

Title	Against nature? Vigny's stones
Authors	O'Donovan, Patrick
Publication date	2019-11-11
Original Citation	O'Donovan, P. (2019) 'Against Nature? Vigny's Stones', Dix-Neuf, 23(3-4), pp. 196-207, doi: 10.1080/14787318.2019.1683972
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2019.1683972 - 10.1080/14787318.2019.1683972
Rights	© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Dix-Neuf on 11 Nov 2019, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14787318.2019.1683972
Download date	2024-05-06 08:41:13
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9101

Against Nature? Vigny's Stones

On 26 October 1838, Alfred de Vigny began to take full possession of his property of Le Maine-Giraud, “ce vieux manoir de mes pères maternels, isolé au milieu des bois et des rochers” (1948, 876), by marking out its boundaries with stones. He noted in his diary that he had “posé les bornes aux limites du terrain” (2012–, 3:542). In the days that followed he progressed around the eighty-five hectares of the domain. On 8 November, he again placed markers along its eastern boundary. This work was interspersed with the completion of “La mort du loup,” which he had begun in Paris: “la nuit écrit *La Mort du loup*—Poème” (3:542). Vigny wrote to Adolphe Dumas that the house was “sauvage et à l’abri des visites.” While there, he felt his “force” to be “inaltérée sinon inaltérable,” a state that owed something to his dual regime as a landowner and a poet: “quand la tête travaille trop je marche la nuit au clair de lune sous les grands chênes en écrasant les bruyères et les ajoncs à coups de pied et, l’animal exercé, je le ramène écouter l’esprit” (2012–, 3:372).

Vigny had first visited the house in the Charente in June 1823, when he met his aunt, from whom he was ultimately to inherit the domain, and travelled there upon her death in 1827 to oversee its transmission to his mother; he observed, as a visitor from the city, that “le pain est mauvais et crayeux” (2012–, 1:467). His period of residence in 1838 was longer, following the death of his mother in December 1837, and the bitter end of his affair with Marie Dorval in August. This, then, was a period of some anguish, when Vigny was preoccupied also with his own version of the question that confronted Marx as he addressed the fate of Greek art: “in the age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs” (Baxandall and Morawski 2006, 108), how does poetry remain possible? Vigny’s poetic project spanned crucial decades in the social and industrial modernization of France. In pursuing it, he was repeatedly prompted to engage in a reappraisal of | environments and their inhabitants, a venture that is identified in his poetry with Le Maine-Giraud: several of the poems that were to be collected in *Les destinées* in 1864 are explicitly or implicitly linked to the domain. In this work, the negotiation of boundaries proves to be central. How is the disruptive modernity of urban and technological development distinct from what Vigny will term the “vieux temps,” especially in its treatment of boundaries? How is the human relation to nature to be understood in a world where the dividing lines between the city and the country, even between countries, are being sharply redrawn? Does the rapid expansion of technology threaten natural boundaries? In sketching a response to these questions, we will be able to trace—initially from within the environment of what Vigny termed his own “montagne”—the prospects for poetry in a context where human interventions in nature become more and more significant.

197

The act of marking boundaries is a sign of the all-too-human habitation of the environment, where natural materials, like stones or pieces of wood, function as tokens of social control of territory. In Roman religion, these *termini* were dedicated to the god Terminus, an ancient association at the heart of the apparatus intended to sustain peaceful and orderly interactions:

Terminus signifies boundary, and to this god they make public and private sacrifices where their fields are set off by boundaries; of living victims nowadays, but anciently the sacrifice was a bloodless one, since Numa reasoned that the god of boundaries was a guardian of peace and a witness of just dealing, and should therefore be clear from slaughter. (Plutarch 1914, 363)

Boundary markers continued to carry a distinct sacred charge throughout the Roman Republic and beyond, as Ovid recalls: “O Terminus, whether thou art a stone or stump buried in the

field, thou too hast been deified from days of yore" (1989, 105). The feast of the Terminalia took the form of a procession (Rüpke 2012, 30), just as for Vigny the assertion of private ownership lay in his transit across and around his domain on foot. Boundaries were marked by long-lasting materials which did not blend with the earth in which they were inserted, so consolidating their symbolic function in Roman religion (Piccaluga 1974, 86–87). It is their ubiquity that gave boundary stones a divine aura as cult objects (Lipka 2009, 89). The granite stones used by Vigny (Ambrière et al. 1989, 271), by virtue of this ancient element of alterity, acquire a connotative value, explicitly numinous or not.

