THE RISK OF INHERITING FROM A SPHINX CALLED AIME

Or The Many Lives of Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*[1]

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Abstract: Through a non-fiction fable, the reader encounters the many lives of Bruno Latour's decades-long philosophical project. While this project partially culminated in the 2012 publication of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME) and its accompanying online platform, the fable seeks to suggest the alternate paths the work could have taken. By tracing the historicity of the choices made over the decades, as well as the fragility and the ever-present threat of failure the final AIME project entailed, the fable embraces the element of risk in Latour's endeavour – and its promises – as an invitation for the project to be taken up anew. Thus, the moral of the fable is that only an understanding of the risks taken during this philosophical adventure can truly equip those who wish to inherit from it.

Keywords: Latour, AIME, EME, modes of existence, empirical metaphysics.

PRELUDE

I had woken up in the middle of the night and could not go back to sleep. Lying in bed, I couldn't stop thinking about the article that sat on my computer, refusing to be finished. I turned the lamp on, put my glasses on, and picked up the beat up copy of Péguy's *Œuvres en prose* that I had left on the nightstand. I liked going through passages I had underlined over the years. Somehow you always ended up jumping to previous pages so as to grasp what the marked sentences were about, and then you always went way past that passage – just because Péguy. I was looking for those gorgeous lines in *Clio* about our responsibility towards Homer – the ones so often evoked by Latour. Péguy's message was so poignant, and his words so beautiful, that

[1] I would like to thank Didier Debaise for his comments on a first version of this text, as well as the editorial team at *In Circolo*, Camilla Zani and Christian Frigerio for their willingness to embrace the risk of this paper.

they made me forgive him for what I always felt like a certain veneration of individual writer's genius which I detested. I was sure that it was the passage on page 111, since I had enclosed it within the boundaries of a square traced in red pencil on the Bible-thin paper. But to my surprise the passage said nothing of Homer, or of his genius. But I was certain that it was that passage that I was looking for. And then my heart skipped a beat. The common occurrence of re-reading a text, and being shocked at not having originally noticed a crucial element plummeted into the horror of finding a term that could not possibly have been written in Péguy's lifetime. To this date I have not dared telling anyone about this impossible event, but today I share with you what I read, with sleepy eyes and trembling hands, that night on page 111 of *Clio*:

> It is a fearsome thought, my friend, to consider that we are granted full license – that we possess this exorbitant right, *the very right* to misread AIME; to strip a work of collective inquiry of its audacity; to realize that the most ambitious philosophical project of a lifetime of work has been entrusted to our hands, not as something inert, but as a living thing, like a small wild rabbit. And above all, that by letting it slip from our hands – from these very hands, these inert hands – we may, through our own neglect, bring about its death. What a terrifying risk, my friend, what a terrifying adventure – and above all, what a fearsome responsibility.[2]

PART I: What Is Philosophy?

The year is 1965. At Franklin, the name by which everyone in Paris knows the Jesuit *lycée* Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague, Monsieur Detape has structured his usual philosophy course for last year high school students entirely around Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science* will be the highlights of the course, but he has chosen to start with *The Birth of Tragedy*.[3] An eighteen-year-old lad from a wine-trading

[2] The original texts can be found in Charles PÉGUY, *Œuvres en prose: 1909-1914*, Vol. 2, Preface and notes by Marcel PÉGUY, Gallimard, Paris 1957, p. 111, and reads as follows: «It is a fearsome thought, my friend, to consider that we are granted full license – that we possess this exorbitant right, *the very right* to misread Homer; to uncrown a work of genius; to realize that the greatest work of the greatest genius has been entrusted to our hands, not as something inert, but as a living thing, like a small wild rabbit. And above all, that by letting it slip from our hands – from these very hands, these inert hands – we may, through our own neglect, bring about its death. What a terrifying risk, my friend, what a terrifying adventure – and above all, what a fearsome responsibility». This and all subsequent translations of works referenced solely in their French edition are ours.

[3] Bruno LATOUR, *Life among Conceptual Characters*, "New Literary History", 47, 2-3, 2016, pp. 463-476, p. 465.

Burgundy family has been nodding in excitement since the very beginning of the first lecture. The contrast with the incomprehensible mathematics class he has just had could not be more stark. Monsieur Detape's words make more sense to him than anything he has ever heard at school. There is no trace here of the usual sense of arbitrariness he feels whenever his teachers pass off their most obscure blackboard manoeuvres as strictly logical or rational. Who is this Nietzsche madman who says that we should look at science «as something problematic and questionable»,[4] that «[p]erhaps there is a kingdom of wisdom from which the logician is banished?».[5] He cannot possibly be right about the scientific method being, not a defence *of* truth, but *against* truth![6] Or can he? And who is this Socrates character who murdered Greek tragedy, this «theoretical man» who occasionally hears divine voices and whose deadly weapon is made out of reasons and counter-reasons? *Ah, finally ideas have flesh*[7] – he thinks to himself. «Finally something rational! Something one can finally understand [...]»; «something that corresponds to a search for truth».[8] Is this bold style of writing pursuing the adventures of such thrilling characters what philosophy is? Then so be it. Suddenly he stands up and exclaims: «Me too I'm a philosopher!».[9] A cry signalling an event. The choice to pursue philosophy – to take up this search for truth. A life trajectory unfolding in its wake. Back in Burgundy, now attending the University of Dijon, the youngster receives a classical training in philosophy. And what a time to study philosophy it is! The great names that will for decades be commented in philosophy departments across the world are putting a new book out every year. However, who said that a clear calling to pursue philosophy, with full family support and in exciting intellectual times, would necessarily result in great academic results? In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. The red ink of his teachers' pens floods his first

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[4] Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, tr. eng. Ronald SPEIRS, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 5.

[5] *Ivi,* p. 71.

[6] *Ivi*, p. 4.

[7] LATOUR, *Life among Conceptual Characters*, p. 465.

