mother nature

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In January this year, immediately following the Haiti earthquake, on the radio I heard an eyewitness refer to this disaster in the following way: “It’s Mother Nature speaking”. Perhaps Hillary Clinton heard the same sound-byte on the radio. In any case, the following day she was cited in *The Age* as saying the following:

> It is biblical, the tragedy that continues to stalk Haiti and the Haitian people. There was so much hope about Haiti’s future, hope that had not been present for many years and along comes Mother Nature and just flattens it.[2]

If indeed it is Mother Nature speaking, then we must pose the question, *what sort of nature is this?*, and further, *what sort of mother is this?* The usual idea we have of nature is, as Lacan says, “a fruit of culture”.[3] In any case, if this Mother Nature speaks, she speaks in a mute and violent manner, one not mediated by the language that we habitually attribute to speech. This sort of nature is not a walk in the park.

We could say to begin with that this Nature, or Mother Nature, in this particular instance, is presenced by this sort of unpredicted, senseless and violent loss of life and limb. Of course the media attempt to measure and to calibrate it, to re-present it, to render it in familiarly reassuring measures. They say that it was a tremor of so many units on the Richter scale, it has caused so many tens or hundreds of thousands of deaths, and of course it is calculated to have caused so many millions or billions of dollars damage. And in countries like ours where people can afford insurance, it is said to cost so many billions of dollars in claims to insurance companies. But none of these measures is able to speak of the presence for the subject of such unforeseen death and destruction in which his or her life and loved ones are utterly destroyed. How can we begin to speak of this mute Mother Nature?

I was reading Hillary Clinton’s words in an aeroplane, thinking about this question of nature with this lecture in mind. However, the words later took on a particular weight, another significance. My own mother was dying and I was in the aeroplane to be at her bedside, effectively to accompany her to the brink, to be with her, to be present, in that moment of her death. In other words this term Mother Nature also became that of my mother's agony, the horror of the moment of her death that I could not have anticipated.

Indeed, it was truly awful to be witness in that moment to the brutal physicality of death, and of course no less so when that person is none other than my mother. I was with her, touching her; she was so close and yet so distant, so familiar and at the same time so unknown and unreachable. Accompanying her in those moments, holding her hand, stroking her brow, confronted me with her body that was as aged, as ill and as deformed by illness as it was nonetheless unmistakably her and beautiful. It confronted me with a thousand memories, memories evoked through that physical contact.

This physical proximity also confronted me with her physical form, her body, with her breasts that suckled me, with her loins from which I was born. It made me think very acutely of that most physical of processes, that of emerging from her, of being born from her. My body, prior to that, was part of hers. How strange then that the next massive earthquake, that of Chile

which occurred six weeks later, should happen on my birthday, on the very day of my birth. This again was a trigger that retrospectively cast a different light and a different shadow on these physical phenomena.

The outgoing Chilean president Michelle Bachelet on that occasion repeated the adage that, "The power of nature has again struck our country".[4] But for me, the difficulty is precisely how to speak of my experience of this death and the encounter with my mother's body and its limits. I did attempt to say something in a eulogy, a eu-*logos*. The *logos*, discourse, might be employed, not so much in order to speak *good* of her, but literally to speak of this experience *well*, with words that touch, however ineptly, upon a suffering, a jouissance of the body, hers, to which I bore witness, and consequently my own. Can the *logos* convey something of this encounter with Mother Nature? How can I speak the words that brush upon the finality of my mother and her body, of a relation of the body and of its words that I shared with her, that I took from her?

