

A “Pagan” Anthropocene? Lyotard Beyond Postmodernism

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Abstract

The article examines the notion of the Anthropocene in the light of several philosophical tools that we can draw from Jean-François Lyotard. At first, I consider Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition, particularly in respect of the process of legitimation and the crisis of grand narratives. Then, I ask if the Anthropocene is itself a new grand narrative or if, on the contrary, another understanding of the Anthropocene can be proposed starting from Lyotard’s reflexions on paganism. After an analysis of some elements of Lyotard’s paganism, I outline the traits of a “pagan Anthropocene,” using several examples from contemporary ecological studies.

Keywords: Ecology, narratives, global condition

1. Introduction

The time we live in can be considered as a time "after the post-." After *postmodernism*, but also after *postcolonial*, *posthumanism*, *post-Europe*, *post-history*:¹ with these terms we define a threshold that stretches from the 1950s to the 1990s in which various attempts were made, using the prefix "post-" to conceive an ambiguous condition hesitating between the weight of the past, and the uncertainty of the future. Common to these traditions is a difficulty in naming the present time and an urgency to find tools and words to conceive it. It might be worth considering that the term of "post-" refers to the break that separates the before and the after, that divides time and transforms the regimes of temporality. At the same time, despite this break, we recognize, within the various cultural reflections that refers to "post-," a shared desire to explain the present without cutting the links with the past.² In contrast to what has often been thought, the postmodern is not situated outside the modern, but rather within a space saturated with modernity in which it is difficult to create something new. Jean-François Lyotard, considering the meaning of the particle "post—" in a text entitled *Note on the Meaning of "Post—"*—highlights the architectural meaning of the term: postmodern architecture inherits a space from modernity and can act in this space only by specific interventions, without any overall project: "Postmodern architecture finds itself condemned to undertake a series of minor modifications in a space inherited from modernity, condemned to abandon a global reconstruction of the space of human habitation"³ This means learning to live in an interstitial space, and to listen to the stories that can emerge from it without creating a full discontinuity between past and future. However, Lyotard's account of postmodernism is not the architectural one—as in the theory of David Harvey, for example.⁴ Lyotard's philosophical use of the word *postmodern* is not about architecture, but rather about the status of knowledge. The question is how knowledge [*savoir*] legitimises itself using certain kinds of discourses. Postmodernity is indeed a way to point out the crisis of a peculiar form of legitimization discourse: the grand narratives of emancipation of all humanity.

At the same time, we need to consider how, over the last thirty years, interest in philosophy and in the human and social sciences has shifted towards a precise analysis of globalisation (from an economic, social, political, and cultural perspective) and has gained awareness

1 If the references to postcolonial and posthumanism are well known, it is useful to recall that Jan Patočka proposed the notion of "post-Europe", and "posthistory" was used by Arnold Gehlen and Vilém Flusser.

2 See the utilisation of the prefix "post-" by Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London-New York: Routledge, 1994) or by Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

3 Lyotard, *The Postmodern explained: Correspondence 1982–1985*, trans. ed. by J. Pefanis and M. Thomas (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 76.

4 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

of contemporary ecological issues. In this context, the notion of the Anthropocene has emerged (along with its variations like Capitalocene, Plantationocene, etc.) not only as a way to express the geological influence of human agency but to address the climate change: the word “Anthropocene” provide a name to an event, and the creation of a set of tools useful to start processes of shared understanding.⁵ Without necessarily being linked to a field of knowledge or to the discursive laws of a particular scientific language, speaking of the Anthropocene allows us to inhabit a common space of differences (in practices, dwellings, and discourses), by weaving together various fields of knowledge and practice, ranging from the natural sciences to literature, philosophy, artistic and political action. My intention in this article is to consider the notion of the Anthropocene in the light of several philosophical insights that we can draw from Jean-François Lyotard’s work.

I will first recall Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition, particularly regarding the dynamics of legitimation and the crisis of grand narratives. Then, I will ask what the connection might be between the Anthropocene and Lyotard’s critique of grand narratives, and whether it could activate another domain, that of “little narratives” (*les petits récits*). This domain appears in the “pagan texts” of Lyotard, particularly in *Rudiments païens* and *Instructions païennes*, which were written a few years earlier than *The Postmodern Condition*. After analysing some traits of Lyotard’s paganism, and offering a warning about the damage [*le tort*] that even small narratives can do, I will ask what examples of a pagan Anthropocene might look like.

2. Postmodern Condition: Legitimation and Grand Narratives

The Postmodern Condition is a text published in 1979 as a “report on knowledge in the twentieth century” commissioned by the Quebec government. Lyotard’s hypothesis is that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which for

5 See Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. D. Fernbach (London-New York: Verso Books, 2017), where the Anthropocene is considered as an “event”, or Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) where the Anthropocene is considered as an event that we must make as short as possible.