[8] ID.*, Bruno Latour, philosophe des modes d'existence*, interview by Adèle VAN REETH, "Les Chemins de la philosophie", France Culture, September 13th, 2019, mins. 9:21-9:53 (accessed March 15th, 2026) https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-chemins-de-la-philosophie/bruno-latour-philosophe-des-modes-d-existence-8024066

[9] ID., *A Dialog About a New Meaning of Symmetric Anthropology*, interviewed by Carolina MIRANDA, in P. CHARBONNIER – G. SALMON – P. SKAFISH (eds.), *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology After Anthropology*, Rowman & Littlefield, London-New York 2017, pp. 327–343, p. 330.

assignments with brutal remarks such as «a very serious defect», «catastrophic», «rhetorical sophism»... He reads the following comment on the first page of an assignment he just got back graded:

> You assert – you don't explain. You seem to think that a kind of lyrical, quasi-poetic phrasing can replace justification, definitions, analysis, and so on... Just as the point is not to reproduce Marx, Sartre, or Heidegger, neither is it to reproduce Nietzsche by merely imitating his style.[10]

Through the commentaries that would have broken most, he learns that the philosophy he fell in love with and what his new teachers call philosophy are two very different things. The one that Nietzsche has taught him does not care whether it is a poem, an aphorism, a fiction, or a dialogue that gets you there. The one his teachers enforce upon him in red-pen scribbles is a discipline whose borders one must never cross. One is about description, narration, and dramatization; the other about explanation, definition, and justification. One's loyalty is to the adventures of the journey; the other's is to the rigors of a well-delimited discipline. He sees no wrong in starting an assignment with a small fiction. It is almost like he treats college homework like chapters in the secret novels pouring out of his typewriter – he is already halfway through another one, a collection of stories for the girl he loves.[11] Even though his teachers won't tolerate his style, he is entirely undeterred. The years pass, he soaks everything in, and he eventually finds his footing. He can now give teachers what they want without completely renouncing his own idea of what philosophy can be – although he learns to keep the more exploratory and literary work away from assignments. His grades begin their steady climb. Perhaps the high school psychologist's verdict after running some tests on him back at Franklin wasn't that far off: «there is nothing else [other than philosophy] that you can do», she told him.[12] Before long the young philosopher graduates and makes the other great choice that would set a life-orienting path. He marries the other love of his life, Chantal.[13] The

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[10] Bruno LATOUR, *Connaissance et existence*, *s.d.*, ms., AMB 114Z-1.
[11] ID., *Les contes pour Chantal et pour toi*, *s.d.*, ms., BMGM FL LAT 127.
[12] ID., *Bruno Latour, philosophe des modes d'existence*, interview by Adèle VAN REETH, mins. 9:59-10:15.
[13] During the same 2019 radio interview Latour vindicated how extremely connected to life-orienting choices philosophy is. Thus he claimed his philosophical work to have been decisively marked by

newlyweds move to Dijon's outskirts, where his uncle is a Catholic priest experimenting with new types of church models.[14] Eventually the young philosopher ranks first nationally in the *agrégation de philosophie* examination,[15] and gets assigned his first post teaching at the *lycée* in Gray. The drive along the road from Gray back to Dijon has some life-changing epiphanies in store for him – namely that one philosophical intuition he will never let go of. And before they could even get used to married couple life in Dijon, duty knocks on the philosopher's door: they are now sitting on a flight bound for Ivory Coast. *Oh well, at least I can teach kids in Abidjan philosophy instead of actually serving in the military... Plus I can maybe learn a thing or two at ORSTOM and hopefully even write my PhD thesis.*[16] They both thought they roughly knew what colonialism was about, but they weren't ready for the obscenity of the racism and inequalities that they witness from inside the belly of the neocolonial beast.[17] Who would have thought that while working alongside all those great anthropologists at ORSTOM another spark is lighting up inside him. The ethnographic method unravels a whole new world to explore other than the one he was taught in Dijon. To his new colleague's surprise, he feels no difference whatsoever between the skills needed to make sense of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and those demanded to do fieldwork in Ivory Coast.[18] In both cases it is about «managing to reconstruct worlds that initially appear completely opaque to us, and that become clear through inquiry, during which

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two choices: the choice to study philosophy with Monsieur Detape in 1965, and the choice to marry Chantal in 1970. See *Ivi*, mins. 20:44-21:04. The same point about the importance of this second choice for Latour's brand of realism is brought up in LATOUR, *Life among Conceptual Characters*, p. 466.

[14] Timothy HOWLES, *Appendix: Interview with Latour*, in *The Political Theology of Bruno Latour*, PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 2018, pp. 365-374, p. 367.

[15] It is worth mentioning that François Dagognet, who Latour has given credit throughout his whole career for his work on visualization in the sciences and on matter, presided his *agrégation* examination jury in 1972. See Arnaud FOSSIER, Edouard GARDELLA, *Entretien avec Bruno Latour*, "Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines", 10, 2006, pp. 113-130, p. 119.

[16] The Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer (ORSTOM) – which in 1998 became the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD) – is the French governmental agency for international development. Between 1973 and 1975, Latour did his national service at its social sciences delegation in Abidjan, where he met (and learned from) colleagues such as Marc Augé and Jean-Pierre Dozon. The results of Latour's first fieldwork study, conducted in collaboration with Amina Shabou, became *Les idéologies de la compétence en milieu industriel à Abidjan* (1974).

[17] Bruno LATOUR, *Réponse aux objections...*, "Revue du MAUSS", 17, 2001, pp. 137-152, p. 137.

[18] ID., *A Dialog About a New Meaning of Symmetric Anthropology*, p. 333.

one takes a great many notes».[19] So again, as taken as he is by the spell of anthropology's methodologies, disciplines are beyond the point. «Anything goes as long as it leads to what you want to find».[20] The ethnographic method equips him with what he needs at this very moment so as to empirically grasp each and every detail of the world. It is as if he is finding new ways to live up to Zarathustra's demand to «remain faithful to the earth», to not «fly away from earthly things»[21] so as to explain them away. Impervious to the extent to which his whole career would revolve around this passion for the trace, this care for details and description, he feels like there has to be a way for anthropology not to limit itself to the sole study of non-modern or peripheral peoples.[22] Why is it that this meticulously empirical registering of every aspect of existence can only be performed on others, never on ourselves? Why are anthropologists so bold towards others – studying the most important aspects of their worlds –, and so timid towards themselves – studying only the margins at home?[23] He is soon going to find out, since he has been awarded a Fullbright scholarship to go to carry out an ethnography of a biology laboratory in San Diego, California, and he intends to study scientists like an exotic tribe – as he makes sure to tell them on his first day, to general

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[19] FOSSIER, GARDELLA, *Entretien avec Bruno Latour*, p. 118.

[20] Bruno LATOUR – Laurent GODMER – David SMADJA, *L'œuvre de Bruno Latour : une pensée politique exégétique*, "Raisons politiques", 47, pp. 115-148, p. 124.

[21] Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, tr. eng. Adrian DEL CARO, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 57. For a full deployment of Nietzsche's late metaphysics of the Earth see Pierre MONTEBELLO, *Nietzsche. Fidélité à la Terre*, CNRS Éditions, Paris 2019.

[22] Latour's answer involves anthropology rejecting any form of universalism – structure, language, unconscious, nature – over which to deploy its ready-made concepts of culture, symbolism, myth, and so on. Rather than registering pluralism through multiculturalism, the aim is to do so through multinaturalism, which means that anthropology must henceforth deal with ontology. See Bruno LATOUR, *À métaphysique, métaphysique et demie. L'*Enquête sur les modes d'existence *forme-t-elle un système ?*, "Les Temps Modernes", 682, 2015, pp. 72-85, p. 83.