198

Alongside its religious meanings, the cult of Terminus assumes a distinctive legal, political and military significance in Roman culture: "le dieu Terme, jadis une roche informe, et manifestement une prolongation du culte des pierres [...] consacre à Rome, tout à la fois la sainteté des limites, les droits de la propriété, et l'accroissement de la république" (Constant 1833, 14; Arendt 1958, 63). Boundaries were held to have an exemplary contractual function: they sustain relations of friendship dependent on shared regard for the law (Dumézil [1966] 1987, 212). In this way, limits point not only to discrete configurations of space but also to all the systems—religious, legal and economic—that give the occupation of territory its social meaning (Piccaluga 1974, 85, 139). They can also evoke the conflicts, whether latent or overt, to which the possession of land gives rise. While no violent struggles resulted from Vigny's ownership of land in the Charente, he observed in the autumn of 1846, when he was seeking to fix his boundaries again, that an old proverb | still resonated: "le: Qui terre a guerre a est toujours vrai" (2012–, 6:190). Even though Plutarch claims that Romulus "knew that a boundary, if observed, fetters lawless power; and if not observed, convicts of injustice" (1914, 363), in this context as much as others, like that of the oath, the supposed interdependence of the sacred and the legal is far from stable, in that none of the many discourses to which boundaries give rise can fully account for them, while any attempt at synthesis is confounded by the plurality of these same discourses (Agamben 2010, 2, 27). Of course, boundaries can and will be challenged, and are regularly modified, legally or otherwise, not least because in the Roman case it was "not the act of tracing boundaries, but their cancellation or negation [that] is the constitutive act of the city" (Agamben 1998, 85): so we can see from the fateful dispute that arose between Romulus and Remus as soon as they sought to establish its limits (Plutarch 1914, 115). In later Roman history, especially the Augustan period, thin borders mutate into thick frontiers and sovereignty comes to be rooted in *imperium*, "a Roman designation for authority that is not territorially bounded" (Longo 2018, 26, 29). Vigny was well aware of the vulnerability of boundaries in Revolutionary France. His father's family was dispossessed of its property in the Beauce. During his first visit of 1823 to Le Maine-Giraud, he dwells on what he saw as the violations to which it had been subjected: "le souffle de la Terreur avait traversé cette demeure, mais sans pouvoir la déraciner" (1948, 876). More than once, Vigny again found himself marking out his land as he negotiated and reaffirmed its boundaries with his neighbours (2012–, 6:691–94). Borders and boundaries, which prove to be dynamic more than they are static (Piccaluga 1974, 84), are markers of the flux of the times that shape them.

In "La maison du berger" (Vigny 1986, 119–28), Vigny invokes Terminus in a context that points ultimately to the mutability of conceptual borders, namely the slow historical progression of what he takes to be an increasingly secular humanity: "Le marbre des vieux temps, jusqu'aux reins, nous enchaîne, / Et tout homme énergique au dieu Terme est pareil" (lines 216–17). He draws less on the aniconic identification of the god with boundary markers (Lipka 2009, 88–89) than on figurative representations of Terminus since the Renaissance, where he is depicted as a human torso emerging from a marble base. Vigny's allusion to Terminus points to the dynamism that is owed to the existence of limits: in human form, the god is associated with the negation of boundaries. The same applies to the appraisal of successive historical civilizations as they are depicted in the course of the poem, so much so that Terminus stands less for the perpetuation of order than the will to exert control over nature. The reference is striking, then, for its robust affirmation of human agency and for the prospect of the emancipation of "les Peuples tout enfants" (line 211) that it heralds. The figure

of Terminus comes to connote a conception of the boundary as a limit to be breached, rather than a fixed division, as something that can indeed be unbounded. But this gesture will be heavily qualified in the poem at the point where the relationship between modern man and the earth from which, like Terminus, he springs is at issue, casting this disruptive agency in a problematic light.