Europe marks the completion of reconstruction."⁶ The so-called "postmodern age" is, in fact, a "condition": "The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe that condition. [...] it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts."⁷ So, *postmodern* is a term that designates a condition of knowledge in a specific space ("the most highly developed societies") and, more generally, it indicates a transformation in the *game rules* of different fields. Pointing out the importance of the *game rules* already implies a consideration of the *legitimation rules* of the discourses about science, but also literature and the arts.

Lyotard provides a "pragmatics" concerning the discourses of "knowledge" [*savoir*]. We should not think that knowledge is the prerogative of science. On the contrary, knowledge can also take other forms: there is a narrative knowledge, and therefore there are processes of legitimation that use the narrative form of knowledge. This narrative form is pre-eminent in the formation of knowledge and cultures, particularly because of its unifying function, capable of bringing together, within a single discourse, several different types of sentences and through its "self-legitimising" nature.⁸ Modern science also distinguishes itself by the fact that it constructs criteria for legitimation and rejects any statement that cannot be understood according to these criteria. Lyotard highlights in some detail the twofold path of scientific legitimation undertaken through research and teaching: research presupposes an addresser who asserts what is true and who is capable of submitting proof of what he says; it presupposes that the addressee is a peer, capable of receiving and understanding the addresser's assertion; it presupposes that the referent is expressed in accordance with its nature.⁹ Teaching, on the other hand, requires the ability to explain to an unfamiliar recipient something that they can understand and then use to

6 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3. The references from Lyotard on the previous use of the words "postmodern," "postmodernism" or "post-industrialisation" are Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society*, trans. L. Mayhew (London: Wildwood House, 1974), Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Post Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), Michel Benamou and Charles Catamello (eds), *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Wisconsin: Center for Twentieth Century Studies & Coda Press, 1977) and M. Köhler, "'Postmodernismus': Ein begriffsgeschichtlicher Überblick", *Amerikastudien*, 22, 1 (1977).

7 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

8 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 18–23. See the analysis of Gaëlle Bernard, "Sur la crise 'post-moderne' de la légitimation et la confusion des raisons," *Cités* 45, (2011): 87–101. Bernard points out that a difference between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge is also to be found in temporality: narrative knowledge accepts forgetfulness and even uses it as a mean of unification through narration, whereas scientific knowledge requires memory to proceed with the verification or falsification of evidence (Bernard, 90–91).

9 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 23–24.

participate in the research themselves, and it implies also a past, a memory of the proofs already produced.¹⁰

However, if research is based on proof, that raises another question: “How do you prove the proof?”, that is, “Who decides the conditions of truth?”¹¹ We are approaching a crucial point here. All these dynamics—and the answers to these questions—need to be based on a dynamic that is, after all, narrative: the production of the narrative of scientific progress, its emancipatory force, and its intrinsic teleology. Modern science, while rejecting the field of narrations, finds its legitimacy in a meta-discourse, by defining itself as “modern.” Yet this self-definition is, in fact, a meta-narrative of modernity: for example, the “hero of knowledge” of the Enlightenment, invested with an “ethico-political” task to strive for universal peace through reason, is a character of this kind of narrative.¹² More generally, it is the very form of legitimisation which, since Plato, has been achieved through a commixture of narrative and scientific discourse.¹³ Delegitimisation is therefore a crisis in which the criterion of legitimisation is neither ethico-political nor science-knowledge-based, a crisis where the grand narratives themselves no longer serve as a principle of legitimisation:

In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimisation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.¹⁴

The grand narratives of emancipation, on which the cultural production of modernity was largely based, proposed a historical univocity that the notion of the postmodern criticizes and calls into question. In this regard, Lyotard writes in a text entitled *Missive on Universal History*: “The thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are governed

10 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 24–25.

11 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 29.

12 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 31. Jameson sums up well the political implications of this argument: “For the two great myths disengaged by Lyotard and identified as the alternate justifications for institutional scientific research up to our own period—that of the liberation of humanity and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge (qua philosophical system) are also national myths and reproduce the very polemic in which Lyotard’s own book wishes to intervene.” (Jameson, “Foreword” in Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, ix).

13 Thus, as Gaëlle Bernard rightly says, the crisis of legitimacy that *The Postmodern Condition* seeks to describe is linked “to a confusion between two incommensurable spheres, or between two heterogeneous ‘uses’ of reason, one practical, the other theoretical,” Bernard, “Sur la crise ‘postmoderne,’” 88. This means that the ethico-political sphere is confused with the sphere of scientific knowledge, that the question of justice merges with the question of knowledge, that the “game of justice” merges with the “cognitive game of truth.”

14 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37.

by an Idea (in the Kantian sense): the Idea of emancipation. It is, of course, framed in quite different ways, depending on what we call the philosophies of history, the grand narratives that attempt to organize this mass of events."¹⁵ The examples that Lyotard proposes are then: "the Christian narrative of the redemption of original sin through love; the *Aufklärer* narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude through knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative narrative of the realization of the universal Idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialization of work; and the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through technoidustrial development."¹⁶ These grand narratives can go all the way back to the origin of humankind (for example, Genesis is part of the grand narrative of Christianity, and it is also part of Bossuet's *Histoire universelle*), but their main aspect is to produce, through the idea of an emancipation of all humanity, forms of discursive legitimisation. Having clarified the question of legitimation central to the 1979 book, as well as Lyotard's clarifications of what he considers to be a grand narrative of modernity, we can more easily approach the contemporary implications of these analyses, in particular the status of the Anthropocene as a grand narrative.

