolitical evolutions, AIME relies on the use of the twelve prepositions [PRE] succinctly described in this summary: these three-letter operators are devised both to ensure the relative autonomy recognized in these various modes of existence (currently crushed under the tyrannical hegemony of the "economic science"⁶) and to help their pluralist articulation within our multileveled forms of collective agency.

Reformulating the Nets [FIC]

Where does literature fit within such a Big Picture? Its main location, of course, is to be found in FIC: the *Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Jacques le fataliste*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Molloy*, or *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* all provide a certain form of presence to fictional ANTIities, with which the readers and spectators develop certain forms of attachments. A human-invented plot, which never and nowhere "existed" in the first place (i.e., which necessarily escapes the procedures of [REF]), does indeed have a certain mode of "existence," since it does affect us, sometimes quite profoundly. We (really) "care about" fictional characters: we fear for them, we hope for them, we are happy when they end up happy. Our encounter with them often alters and shapes our worldview, our perceptions, our attention, our behaviors—sometimes much more significantly than do our encounters with "real" human beings.

[FIC], of course, is not restricted to the mere "content" of the fictions (their characters, their plot), but accounts for the mode of existence specific to what we, Moderns, identify as "works of art," where the medium, forms, and content constitute an inseparable unity. An abstract painting or a sonic organization, totally independent from any representational pretense, belongs to [FIC] as much as *Emma Bovary* does. Their felicity conditions are not to be found in the correspondence with an external reality, but in an immanent force of vibration (a property Bernard Stiegler calls "consistence," distinguishing it from subsistence, existence, and insistence).⁷ The beings of [FIC] exist inasmuch as they are animated by the (mysterious and elusive) strength of resounding vibrations that allows them to resonate both internally, thanks to a certain degree of coherence between their different elements of composition, and externally, thanks to their attunement to concerns and issues that inhabit and structure our shared experience of reality. In order to benefit from the surplus value of sensitivity, sensuality, or intelligibility that they can bring to us, however, we need to "care for" them: they only exist insofar as we have the "disponibility" (the leisure, the time, the luxury) to invest our attention in them—for they live solely from our attention: their mode of existence vanishes when no human attention comes to fuel their terribly fragile and precarious life.

But [FIC] is not even restricted to what we commonly call "fiction," in a rigid and superficial opposition with "reality." Our modern definition of literature includes "nonfiction" works such as Montaigne's *Essays* or Rousseau's *Confessions*, as legitimately as Margaret Cavendish's allegorical flights of fancy in *The Blazing World*. In its broadest sense, [FIC] encompasses all of our expressive attempts to forge (*fingere*: invent, devise,

design, craft) objects that *may* help our orientation within our puzzling experience—which they do as soon as they manage to resonate in and with it. [FIC] are therefore to be found everywhere, not only in literature and the arts, but in religion, politics, law, and even the sciences. They are ANTIities that we throw into the world, in our expressive attempts to catch aspects of reality previously escaping from our grasp—like nets that sometimes are pulled back loaded with prey (when they are blessed with phasing into an external resonance), sometimes come back empty (when their tinkered assemblage is not graced with inner consistency, when they fail to match outer wavelengths, when nobody listens). Thus, there is [FIC] wherever humans (or even nonhumans⁸) attempt to formulate an expressive device that will gain another (firmer) mode of existence by returning home loaded with different properties: this device can be a judgement, when a well-argued case returns as [LAW]; a piece of legislation, when a demand manages to close the circle of [POL]; or a scientific discovery, when the conditions for the capture of the prey are made sufficiently explicit by [REF], so that the net systematically returns with its intended targets.

Hence emerges a first redescription of literature according to AIME, very much in tune with our professional common sense: well beyond the pages of novels, poems, or plays, well beyond the limits of the artistic sphere, there is literature as soon as an agent attempts to (re)formulate a new concatenation of letters, words, and sentences in order to meet a shared thirst to account for a yet-inexpressible nuance in our modes of existence. Although somewhat younger in terms of age, Latour clearly belongs to the glorious generation of Barthes, Deleuze, and Derrida, who promoted the practice of “writing” (*écriture*) as central both to social life and to theoretical-philosophical inquiry—as demonstrated by his witty personal style of writing, full of tongue-in-cheek puns and animated by a playful jubilation with the (inexhaustibly wise) poetic richness of our common languages.