This question of nature was a prominent theme at the time of the Enlightenment. Last year I presented a public lecture entitled "The Origin of Language". In doing so I neglected an important reference, precisely Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.[5] In this work that was published only posthumously, Rousseau puts forward a thesis that nonetheless marked his thought and work throughout his life. In part, this thesis is that language is a rigid convention that alienates man from his experience. In doing so, Rousseau proposes and privileged a type of mythology of a primitive language by which man can gain access to an unmediated experience. Let us cite Rousseau from one of his earliest works, *The Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality amongst Men*:

> The first language of man, the most universal language, the most energetic and the only one he needed, before it was necessary to persuade groups of men, is *the cry of nature*. As this cry was ripped from him only by a type of instinct in the most pressing circumstances, in order to plea for help in the greatest of dangers, or of relief from the most violent evils, it was not in great use in the ordinary course of life, where more moderate sentiments reign. When the ideas of men began to spread and to multiply, and there was established amongst them a tighter communication, they sought more numerous signs and a more extended language: they multiplied the inflections of the voice, and joined to them gestures, which, *by their nature*, are more expressive, and whose meaning is less dependent on a prior determination.[6] [my italics]

For Rousseau, this cry of nature is one that would be unmediated by language and one that is closer to music. But this primitive language is intangible, it is nowhere to be spoken. Rousseau has to invoke the myth of the *original man* and proposes that the difference between he and 'civilised man' is due to the corrupting influence of society and the state which takes man away from nature. In order to further examine this, we need look no further than the first sentence of his *Émile, or Treatise on Education* which serves as a type of manifesto:

> Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man.[7]

What first strikes us in this proposition are the moral overtones: nature is good, civilization is bad. The ideal of the noble savage is not far away. But if only we can find our path back to nature, then all will be well. But here we have a very different notion of 'nature' to that of the 'Mother Nature' we are elaborating here. Nature, in this proposition, is something that is authored, it is already ordered, but by an order – if one is to follow Rousseau – that would be independent of language. If this authoring and ordering remains mysterious, it remains so by

virtue of the Mysteries of Being, of a sort of greater Being who is the author of nature. In other words there is a type of Otherness at play here, a pantheistic deity in whom Rousseau must continue to have faith for his schema to function. We might see such a belief in the orderly purpose of nature in the current emphasis in and out of the clinical field in the notion of 'development', or that of 'genetics' in which we place our trust.

However, in 1755, the year of the publication of the Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* which we have just cited, there was another tremendous earthquake, on this occasion, that of Lisbon. That earthquake was said to be felt in such distant places as Finland and the Caribbean, both directly and via the ensuing tidal waves. The Lisbon earthquake lasted only a number of minutes but caused fissures five metres wide to appear in the city centre. Survivors rushed to the open space of the docks for safety and watched as the water receded, revealing a seafloor littered by lost cargo and old shipwrecks. Walter Benjamin cites the eyewitness account of an Englishman:

> […] I now became witness to a terrifying spectacle: out on the ocean, as far as the eye could see, there was a throng of ships being tossed about by the waves and crashing into each other as if they were the playthings of a mighty storm. Suddenly the huge quay by the shore sank into the sea and vanished, together with all the people who had imagined that standing on it ensured their safety. At the same time, the boats and other vehicles in which so many were trying to escape all suddenly became victims of the sea.

Benjamin continues that:

> […] it was about an hour after the second and most destructive tremor that the vast wave – twenty metres high – which the Englishman could see from a distance came crashing down over the city. As the tide withdrew, the bed of the Tagus was suddenly left completely dry: the ebb was so powerful that it drained all the water from the river.[8]

In areas unaffected by the tsunamis, fire quickly broke out and the flames raged for five days. Thus Lisbon lay in ruins. The 70,000 volumes of the Royal library, hundreds of masterpieces of art and the entire Royal archives were utterly destroyed, thus effacing the history and the symbolic records of the nation and its discoveries of the new worlds, including our own.