This poem is, however, notably provincial in its initial move, which is to call for a break with the environment of “toutes les villes” (line 22). The first three stanzas offer a mapping of urban settings, both their spatial attributes, and what these stand for in social and affective terms: |

199

Si ton cœur, gémissant du poids de notre vie,
Se traîne et se débat comme un aigle blessé,
[...]
S'il ne bat qu'en saignant par sa plaie immortelle,
S'il ne voit plus l'amour, son étoile fidèle,
Éclairer pour lui seul l'horizon effacé;

Si ton âme enchaînée, ainsi que l'est mon âme,
Lasse de son boulet et de son pain amer,
Sur sa galère en deuil laisse tomber la rame,
Penche sa tête pâle et pleure sur la mer,
[...]

Si ton corps, frémissant des passions secrètes,
S'indigne des regards, timide et palpitant;
S'il cherche à sa beauté de profondes retraites
Pour la mieux dérober au profane insultant. (lines 1–2, 5–11, 15–18)

The anaphoric rehearsal of the causes of modern alienation prompts a forceful imperative in the following stanza: “Pars courageusement, laisse toutes les villes, / Ne ternis plus tes pieds aux poudres du chemin” (lines 22–23). The city is a space of lost horizons, where the “cœur” can no longer find its bearings, where a climate of subjection prevails, and where the massification of society means that the most intimate boundaries are in jeopardy. The exhortation to depart is an uncompromising call to inhabit a different environment: deliverance from the enslavement of “les cités serviles” (line 24) demands the abandonment of any and all urban settings. Some comfort is to be found in a kind of borderless repossession of a more “natural” space, or so a new imperative seems to promise: “Marche à travers les champs une fleur à la main” (line 28). Irrespective of their boundaries, we can range freely over these *champs*, blossom in hand, as enjoined by the poet. A crepuscular “Nature” (line 29), which awaits the Éva to whom the poem is addressed, is presented as being on the same side in resisting the alienating encroachment of the city.

Yet, the poem proves to be governed by an acute tension. Vigny experienced Le Maine-Giraud as a secure environment, enclosed and protective within the notarized lines that divided it from other properties. But here, the search for a private setting endowed with the same virtues amounts to a suspension of regular legal boundaries. This gesture co-exists with an equal awareness of pervasive globalization. The boundary between “Nature” and what seems to be Vigny’s own domain remains indeterminate at the outset, in keeping with the desire to create a personal environment exempt from the taints of the invasive city: thus the first explicit marker of the subjectivity of the speaker, who refers to the “épaisse” and enveloping “bruyère” of “*ma montagne*” (line 43; my emphasis). In this, the first of the poem’s three parts, the poet’s mountain is indeed identified with a silent, austere and abundant nature, in which he assumes the guise of a humble shepherd (Pearson 2016, 556) moving without apparent hindrance through the fields and protected from the transgressions unleashed by the Revolution. But then the transformations of a rapidly modernizing society are brought once

more into view, as the poet's meditation is abruptly curtailed by the sombre excursus on the train's "vapeur foudroyante" (line 64). The contrast with the tranquil shepherd's cabin and its "course vagabonde" (line 61) could hardly be more pronounced: "Sur ce taureau de fer qui fume, souffle et beugle / L'homme a monté trop tôt" (lines 78–79). |

200

The provincial perspective is reasserted a few stanzas later when Vigny evokes a way of traversing the landscape distinct from the locomotive that is now on the verge of disappearance. Even as he urges Éva to retreat to the countryside, Vigny's "je" concedes that such a way of life will soon recede into the past. Something bordering on a remembrance of the countryside delineates a kind of habitation about to be revolutionized:

On n'entendra jamais piaffer sur une route
Le pied vif du cheval sur les pavés en feu;
Adieu, voyages lents, bruits lointains qu'on écoute,
Le rire du passant, les retards de l'essieu,
Les détours imprévus des pentes variées,
Un ami rencontré, les heures oubliées,
L'espoir d'arriver tard dans un sauvage lieu. (lines 113–19)

Vigny's poetry is haunted by the imminent transfiguration of the landscape in the modernity of rising industrialization. A topography soon to be eclipsed contrasts with that of the railway, in which "l'humaine créature" (line 110) can make out only "un brouillard étouffant que traverse un éclair" (line 112). His lament is an acknowledgment of a dramatic shift in the experience of boundaries. What this implies is that the destination of any retreat to a pastoral nature is more and more uncertain, even though a succession of highly orthodox alexandrines, shaped by uniform *coupes* in the hemistichs—these "entraves" (line 171), as Vigny later terms them, like stones in the regulated territory of the line—rehearses a still enchanted progression culminating in the withdrawal into the landscape at its most "sauvage."