Reweaving the ANTs [MET] [REL] [POL] [MOR]

If [FIC] extends well beyond the traditional limits assigned to fictions, similarly, the powers of literature extend well beyond the sole mode of [FIC]. The work accomplished by literary ANTIities—actor-networks intricately enmeshing the writer and her readers, the text and its interpretations, the editor and the believer, the aesthete and the scholar, the learner and the teacher—fuels as well several other modes of existence.

When resonating at their highest power, literary experiences transform us by mobilizing affects that are originally out of our control, providing us with the means to tame or unleash them [MET]. They constitute us as persons, they call us to become more than we currently are, they lift us above our own expectations [REL]. They help us share a common ground through the back-and-forth movement of interpretation, through progressive and reciprocal attunements over the deeper meanings that are to be found in the choice of a certain word or in a certain twist of the plot, thus composing, maintaining, adapting the interpretive communities that are the underlying agents of social change [POL]. They excel in making us feel the unacceptability of certain forms of behavior that may be perfectly legal, but nevertheless socially repugnant, expressing scruples that haunt us in silence, undermining our common power to collaborate and coevolve in peace [MOR].

Literary experiences nurture these modes of existence through the way they *matter* to us. As Ranjan Ghosh recently wrote, "Literature is more important in its 'mattering' than in its 'matter,' in the unfolding of love than in the mere assertion of it."⁹ The power of [FIC] is less to be located in its capacity to represent something that never actually existed before, than in its ability to make us feel that this inactual ANTity actually (although mysteriously) matters to us. The arts matter through their mattering, i.e., through their power to give actual existence to relations whose *relata* are still to emerge in our shared reality. [FIC] makes us feel attached [ATT] to ANTities that still escape our shared cognitive mapping. These fictional attachments pave the way for fuller recognition of the role played by such ANTities, within as well as without us. They instill or awaken the still-hollow forms of what will start to matter as soon as it is more strongly perceived.

This process of mattering is at the very core of the AIME project as a whole. Against the late modern tendency to attribute subsidiary existence to whatever cannot be translated into quantified financial value, AIME claims that there are at least twelve modes of existence that, for us (who have never been fully) Moderns, are irreducible to each other, even though they most often inextricably permeate each other. Each of these twelve modes matters: each of them suffices, on its own, to claim a certain form of existence, to provide some of the stuff our experience is made of. Each of them is important enough for us collectively to *care about* and *for* it. One could say that the AIME project is itself deeply literary, insofar as its dynamics rely on a recursive loop whereby we care about and for something because it matters to us, while at the same time it matters to us because we care about and for it.

Literature perfectly illustrates this self-feeding loop that provides the *ultima ratio* of our attention ecologies. Latour has often stressed how impossible it is to separate neatly matters-of-facts from matters-of-concern. We construct the facts in light of our concerns, so that the *facta* can simultaneously be described as “objective” (insofar as *they* bring their own responses to our questions independently of our desire to hear them say this rather than that) and as “relative” (insofar as they only respond to these questions that *we* have asked to them, in view of our selfish and limited current concerns). The first movement of the loop is intuitive enough: we pay attention to something when it matters to us. What is less intuitive, but equally true, is the reverse movement: something starts to matter to us when we pay attention to it. An archetypal literary writer expressed this principle more succinctly than anyone else: “For a thing to become interesting, it suffices to look at it for a long time.”¹⁰ In other words: concerns make facts matter, but attention to facts generates concerns.

It is this reverse movement of the attention loop that Jean-Marie Schaeffer has recently analyzed as the fundamental drive of the aesthetic experience, after having described it as the crucial spring of successful literary studies.¹¹ While it is highly questionable that only a specific set of texts deserves to be considered as literary, we can more easily acknowledge that there is a specific type of attention that constitutes a text (whatever it may be) as literary. Literature is less in the eye of the beholder than in his gaze, i.e., in the aesthetic attention he devotes to the text. Schaeffer provides a very rich description of the contrast between standard vs. aesthetic attention (serial vs. parallel treatment of information; ascending vs. descending; convergent vs. divergent; integrating vs. detailing; focused vs. distributed; task-oriented vs. freewheeling; economical vs. anti-economical; hierarchical vs. dehierarchial). His conclusion agrees with Flaubert’s statement as to the importance of the time-factor: “To engage in an aesthetic experience means to adopt a particular attentional style, the divergent style,” while “the disposition to adopt this divergent cognitive style is proportional to the individual’s capacity to tolerate delayed categorization.”¹² The facts that matter in an aesthetic experience only surface once the matters of immediate concern (along with their preexisting categorizations) have been temporarily put to rest, so that we can let unsuspected categories emerge from a freewheeling attention that discovers new facts and new concerns within the matter under scrutiny.