And it was not just Lisbon that was destroyed. Benjamin recounts that the southern Spanish "cities of Cádiz, Jerez, and Algeciras were almost completely destroyed. An eyewitness in Seville claimed that the cathedral spires shook like reeds in the wind".[9]

The earthquake had vast effects in Europe at this time of the Enlightenment. The place of God was put into question in the face of the senseless destruction of an entire European city, one of far greater political, economic and cultural importance than it is today, still at the height of its powers as the capital of a colonial empire. It struck on the Catholic holiday of All Saints' Day, thus immediately putting into question God's design. We can recognize a contemporary ring about such attributions since we recall that American evangelist Pat Robertson declared that the people of Haiti were "cursed" since they "swore a pact to the devil".[10]

Most famously Voltaire sketched a poem, first published in the volume: *Poems on the Disaster of Lisbon and on Natural Law*[11] that questions (surely more eloquently than a Hillary Clinton or a Pat Robertson) the prevailing idea that there is a beneficent God who reigns "in this best of all imagined worlds", thus parodying the philosophers of the time. Let us cite a little from the beginning of this poem:

UNHAPPY mortals! Dark and mourning earth!

Affrighted gathering of human kind!

Eternal lingering of useless pain!

Come, ye philosophers, who cry, “All’s well,”

And contemplate this ruin of a world.

Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,

This child and mother heaped in common wreck,

These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts –

A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,

Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,

Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,

In racking torment end their stricken lives.

To those expiring murmurs of distress,

To that appalling spectacle of woe,

Will ye reply: “You do but illustrate

The Iron laws that chain the will of God”?

Say ye, o’er that yet quivering mass of flesh:

“God is avenged: the wage of sin is death”?

What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived

That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother’s breast?[12]

Voltaire is able to speak of the devastation and the way it touches the lives of those caught in this so-called ‘natural phenomenon’. He also speaks of nature, but in contrast to the witness of the Haitian earthquake, he does not say that *she* speaks. He declares:

Nature is mute, we interrogate it in vain.

We need a God, who speaks to humankind. [my translation][13]

In other words, this God is missing: what is missing is an Other who might have the words to speak of it since we cannot as our words fail us here. Rousseau, however, holds steadfastly to both his ideal of nature and the goodness that he expects from it. He also hopes that it will speak, or he at least hopes to resolve its incomprehensibility by reducing it to some familiar meaning. In his *Letter to Voltaire*[14] Rousseau writes:

> My grievances are all against your poem on the disaster of Lisbon, because I expected of it more dignified impressions of humanity than seem to have inspired you. [my translation]

And in so far as it cannot be reduced to meaning, in so far as no man is able to give proof of the reasons for such a disaster, Rousseau must invoke, with religion, an Other who *does* know. He writes:

> […] these proofs depend on a perfect knowledge of the constitution of the world and of the aim of its Author, and this knowledge is incontestably above that of human intelligence.[15] [my translation]

Furthermore, Rousseau is eager to attribute the disaster, or at least the devastation of the earthquake, to the nefarious effects of a society that lives, in his opinion, *against* nature. Hence he goes on to say to Voltaire:

> Without leaving your subject of Lisbon, consider, for example, that *nature* did not at all bring together in that place 20,000 buildings, each six or seven floors high, and if the inhabitants of that great town had been more evenly spread out and more lightly accommodated, the damage would have been far less, and perhaps none at all. All would have fled at the very first shake, and the following day one would have found them 20 leagues away, all as gay as if nothing had happened to them. [16] [my translation and italics]

This is quite an idyllic scene, all of these inhabitants living in accordance with an ideal of nature and fleeing this disaster-free earthquake with gay abandon. But here we have an idea of nature typical of Rousseau: one which unfolds in a timely manner by giving a little shake, a little 'cry of nature', which of course the inhabitants must interpret as a warning, allowing them to be a full 20 leagues away by the time the full force of the earthquake is unfurled.

If Voltaire speaks or writes in a way that touches upon and confronts the physicality of the suffering induced by the earthquake, we hear on the other hand a rejection of this by Rousseau. Towards the end of his letter he says to Voltaire:

You enjoy [*vous jouissez*] but I wait, and the waiting embellishes everything.

