



Being Dumped

MICHAEL MARDER

Department of Philosophy, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), and Ikerbasque: Basque Foundation for Science, Spain

Abstract In this article, Michael Marder interprets the “toxic flood” we are living or dying through as a global dump. On his reading, multiple levels of existence—from the psychic to the physiological, from the environmental-elemental to the planetary—are being converted into a dump, a massive and still growing hodgepodge of industrial and consumer by-products and emissions; shards of metaphysical ideas and theological dreams; radioactive materials; light, sound, and other modes of sensory pollution; pesticides and herbicides; and so forth. Toxicity targets our bodily tissues, senses, and minds, not to mention our worlds, without individuating us in this targeting, as indifferent and random as the global dump that nourishes it. Disrupting metabolism at every scrambled register of existence, it waxes into what Marder calls “ontological toxicity,” the mangled parts of the dump that do not pass through and out of being and, in not passing, warrant the annihilation, the rapid passing away, of all else. In an ontologically toxic state, the meaning of being is being dumped.

Keywords dumping, ontological toxicity, light and sound pollution, individuation/nonindividuation, metabolism, metaphysics

A Global Dump

Ours is the age of the global dump. And the information without form that sometimes lends a name to postindustrial societies, economies, and ways of crafting knowledge is but a brushstroke in its portrait, the still or already unframed world-picture.

We live and die on a dump of ideas, bodies, dreams, materials, snippets of relations, sound bites and memes, decontextualized and dehistoricized, produced as waste, clipped, isolated and thrown together in a massive jumble in the wake of what used to be a world. What do the words *we live* comprehend?¹ How to apprehend them without

1. The plural form of the question is not accidental. On a dump, I do not live; we live, or carry on something resembling acts of living, a “we” without togetherness, neither sharing in difference nor aired among ourselves, in the interstices between us. “I,” in turn, am biomass, a massified and massed life.

arresting their referent? According to the preeminent ancient sensibility, they mean “we animate and are animated, move and are moved”;² in the modern paradigm, they are likely to convey that we produce and reproduce (ourselves). Living on a dump, we are moved, produced, and reproduced by the dump, as by ourselves. For the most part and albeit technically alive, we are dying there, dismembered, thrown out, trashed, alienated from our alienation, coming to love it or altogether indifferent, apathetic, no longer involved, anaesthetized with pharmaceutically and ideologically manufactured painkillers. The dump lives us, lives *for* us. It takes over the movement, production, and reproduction of world-destruction, wrecking the very being-world of the world.

Metaphysical and religious systems scream in our ears that we must wake up from the nightmare of our individual and collective lives while it is not too late, while the time for repentance and conversion has not yet run out. They urge us to open the eyes of the mind or of the soul and finally to begin living, even if we are already in the concluding phases of our biological lives, abiding for the first time with truth or with God. As we shall see with yet another set of eyes, however, on the brink of every sort of vision turning inutile, the dump that lives us and lives for us is nothing else but that coveted “true life” realized. To be precise, the dump is that life’s unforeseen side effect, the result of persistently devaluing and trashing the world here-below, treating it as a vast wastebasket or, in the most sympathetic scenario, a springboard for the noblest, most luminous, ideal, eternal being.

In the middle of a terrible nightmare, we wake up to a worse nightmare, falling deeper into troubled sleep. (Is it possible not to fall but to be dumped into sleep? If so, this is what’s happening to us.) The old metaphysics has been, by and large, dismantled. Yet, the work of disassembling its scaffolding and edifice is not a demolition derby: one cannot accomplish such a task once and for all. A mere pause is fertile grounds for resurrecting the tired, frayed, tattered instantiations of the metaphysical project that unabashedly claim to be new. To add fuel to the fire, the work of mourning metaphysics, ongoing since the nineteenth century, has been not just paused but brusquely terminated. In exchange for metaphysics *and* for mourning it, we endure a narcissistic reopening of the wound that is a global melancholia. The business of the Anthropocene is one symptom of this malaise, this melancholic navel-wound gazing. Another is the reconstruction of ontology “after” metaphysics (*after* is the marker of a temporal sequence here as much as a sign that what follows emerges in the negative image of