This suspensive time and space of delayed categorization requires us first to accept, and then hopefully to revel in, looking and listening without understanding: they need us to be receptive to what can be

perceived and made sense of, beyond, above, and apart from what our preconceived categories lead us to identify. This privileged and luxurious time and space allows the reader, listener, spectator to develop a certain type of activity well described by Jacques Rancière in (non-Latourian) terms of “emancipation”: the spectator’s emancipation “begins when one understands that looking is also a form of action, which confirms or transforms the pre-existing distribution of positions. The spectator too acts, like the pupil or the scholar. He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He links what he sees with many other things he has seen on other stages, in other types of places. He composes his own poem with the elements of the poem provided to him.”¹³

What interests me in Rancière’s formulation is his reference to the activity of linking, tying, or binding.¹⁴ French poets have for the longest time played with the anagrammatic proximity between *lire* and *lier*: to read is to link, and to reread (*relire*) is to relink (*relier*). Literature—which vividly carries the image of the continuous thread linking the *litterae* traced by the pen on the paper—is a matter of relinking our facts into new forms of concerns, as well as it is a matter of tying new concerns onto previously unobserved facts. Yes, we are always already attached to each other, humans and nonhumans alike, whether we know (and like) it or not. But it takes the relinking activity of the literary tracings for some of these ubiquitous attachments to become matters of concern, to be mapped into actor-networks, to appear as modifiable *facta*, and hence to be reconcatenated into less unjust, more satisfying, less dangerous liaisons.

Latour has often repeated, over the last years, that our common world demands less to be defended, preserved, or protected, than to be *composed*.¹⁵ It does not stand on its own: it is wonky, always on the verge of collapsing, it results from our clumsy efforts to compose it, to link and relink its countless heterogeneous threads, bits, and pieces. In this endless work of composition, linking and relinking, literature appears as a most powerful weaver. Epics, tragedies, comedies, poems, tales, and novels, along with, of course, films and TV series, constantly perform the daily weaving of our social fabric. Their mattering is a meshworking. The ANTities constituted by the countless networks of collaborations and coevolutions require an endless work of maintenance and update: they will be fortunate enough to matter only as long as they manage to weave and reweave the attachments that sustain their existence.

This activity of meshworking has been addressed with both depth and wit by anthropologist Tim Ingold, in a short article in form of a dialogue where he staged himself as a SPIDER while admittedly caricaturing Latour as an ANT. Before the AIME project came to fruition, he

(sympathetically) criticized ANT for painting all cows in grey, i.e., for indiscriminately considering everything as a “network.” More precisely, Ingold-the-SPIDER pointed to Latour-the-ANT that the weaving of our daily existence should not be modeled after a network of heterogeneous objects, but after a fabric of threads constituting a *medium* or a *milieu*—ontologically different from a mere entity inhabiting this milieu:

You imagine a world of entities—spider, web, stems, twigs and so on—which are assembled to comprise the necessary and sufficient conditions for an event to happen. And you claim that the agency that “causes” this event is distributed throughout the constituents of this assemblage. My point, however, is that *the web is not an entity*. That is to say, it is not a closed-in, self-contained object that is set over against other objects with which it may then be juxtaposed or conjoined. It is rather a bundle or tissue of strands, tightly drawn together here but trailing loose ends there, which tangle with other strands from other bundles. . . . The world, for me, is not an assemblage of bits and pieces but a tangle of threads and pathways. Let us call it a *meshwork*, . . . so as to distinguish it from your *network*.¹⁶

Aren't fictional attachments and literary weavings more in tune with the SPIDER than with the ANT? Does literature matter more as a network of entities or as a meshwork of threads? Does it link us together as juxtaposed and conjoined, or does it immerse us in the medium of a milieu? Latour's latest writings, focused on the figure of Gaia, may help us address such questions—and be more specific about what Latour can bring to literary studies and what literary studies can bring to Latour.