3. Anthropocene: A New Grand Narrative?

Looking at the globalisation process from an economic perspective, we can easily find an extension of the capitalist narrative in which the opening of markets is triumphant and the idea of any alternative model is set aside. The polemic about an "end of history"¹⁷ moves in the direction of this idea, as well as a certain ideal of a smooth and unfettered globalisation which would have united the entire globe under the aegis of global markets and liberal democracies.¹⁸ This idea of a "globe" is not only linked with a metaphysical prejudice existing in Western philosophy for thousands of years, as pointed out by Sloterdijk and Latour,¹⁹ it is also a grand narration in the economic field that spills over into the cultural, social, and political spheres.

The notion of the Anthropocene first appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century,

15 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 24–25.

16 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 25.

17 The reference is obviously to Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), but also to the Derrida's and Baudrillard's critiques of this idea: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006) and Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. C. Turner (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1994).

18 On this see the critique of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) that pointed out the *frictions* of the global condition.

19 Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres Volume II: Macrospherology*, trans. W. Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014) and Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

when Paul Crutzen claimed that a new geological epoch was underway, in which humanity had become a geological agent with an impact on geochemical processes and therefore on the Earth's geological strata.²⁰ In light of what we have said, I want above all to ask if this notion, closely linked with the transformations of globalisation, can be understood in the light of Lyotard's analysis of grand narratives, whether the Anthropocene is the bearer of a completely new narrative or, on the contrary, whether it can be viewed as a producer of *little narratives*—using Lyotard's terminology?

Studies on the topic generally consider that two types of ecological grand narratives could emerge: one that would extend the narrative of technical performativity and which would be linked to geo-engineering and its potential to “save humanity,” and another, rather catastrophic, in which the unifying narrative would be that of future catastrophes, or even the end of the world.²¹ The problem is that, while the idea of “saving humanity” is still part of a conception of a process of human emancipation, the apocalyptic path loses the salvific finality that was characteristic of modern narratives, although it retains its human protagonist and the dynamic of unification.

Without being a “grand” narrative in the sense of finality linked to the emancipation of all humanity, the apocalyptic discourse as well as the techno-scientific discourse use narrative elements as a legitimizing factor of power, practice, and knowledge: for example, they continue the existing technological and economic structure by, on the one hand, prolonging the idea that the same progress that caused global warming could solve it (the geo-engineering narrative) and, on the other, asserting that no action is possible in the face of a predicted apocalypse (the apocalyptic narrative). Both narratives risk creating an illusion similar to that of the grand narratives of modernity: producing forms of legitimacy in a monolithic discourse, tending toward unity, and confusing the speculative field with the narrative field, yet always producing practical-political consequences. Indeed, this is one of the first elements that we must be aware of when linking the question of the Anthropocene to that of grand narratives.

It is also to be said that the way in which the notion of the Anthropocene itself has been considered, specifically in its scientific construction, certainly recalls some of the characteristics of Lyotard's grand narratives. Let us bear in mind the description of all the stages that have led to the current geophysical condition: the invention of the steam

20 Paul Josef Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change* 41, (2000): 17–18.

21 See, for example: Catherine Larrère, “Anthropocène : le nouveau grand récit” in Rémi Beau and Catherine Larrère (eds.), *Penser l'Anthropocène* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2018), 487–497, which distinguishes the geo-engineering narrative from the catastrophic narrative. Another example is the book of Carl Cassegård and Håkan Thörn, *Post-Apocalyptic Environmentalism: The Green Movement in Times of Catastrophe* (London: Palgrave, 2022), where the authors distinguish not two but three narratives: the narrative of green progress, the apocalyptic narrative and the postapocalyptic narrative, and focus on the last one.