2. We arrest our comprehension in its tracks as soon as we reduce movement to mechanical *kinesis*. With movement as locomotion or mere displacement conquering every sense of kinetic unfolding, our comprehension stops in its tracks; it, too, ceases moving, growing, changing forms so as to be or become more adequate to what it tries to comprehend, or even decaying and nourishing new growths with its own decomposition. These senses of movement are, incidentally, the ones Aristotle puts on par with locomotion. So, the cipher of living as movement, in movement, is incomplete without these variations, themselves organized along the “active” and “passive” dimensions.

what preceded it) that culminates in being-as-residue. Being is leftovers,³ morsels that fell from the table of nothing. Following the thread of both symptoms, the dump is an outgrowth of nihilism in all its positive splendor. Give the floor to Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "The desert grows: woe to the one who harbors deserts! [Die Wüste wächst: weh Dem, der Wüsten birgt!]"⁴

The global dump is a desert extending on land and in the hypoxic zones of the oceans. The more of it there is, the more it grows—mimicking the activity of what the Greeks called *phusis* and the Latins knew as *natura*—the fewer are the opportunities for future flourishing and finite growth. The vastness of devastation is at once vacant and full, spacious beyond measure and running out of room, barren and strewn with debris, a desert and a dump. Devastation de-"vastates" itself: we are aimlessly traversing the hyphen between the prefix *de-* and the vastness it simultaneously negates and affirms. Many species will not make it across this line, as short syntactically as historically, if grafted onto deep evolutionary time, the time of "natural history." It is uncertain that humanity will, either. In a pervasive desertion of being, the desert grows outside and within those who harbor it. We are deserted by being to the extent that we desert being. Today—better: tonight, in the creeping boundless night of the world—in today's tonight, then, being is being dumped.

Perhaps, a poisonous flower of nihilism, the desert blossoms from the inside, irradiating outward. Or, perhaps, the desert we harbor within arrives to us from the outside, searing with its dry heat every one of our thoughts, aspirations, retinal cells and intestinal tissues, the bronchial tubes and the lungs. In the outdated quarrel of materialism and idealism, it mattered where the growth had commenced: in being or in consciousness, actuality or idea. None of this is significant any longer. The expanding desert is outside in and inside out. We are back at square one, tending to zero.

It is not that the dump is over there, at a safe distance from the well-off members of affluent societies, who live at several removes from polluted water sources and open-air landfills. Radioactive fallouts know no national boundaries, microplastics are as ubiquitous in tap and bottled water as mercury is in fish, and smog does not stop at the municipal borders dividing the city's poor neighborhoods from the rich. The toxicity of the air, the clouds, the rain and the snow; of the oceans and their diminishing fish and crustacean populations; of chemically fertilized soil and the fruit it bears—this pervasive and multifarious elemental toxicity is also in us. The outside slips in when we inhale and ingest it, the body's "hollow" interiors, the lungs and the stomach, inexorably exposed to the atmosphere, water, and food. But there is also a philosophical explanation for this primordial infiltration.

3. Santiago Zabala explores the theme of postmetaphysical being as the leftovers (or "the remains") of being. See Zabala, *Remains of Being*.

4. Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 417, translation modified. For more on my reading of this line and its reception by Heidegger, see Marder, *Heidegger*, esp. chap. 5, "Devastation."

In keeping with an ancient line of reasoning, the body and its senses are microcosms that set apart, for the time being and in varying proportions, a tiny fraction of immense elemental regions: the heat of fire and its luminosity in the heart and the eye, the earth in the bones and the joints, water in the vital fluids. The elements are not the fundamental particles from which, brick by brick, cell by cell, molecule by molecule, we are cobbled together. The elements are not in us, or, if they are, only secondarily so. It is we who are in the elements as their proportionate and temporary circumscriptions. When proportions are out of whack, the imbalance restitutes the bulk of the delimited to exteriority, into which we dissolve. When these outside regions themselves are deranged and contaminated, so are their bounded segments. Toxic elements toxic bodies and senses make. Since the mind is embodied, the list is incomplete without toxic thoughts, desires, fantasies, and modes of reasoning that have, to be sure, also occasioned the evisceration of the world. With the acceleration of a positive feedback loop between the exteriority and the psychophysical interiority that sets a bit of the outside world apart, their contents do not filter, ooze, seep, or percolate into one another. They are massively discharged, mutually dumped, instead.