Here jouissance, the possibility of an enjoyment of a contact, the actuality of a suffering, is rejected in favour of hope and waiting, waiting for a deferred enjoyment that for Rousseau can only be granted in another life. The waiting embellishes everything, but the embellishment is no more than that of Rousseau's imagination. As Jean Starobinski notes:

> He composes books and operas only to console himself, to enter into conversation with his chimeras, his imaginary characters.[17] [my translation]

Rousseau's own mother died in giving birth to him. "I cost my mother her life", he wrote, "and my birth was the first of my misfortunes".[18] Starobinski interprets Rousseau's yearning for the original language, for the ideal of nature, as: "A return to the original belly, to the peacefulness of Mother Nature".[19] Perhaps, but surely there was nothing peaceful about that death either, the only peacefulness residing in a final *rest in peace*. But despite Rousseau's copious writings including his attempt to produce a theory of language, he disdains speech and language in favour of the elusive 'cry of nature', a choice that surely alienates him from the very possibility of an encounter with Mother Nature. Instead he is reduced to interpret signs in what Starobinski describes as his "delusion of interpretation" of the latter years of his life and the "impossibility of [the] transparency" that he so desperately seeks. In other words, without language, the only knowledge he can have is a paranoid knowledge.

In *Émile,* Rousseau refers to his contemporary Étienne Bonnot de Condillac as a man "who honoured me with his friendship", and whom he describes as "amongst the best reasoners and the most profound metaphysicians of his century".[20] Here Condillac himself articulates what he understands by metaphysics:

> This metaphysics is not itself the first science. How would it be possible to analyse all of our ideas? We don't know what they are and how they are formed. Thus we first have to know their origin and how they are generated. But the science that deals with this object does not yet have a name, since it is so young. I would name it psychology if I knew any decent work under that title.[21] [my translation]

If Condillac shares with Rousseau the ideal of origins and thus of development, he differs in that he considers that the object, which we might here call Mother Nature, may only be apprehended through the mediation of language. Thus:

> […] our ideas and our faculties are nothing but sensation that takes different forms […] We have noted that the development of our ideas and of our faculties only occurs through the means of signs, and would not at all occur without them; consequently our manner of reasoning can only be corrected in correcting language, and that all the art is reduced to properly constructing the language of each science. We have proved that the first languages, at their origin, were well-made, because the metaphysics, which presided upon their formation, was not a science like today, but an instinct given by *nature*.[22] [my italics and translation]

For Condillac the first languages, and therefore the first sciences, were those of the sensations. Hence Condillac's ideal, an illusory ideal, is to have a language that can be "caught up in a total adequation"[23], as Michel Foucault says, with the sensations that, for him, were the first matter. His wish is that language should be able to accommodate itself to Nature, that there should be a proportionate relation. But since that adequation necessarily fails, a leftover remains. Jacques Derrida proposes that this *first matter* in Condillac is one that can never be completely domesticated by language. He states:

> Thus there would exist a *mute* first matter, *an irreducible kernel of immediate presence* to which would befall secondary modifications, which would enter into combinations, relations, liaisons, etc.[24] [my italics and translation]

… in other words all the functions of language as Condillac conceptualises them. Here we might consider that such an "irreducible kernel of immediate presence" is something that we are attempting to name as Mother Nature.