engine and the industrial revolution led to a configuration of world capitalism, which then led to the rise in CO₂; the Great Acceleration after World War II marks another pivotal moment in the grand narrative of the Anthropocene, which—according to Crutzen and other researchers—has reached its third phase, characterised by awareness and a call to action to limit humanity's geological impact.²² This time, alongside the evident narrative aspect in portraying the various stages of planetary transformation, the emancipatory character reappears in the third phase, producing a narrative-theoretical discourse regarding the impact of human action on the Earth. Human action produces consequences right down to the geological strata. Climate change has a human origin, and humanity, again taken as a whole, causes irreversible transformations. This crucial discovery completely revolutionizes our way of being in the world and of thinking about domains such as history and politics. It is also interesting to note how the speculative genre of discourse is found united with the narrative genre to produce such fundamental knowledge. In this sense, as Christophe Bonneuil and Pierre de Jouvancourt have pointed out in describing the different moments of its emergence, the notion of the Anthropocene itself resembles the structure of a *historical* grand narrative:²³ "The scientists who have proposed the term Anthropocene have not simply put forward fundamental data on the state of our planet, nor simply promoted a systemic point of view on its uncertain future. They have also proposed a history."²⁴ But this raises many questions about the "subsumption of different experiences of Earth," about "the role played by 'environmental' warnings and knowledge in the construction, legitimisation and history of Empires," and the process of subjectivation at work in the Anthropocene.²⁵ It is by following these questions that they propose a history of this "grand narrative" of the Anthropocene, not necessarily to criticize the results of the various approaches studied, but rather so "that other words from and for the Earth, coming from other groups, can also be heard; so that other explanations of 'how we got here' and other proposals for 'what to do' can also be said; so that the concept of the Anthropocene does not become the legitimate philosophy of a new geopower".²⁶

It seems to us that to philosophically understand the Anthropocene means not hiding these implications but problematizing them. This has been done, for example, with a critique of the use of the term "anthropos," which would tend precisely to give great weight to "humanity" in its entirety, and by proposing alternatives like Capitalocene,

22 Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 23, no. 8 (2007): 614–621.

23 Christophe Bonneuil and Pierre de Jouvancourt, "En finir avec l'épopée. Récit, géopouvoir et sujets de l'anthropocène," in Émilie Hache (ed.), *De l'univers clos au monde infini*, (Paris: Dehors, 2014), 57–106.

24 Bonneuil and de Jouvancourt, "En finir avec l'épopée," 59. My translation.

25 Bonneuil and de Jouvancourt, "En finir avec l'épopée," 59–60.

26 Bonneuil and de Jouvancourt, "En finir avec l'épopée," 60. My translation.

Plantationocene, etc.²⁷ To continue in this problematization, we propose using some other tools that we can find in Lyotard's thought and in particular the "little narratives" related to the "pagan approach."

4. Going Back to Paganism

To understand whether the notion of the Anthropocene can be used in a plural and productive way, we need to focus on how Lyotard speaks of "little narratives" [*petits récits*]. This idea is first found in Lyotard's elaboration of "paganism." Reflections on paganism are not far from those on postmodernity, and they constitute one of the fertile grounds for the latter.²⁸ The use of the word paganism is obviously linked to monotheism, to which it is opposed. *Rudiments païens* (1977, two years before *The Postmodern Condition*) is an attempt to bring out a pagan attitude against "imperial," "Caesarist" thinking.²⁹ But paganism is also linked with the *pagus*; as Lyotard writes in *Instructions païennes*:

Pagus designated the region at the boundaries of the towns. *Pagus* became *pays*. It is not the *Heim* or the *home*, the habitat, the shelter, but neighbourhoods, regions, which are not necessarily uncultivated, which are the horizons of these ballads during which we see the country. You are not at home there. You do not expect to find the truth, but you do meet a great many entities, subject to metamorphosis, lies, desires, and anger: passible gods.³⁰

To delineate the contours of this space, we have to go back to the *Rudiments*, when, reading Freud's 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lyotard develops an analysis based on Freud's

27 This analysis could also be conducted with reference to the problem of the "we" as it appears in *The Differend*.

28 The link between "paganism" and "postmodernism" and the continuities and ruptures between these two terms, has been analysed by Pierre Billouet, *Paganisme et postmodernité: J.-Fr. Lyotard* (Paris: Ellipses, 1999). Billouet points out the possibility of "silence" as a factor of transformation in Lyotard's attitude: silence becomes impossible for Lyotard, because it still means something, even though in *Libidinal Economy*, philosophy could no longer say anything, had no object, and had to begin the work of formulation all over again: for Lyotard "It is still a question of affirming paganism against religious mono(theism), Marxism and capitalism, but since silence is impossible, it has to be formulated in an understandable way," and this effort pushes towards the *Differend* (Billouet, 61. My translation).

29 J.-F. Lyotard, *Rudiments païens. Genre dissertatif* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1977), 114–119.

30 J.-F. Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris : Galilée, 1977), 43. My translation. The *pagus* can also be found in J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in dispute*, trans. G. V. D. Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), §281, 151, where Lyotard says: "A phrase, which links and which is to be linked, is always a *pagus*, a border zone where genres of discourse enter into conflict over the mode of linking. War and commerce. It's in the *pagus* that the pax and the pact are made and unmade."