[23] In terms of the postcolonial tension between centre and periphery Latour's project attempts to answer the following question: «what would happen if we used rigorous anthropological methods [as habitually applied to the core of the peripheries] to understand the key elements that are at the heart of the powers assembled at the centre?» LATOUR, *Réponse aux objections*, p. 138. Scientific objectivity, through the field work for *Laboratory Life*, was the first target of such an approach, which was eventually vindicated as symmetrical anthropology. See ID., *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, La Découverte, Paris 1991; tr. eng. Catherine PORTER, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1993, especially pp. 100-101 for the asymmetry between the ambition of Marc Augé's Ivory Coast research and the relative shallowness of his work on the Parisian subway.

mockery.[24] Good thing he still does not care for disciplines, since Greimas' semiotics and the ethnomethodology he learns from Garfinkel's disciples at UCSD are the tools he is now giving himself so as to remain completely local in his analyses – always the constraint to never fly away from earthly things. Although he remains somewhat in contact with French academia through the influx of big-name visiting professors to San Diego – Michel Serres and François Lyotard among others –, the obligation he set for himself already upon arriving in Abidjan to write straight into English, while initially having reduced some of his literary capacities, has sheltered him from the slippery slopes philosophy seems to be sliding into back home in France.[25] The philosophical golden age which he grew into seems to have stylistically snowballed into something he is really glad not be a part of. He sometimes professes to be doing sociology of science or even anthropology of science. But any attempt to confine him within the limits of the disciplines he now claims to practice will prove futile. To begin with, the names popping up all over the descriptions of laboratory practices we find in his first book are too diverse for that. Michel Serres, information theory, and the Chinese game of Go are blended with semiotics, a quote from Marx, and a transcription of a conversation overheard at the lab. A dash of Foucault followed by quotes from a biology textbook giving way to a photo of a refrigerator filled with samples, veering into a footnote on Leibniz or Derrida. «[P]hilosophy and field studies should be carried out under the same roof and, if possible, in the same head»[26] – a «binary weapon»,[27] he would later call it. Back in France, the dual approach is made all the more evident when, as an appendix to a historical study of Pasteur, he adds a philosophical treatise in the most classical of styles – numbered propositions and scholia included. This short text would set out the guidelines for a lifelong of research, drawing on that epiphany he had had back in 1972 while driving from Gray to Dijon. First intuition: «Nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else,

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[24] Bruno LATOUR, Steve WOOLGAR, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills-London 1979, p. 17.

[25] LATOUR – GODMER – SMADJA, *L'œuvre de Bruno Latour : une pensée politique exégétique*, p. 127.

[26] Bruno LATOUR, *Les Microbes: Guerre et paix, suivi de Irréductions*, Métailié, Paris 1984; tr. eng. Alan SHERIDAN, John LAW, *The Pasteurization of France*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1988, p. 252 n. 7.

[27] Bruno LATOUR – Graham HARMAN – Peter ERDÉLYI, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE*, Zero Books, Winchester-Washington 2011, pp. 42, 49.

everything may be allied to everything else».[28] Irreductionism will henceforth be the name of the game, and the sociology of associations – or associology, as he loves to call his baby – its laboratory. This quirky sociology born from his meeting with a former engineer turned sociologist – Michel Callon – will keep them increasingly busy, and even gets him his first positions in academia. The plaque outside his office's door at the École de Mines in Paris now reads "sociologist" – again, who cares about disciplines. All those empirical studies of technology that they keep publishing – many of them in English – are still under the philosophical aegis of his so-called *tractatus scientifico-politicus* – also known as *Irreductions*. The sociology of translations – yet another name for it – has helped sociology gain much celebrated freedom of movement across heterogenous spheres and actors, but of course this comes at a cost; one that soon proves too high for him. He gradually realizes how desperately the social sciences – his own brand included – need better metaphysics and ontology.[29] *Irreductions* has been very important. It is bold. Daring. Undeniably juvenile. But its virtues are built around its major flaw. But didn't he see it coming? Indeed. One of *Irreductions*' interludes even points out that there seems to be a paradox at the heart of the irreductionist principle: that first having to agree with reducing everything down to a certain number of associations.[30] But he is young and wild; willing to pay the price of an unembraced paradox in exchange for taking his first strong philosophical intuition as far as possible, regardless of how outrageous. A quick turn around the corner after a *non sequitur* and we are clear of danger: «Thus there is no paradox».[31] But there is. He knows it. Smart critics know it.[32] And yet it keeps creeping in. Busy as he is with

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[28] LATOUR, *The Pasteurization of France*, p. 163.

[29] ID., *One More Turn After The Social Turn . . .*, in E. MCMULLIN (ed.), *The Social Dimensions of Science*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1992, pp. 272-294. For an account of how the discovery of Alfred N. Whitehead's work thanks to Isabelle Stengers provided the tools for such a metaphysics – in turn unleashing the processual element in Latour's work – see Buenaventura MARCO, *The World Is Articulated: Bruno Latour's Long Road Towards a Process Empirical Metaphysics*, "Philosophy Kitchen", 24, forthcoming.

[30] LATOUR, *The Pasteurization of France*, p. 190.

[31] *Ivi*, p. 191.

[32] For a very early – June 21st, 1984 – critique of the inherent reductionism of *Irreductions*-type accounts of science that was spontaneously articulated by a scientist during the discussion of a paper delivered by Latour at a colloque see Bruno LATOUR, *La rhétorique scientifique : qu'est-ce que la force d'un argument ?*, in J.-P. DUPUY *et al.* (eds.), *Sens et place des connaissances dans la société*, Presses du CNRS, Paris 1986, pp. 251-287, p. 286. For an account of how not having embraced the

the post-sale customer service[33] of this huge machine he helped built known world-wide as actor-network theory (ANT) – last name, I swear –, he keeps thinking about the plurality that he robbed the world of in exchange for the one that *Irreductions* fleetingly helped re-gain. And now he is lying in the sun, vacationing in some island off Gothenburg, and he cannot stop thinking about that Whitehead quote that his friend Isabelle had shared with him last month by the Fondation des Treilles' swimming pool.[34] Could these red rocks his fingers keep trying to read be taking risks so as to remain in existence? Could they be translating their way into existence differently than the reference chains through which scientists obtain objectivity about them? Could the way of remaining in existence of the technological projects he studies back home in Paris also differ from that of the rocks he cannot stop touching? Second great intuition: the others needed for existence are not only the heterogenous and far-reaching associations discovered by *Irreductions*, but the antecedents and successors of each particular type of existence's trajectory. And they come in different colours.[35]

PART II: Biography of a Riddle

Tuesday, July 26th, 1988. Melbourne.