Rewiring the Humanities (as Alien Loops)

The series of Gifford lectures Latour delivered at the University of Edinburgh in February 2013 under the general title *Facing Gaia: A New Enquiry into Natural Religion* provide an interesting framework with which to recast the place of literary studies and the humanities in the age of the Anthropocene. The difficulty raised by Ingold is (implicitly) addressed through a (rather literary) problem of nomination, the choice of an adequate name for the-species-formerly-known-as-“humans.” After pondering and rejecting a series of other options (“Gaians,” “Terrestrials,” “Earthlings”), Latour finally unveils the best candidate expected to face up to the irruption of Gaia: “I have chosen *Earthbound*—‘bound’ as if bound by a spell, as well as ‘bound’ in the sense of heading somewhere, thereby designating the joint attempt to reach the Earth while being unable to escape from it, a moving testimony to the frenetic immobility of those who live on Gaia. I know that it's terribly dangerous to state

the matter this starkly, but we might have to say that at the epoch of the Anthropocene the Humans and the Earthbound should be at war."¹⁷

The clever choice to rename us "Earthbound," and to consider "the Humans" as our enemies, makes a whole lot of sense once we realize how intimately a certain form of (scientist and anthropocentric) modern humanism has been an accomplice to the careless and arrogant wrecking of our common environment. This choice cannot but question our habit to unite behind the flag of "the Humanities." Even though Latour devoted many semesters of his tenure at Sciences Po Paris teaching a course on *les humanités scientifiques*,¹⁸ it seems difficult for us Earthbound to be simultaneously at war with "the Humans" and enrolled in "the Humanities." This may be where the binds and relinkings operated by literature could provide an alien alternative coming from within the hollow shell of the humanities.

What interests me the most in the baptismal sentence quoted above is the absence of reference to the most obvious connotation of the term "Earthbound": aside from the magic spell and from the direction of movement, the suffix *-bound* fully belongs to the vocabulary of attachments so strongly emphasized in the AIME project. We are bound to the Earth by the many forms of tying, linking, and binding that pull us together on the surface of this planet. Even more than the suffix, it is its linking with the *Earth* that may be the most striking feature of our new name. For the Earth can be understood as a planet, of course, but also, more interestingly, as an element and as a medium.

Or, translated into SPIDER vocabulary: the Earth can stand both for a network of *actants* bound to each other, "juxtaposed and conjoined," and for a muddy medium/milieu that immerses us in the elemental experience of a continuum. Isn't it a persistent mistake of our enemies, the Humans, to divide and conquer by individualizing and objectifying—and inevitably putting a price tag to—what should rather be perceived as a continuous agency? Our Earth is less a network than a bundle: we are less bound by distant links than tied (and crushed upon each other) by tight knots. As Arne Naess stressed many decades ago, environmentalism has got it all wrong from the very start when it claims to preserve an environment that surrounds its inhabitants. The individual *is* its environment: both exist as the set of relations that weave them together into one single piece of fabric.¹⁹

What should these Earthbound creatures do, with their feet in the mud and their relations tightly knit? The short answer is that they should write literature:

What I propose to say is that, in this new cosmopolitical situation, those who wish to present themselves to other collectives have a) to specify what sort of people

they are, b) to state what is the entity or divinity that they hold as their supreme guarantee and c) to identify the principles by which they distribute agencies throughout their cosmos. Of course, conflicts will ensue—but then also, later, some chance of being able to negotiate peace settlements. It is precisely these peace conditions that are *not even going to be looked for* as long as we believe that the world has *already* been unified once and for all—by Nature, by Society or by God, it doesn't matter which.²⁰

This diplomatic endeavor—which constantly looms at the horizon of the AIME project as well as of the Gaia writings that followed it—deeply resonates with the function assigned to literature by a philosopher like Richard Rorty.²¹ The necessity (and opportunity) for a plurality of cultures to coexist and coevolve on the surface of planet Earth calls every one of them to express (1) its conception of identities and becomings, (2) its figures of authority and validation, and (3) the modes of existence it is eager to assert and protect (a.k.a. its “final vocabulary”). Literature, as we have already seen, is intrinsically compositionist (a.k.a. “poetic”): we Earthbound need it to weave our lives and values together, thanks to the back-and-forth movements of narration, explanation, explicitation, interpretation, redescription, rewriting, relinking, precisely because we don't trust either Nature, nor Society, nor God to unify them for us. Our countless literary stories (plays, tales, novels, epics, memoirs, autobiographies) are operators of unification, agents of worlding: our literary attention projects value on them not only according to the narrative lines they weave across our lives, but also according to their capacity poetically to express our perspectives of becomings, our rituals of validation, and our modes of existence. The Gifford lectures are quite explicit on this point: “As for the rites and rituals which are necessary to render this people conscious of its vocations, it is to the artists that we would have to turn.”²²

How should these artists take their turn? By developing a literary form of attention. The delayed categorization that is a precondition to aesthetic attention, according to Schaeffer, appears in the Gifford lectures as a capacity to name and account for our realities by letting them speak through us, by momentarily surrendering agency to the unexpected reactions coming from the Earth back to us. By calling ourselves “Earthbound,” in the sense of “heading for the Earth,” we remind ourselves that we must delay projecting our preexisting categorization upon our environment, in order to become more attentive to our milieu's weaker signals.