By contrast, in the following stanza, the instrumental rationality of a globalized world carries us over a distinct threshold:

La distance et le temps sont vaincus. La science
Trace autour de la terre un chemin triste et droit.
Le monde est rétréci par notre expérience
Et l'équateur n'est plus qu'un anneau trop étroit.
Plus de hasard. Chacun glissera sur sa ligne
Immobile au seul rang que le départ assigne,
Plongé dans un calcul silencieux et froid. (lines 120–26)

The provinces find themselves decisively relegated under conditions of temporal and spatial compression, in a world that is "rétréci." Vigny recognizes the strong inclination to see in machines the potential for the transformation of social structures: in portraying this desire for progress as something triumphant, no doubt, but also crepuscular, he signals to posterity that these advances cannot, in fact, be self-fulfilling, for in living this moment in the evolution of technology, "Vigny l'a rendu juste et significatif en comprenant qu'il ne pouvait se satisfaire de lui-même, se fermer sur lui-même" (Simondon 1958, 117). Such is the flaw that he detects in the over-abstract path that science traces for itself, in which the landscapes of "les grands bois et les champs" (line 26) are portrayed as mere accidents. The shift in the rhythmical pattern from one stanza to the next is abrupt: a *contre-rejet* between the first and second lines of this stanza brings about a more uneven rhythmical pattern. Between lines five and six, a shorter, more forceful, measure in the first hemistich modifies the symmetrical structure of the line, and also prompts an enjambement. |

201

Here we witness a mode of lyric performance that hints at the urgency of resistance and the will to sustain a different way of inhabiting the world (Culler 2015, 131). This lapidary turn, where we can glimpse something of the potential of "verse-junctures" to articulate "adjustments of consciousness" (Scott 2002, 139), recurs several times, where the compressed

measure of four syllables is used or where the full first hemistich reads as a pressing declaration, sometimes leading to a sententious pronouncement in the second part of the line:

Arriver ou mourir.—Les marchands sont jaloux. (line 86)
 Évitions ces chemins.—Leur voyage est sans graces, (line 106)
 Pourquoi le fuir?—La vie est double dans les flammes. (line 143)
 —Le jour n'est pas levé.—Nous en sommes encore
 Au premier rayon blanc qui précède l'aurore (lines 208–09)
 L'Invisible est réel. Les âmes ont leur monde
 Où sont accumulés d'impalpables trésors. (lines 220–21)

These rapid interventions are reference points in the poem's argument. They represent moments where the “je” makes sharp judgements—in the final instance above, by repudiating the philosophy of positivism—and thus overcomes some obstacle, or projects the movement of the poem onwards.

The path on which the poet has embarked has taken him well beyond the bucolic evocation of the splendours of his “montagne.” Vigny places poetry decisively in a world of “bustle and commotion,” where the “power of socialization” is in play (Adorno 1991, 37). The preoccupations with modern life extend even beyond those cited in the opening stanzas to encompass the railway and the doctrine of positivism, as we have seen, the emergence of a society rooted in coal, steam and iron, and the very novel channels of communication owed to telegraphy (Beltran and Carré 2016, 31–44), as well as the emergence of parliamentary democracy and the rise of political oratory. The poem itself is engaged in the mapping of unstable boundaries: it generates meaning from the account it gives of spaces and, above all, of their transformations, not least because these innovations are means by which the city becomes unbounded.