This is it! This is what I have been scribbling in my notebooks ever since Abidjan.[36] *The grand project I never knew I had started.* Irreductions *seems minuscule in comparison, and yet, it's still somehow compatible. Now it makes sense... the jumping*

paradox at the heart of the irreductionist principle made Latour privilege quantitative analyses over qualitative ones see MARCO, *The World Is Articulated: Bruno Latour's Long Road Towards a Process Empirical Metaphysics*, especially the section "ANT Yet It Moves".

[33] John TRESCH, Bruno LATOUR, *Another turn after ANT: An interview with Bruno Latour*, "Social Studies of Science", 43, 2, 2013, pp. 302-313, p. 304.

[34] Bruno LATOUR, *Biography of an inquiry: On a book about modes of existence*, "Social Studies of Science", 43, 2, 2013, pp. 287-301, p. 297. For Isabelle Stenger's take, more than three decades later, on that very same moment see Isabelle STENGERS, *Bruno Latour: Recollections of a Traveling Companion*, "Common Knowledge", 29, 3, 2021, pp. 283-308, p. 291.

[35] The metaphor comparing the change from irreductions to modes of existence to the transition from a black and white visualization to a colour one has been used very often by Latour. See for example TRESCH, LATOUR, *Another turn after ANT: An interview with Bruno Latour*, p. 308.

[36] LATOUR, *Biography of an inquiry: On a book about modes of existence*, p. 290; ID, *Coming out as a philosopher*, p. 603.

around from biblical exegesis, to laboratory studies, to technology... also Shirley's baboons...[37] *The paradox is finally solved!* He types into the keyboard:

> The paradox of the word "irreduction" used to describe the continuity of relations of force is thus solved: it is the regimes of enunciation that are irreducible.[38]

That's it, it is the different ways of translating that are irreducible! Networks are just one of the ways! Now I'm not sure how many of these there are. I hope there isn't an infinity of them. He continues typing:

> I am still unable to make up my mind on whether it is a potpourri – why aren't there two hundred and forty regimes rather than ten or two?[39]

I've got eleven for the moment. I knew it! If we[40] *could push Greimas' semiotics into scientific texts, why wouldn't we go ontological all the way? Damn, Françoise! We came so close.*[41] *Wish I could tell you all about these regimes when I get back from Melbourne... Rest in peace.*

Sunday, September 28th, 2008. Frankfurt.

By day the philosopher receives honorary degrees in anthropology or sociology in the most prestigious universities across the world. By night he works on this never-announced backdoor empirical philosophy grand project. He keeps things

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[37] Latour's early collaboration with primatologist Shirley Strum was a decisive influence on his work on technology. Furthermore, in a late interview Latour claimed that without the foundational episode of having met Strum and her baboons it is impossible to understand his lifetime research project, «after all, why take an interest in law, religion, science, technology, and the different modes of existence, if not because it allows for a redefinition of *what the social is made of*?». See ID., *La religion à l'épreuve de l'écologie*, La Découverte, Paris 2024, p. 86.

[38] ID., *Enquête sur les régimes d'énonciation*, August 1988, ms., AMB 114Z-146.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] Latour's first attempts at applying Greimas' semiotics to scientific texts in the late 1970s where first co-authored with semiotician Paolo Fabbri. In the 1980s, Greimas' disciple Françoise Bastide became Latour's semiotician co-author of choice, in a collaboration which was abruptly put to an end due to Bastide's tragical death in 1988.

[41] Notwithstanding Latour's claim that the project had already been sketched in his notebooks during his time at Abidjan, the first attempt at something resembling what would later become "regimes of enunciation", and finally "modes of existence", is Bruno LATOUR, Françoise BASTIDE, *Traité des categories*, October 1986, ms., ANF 20240457/19.

meticulously secret for decades while publishing books on political ecology, technology, law, religion, and ANT. But the time is getting closer. He won't be able to keep the secret for much longer. His side project keeps leaking into everything he lays his hands on.[42] He even stages a "coming out as philosopher" moment as part of a speech given as the recipient of an important prize he is awarded in Frankfurt.[43] But like all coming outs, this is only a wake-up call for those who were not paying attention. He has left traces all over the place. As he delivers his speech before the Siegfried Unseld Foundation twenty years of private meticulous work contemplate the scene.

– He sounds convincing.

– I just hope that it goes better than last year at Cerisy-la-Salle[44]...

– That's different. That was an actual test, I mean...and a text.

– Whatever. I'd rather not get publicly shamed regardless of how much this guy loves to be critiqued by his peers, particularly by that mean Belgian lady.[45]

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[42] Latour's work during the 1990s is bursting with comments about how simply following heterogenous actors or mediators does not suffice. The type of mediation/translation/trajectory needs to be specified. For just one of the many examples see ID., *On actor-network theory: A few clarifications*, "Soziale Welt", 47, 4, 1996, pp. 369-381, p. 380.

[43] Latour's reception of the third Siegfried Unseld Prize took place in Frankfurt on September 28th 2008. The speech given by Latour was published two years later as ID., *Coming out as a philosopher*, "Social Studies of Science", 40, 4, 2010, pp. 599-608. The ceremony also featured an introductory speech by Peter Sloterdijk that has subsequently been included in different publications by the German philosopher such as Peter SLOTERDIJK, *Latour. Ein Philosoph im Exil – oder – Der Mann, der die Wissenschaften liebt*, in *Mein Frankreich*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2013, pp. 228-235.

[44] A version of what eventually become the book *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* was discussed with close to eighty scholars during a week-long conference under the title *Exercises de métaphysique empirique (Autour des travaux de Bruno Latour)* in late June 2007 at Cerisy-la-salle. The program and abstracts for most papers delivered are available at the Centre Culturel International de Cerisy website (accessed March 15th, 2026) http://www.ccic-cerisy.asso.fr/latour07.html

[45] For an account of the fundamental role played in Latour's work by the challenging and continuous dialogue with Isabelle Stengers see Antoine HENNION, *Bruno Latour, Pragmatism and Politics: A Researcher on a Mission*, "Theory, Culture & Society", 41, 5, 2024, pp. 3-22, specifically p. 10 and p. 19 n. 15.

– She's not mean. And come on: what else did you expect from the so-called «philosopher of exigency»?[46] And anyway, she's not here today.

– OK, but still. The whole Cerisy thing was a big mistake. I wish he had never presented us to his colleagues through such a short draft. How the hell were they supposed to make sense of us, let alone engage in a collective inquiry?

– I mean... I kind of think the opposite. He's been working on us for two decades. With each new influence new constraints are added. All those notebooks and tables. And the name-changing! For Christ' sake! He used to call me Substitution...TRA for friends! Remember?