But Earthbound are not land-surveyors, cartographers or geologists looking *from above* at the flat surface of their well-delineated maps. Their discipline is

not geometry and optics but rather biology and natural history. The initiative of naming and surveying no longer comes *from them* to the land they have appropriated by a sovereign gesture of domination. As we have recognized in the third lecture, the lines that they have learned to trace, thanks to their instruments, have the shape of entangled and retroactive *loops*. Those loops don't start with them toward the map, but *from* the landscape *back to them*—and more often than not they come back with a vengeance! Each of those loops registers the unexpected reactions of some outside agency to human action.²³

It is our literary attention that binds us to the medium of the Earth, considered as a source of unexpected recategorization. Our first imperative must be to control our habits of projecting our (hopelessly “human”) mental maps upon our surrounding landscapes: instead of looking for what we know, as Humans have grown accustomed to, we must learn to listen to the noise, in order to let the soundscape reshape our minds—Earth-bound rather than task-oriented.

Such is the challenge of literature in the Anthropocene: the “entangled and retroactive loops” that weave our common lives must originate “from the landscape back to us.” Even if, of course, as Rorty reminded us, “the world does not speak. Only we do,”²⁴ literary attention assumes that some form of Alien wisdom is speaking through the text, well above and beyond the mere intent of its all-too-Human author. The Earth—i.e., the meshwork of relations that sustain our common lives, whose constant interweaving simultaneously composes our milieu and our self—is the ultimate Alien to which artists and shamans have trained themselves to become attentive.²⁵ And it is this interweaving of echoing responses that gives parallel consistency to the subject of enunciation, to her interpreter, to the interpretive community to which they belong, and to the shared world within which they interact:

Whatever is reacting to your actions, loop after loop, begins to take on a consistency, a solidity, a coherence, that, for sure, does not have the technical predictability of a cybernetic system, but which nonetheless weighs on you as a *force* to be taken into account. This is what happens when you keep adding the “response” of the ice sheet to the “response” of acidity of the oceans to the “response” of thermohaline circulation, to the “response” of biodiversity, and so on and so forth. Such an accumulation of *responses* requires a *responsible* agency to which you, yourself, have to become in turn *responsible*. Here again, the performances end up generating a competence: “behind” those cumulative responses, it is hard not to imagine that *there exist a power that does listen and answer*. To grant it a personhood is not to imply that it may speak and think or that it exists as one single substance, no more than you would do with a State, but that in the end it has to be recognized as a *politically assembled* sort of entity. What counts is that such a power has the ability to *steer* our action, and thus to

provide it with limits, loops and constraints, which is, as you know, the etymology of the word “cybernetic.”²⁶

What if Latour was reaching his most penetrating insights when he is apparently giving in to his most religious tendencies? It would be too easy to disqualify this long quote as carried away by a mystical drift. One would be right, of course, to object that the mere fact of “responding” does not suffice to make one “responsible”; that thermohaline circulation does not “respond” to anyone, since it cannot be considered as a subject of enunciation; that imagining a superior power endowed with “the ability to steer our action” and “granting it a personhood,” even if a final twist requalifies this power as a “cybernetic” system, cannot but sound uncomfortably close to the countless dogma projecting final causes onto a divine “power that does listen and answer” to human needs and demands. Is Gaia merely a (female) avatar of the Good Lord?

What would happen, however, if we, Earthbound creatures who, as we know, have never been modern in the first place, were to overcome our visceral reluctance toward such mystical drifts? What if the relinking (*relier*) practiced by literature was profoundly analogous to the weaving of agency practiced by religion (*religare*)? What if religion itself was merely a form of literary criticism—since *religio* can also be derived from *relegere*: to read again, with care and devotion, the same canonized texts?²⁷ What if, within the context of the war against “the Humans,” the humanities could only be saved by embracing the critical care and the literary exaltation of Alien loops?

Remediating the Spells [MED?]