sentence: "I think it is time to interrupt myself."³¹ This sentence comes in the wake of Freud's considerations of drive duality: in fact, in this essay he develops and investigates the notion of "death drive" which flanks the "life drive." Lyotard sees this as a moment of rupture with the theoretical type of discourse. In the economy of Freudian discourse, this phrase heralds a moment of "epistemological uncertainty," an "indistinguishability of effects on the pulsional body," and thus "the opening of a new region, the region of apathy."³² In this way, "the third theory of the drive 'duality' escapes the theoretical and practical requirements of the scholarly genre. It can become a *theory-fiction*. Its specific affect is *impassibility*, not conviction. Impassibility should be understood as the impossibility of experiencing the yes and no of conviction."³³ We already have enough elements to make an initial consideration of what a pagan Anthropocene might be. If paganism is the interruption of theoretical terror, then this must apply to any conception of the Anthropocene that seeks to build a shared enterprise of diverse disciplines. The theoretical genre must relinquish its dominant position and once again become a genre—a genre that has its importance and its strength in a plural system of discourse, but that is not the only one. My proposal is that, if "paganism" is the stage before postmodernism, then we can go "beyond" postmodernism, considering Lyotard's previous elaboration. In his postmodern phase, Lyotard argues that, even if theoretical discourse becomes central, it is still a discourse among others, and his debt to narrative discourse plays an important role in his legitimization, as we have seen in relation to the narratives of emancipation of all humanity. Lyotard's paganism already affirmed this: refusing theoretical terror, because in "truth" there is an indiscernibility, an "effect of uncertainty" subverting the order of desire—desire of truth, for example—and redefining the semantic of intensities.³⁴ "Apathy in theory" means not allowing one to be defeated by the passionate component of theory—its effect of domination and hegemony.

Another important point is that paganism already criticises the grand narratives. In his pagan texts, Lyotard expresses the need to think of "little narratives" that would bring theory and fiction together and that would "destroy the monopoly of narratives."³⁵ The

31 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 19–32. My translation. About the quote see S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVIII* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955, 58) where the sentence is translated: "I think, the moment has come for breaking off."

32 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 27–28. My translation.

33 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 28. My translation. The highlights are from Lyotard, who uses in French the composed word "théorie-fiction." It could be interesting to study the convergences and differences between Lyotard's insight and contemporary reflections on theory-fiction.

34 We can find already the idea of "paganism" linked with the intensities of the libidinal band in *Libidinal Economy* with the reference to the "Pagan Theatrics": "We desire the atheism of the libidinal band, and if it cannot be critical, that is to say religious, then it must be pagan, that is to say affirmative," Jean- François Lyotard, *Libidinal economy*, trans. I. H. Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 6.

35 Lyotard, *Instructions*, 86. My translation.

texts that compose Lyotard's *Rudiments* themselves possess this form, which attempts to hybridize the theoretical with the narrative without falling into "theoretical terror." It is a question of engaging in a space that is not that of the Empire and therefore not that of Platonism, transcendent monotheism, or the philosophies of history: "what is at stake, in the small or large *spasms* that the traces are, is another space, another logic, another story."³⁶ *Spasms* mean intensities, but also traces, stories, and narratives. "The logic and space-time of these traces escape the categories of the centre; they belong to paganism: to theatrical theology, to polytheism, to sensualism, to the sophistry of *kairos*, to *virtu* without judge."³⁷ So, the *pagus* does not designate borders as an imperial institution that seeks "its finitude, its circumscription, its limes."³⁸ However, we should not think that the emergence of intensities occurs outside society and its institutions; on the contrary, Lyotard gives the example of Roman paganism (different from imperial Caesarism), where, on the one hand, we see the indifference of the divinities, but, on the other hand, they require homage, as well as "the derisory honour of parodies."³⁹ There are therefore two aspects to paganism: the indifference of the gods, that is, the absence of a centralization by a unique power, but also the derision of parody, which can take place in instituted rituals and which also creates intensities at the surface of the social body. To use Lyotard's words:

The paganism we are thinking of cannot be that of the ancient instituted religions, even if they are Dionysian; it resides in the infiltration, on the surface of the social "body," of areas left free to the imaginations and to concrete initiatives that we call deregulated, useless, dangerous, singular, in other words to the impulses, and this within the very political and religious institutions.⁴⁰

In this sense, this paganism should not turn into a "transcendental appearance."⁴¹ Lyotard is aware of this risk, and it is perhaps also out of fear of giving a power of transcendence to narratives that he gradually abandons the notion of paganism in favour of the notion of postmodernism. Another problem is that Lyotard increasingly realises that even the "little narratives" can hide some form of "damage" [*tort*], like that of grand narratives. The grand narrative performs damage by including all humanity in the same discourse, while the little narrative performs damage if it becomes the discourse of an exclusionary community.⁴² In both cases, it is crucial to understand what happens to the "third party":

36 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 62. My translation.

37 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 62. My translation.

38 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 83. My Translation.

39 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 117. My translation.

40 Lyotard, *Rudiments*, 126. My translation.

41 See Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, 68.

42 On this see the analysis of Corinne Eneadeau, "La politique étrangère" in C. Eneadeau, J.-F. Nordmann, J.-M. Salanskis and F. Worms (eds.) *Les transformateurs Lyotard* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2008), 345–364.

whether it is included in the universal discourse, or excluded from the exclusionary community; in both cases it performs a form of damage. However, if we do not forget the reasons that lead Lyotard away from paganism, several aspects of paganism, especially those here underlined, are still useful in thinking about our time and the Anthropocene.