The second part of the poem deals with the implications for poetry of new forms of politics. The “figurative projection” (Kornbluh 2015, 199) of a social space in flux represents an aesthetic mode that is political as well as poetic. Poetry itself is treated as a contested site, in that it is identified with the settings in which its history has unfolded, on the whole for the worse: likened to a “fille sans pudeur” (line 155), it has fallen to the point where it can only “chanter aux carrefours impurs de la cité” (line 158). The projected withdrawal from the city is remedial: it promises to create an independent, if marginal, domain for poetry. The distinction between the country and the metropolis proves to be a means of provincializing politics (Chakrabarty 2000, 6); thus the poem manifests a commitment characteristic of the modern lyric to be a “potent negation” (Culler 2015, 330). On this basis, poetry can again aspire to be a “diamant sans rival” (line 204). Despite the emergence of distinctively modern forms of politics centred on individual freedom of choice and the constitutional guarantees that it demands (Constant 1997, 603, 612), cities remain servile and the provinces throw the deficiencies of the politics of the July Monarchy into relief: |

202

L'ombrageux paysan gronde à voir qu'on dételle,
 Et que pour le scrutin on quitte le labour.
 Cependant le dédain de la chose immortelle
 Tient jusqu'au fond du cœur quelque avocat d'un jour.
 Lui qui doute de l'âme, il croit à ses paroles.
 Poésie, il se rit de tes graves symboles,
 Ô toi des vrais penseurs impérissable amour! (lines 190–96)

Poetry is connected to the rural environment in that it, too, is jeopardized by the explosion of the political sphere and the rise of representative democracy (Picot 1981, 26). This sense shapes the poetic militancy that we see the poem display.

But the risks of alienation and death supersede those of politics. The end of “La maison du berger” stages a turn to human solidarity in the face of the “tourmentes civiles” (line 264) that continue to beset modern France. What prompts this gesture is the sense that nature is

suddenly in peril. The repeated figure of twilight amounts to an intimation of the transience of what Yves Bonnefoy termed “la société si bien dite occidentale” (1997, 56), in which “les grands bois et les champs” do contain “de vastes asiles” (line 26), but which has become the theatre of our own mortality as much as the focus for the transformative application of human energy. We witness the realization that an altered view of nature imposes on human consciousness. This shift in perception proves to be a step in the direction of a distinct, if acutely troubled, ecological awareness.

The courageous departure from the city evoked in the “je”’s address to Éva has an unexpected outcome, in that humans don’t end up on the side of nature, not least because of the damage they have inflicted on the environment. This is what a feminized Nature discloses to the poet in a “voix triste et superbe” (line 302), in which she declares herself to be “l’impassible théâtre” (line 281) of human actions. These, she reveals, are performed in a universe devoid of protective divinities:

à peine

Je sens passer sur moi la comédie humaine

Qui cherche en vain au ciel ses muets Spectateurs. (lines 285–87)

The perspective of Nature is one in which human boundaries are indeed meaningless, with the result that any human intervention, like the marking of territorial limits, is annulled by an all-consuming mortality:

“Je roule avec dédain, sans voir et sans entendre,
A côté des fourmis les Populations;
Je ne distingue pas leur terrier de leur cendre,
J’ignore en les portant les noms des Nations.” (lines 288–91)

Nature is reduced to disdainful silence in the face of the din of industrial modernity:

“Avant vous j’étais belle et toujours parfumée,
J’abandonnais au vent mes cheveux tout entiers,
Je suivais dans les cieux ma route accoutumée,
Sur l’axe harmonieux des divins balanciers.
—Après vous, traversant l’espace où tout s’élance,
J’irai seule et sereine, en un chaste silence
Je fendrai l’air du front et de mes seins altiers.” (lines 295–301) |

203

“La maison du berger” magnifies what “la Nature” can tell us about death, namely that humans are ultimately reduced to ashes and dust. The *terrier* in which humans seek shelter is indistinguishable from their remains, and this annihilation carries off human interventions in the landscape, too. A damaged “Nature” falls mute, and the realization that death is beyond redemption induces a painful split in the “je.”

Vigny’s desired identification with “la Nature” gives way to a materialism in which soil and ashes are inextricably mingled. By the end, the poem has juxtaposed human energy with a wider appraisal of its impacts on the earth in which humans are rooted, like the god Terminus as portrayed by Vigny. The poem shifts in focus, away from the successive states of civilization towards an abrupt realization of the long-term impacts of our interventions in a framework—that of “la Nature”—where human agency and its environmental impact have been so greatly, and so harmfully, magnified (Glacken 1967, 710). On this, Vigny is explicit: it is “l’homme” who has mounted the “taureau de fer.” Vigny’s sudden apprehension of mortal disembodiment marks a moment where the pervasive “material entanglements between bodies and the environment” (Iovino and Opperman 2012, 466) can, however painfully, be acknowledged.