We are finally getting a glimpse of where we, Earthbound, are heading to, in the epoch of the Anthropocene: our destiny is *to become-medium*. This is to be understood in the various meanings folded in the highly polysemic term of “medium.”²⁸

The Anthropocene calls us to become-medium, first and foremost, in the sense of becoming-“milieu.” Gaia is coming back with a vengeance, in terms of climate change, collapse in biodiversity, pesticidal and nuclear contaminations, because we have ceased to feel identified with the meshwork of relations composing our being-(in-)the-environment. This was indeed the main point stressed by SPIDER in its supplementing of the ANT theory, as staged by Ingold: the spider’s web, like the “air and water are not entities that act. They are material media in which living things are immersed, and are experienced by way of their currents,

forces, and pressure gradients. . . . For things to interact they must be immersed in a kind of force field set up by the currents of the media that surround them. Cut out from these currents—that is, reduced to objects—they would be *dead*.²⁹

This (deep) ecologic awareness resonates with recent currents in literary criticism. For a number of years, ecocriticism has taken up the challenge of reading literature precisely as “an accumulation of *responses* requiring a *responsible* agency to which you, yourself, have to become in turn *responsible*,” staging a dense interplay from “the ‘response’ of the ice sheet to the ‘response’ of acidity of the oceans to the ‘response’ of thermohaline circulation, to the ‘response’ of biodiversity, and so on and so forth.”³⁰ More generally, though, this ecological turn of literary criticism deserves to be understood within the broader perspective of the rich affordances inherent in the references made to “media.”

For the Latourian take on the Anthropocene also calls us to become-medium in the sense of becoming spiritual “mediums”—shamans and intermediaries between the various ghostly presences that haunt our down-to-Earth realities. After all, the first connotation stressed when baptizing us as “Earthbound” was indeed “as if bound by a spell.” Within the AIME project, both [MET] and [REL] take on some of the properties the Moderns have dumped on the boogie man of mediumism.³¹ A wonderful little book by Laurent de Sutter has recently suggested, via Gabriel Tarde (the nineteenth-century sociologist so close to Latour’s heart), that [LAW] fully deserves to be added to the list, stating that “there is no law [*droit*] without magic, and there is no magic without law.”³² The theory of the “factishes,” in its mix of scientific “facts” and magic “fetishes,”³³ already stressed the need to add a mediumic perspective to our supposedly disenchanted approach promoted by modernity. It was profoundly inspired by Tobie Nathan’s ethnopsychiatry, which finds much therapeutic wisdom in the “magic” practices disqualified by Western science as “superstition.”³⁴ We Earthbound are spellbound through the meshwork of relations that influence us well beyond the few causal links we manage to become aware of: we are ubiquitously re-linked by these rich re-religious spells that necessarily complement and strengthen our poorly explicated social ties.

This Latourian magic suggests it may be time for literary studies to account for their mediumic dimension: what are we doing, when we interpret literary texts beyond their explicit or historical content, if not becoming mediums, in-spired and in-spirited by dead authors’ inscriptions whose endlessly unfolding meanings are carried through us by an unpredictable succession of Alien loops? What is the literary experience good for, if not for affording metamorphoses through which both the

texts and our selves become something more than they were, something (deliciously or disturbingly) alien to what they used to be? The first and the second meaning of “medium” thus converge in a single necessity. As suggested in a popular song by Seal, “we are never gonna survive unless we get a little crazy”: the need to become-medium attuned to the alien loops coming from our environmental milieu is nothing less than a matter of survival. In an age when (foreign and English) literature departments are being downsized, if not simply shut down, while narrow-minded GDP accounting, maddeningly driven by financial profit, steers us ever more rapidly against the anthropocenic wall of reckoning, making literary studies a matter of survival may come more naturally than it may have seemed fifty years ago.

But there is a third meaning for which the call to becoming-medium makes even more sense for Latourian-inspired literary studies—reconceived and *remediated*³⁵ within the larger field of “media” studies. The notion of media is experiencing a highly stimulating redefinition itself, with authors such as John Durham Peters directing his latest inquiry “Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media,” while the New York trinity of Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark suggests we should go back to “the central question: *what is mediation?*”³⁶ Fifteen years ago, Jeffrey Sconce had already published a masterful study of the constant weavings that tied together media technologies and mediumic imaginaries in a “logic of transmutable flows” between “1) the electricity that powers the technology, 2) the information that occupies the medium, [and] 3) the consciousness of the viewer/listener.”³⁷ Beyond the role of informational milieu played by mass-media since the twentieth century, the most interesting definitions of media provided by younger theoreticians tend to be environmental: “Media are an action of folding time, space and agencies; media are not the substance, or the form through which mediated actions take place but an environment of relations in which time, space and agency emerge.”³⁸