There are, thus, three fundamental aspects of interest here. First, paganism is an acknowledgement of the fact that the theoretical genre is one kind of discourse among others, but that this kind of discourse produces a "theoretical terror" that reduces the other forms of discourse to it; secondly, intensities are present in discourse (we can think about how something like a *libidinal economy* demonstrates, in its very form, the interplay of intensities in language), and we must, therefore, oppose theoretical terror by creating "theory-fictions," or "little narratives," without, however, totally abandoning the theoretical form; finally, the *pagus* is neither our home nor a full otherness, it is an interstitial space, both in discourse and in practice. If we inhabit this space in our philosophical journey, we can help to let these "little" intensities emerge, that is to say, acknowledge those other knowledges that would otherwise perish under the pressure of theoretical terror.

5. Towards a Pagan Anthropocene

The question that arises now is: can this idea of paganism allow us to think of an Anthropocene that does not fall prey to the theoretical terror of a grand narrative? I want to address this question by referring first to the idea of *translation tables* proposed by Bruno Latour in his book *Facing Gaia*. The "Gaia hypothesis" was proposed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in 1970 and was then taken up again in the 2000s and 2010s by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. From Stengers' point of view, Gaia is, above all, an act of naming: naming the processes of the Earth system shows their radical otherness and the indifference that planetary, geological, and telluric processes have towards humans, their interests and their values. But Stengers goes even further, because she speaks of the *intrusion* of Gaia. Gaia is not just an act of naming, but also something that intrudes into thought. Thus, the intrusion of Gaia pushes us to talk of the processes that lie outside the field of the human (but that are influenced by the human) and, by naming Gaia, we can learn to see, to think about, and to discover them. The intrusion of Gaia in no way reduces human responsibility for global warming, but it does point to a permanent and lasting transformation of our situation, our existence, and our ways of thinking.⁴³ All this already leads us to think in the direction Lyotard mentioned earlier: living in a place where you are not at home, but where "you meet a great many entities subject to metamorphosis,

43 Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. A. Goffey (Open Humanities Press, 2015).

lies, desires, and anger: passible gods.”⁴⁴

But let us go further and look at Bruno Latour’s argument from his lectures on Gaia. The question is: how can we avoid falling into the trap of a name that would be incapable of speaking to everyone in the global world, in other words, the trap of a monolingualism of the global? To resolve this problem, Latour refers to the translation tables that were in use in ancient times when the numerous movements of populations made it necessary to set up systems of equivalence between different divinities.⁴⁵ These translation tables made it possible to identify divinities not just by their names, but by their characteristics and attributes. In this way, even though we know in advance that it will be impossible to perfectly identify each divinity with another, the search for the attributes, and therefore the characteristics that could define this or that entity prevents us from limiting ourselves to simply stating a name. Latour writes:

According to Assmann, these translation tables worked by shifting attention from the proper names of the divinities to a series of characteristics that the names summed up in the mind of their worshippers. If, for example, the name “Zeus” was incomprehensible to a listener, the speaker would reel off the list of his *attributes*: “Guide of destinies” (*Moiragêtès*), “Protector of the suppliants” (*Ikesios*), or “God of the favorable winds” (*Evanémos*), and, of course, “Bearer of thunder” (*Astrapeios*), until the foreigner found a corresponding divinity in his own language. The precaution that such people took to cohabit without cutting each other’s throats was to make sure that, if the list of qualities was similar enough, they could take the proper names to be more or less synonymous – or in any case negotiable.⁴⁶

The translation tables provide a way of understanding that is impossible in a monolingualistic (and monotheistic) paradigm. This is of interest to us, of course, because it allows us to move towards the first superficial conception of paganism that we see in this example.⁴⁷ First, it is important to remember that “negotiation” is also a translation paradigm, proposed in particular by Umberto Eco, which is different from the paradigms of untranslatability or betrayal in translation;⁴⁸ that is, the translator is always and above all a negotiator, his work is that of a diplomat. Even if Latour is not referring explicitly to

44 Lyotard, *Instructions*, 86.

45 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 154–183.

46 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 155. Latour is referring to the research of Jan Assmann.

47 Also, we must consider what Latour explicitly writes on paganism: Gaia “mistrusts paganism – that pejorative version of the old way of belonging to the world – as much as it mistrusts the notion of letting itself be transformed by the Christian religion into the providential design of a transcendent God. It mistrusts all transcendence.” Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 289.