The “silence austère” (line 29) ascribed to “la Nature” now takes on a more sinister meaning:

C’est là ce que me dit sa voix triste et superbe,
Et dans mon cœur alors je la hais et je vois
Notre sang dans son onde et nos morts sous son herbe

Nourrissant de leurs sucs la racine des bois.
 Et je dis à mes yeux qui lui trouvaient des charmes:
 Ailleurs tous vos regards, ailleurs toutes vos larmes,
 Aimez ce que jamais on ne verra deux fois. (lines 302–08)

Vigny glimpses an ecology in which nature is ultimately less a shelter than the voracious destroyer of humanity. This is also a threshold to a different worldview. The “je” bears witness to a breach in the Kantian notion of a theory of nature compatible with human values (Glacken 1967, 549), and sketches a materialist vision of the lifecycle of the whole of nature. A more extreme form of the “sauvage” environment, and the untamed wildness it represents, makes its presence felt, as a reference to the goddess Diana in the closing stanza of the poem intimates.

What results is a final relativization and another drawing of boundaries, which amount to the discernment of a marginal space for humans (and non-humans, as we can see in “La mort du loup”), on the basis of their conflictive interactions with “la terre ingrate” (line 331) and their modified interrelations with each other. What Vigny shows is just how forcefully human identity comes to be in play across the series of dividing lines that he encounters in this one poem: between spaces of servility and spaces of asylum; between life and death; between “l’homme” and “la Nature.” While the horror of the “je” shows that, in thinking about the whole of nature, there is the risk that “we never quite leave the human” (Kohn 2013, 125), the poem makes a final implicit concession: there is no teleology that shapes the relationship between humans and nature (Glacken 1967, 550), which means that, just as for Vigny’s “je,” we must make the shift to an ecology in which we are compelled to acknowledge that our actions threaten the survival of nature, as well as our own. This is an | altered environment, in which “anything we leave untouched we have already touched” (Williams 1995, 240).

204

The sentiment that shaped “La maison du berger” surfaces again in an inversion of Vigny’s original possessive gesture of marking out the boundaries of his land in 1838. In 1846, Le Maine-Giraud becomes the setting for a confrontation with “Nature,” when Vigny writes to Marie d’Agoult. He reproaches her for cherishing “les arbres et les gazons qui sont nos ennemis mortels”. The tone is light, though he rehearses again the shocking realization of the ending of “La maison du berger:” trees and meadows are our enemies because they “se réjouissent quand ils peuvent pousser et reverdir sur nos squelettes” (2012–, 6:132). He continues in his ironic vein by saying that he will not share her “lâches complaisances” with regard to nature and trees. When he goes to the country, he says, it will be to raze the oaks and the poplars to prevent them from feeding on human remains. Vigny’s anticipated gesture of revolt is again staged in the provinces, now depicted as the setting for an ambivalent relationship with nature, where we witness the acknowledgment, however reluctant, of a living system and its greatly extended temporal horizon, within which the meaning of human actions, like that of marking boundaries, pales into insignificance.

Vigny’s disabused representation of human life finds an echo in the emphasis in contemporary anthropology on our place in “un collectif singulier mêlant indissolublement des territoires, des plantes, des montagnes, des animaux, des sites, des divinités et une foule d’autres êtres encore, tous en constante interaction” (Descola 2015, 22). As Descola concludes, humans discover that they no longer possess “la ‘nature.’” Rather, “ils sont possédés par elle” (22). This represents an ecological turning point, in that it implies an acknowledgment of “la fin de la ‘nature’ comme concept permettant de résumer nos rapports au monde et de les pacifier” (Latour 2015, 50–51). At the end of Vigny’s poem, there is no truce with Nature, and it is hard to see his final expressions of defiance as being exempt from the realization that humans inhabit an environment where their hegemony as social agents is not assured (Descola 2014, 268). Is Vigny against nature in “La maison du berger” and his letter to Marie d’Agoult of 1846? Or do we witness a different rupture, in which “la Nature” connotes a much larger ecology, in which humans find themselves all too implicated? Even if we continue to inhabit the same environment, we must learn to perceive it and intervene in it differently, so breaking with “fantasies of conquest and consumption” (Bennett 2010, ix).