Literary studies have already provided a good number of the most interesting media theorists, from Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler to N. Katherine Hayles and Michael Cuntz. The development of a “media archaeology” creatively hybridizing historical inquiries, science and technology studies, aesthetic analyses, political philosophy, and artistic practices allows for media studies both to craft fascinating new objects of research-experimentation and for vital technopolitical issues to be revisited from the kind of reflexive standpoint to which literary studies have so much to bring: “Media archaeology is introduced as a way to investigate the new media cultures through insights from the past new media, often with an emphasis on the forgotten, the quirky,

the non-obvious apparatuses, practices and inventions. In addition, as argued in this book, it is also a way to analyze the regimes of memory and creative practices in media culture—both theoretical and artistic. Media archaeology sees media cultures as sedimented and layered, a fold of time and materiality where the past might be suddenly discovered anew, and the new technologies grow obsolete increasingly fast.³⁹

Because of their long and rich tradition of hermeneutics, because of their marginalized situation within the current media landscape dominated by audiovisual and digital products, because of their reflective and (yes!) critical temporality of rather slow motion, because of their deconstructivist and theoretical bend, literary studies occupy a privileged position, somewhat perpendicular to the development of mass- and new-media. Now that their once-hegemonic position is being (brutally) reduced to quasi-minority status—an opportunity in terms of intellectual inventiveness, as much as a curse in terms of institutional status and economic livelihood—they are well located to shed an orthogonal light on the rapidly evolving mediascape, helping to reveal its more occult dynamics—if only literary scholars are willing to recast their practices in the framework designed by Hayles under the label of *Comparative Media Studies*.⁴⁰ Such a field of inquiry provides a natural but curiously missing development to both literary studies and the Latourian project.

The “media spells”⁴¹ that structure our public debates and social networks are curiously left out of the modes of existence listed in the AIME project, even though they account for a unique and crucial modality of our social dynamics. Even more than what comes from the sensory experience of our proxemic material environment, what currently “matters” to us (individually and, even more so, collectively) is what the media draws our attention to. It is this process of technologically mediated mattering that we desperately need better to understand. Media archaeology provides an inspiring framework to figure out how, by “folding time, space and agencies,” the old and new media simultaneously structure our perceptual milieu, cast magic spells once enacted by shamans, sorcerers, and mediums, and remediate the multifarious relations that constantly reweave our social meshwork. Even though skeptical about elevating the media [MED?] to the full status of a mode of existence, Latour does not condemn the project, leaving it to his continuators to build the case and do the job.⁴²

Similarly, literary studies have not exploited their capacity to shed light on mediation as a spell, even though most of the analytical and experiential devices to pursue such an inquiry are readily available in our current methodological toolbox. In our anthropocenic age of ubiquitous media, a Latourian approach thus suggests that we consider the task of

remediating our media spells as a most important and most promising perspective where literary studies and ecopolitical mediactivism may felicitously converge. If indeed “the Humans and the Earthbound should be at war,” the “Humanities” need to be rebound to our earthly environment. And since the media now provide our most common intellectual and sensory milieu, becoming the very element in which we inhabit our world, the humanities need to be media-bound.

Literary studies can matter (again) if they manage to investigate and mobilize our fictional attachments in order to weave our inseparably mediatic and mediumic modes of existence into a reconstituted sustainable meshwork. If, as stated earlier, there is literature as soon as an agent attempts to (re)formulate a new concatenation of letters, words, and sentences in order to meet a shared thirst to account for a yet-inexpressible nuance in our modes of existence, our first task may be to intervene in the anthropocenic war with a baptismal gesture of diplomacy—remediating the humanities, irretrievably tainted by their siding with “the Humans,” with a comparative and compositionist conception of the *medianities*, still to be invented.