– OK but where is all this going, [MET]?[47]

– I'm just saying that simply circulating the manuscript among a few friends and then having it go through the publisher's peer reviews won't do this time. Just look at how busy he has been re-writing the whole thing ever since the Cerisy shock.[48]

– Your point being that...?

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[46] See the dedication page of Bruno LATOUR, *Politiques de la nature. Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie,* La Découverte, Paris 1999, p. 7: «For Isabelle Stengers philosopher of exigency».

[47] [MET] is the mode of existence of metamorphosis in AIME. While ANT countered the excesses of epistemology by making the "exterior world" of epistemology's objective reality circulate inside networks, [MET] in turn allows for the inverse operation, i.e. the exteriorization of the exaggerated inside world of psyches. The beings of [MET] are responsible for our transformations, our crises, and our emotions. As they pass through us, inhabit us or possess us they leave interiorities in their wake. All the forms of therapeutic arrangements that offer care and treatment deal with beings of [MET]. However, the advantage of ethnopsychiatry, as developed by Tobie Nathan, is that, not only does it explicitly deal with external beings, but furthermore its healing sessions are collective, and thus they can be subject to public empirical inquiry – an ineludible requisite for AIME. See ID., *Enquête sur les modes d'existence : une anthropologie des Modernes*, La Découverte, Paris 2012; tr. eng. Catherine PORTER, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2013, Chapter 7.

[48] As the Acknowledgements section to the French version shows, the actual finally published book was the result of five years of intense re-writing following the critiques received at Cerisy: ID., *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*, p. 9 (only in French edition).

– My point being that we are spread over thousands upon thousands of pages. Take that two-volume version he printed out around 1995.[49] Definition upon definition, and then the endless descriptions of all our possible crossings. Not a single narrative or an argument tying us all up. How long was that? Like 400 pages?

– 510 printed on A4 sheets! But that was for his own private use, and at least he had the decency of putting us in company of a bunch of those funky diagrams. Even if people make fun of them I do feel like they help readers grasp some of the harder arguments. I heard he doesn't plan on including any for the big thing. If that ever actually happens...

– Are you sure about that? Remember last month he told those two Scandinavian guys that interviewed him for their book that it was gonna be 1,000 pages in French.[50]

– Hmmm, even at 1,000 pages. I'm not sure he can pull it off. Even after a huge trimming, the bibliography will still be gigantic, and just like he did in *Politics of Nature* and *Pandora's Hope* there needs to be a glossary at the end. Otherwise this thing is impossible to understand. Also, I guess he will need to come up with a narrative to weave the whole thing up – like the Mont Aiguille thing he tried at Cerisy –, and then throw in some examples here and there, if not the whole thing is way too arid and

[49] ID., *Tirage EME*, 2 vols., *s.d.*, ms., AMB 114Z-119. Each of the two undated volumes present the title *Tirage EME* handwritten in their first pages – with EME standing as an acronym for *Enquête sur les modes d'existence*. There is no doubt as to that inscription having been added long after the writing of the text, since there is in those pages not a single mention of the notion of "modes of existence" – which Latour started using around the early 2000s upon having discovered Étienne Souriau through Stengers. While the two volumes are undated, it's safe to conclude that their writing must have ended between 1993 and 1995. Throughout these volumes Latour often mentions his famous "The «Pedofil» of Boa Vista" paper – which first appeared in *La clef de Berlin* (1993). Furthermore, the presence of Tobie Nathan's work, which Latour started quoting in 1994, is also major in these volumes. However, at this point Latour hadn't come up yet with the concept of factish [*faitiche*], which first appeared in *Petite réflexion sur le culte des dieux faitiches* (1996). Other elements such as speaking in the present tense about the Bosnian War – which took place between 1992 and 1995 –, and the fact that there is in the 510 pages no trace of William James – who Latour started quoting non-stop after reading David Lapoujade's 1997 book on him –, further seem to back the 1995 upper threshold hypothesis for an approximate dating of *Tirage EME*.

[50] Bruno LATOUR – Anders BLOK – Torben Elgaard JENSEN, *"We would like to do a bit of science studies on you..." An interview with Bruno Latour*, in A. BLOK, T. E. JENSEN, *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, Routledge, London 2011, pp. 151-166, p. 165.

frankly too convoluted. And still, I'm not even sure that's possible at 1,000 pages. Oh, and an index of contents. You still think there's room for diagrams?

— Plus who in France is gonna buy – let alone read! – a 1,000 page philosophy book from a guy whose discipline is never really clear to his readers... Maybe a 500-page version... Dunno.

— OK, so we agree then. The whole thing is impossible. I'd rather stay the way we are. And I don't mind having some of us change names every once in a while... or even the whole project being renamed for that matter... Like that weirdo he's been reading for the last couple of years, again thanks to that Belgian lady ... What's his name? He published a short review on him last year.[51] Souris?

— Souriau, right?

— Yeah, that's it. Thanks to him he's now thinking of renaming what we all do. But again, I got used to readapting our whole world to the constraints brought about by every new author he discovers. Through the decades you kinda learn to live with it. Frankly, I can keep going another ten or twenty years.

— You really don't get it, do you? I'm telling you. The conceptual finetuning and the amassing of fieldwork can't go on forever. Or at least not all by himself. Especially since the empirical part really needs us being put to the test by those who best know us through their daily practices. We must go public. And this time for real. The 2007 draft was a warning for how bad this can go both for him and us. We're his most ambitious contribution to philosophy. Stuff he has been working on for decades. And it can all go down the drain if he tries to simplify us too much. People won't understand a thing!

— See? It's an impossible task. There is no way he can do justice to us, and have the footnotes, bibliography, glossary, index, and diagrams, and keep it under 1,000 pa... No. Wait! You said 500 pages now!

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[51] Although mentions of Étienne Souriau, and his concepts of "instauration" and "the work to-be-made", start popping up in articles published in 2002 and 2003, Latour's first full text focusing on his work – which would later be expanded and added to the famous 2011 collective volume *The Speculative Turn* – is Bruno LATOUR, *Pluralité des manières d'être*, "Agenda de la pensée contemporaine", 7, Printemps 2007, pp. 171-192.

– So... I wasn't going to tell you, but I decided I'm going to intervene.

– What? Wait. You're joking. That can go very very wrong.

– In the right dose you know I can be of so much help.

– Sure, just like the rest of us! That's the whole point of the project![52] But your stuff can be brutal, [MET]. People can take forever to get over one of your strikes.

– Well, this project needs to happen. It's been decades already, he turned sixty-one last June, and I don't see things turning out great for us the way things are going.

– You know it can brake him. And the project is too important to be put at risk.