A muted claim along these lines is conveyed in Vigny's final poem, "L'esprit pur" (1986, 166–68), where he dwells not on the possession of land and trees, but on the leaves of what was to be a posthumous book, *Les destinées* of 1864. He again acknowledges the finality of death while gesturing towards the faintest margin of survival that poetry may sustain:

Dans le caveau des miens plongeant mes pas nocturnes,
J'ai compté mes aïeux, suivant leur vieille loi.
[...]

Ils furent Opulents, Seigneurs de vastes terres (lines 8–9/15)]

205 Vigny renounces "les champs de la Beauce" (line 29) of his paternal "aïeux" (line 9), and looks to the ascendancy of the "pur esprit" (line 50) of the poet, to which they—and he—owe their only hope of an afterlife: "Si j'écris leur histoire, ils descendront de moi" (line 14). Far from appropriating territories and marking their boundaries, the poet is | dispossessed of his ancestors' lands, at the same time as his poetry takes its own step towards "la démocratie de la lettre nue" (Rancière 1998, 173), through which this shared "histoire" can hope to find its "Jeune Postérité" (line 64).

Vigny's sorrowful acceptance of mortality carries him into the future. In "La maison du berger", poetry becomes a "pierre" (line 201), and the poet a stonemason (Thibaudet 2018, 49; Pearson 2016, 560). Like the stones used by the Romans, this one is not absorbed into the perishable cityscapes in which it is inserted:

Reste des nations mortes, durable pierre
Qu'on trouve sous ses pieds lorsque dans la poussière
On cherche les cités sans en voir un seul mur. (lines 201–03)

Here is a stone that eclipses in significance the ground in which it is set and to which Vigny looks to compensate for misadventures that have affected society, environment and poetry alike in post-Revolutionary France. The fate that Vigny imagines for *Les destinées* here and in "L'esprit pur" seems to sustain Dominique Aury's view of an ecology of literature in which books, if we continue to hold that they "n'aient jamais de fin, qu'ils durent plus que les forêts, plus que les pierres même," can be the bearers of our secrets in perpetuity (1958, 7). Today, we might be less confident of the survival of poetry, if only because we inhabit a world in which we face the much graver peril of the extinction of our species (Descola 2005, 689–90). Perhaps Vigny, by urging us to embrace a discourse of poetry that is reminiscent of one version of the figure of Terminus, inasmuch as it seeks to resist the forces that endanger it, can equip us to face this threat. After all, as Descola argues, the risk is one that compels us to find and to perpetuate "de véritables moyens d'expression" (690).

For some, the prospects for such a commitment are still rooted in "La maison du berger." Such is the conclusion to be drawn from Michel Deguy, when he quotes lines where Vigny refers to the "Seigneur" who presides over the invisible domain that is "réel," as we have seen: "Son Verbe est le séjour de nos intelligences / Comme ici-bas l'Espace est celui de nos corps" (lines 223–24). The question that Deguy finds himself prompted to ask is "qu'est le monde?" (2012, 201). Like Vigny, he witnesses a world "envahi" by humans, by "Each-other—c'est notre nom" (201). But again, as for Vigny, this is a world that has the power to alter our perceptions of human actions, preoccupations and interventions: "mais lui, le monde, surpasse et noie d'admirable nos différences, plus infiniment fini que toutes nos finitions" (201). Even the landscape to which Vigny appeals to characterize this world resurfaces: "le cherches-tu encore dans ce qui fut la 'campagne?' Y a-t-il encore des bouts de monde aux bouts du monde?" (201). A kind of poetry that might seem "ridicule" or "désuet" has become something that is available to "remployer" (202). And like Vigny, what Deguy seeks is the prospect of reinventing our relation to each other and the "monde:" "ici bas ici haut là-bas là haut d'ici là maintenant c'est lui, le monde est la révélation ayant besoin d'illumination pour que tu y demeures" (202). It is in poems that remain defiantly "infaillible[s]" (202), as much as in the "bouts du monde" they evoke, that we can still hope to fashion our dwelling places. |