48 Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, trans. A. McEwen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Eco here, this work of negotiation in the search for attributes and correspondences that exist between entities recalls the notion of the *pagus*, and the attempt to create a shared legitimization of discourse not through the authority of fixed names, but with an attention to attributes. Latour therefore proposes to start drawing up tables of equivalence, which he calls *cosmograms*, in relation to the climate crisis. This means asking "the new diplomatic question: is it possible to reinvent this practice of tables translating the names of gods for the purpose of listing other entities, other cults, other peoples, and spotting among these various collectives the relationships that remain invisible as long as we stick to our overly local and overly sectarian viewpoint?"⁴⁹ The idea of the entities that inhabit the *pagus* returns again, this time by pointing out that encounters take place in the *pagus*, requiring processes of exchange and communication to be put in place that are not based on the authority of a univocal discourse. In Latour, this means considering how "Nature" is a confounding word, which contains a large number of attributes, some of which even contradict each other. But we could say, with Lyotard, this is also the consequence of a principle of discourse authority surrounding the concept of Nature.⁵⁰ Latour's *cosmograms* therefore seek to define the attributes of what we call Nature, precisely because this simple proper noun cannot really tell us what this term conceals.

Another example that resonates with what we have just said is the research carried out by Yuk Hui, who proposes to study "technique" and "technology" in the light of non-Western traditions. He proposes, at the beginning of his book, something similar to Latour's operation: which deities (or entities) represent technology in the West and in China, and what are their attributes? On the one hand, we have Prometheus, whose attribute is—among others—to be eternally punished and to be the "father of all technics and the master of all crafts."⁵¹ Whereas in China there is Nüwa, the half-human, half-serpent hybrid creature who created humans; Fuxi, half-man, half-dragon, who invented the trigram bagua; and Schennong, the god of fire, the god of cooking, but also the inventor of agriculture, medicine, and technology.⁵² As Hui writes, "Note that the gods of agriculture and fire came from different systems of mythology, and that, although they are called gods, they are only recognized as such after their deaths—originally, they were leaders of the ancient tribes."⁵³ The entities, hybrids of humans and animals, become gods, but if we understand them first by their attributes, we can better study the question of technology in China.

49 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 157.

50 Concerning the notion of Nature see also Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* trans. J. Lloyd (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013) and M. Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

51 Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), 13. It is also interesting to note that Hui refers to Lyotard at the end of the book by reading the text "*Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy*": Hui, 269–282 and Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity press, 1991).

52 Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 14–15.

53 Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 16.

More to the point, the reflection on *cosmotekhnics* proposed by Hui could be seen as an attempt to conceive a plural Anthropocene. As Peter Lemmens points out:

The cosmotekhnics project explicitly looks at the future and aims to be an imaginative and inventive discipline in search for new cosmotekhnics, and that is to say a plurality of cosmotekhnics for the age of the Anthropocene, in which the different cultural spheres that exist across the globe are not called to retreat into their ancient cosmological structures ... but to imagine and invent new practices of technological worldformation, taking inspiration from the ideas behind these structures, not in the least the moral or ethical ideas.⁵⁴

In general, we can find elements that point in this direction in anthropological studies, especially where reference is made to an ontological plurality. For example, Viveiros De Castro and Danowski studied Amerindian ontologies and their narratives from the perspective of the “fears of the end.”⁵⁵ In this case, we are not dealing with a grand negative apocalyptic narrative, in which humanity and its end are central, but, on the contrary, what is considered here is the ontological plurality within humanity and in the relationships between humans and non-humans. Not only does this example encourage us to consider a form of knowledge that is not immediately or completely theoretical, but it also highlights the importance of taking into account emotional, desiring, and impulsive intensities, and of considering how they act not only in the construction of discourse, but also in the shaping of an ontological space.

All these examples allow us to consider the meaning of a “pagan” Anthropocene in the sense that Lyotard attributed to this term, but without falling into the damages that even this paganism could bring. These examples keep active the characteristics of paganism that do not succumb to the damages of little *excluding* narratives, which are often related to nationalist rhetoric. These examples invite a form of “resistance” that passes through diplomatic practices between the humanities and the natural sciences, and between entities and institutions, which must jointly construct responses to “face” ecological challenges. In this sense, the “resistance” to the Anthropocene, understood as a catastrophic complex event, is made possible by using this very term as a gatherer of different discourses produced in different fields that, all together, produce responses to the actual urgencies, as well as strategies that can confront the catastrophic consequences of climate change.

54 Pieter Lemmens, “Cosmotekhnics and the Ontological Turn in the Age of the Anthropocene,” *Angelaki* 25, 4 (2020): 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1790830>

55 Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. R. Nunes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

6. Conclusion: Inhabiting the *Pagus*

In *Postmodern Fables* (1993), Lyotard proposes something that recalls the "theory-fiction" evoked during the pagan period, but which he now calls *fables*. One of these *fables* (A *postmodern fable*, as Lyotard calls it) considers how, faced with the certainty of the sun's explosion, humanity begins preparations to leave the solar system. However, these preparations are presented as part of a larger story that span the emergence of life and the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions.⁵⁶ Lyotard understands this fable as a story concerning energies:

The fable tells the story of a conflict between two processes affecting energy. One leads to the destruction of every system, of every body, living or not, that exists on planet Earth and in the solar system. Inside this continuous and necessary entropic process, another process, contingent and discontinuous, at least for a long time, acts in the opposite direction through the increasing differentiation of these systems.⁵⁷