– What? Risk is precisely the name of the game. He hasn't stopped taking risks since the very beginning. Wasn't it his teenage idol Nietzsche who exclaimed «On to the ships, you philosophers!»?[53] At this point, not taking the risk means facing the riskier of all risks: we die.[54]

– Aren't you getting a little too dramatic, [MET]? The guy is just taking his time. It is his grand project, after all.

– Considering the immensity of the project I appreciate him having sat on this one for a while, but it's time to jump again; to take the risky leap across the hiatus and into existence! Just like us.[55] Of course it can fail. Just like any adventure that is worth taking. But this got way too long, too complex, too messy. Last time I checked that NoteTaker

[52] Exemplified in [PRE] – «the mode that protects all modes» –, philosophy plays a defensive function in the *Inquiry*, «whose object is to preserve the diversity of modes». See ID., *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, pp. 263, 481. For a reading of the *Inquiry* as pursuing a pharmacological function of philosophy see Didier DEBAISE, *The People of Ideas: What Latour Does to Philosophy*, "Subjectivity", 30, 2023, pp. 107-111.

[53] Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, tr. eng. Josefine NAUCKHOFF, Adrian DEL CARO, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 290.

[54] The alternative between the risk of ageing and disease, and the riskier of all risks – i.e. death – is of course taken from Péguy's *Clio*. See PÉGUY, *Œuvres en prose: 1909-1914*, pp. 113-115.

[55] LATOUR, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 162.

program he uses the counter said 5,000 pages.[56] It's way too much work for a single person and a single book. Either he will grossly summarize things and humiliate himself and us again, or worse, he might try to do justice to us by overemphasizing the systematic side – which you know is really not his thing –, and maybe come up with an old-school type paper brick editorial suicide. Either an incomprehensible summary, or a bad caricature of a 19th century philosophical system aimed for the 21st century battle against climate change! Not the greatest sounding alternatives if you ask me.

– Come see it that way...

– It won't really be aimed at him, but if by possessing him I make him make a big choice... We might actually stand a chance.

– Is this about that ERC grant? I know you also heard that conversation.

– That's exactly the type of choice we need him to make. Just imagine the possibilities that might open up if we get that kind of funding. There might be a different way out of this "infernal alternatives" scenario we seem to be running into.

– So... I'm not necessarily saying you're right, but also next year he's inaugurating that Médialab at Sciences Po. He could probably use some of those engineers and state of the art equipment for the project. Just sayin'.

– BOOM! See? I'm always right!

– I can't stand you... So manipulative and pushy... Why do you always have to try to make me see everything your way. I swear sometimes I almost forget who I am, and find myself doing exactly what you would do!

– Come on. You know how it is...Isn't that how we all are?[57] You do it all the time too. No hard feelings. Oh wait, he's finished.

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[56] After having initially used a software called MORE for years, Latour eventually migrated the notetaking for his grand project to an app called NoteTaker. In the ERC Grant proposal Latour claimed that the app hosted 5,000 pages of his work on the project, and that the whole content should be made available to the readers of the published book as part of the «augmented publication of AIME»: ID., *ERC Advanced Grant 2010: Research proposal (Part B2)*, *s.d.*, ms., AMB 114Z-118.
[57] LATOUR, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 316.

The audience starts clapping.

– Thank God. I was getting bored to death with this "coming out as a philosopher" pantomime.

– Ha ha right. Like he wasn't always one...

They both join the audience's applause along with the other thirteen modes.

Monday, August 13th, 2012. Somewhere 11,000 metres above the Atlantic ocean.

With the melodic cadence of a Portuguese accent, the flight attendant asks him if he wants anything else to drink. He kindly declines and gets back to his laptop. He has tons of finetuning work with the team waiting in Paris if the online platform is to be ready by the time the book is published next month. He really wants to proof-read this interview he did back in June for *La Vie des idées* before he tries to get some sleep. He would gladly work through the whole flight – there's the Armin Linke workshop this weekend, and the Venice dialog on aesthetics of data next month. But by now he knows really well that the only way to mitigate the jet lag – especially for an eleven hour flight like this – is to sleep as much as possible.

He had forgotten how good the questions were. Arnaud and Jeanne had clearly done their homework before the interview and it showed. For the moment there isn't much editing to do. He gets to the part about how the diplomatic collective inquiry aspect of the project would be approached through the digital platform, and about how having won the ERC Advanced Grant changed the project compared to what he presented at Cerisy. He is now reading through the part where he listed the possible failures that the project could face:

> The conditions for failure are quite specific. It would obviously be a failure if no one were interested in this [online] platform. Another failure would be if people were interested in the book but not in the platform, and therefore treated the book as a philosophy book rather than the beginning of an investigation. This is a real possibility because, especially in France, this is how books are judged, with lots of people saying, «Nah, nah, nah... the book isn't ready». Of course it's not ready, it's a provisional report! [...] [*Laughs*] The seven people who reviewed the project I submitted to the European Commission all said

> that this bizarre project will fail but that it must be funded! So we are relatively relaxed about the conditions for success or failure of this venture. [58]

Surely those were problems that the project was bound to face, but there was one that he had been obsessively thinking about, and that he had discussed endlessly with Dorothea.[59] He hadn't made this point clear enough the day of the interview and decides to add it now:

> Another possibility for failure would be that digital habits, that digital technology won't be sufficiently established and that we won't be able to move away from paper books. But the book is dry, there is no bibliography, no index, no documents of any kind. And since it also summarizes twenty-five years of work, it's not that easy to absorb, even though it's written in a simple style. Our bet is that no one will read 500 pages on a screen, but we can imagine the combination of the paper book and the screen working. But that's just a hypothesis, because it's far from clear whether reading habits will develop in this manner. [60]

By the time he finishes editing the interview, the entire cabin is asleep. He clicks off his overhead light and reclines, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep before landing.

INTERLUDE: *Hic Et Nunc*

You have been reading this weird paper for a while – on a screen no less –, being equally shocked by its fable-like style having been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal, and by the fact that every detail that made it into the storyline seems to be backed by an actual academic reference. And yet the feeling of uneasiness that has been bothering you all along is not just about the paper's style. Not only have you interrupted the reading in order to Google its author's name one more time – weird; he hasn't published that much. You also tried to log into the modesofexistence.org website but you couldn't remember your username and password. You created an account a few years ago but never really made much use of it. Let's be honest: the ceaseless

[58] Bruno LATOUR – Arnaud ESQUERRE – Jeanne LAZARUS, *Le diplomate de la Terre. Entretien avec Bruno Latour, entretien avec Arnaud Esquerre, Jeanne Lazarus*, "La Vie des idées", September 18th, 2012 (accessed March 15th, 2026) https://laviedesidees.fr/Le-diplomate-de-la-Terre pp. 9-10 of transcript.