A little later on, around 1813-1815, Jeremy Bentham formulated what was posthumously published as his *Theory of Fictions*.[25] In these writings, in a footnote, he gives a critique of Condillac's notion of nature which might be instructive for us. He puts forward:

> Of the aggregations [the result of a synthesis] thus formed, some have been better made, others worse. Those which [Condillac] regards as having been better made were (he assures us) the work of *Nature*; those which were worse made, the work of learned men – meaning such whose labours in this line he saw reason to disapprove of. Nature being a sort of goddess, and that a favourite one – by ascribing to this goddess whatsoever was regarded by him as good, he seems to have satisfied himself that he had proved the goodness of it: and by so concise an expedient – an expedient, in the employment of which he has found but too many successors as well as contemporaries and predecessors – he has saved himself no small quantity of trouble. *Nature* is a sort of fictitious personage, without whose occasional assistance it is scarce possible (it must be confessed) either to write or speak. But, when brought upon the carpet, she should be brought

> on in her proper *costume* – nakedness: not bedizened with *attributes* – not clothed in *eulogistic* any more than in *dyslogistic* moral qualities. Making minerals, vegetables, and animals – this is her proper work – and it is quite enough for her; whenever you are bid to see her doing man's work, be sure it is not *Nature* that is doing it but the *author*, or somebody or other whom he patronizes and whom he has dressed up for the purpose in the goddess's robes […].[26]

Thus this Nature, this goddess, is then the God that takes the place of the author, reminding us of Rousseau's "Author of all things". For Bentham this Nature is a fiction, a *necessary* fiction to be able to write or to speak, the fiction of language, the fiction of the symbolic, but a fiction nonetheless. Whether eulogistic or dyslogistic, such a fiction is *necessary* in the way that Lacan proposes that "truth has a structure of fiction". He also notes that:

> It is in this dialectic of the relation of language to the real that Bentham's effort to situate somewhere this good of the real, the pleasure in this instance […].[27]

But can our eulogy, pertaining as it does then to the field of fiction, the field of speech and writing, touch upon, or even penetrate the goods of the real: Mother Nature?

We can evoke the presence of Mother Nature in what Lacan calls "the maternal thing, the mother in so far as she occupies the place of this thing", the thing to which Freud refers in German as *das Ding*.[28] This is the "irreducible kernel of immediate presence" to which we have referred with Derrida. Like Voltaire above, Lacan speaks of this as "this *mute* reality that is *das Ding*".[29] It is mute in so far as it cannot be articulated, Mother Nature cannot speak.

Nonetheless the "distance of the subject to the *Das Ding* […] is precisely the condition of speech"[30] says Lacan. If it were able to be grasped in an unmediated fashion, there would be no language. And *das Ding*, "the mother, object of incest is a forbidden good".[31] In other words, our Mother Nature, as we have spoken of it here, pertains to the body of the mother, this body as unattainable, unassimilable. This distance then is irreducible. It is the distance that separates our words from Mother Nature. We know from Claude Lévi-Strauss that "the prohibition of incest constitutes the fundamental step […] in which is accomplished the passage from nature to culture".[32] Therefore to move in the opposite direction, from culture, or language, in order to touch upon Mother Nature, is precisely the *transgression* of the incest taboo.

So it is the very attempt to penetrate the irreducible presence by our words that constitutes the transgression of the incest taboo. There is a presence, a fearful presence, an irreducible presence, a distance that cannot be spanned. But this distance then is also none than our endeavour, always failing and inept, to produce a eulogy, to speak of Mother Nature. And yet we must attempt to speak of it. In the seminar *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, Lacan speaks of the fate of Oedipus. "*Naturally*", he says:

> […] the consequence that is well known and which was finally on display, or if I may say so, visible […] for Oedipus – wasn't it, to show him what was awaiting him […] for having existed, him precisely, as man of this supreme possession that resulted from the dupery, in which his partner maintained him, from the veritable *nature* of what she offered to his jouissance.[33] [my italics and translation]

This "veritable nature" is Mother Nature as we have been elaborating it: a jouissance of the body that is at the very same time a suffering of the body, an enjoyment for which Oedipus paid the price with his own body, blinding himself many times over with the pins that he broke off from the robes with which his mother was adorned. He did so when he discovered

the limp body of his mother, his lover, and released her from the noose by which she had hung herself. In the tryst with death, the brush with a mother's body and its limits, it is this jouissance, this suffering that is so difficult to say.

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