The hero of the fable, therefore, is not humanity itself but a complex way of organising energy. This is also because the fable implies that the humans cannot, as such, go into exile, rather, they must transform themselves beyond their earthly context. Lyotard describes writing and language as forms of energy —energy that expands in the fable through imagination, and is also capable of shaping reality. But what is interesting is that the fable is not directed towards emancipation, Lyotard says,⁵⁸ it is not meant to be a grand narrative, but on the contrary, to interrogate, with the tools of narrative, the conditions of a humanity without an Earth (and not only without a body): "A fable is exposed neither to argumentation nor to falsification. It is not even a critical discourse, but merely imaginary. This is how it exploits the space of indetermination the system keeps open for hypothetical thought."⁵⁹

As Corinne Enaudeau points out, Lyotard here reveals a "dark" aspect of postmodernism, that of the hopelessness that could be caused by the end of grand narratives: "The metaphysical fable gives an energetic version of the finality-free end of capital: 'development' without 'progress'. Through this libido-less economy, which does not

56 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. G. V. D. Abbeele (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 83–101. This story can be read together with another text, a dialogue, entitled *Can Thought Go on Without a Body?* (Lyotard, *Inhuman*, 8–23).

57 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 92. See on this the comment of Enaudeau, "La politique étrangère": "Lyotard attempts the perilous genre of the 'metaphysical fable.' A deliberately naive tale, where the world tells his becoming as 'the story of a force that makes, breaks and remakes reality,' following to opposed process: entropy and negentropy." My translation.

58 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 98.

59 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 101.

ask to be believed, Lyotard expresses postmodern darkness: the mourning of hope and the absence of a remedy.”⁶⁰ By shifting the protagonist from humanity to the conflict of energies, and the unrestrained development associated with this conflict, the question remains open: that of the tragedy developed without even an ideal of human progress, and of how to find points of reference in this context, in thought and action.

Certainly, this passage allows the weight to be lifted from the “human,” *anthropos*, and shifts the question towards the production system and the ideal of unlimited development. Yet it leaves open an obscurity of which Lyotard himself seems to be aware. Perhaps then, the very return to the themes of paganism can help to find possibilities for action. Not only in the examples we have given of “diplomatic” action to be carried out between the human, social and natural sciences and between artistic and political practices. Lyotard referred to this as inhabiting a “pagus”: that is, a boundary zone between genres of discourse. And the dwelling of this *pagus* persists even in *The Postmodern Condition* and in *The Differend*. Is it not possible to find, despite the obscurity that metaphysical fables place us in front of, even in this case, a *pagus* to inhabit? In this phase of his thought, Lyotard speaks of *infancy* (*enfance*), of “affect” (*la phrase-affect*), of a domain that is not that of articulated *logos*, but the domain of a *logos* always linked to a form of *phonè*, of non-articulated voice, the paradox of a world that is already here.

Facing the question of how these tools might help us to think the Anthropocene, perhaps we could refer to Donna Haraway when she recounts, in *Staying with the Trouble*, the fable of Camille—what she calls a speculative fabulation. With this tale, she too inserts herself into an interstitial space of indeterminacy, but at the same time she performs an action that is partly theoretical and speaks of us and others, about the future, about the intensities we live and will live, and about the past. Camille stories (those of several Camille) tell of a symbiosis that passes between various generations, and that unites the protagonist with the other protagonist, her non-human symbiont:

The Camille Stories are invitations to participate in a kind of genre fiction committed to strengthening ways to propose near futures, possible futures, and implausible but real nows. Every Camille Story that I write will make terrible political and ecological mistakes; and every story asks readers to practice generous suspicion by joining in the fray of inventing a bumptious crop of Children of Compost ... The Children of Compost invite not so much fan fiction as sym fiction, the genre of sympoiesis and symchthonia—the coming together of earthly ones.⁶¹

60 Enaudeau, “La politique étrangère,” 336. My translation.

61 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 136.

This "compost" recalls our planetary and terrestrial condition, as well as the *chthonian* condition Haraway speaks of. The Chtulucene that she proposes is not an alternative name for the Anthropocene: it is rather a way of ensuring that the Anthropocene will be as short as possible. I would like to conclude by suggesting that we can think of Haraway's *compost* as something akin— though more aware of the terrestrial condition—to the *pagus*, this place where we meet entities—Gods? Animals? Humans? Plants? Chthonian beings?—with which we must communicate and negotiate tables of translation. The aim of fabulation, however, should neither be to tell the truth about reality nor to legitimise a practice directly. Rather, it would be to understand the world in which we live, and the discourses that are produced in it. This is the other lesson we can take from Lyotard into the 21st century: thoughts and actions are constituted between genres of discourse of which we must remain aware. The intermingling of genres is not a bad thing, on the contrary, it enable play and transitions between fields. It is when one discourse tyrannically conceals the others, or claims to be superior to them, that the risk of damage, but also of denialism, is reactivated.

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