[59] Dorothea Heinz was research assistant for the AIME project from 2011 to 2013, her role sometimes being referred to as «scenographer of concepts».

[60] LATOUR – ESQUERRE – LAZARUS, *Le diplomate de la Terre*, p. 9 of transcript.

notifications and distractions daily bombarding you through digital devices are already enough of a challenge to your attention without the added burden of a paper book that demands using a website. Back in the day you would read for hours on end and, in so doing, even skip lunches. But since smart phones became popular and you started using email for work, it has been increasingly difficult to focus on reading. Surely you work with PDFs all the time, and searching through them has made your life so much easier. But a website accompanying a paper book? At first the funny ▸ and ◂ signs around section headings, and the many terms in block capitals sprinkled throughout the book felt slightly unsettling, but eventually you started reading the paper copy and it felt good. So you welcomed Latour's gesture to publish a longer book than he ever did, and decided to treat it as yet another 500-page philosophy book – don't worry, you are far from alone on that.[61] Now you barely notice those awkward signs and the block capitals whenever you pick up the book, and even forgot the initial disclaimer about it being a «provisional report»,[62] and about its accompanying website. You actually got some interesting points out of the book, and quote them every once in a while, always making sure to accompany them with a footnote saying: «unfortunately the space accorded does not allow for a more detailed account of Latour's *magnus opus* to be given». But what if there was more space accorded? What would that have changed? What a blessing these footnotes are! If by chance anyone actually happens to read them, they will never know if you had vast insights into the AIME project, or if you barely scratched its surface enough to quote that one minute detail you always use. Although you always felt like there was more to the book than you initially grasped, admittedly some aspects of the book seem very far from clear – if not plainly contradictory. And anyway, Latour is always a little bit quirky, and you feel like his

[61] For an early analysis of 39 internet reviews that concluded that reviewers mostly considered AIME a «philosophy book» see Donato RICCI *et al.*, *Clues. Anomalies. Understanding. Detecting underlying assumptions and expected practices in the Digital Humanities through the AIME project*, "Visible Language", 49, 3, 2015, pp. 34-61. For a later analysis of reviews which took AIME either as a «book», as a «blog», or as «encyclopedic» – none of which it is – see Robin DE MOURAT – Donato RICCI – Bruno LATOUR, *How Does a Format Make a Public?*, in M. P. EVE – Jo. GRAY (eds.), *Reassembling Scholarly Communications: Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access*, The MIT Press, Cambridge–London 2020, pp.103-112.

[62] LATOUR, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. xix.

intention was not to have an actual system – and you are right about that.[63] But then why would he have written 5,000 pages of glossary entries and descriptions of category mistakes during close to a quarter of a century? Why make the effort to ask for an ERC grant for an impossible project? Why turn a book that was already finished into a collective foray into a digital humanities inquiry? And yet, you are entitled to ask, why Latour's own gradual neglect of his lifelong project? Why consent to its destiny being to roam the hollow promises of future footnotes?

PART III: The Sphinx's Last Dance

Monday, November 28th, 2021. 5 rue Danton, Paris.

Her deafening cries had been considerably muted since the provisional report and the online platform had come out. He had still kept her within arm's reach of his writing spot – at least the French paper version – even while being completely seized by Gaia in preparation for his Gifford Lectures. But after the ERC schedule was completed and the *Reset Modernity!* catalogue and exhibition concluded, Gaia took hold of his every waking hour. The very few times in which he could hear her cries again they almost blended with Gaia's.[64] But for those rough moments when neither Chantal's piano nor Gaia's inescapable cries where enough to overshadow her murmurs, he had hid her on the uppermost shelf right across the room, the furthest possible place from his desk. That kept her riddles at bay for a while – enough time for his disease to have gotten worse, the world to have been hit by a global pandemic, and for his work on ecology to have propelled him to intellectual stardom in France. But for weeks now he has been noticing that her screams have gotten louder and louder. At first they were almost inaudible – it could have been just the neighbour's TV set. But he is sure now. They pierce like needles through the paper wall of translations of *We Have Never Been Modern* he had used to muffle her. He had barely succeeded in ignoring them through

[63] The arrangement of the modes into four groups of three plus an additional three meta-modes is taken by Latour as a historical contingency, as well as a matter of style: *Ivi*, p. 489. At most AIME may be considered an anti-system system, i.e. a system to avoid all reductions of content to a system: ID., *À métaphysique, métaphysique et demie. L'*Enquête sur les modes d'existence *forme-t-elle un système ?*, pp. 83-85.

[64] While climate change was initially not part of it, the project eventually gravitated into becoming what Latour argues is the Moderns' only chance of confronting Gaia: ID., *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 22.

the writing and editing of the memo with Nikolaj, but that was hardly the issue – that text harboured hesitations of its own.[65] But her cries became unbearable as his participation in career retrospectives became increasingly more frequent, painfully reminding him what his whole life's work was geared towards. The four days in a row being interviewed for France Culture two years ago. The ARTE interviews he filmed last month. And the four interviews with Frédéric, Anne-Sophie and Pierre-Louis that he has been unsuccessfully trying to edit for a year now.[66] The elephant in the room might seem to be his illness, but although it is present, it is no elephant. It is a Sphinx – and the roar of her riddles is now ear-splitting. Almost as strong as it was for decades before the ERC grant.

What do you want from me, you damn Sphinx? I tried my best and failed. You knew it was impossible. No one used the website along with the book. The few who did accused me of lording over it undemocratically. But you know the online platform and the workshops were the only way to get other researchers interested, in the hope that they might correct what I wrote and perhaps take the Inquiry *where my empirical studies failed to arrive. And now I keep reading these interviews I gave and feel like, not only is embracing the plurality of modes of existence the only chance we stand of facing Gaia, but the political lessons we learned from each of the* ateliers Où atterrir[67] *must become a part of the project too. Is this what you are trying to tell me? I don't know how much time I have left, but I will answer your riddle one final time. But I need one last thing from you. I need you to get more people engaged. I will do my*

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[65] On Latour's hesitations regarding his role in *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (2022), written with Nikolaj Schultz, and on his neglect of the AIME project due to the urgency imposed by the irruption of Gaia see Marie LEMONNIER – Rémi NOYON, *Bruno Latour : « Le programme de M. Macron avait un sens en 1945 »*, "L'Obs", January 7th, 2022 (accessed March 15th, 2026), https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20220107.OBS52967/bruno-latour-le-programme-de-m-macron-avait-un-sens-en-1945.html

[66] These interviews were eventually published posthumously, followed by Latour's long-forgotten PhD thesis *Exégèse et ontologie*, in LATOUR, *La religion à l'épreuve de l'écologie*, pp. 7-168.