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1991. *Notes to Literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press. (Originally published as *Noten zur Literatur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.)
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Originally published as *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Turin: Einaudi, 1995.)
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2010. *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* ("Homo Sacer" II, 3). Translated by Adam Kotsko. Cambridge: Polity. (Originally published as *Il sacramento del linguaggio: Archeologia del giuramento* (Homo sacer II, 3). Rome: Laterza, 2008.)
- Ambrière, Madeleine, et al. 1989. *Alfred de Vigny et les siens: Documents inédits*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Aury, Dominique. 1958. *Lecture pour tous*. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard.
- Baxandall, Lee, and Stefan Morawski, eds. 2006. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*. Nottingham, Critical, Cultural and Communications Press.
- Beltran, Alain, and Patrice Carré. 2016. *La vie électrique: Histoire et imaginaire (XVIII^e–XXI^e siècle)*. Paris: Belin.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bonnefoy, Yves. 1997. "Vigny, le peintre." In *Vigny: Romantisme et vérité*. Edited by Jérôme Thélot, 45–67. Mont-de-Mersan: Éditions InterUniversitaires.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Constant, Benjamin. 1833. *Du polythéisme romain, considéré dans ses rapports avec la philosophie grecque et la religion chrétienne*. Paris: Béchét Sr.
- Constant, Benjamin. 1997. *Écrits politiques*. Edited by Marcel Gauchet. Paris: Gallimard.
- Culler, Jonathan. 2015. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Deguy, Michel. 2012. *Écologiques*. Paris: Hermann.
- Descola, Philippe. 2005. *Par-delà nature et culture*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Descola, Philippe. 2014. "All Too Human (Still): A Comment on Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*." *HAU* 4 (2): 267–73. (Book Symposium on Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*.)
- Descola, Philippe. 2015. "Humain, trop humain." *Esprit* 420: 8–22. (Dossier on "Habiter la Terre autrement," edited by Jonathan Chalié and Lucile Schmid.)
- Dumézil, Georges. (1966) 1987. *La religion romaine archaïque*. Paris: Payot.
- Glacken, Clarence J. 1967. *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. 2012. "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19 (3): 448–75.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kornbluh, Anna. 2015. "The Realist Blueprint." *Henry James Review* 36 (3): 199–211.

- Latour, Bruno. 2015. *Face à Gaïa: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*. Paris: La Découverte. |
- Lipka, Michael. 2009. *Roman Gods: A Conceptual Approach*. Leiden: Brill.
- Longo, Matthew. 2018. *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ovid. 1989. *Fasti*. Translated by James G. Frazer. Revised by G. P. Goold. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pearson, Roger. 2016. *Unacknowledged Legislators: The Poet as Lawgiver in Post-Revolutionary France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Piccaluga, Giulia. 1974. *Terminus: I segni di confine nella religione romana*. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo.
- Picot, Jean-Pierre. 1981. "Variations philosophiques autour d'un grain de sable: Nature et société dans *Les Destinées* d'Alfred de Vigny." *Romantisme* 33: 17–34. (Issue on "Poétiques.")
- Plutarch. 1914. *Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press.
- Rancière, Jacques. 1998. *La parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*. Paris: Hachette Littératures.
- Rüpke, Jörg. 2012. *Religion in Republican Rome: Rationalization and Ritual Change*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Scott, Clive. 2002. *Channel Crossings: French and English Poetry in Dialogue*. Oxford: Legenda.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 1958. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Thibaudet, Albert. 2018. *Alfred de Vigny*. Edited by Stéphane Zékian. Paris: Éditions des Équateurs.
- Vigny, Alfred de. 1948. *Œuvres complètes*. Edited by Fernand Baldensperger. Vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard.
- Vigny, Alfred de. 1986. *Œuvres complètes*. Edited by François Germain and André Jarry. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard.
- Vigny, Alfred de. 2012–. *Correspondance*. Edited by Madeleine Ambrière et al. 6 vols (to 2015). Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- Williams, Bernard. 1995. *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers: 1982–1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.