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NOTES

- 1 See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), esp. 162–85.
- 2 See for instance Philip Watts, *Roland Barthes' Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016) and Olivier Quintyn, *Valences de l'avant-garde. Essai sur l'avant-garde, l'art contemporain et l'institution* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2015).
- 3 Felski, “Latour and Literary Studies,” *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 740–41.
- 4 Bruno Latour, “Les Médias sont-ils un mode d'existence?” *INA Global* 2 (2014): 152. This 2013 interview with Michael Cuntz and Lorenz Engell was first published in German translation and in an expanded form as “Den Kühen ihre Farbe zurückgeben. Von der ANT und der Soziologie der Übersetzung zum Projekt der Existenzweisen,” in *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* (ZMK) 4, no. 2 (2013): 83–100.
- 5 The rest of this section is shared with a more political article entitled “All You Need Is LOVE,” to be published in *Reset Modernity*, ed. Bruno Latour (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming).
- 6 This goal sets the AIME project in continuity with Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and with Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).
- 7 See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 3 vols. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998–2010).
- 8 In his admirable latest book, Jean-Marie Schaeffer analyzes the way in which certain species of birds arrange and ornate their nests as a form of aesthetic behavior strikingly similar to our artistic practices—see *L'expérience esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

- 9 Ranjan Ghosh, "Literature: The 'Mattering' and the Matter," *SubStance* 131, no. 2 (2013): 42–45.
- 10 Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Alfred Le Poittevin, September 16, 1845, in *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1973), 1:252. On these questions, see my *Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
- 11 Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique*, 48–112, and *Petite écologie des études littéraires: pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature* (Vincennes: Thierry Marchaisse, 2011), 112–14.
- 12 Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique*, 104–105.
- 13 Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 19 (my translation).
- 14 This metaphor is further developed in one of his later publications on literature, *Le fil perdu* [The Lost Thread] (Paris: La Fabrique, 2014).
- 15 See Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 471–90.
- 16 Tim Ingold, "When ANT Meets SPIDER: Social Theory for Arthropods," in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 91–92.
- 17 Latour, "War of the Worlds: Humans against Earthbound," *Facing Gaia: A New Enquiry into Natural Religion*, lecture 5 of the Gifford lecture series delivered between February 18 and February 28, 2013, at the invitation of the University of Edinburgh, available online at <http://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/facing-gaia-new-enquiry-natural-religion>. The quotes are excerpted from a PDF document sent by Latour when he delivered the lectures.
- 18 See Latour, *Cogitamus: Six lettres sur les humanités scientifiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).
- 19 Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).
- 20 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 4, "The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe."
- 21 See for instance Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).
- 22 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 6, "Inside the 'Planetary Boundaries': Gaia's Estate."
- 23 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 6.
- 24 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 6.
- 25 See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
- 26 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 6, "Inside the 'Planetary Boundaries': Gaia's Estate."
- 27 I thank Stephen Muecke for suggesting this alternative etymology, highly relevant indeed. A parallel between literary studies and theology may not bode well, however, for the future of the profession: by the end (or the middle?) of the twenty-first century, literature professors may be as few and marginalized within the university as theology professors have been for the most part of the twentieth century. This unappealing fate may lead us to consider ourselves as practitioner shamans no less than as erudite scholars.
- 28 On this question, see Thierry Bardini, "Entre archéologie et écologie: une perspective sur la théorie médiatique," *Multitudes* 62 (2016): 159–68.
- 29 Ingold, "When ANT Meets SPIDER," 92–93.
- 30 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, lecture 6.
- 31 Bertrand Meheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, 2 vols. (Paris: Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1998).
- 32 Laurent de Sutter, *Magic: Une métaphysique du lien* (Paris: PUF, 2015), 82 (my translation).
- 33 Latour, "The Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, Factishes," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 266–92.
- 34 See for instance Tobie Nathan, *L'influence qui guérit* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1994).

- 35 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
- 36 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015); Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015).
- 37 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 8.
- 38 Jussi Parikka, "Media Ecologies and Imaginary Media: Transversal Expansions, Contractions, and Foldings," *The Fibreculture Journal* 17 (2011): 35.
- 39 Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 2–3. See also Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (2002; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) and Erkki Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, Implications* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2011). For a literary exercise in media archeology, in the form of a close reading of the works of Charles-François Tiphaigne de La Roche (1722–1774), see my *Zazirocratie: Très curieuse introduction à la biopolitique et à la critique de la croissance* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2011).
- 40 See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012) and Hayles and Jessica Pressman, introduction, "Making, Critique: A Media Framework," in *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2013), vii–xxxiii.
- 41 On the notion of "media spell," see the dossier "Envoûtements médiatiques" in *Multitudes* 51, no. 4 (2012), available at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2012-4.htm>, as well as my *Ecology of Attention*.
- 42 See Latour, "Les Médias sont-ils un mode d'existence?"