[67] For a brief introduction to the ateliers Où atterrir ? see Bruno LATOUR, *Où suis-je ? Leçons du confinement à l'usage des terrestres*, La Découverte, Paris 2021; tr. eng. Julie ROSE, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2021, Chapter 9. For a detailed account of this political project based on experiments with collective redescription of dependencies see Bruno LATOUR, COLLECTIF « OÙ ATTERRIR ? », *Comment atterrir ? une boussole pour le monde qui vient*, Les Liens qui Libèrent, Paris 2025. The ateliers Où atterrir ? experience is currently being taken up all around France mainly by S-Composition and Collective Ravage.

best to plan workshops and conferences again, but you need to make sure that your cries become audible to others, especially to those who won't hesitate to take the project beyond what I could make of you. Is this what you want from me? Please answer!

— We leave in five minutes! The taxi is almost here.

Chantal's voice coming from the living room interrupted their tacit dialogue:

— I'm coming, honey! Almost done.

Before they got into the taxi that would get them to his weekly Taxol injection at La Salpêtrière hospital[68] he writes the following email:

> Dear Didier,
> Are you free for a meeting at my place on December 15? I'd like you to present your research to some colleagues for a thing I have in mind. Frédéric Louzeau will be there.
> Best,
> Bruno[69]

CODA: The Tightrope Walker, The Sphinx, And Us

It's getting slightly colder. A very mild wind is starting to blow through the agora. It has been hours since the negotiations have been stuck. Everybody knew that they would require hard work, but things are worse than expected. Our dwarfed, dying out delegation has despised all other delegations claiming that we will not make a single concession to anyone not first agreeing to what our spokespersons keep calling Reason. We are surrounded by both rising giants who laugh at our claims to rationality, and by those others that we have been destroying for centuries, back when we really thought the world was ours. Oddly enough, and as unfair as it may sound, there is an overall shared feeling that we are all (relatively) on equal grounds when it comes to how our

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[68] LATOUR, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, p. 91.

[69] This section's fabulation was spurred by the actual email and meeting that Didier Debaise described during the *Bruno Latour ou l'art d'assambler* homage at Sciences Po on December 5th, 2024. The video recording is available on Sciences Po's YouTube channel (accessed March 15th, 2026): https://youtu.be/gkpoAtHSISM?si=-39M08j4JPZA1FrG. Didier Debaise and Frédéric Louzeau have since been responsible for organizing seminars and conferences aimed at taking up the *Inquiry*. To date two such events have been held at Université Libre de Bruxelles. The latest one, *Anatomie des Modernes. Reprises de l'*Enquête sur les modes d'existence *de Bruno Latour*, took place between June 30th and July 2nd, 2025, and is expected to soon result in a publication.

respective worlds are crumbling down. None of us knows how to live among these ruins, but for what it's worth, we might learn something from those that have already been living in the ruins we made for them.[70]

And yet seeing how our spokespersons do not make the slightest effort to understand those they negotiate with, other than by considering what they bring to the negotiation table as beliefs, is not even the worse thing we have been witnessing in this agora. The worse is that all our own sub-delegations have agreed to speak this talk of rationality and belief, but so many of us get the feeling that there is so much more to what we do than what our template for truth allows for. Not only are negotiations with the others impossible, but our own attempt to reconsider what we want to stand for, in light of the fact that we are getting nowhere, has started the wildest fights among us. The most discouraging words have been those of novels and prayers that have capitulated into agreeing with the scientists that they operate within the realm of the symbolic and beliefs respectively. But there has been a ray of hope. One of the climate scientist that used to thump his fist on the table every time he yelled that «it's true whether you like it or not!» has started talking about building trust in scientific institutions. There might be a way out.

Wait. Why is everyone suddenly looking up? Is that a person up there? It is! From the stone tiers where our delegation sits I can see a tightrope walker advancing through a rope that seems to bridge the West Stand of the agora with its eastern counterpart. The mixture of screams of surprise and loud joking about the absurdity of his feat do not seem to bother the tightrope walker. In a white suit and bright-coloured tie, the old man takes very short but firm steps on the shaky rope trying to keep balance as he advances with his arms fully outreached at his sides. As I move closer towards his position I can see that he seems to be keeping balance by holding a thick book with his stretched out left arm's hand and a small pile of books on his right one. We don't realize it at first because of the noisy crowd, but the birds and the insects are now completely mute, and a dead calm has swallowed even the slightest stir in the air. And then the unthinkable. A pop in the ears. The yelling fades into murmurs for an instant, and then builds into even louder screaming, and there it is. The sun disappears under the whirlwind as we start getting whipped by a million grains of sand. The extreme climatic events had gotten more frequent, but a tornado hitting these latitudes is

[70] LATOUR, *A Dialog About a New Meaning of Symmetric Anthropology*, pp. 335-337.

unheard of. Everyone forgets the tightrope walker and runs for cover, fleeing the agora, but I hold fast to one of the balustrades closest to our tier. By the time I raise my half-closed eyes I see the tightrope walker being carried away by the tornado, as the books he is now pressing against his chest are being torn apart by the fierce gusts of sandy wind. A fraction of a second later, the tightrope walker is nowhere to be found, as the maddening noise starts to fade. What remains of the tornado is a small, spiralling column at the centre of the empty agora – a vortex of torn book fragments. For reasons I hope to understand one day, I feel I must save the shattered volumes that served as his counterweights, and I run toward the centre of the agora as the spiralling wind loses its stamina. I desperately try to catch every shred of the mangled books before they are forever lost. Now it's me who is pressing a pile of dismembered books and stray pages against my chest as the final high-pitched hum fades into complete silence. Now all I can hear is the fast pumping of my heart. But there is a hint of something else. A low murmuring. I look around me and see only devastation and an empty agora. I look down at my chest, at what little I have salvaged. I can see clearly now. The book that has been shredded into many pieces is the *Inquiry*, and all the loose pages belong to *Facing Gaia*, *Down to Earth*, and *After Lockdown*. I look around again and I'm completely alone. I finally bring the fragments closer to my ear, and what I took for whispers became crystal-clear. Uttered by the mass of shredded books, I heard for the first time the words I have been hearing ever since: «Work it out, or thou shall be devoured».[71]

Abbreviations

ANF – Archives Nationales de France, Paris, *Fonds Bruno Latour*

AMB – Archives Municipales de Beaune, *Fonds Bruno Latour*

BMGM – Bibliothèque Municipale Gaspard Monge, Beaune, *Don Bruno Latour*

[71] Étienne SOURIAU, *Du mode d'existence de l'œuvre à faire*, "Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie", 50, 1, 1956, pp. 4-24; tr. eng. Erik Beranek, *On the Mode of Existence of the Work to-be-made*, in *The Different Modes of Existence*, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis 2015, pp. 219-240, p. 229.

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