Involving huge quantities of data and construction debris, the stuff of junkyards and a unilaterally declared end of an intimate relationship, excrements and a snapshot of a computer program's working memory at a given time, the flooding of foreign markets with extraordinarily cheap products and dreary living conditions, the dump is both outside and within. It relinquishes distinctions in physical space and the pivotal metaphysical opposition between the inner and the outer. Through its global reach, the dump swallows up and spits out *what* is together with the beyond of being, to which it was possible to elope as recently as the second half of the past century.⁵ Its impact disorients and unsettles; it renders useless the habitual signposts for navigating complex, wrinkled, rippled, emplaced space.

Conceptually speaking, the global dump is an achievement, indicating how the much-maligned subject/object dualism has been overcome. Crude differentiation may be resolved either into finer differences or into indifference and undifferentiation. The crudeness of the subject/object relation is now replaced with a disorderly collection of -jects, often paleonymically termed "objects," and a chaotic movement of -jection, oblivious to questions regarding points of departure and destinations. Late postmodernity has exchanged one of modernity's most important distinctions for an amorphous heap, which is not at all unheard of in mythology and in the history of philosophy.

Not so innocent, the ecological, environmentally friendly, "green" discourses prevalent today are implicated in the growth of the desert and the dump they abhor. As they rave about the "butterfly effect" adopted from a key figure in chaos theory, Edward Lorenz,⁶ and aver that "everything is interconnected," ecologists destroy much more than

5. Think back, for instance, to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, with its two main titles *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1981).

6. Sherratt and Wilkinson, *Big Questions in Ecology and Evolution*, 133.

the category of causality and predictability with its illusion of control; they harm the fragile logic of articulation, the prelogical arc of *logos*, the precondition for establishing relations. The moment everything is linkable to everything else with the same intensity of association, nothing is related to anything. Relations are stitched together of varying energies, degrees of exclusivity, the push-and-pull of the in-between. In a word, of differences. It follows that undifferentiation combined with indifference is lethal to relations.

Starting from the mental act of paying attention that singles out, is provoked or convoked by, and relates to a *this*, consciousness is partiality and discrimination, selective adherence and devotion. It neither predates nor survives its unique attachments.⁷ The unconscious, as well, consists of multiple cathexes, the irregular investments of libidinal energy into an object. But the impersonal consciousness that predominates in the dump is a consciousness deracinated from its relational dynamics, uncathected, and dumped, failing as much as to rise to the level of the unconscious.

In existence where everything is interconnected, everything plummets haphazardly into the same heap. It all ends up on a global dump, which englobes us on the outside and clutters us with its desert emptiness from within. The cognitive state best suited for this condition is the kind of “absolute” distraction that tears to shreds the ties of consciousness to that of which it is in each case conscious. Dumping someone after a period of infatuation does not just terminate a relation; the act disposes of relationality. The same goes for fusion with the other. Trendy entanglements barring a modicum of *disentanglement* contribute to the dense mess of dumped being. Resigned in the face of the nascent dump, Heidegger had a premonition of its global approach: “Unavoidable is a confused *entanglement* [*die wirre Verstrickung*] in the massiveness, the boundlessness, the hastiness of the present at hand.”⁸

Our Polluted Senses

Hegel’s dump is the desert of sense-certainty, a pure, unmediated abstraction of the *this*, *now*, and *here* flipping in a blink of an eye into a *that*, *then*, and *there* (*PhG* secs. 95–108). Sense-certainty appears to yield “infinite wealth,” *unendlichem Reichtum*, which, as soon as we enter it, presents itself for what it actually is—an absence of boundaries (“no boundaries are to be found for it [*keine Grenze zu finden ist*]”) (*PhG* sec. 91). With its sudden reversals, such as the upending of plenitude into almost nothing, sense-certainty is the missing link between the dump and the desert. I, *this* I here-and-now (*hineni!*), am dumped together with the rest of the *prima facie* singular but, in fact, generic—neither particular nor universal—placeholders for being. Infinite wealth is boundless penury, since *this*, *now*, and *here* are uninvolved with the entities that pass

7. That is the core insight of Edmund Husserl’s notion of intentionality, the idea that consciousness is always a consciousness of . . . , tending toward that of which it is conscious.

8. Heidegger, *Ponderings* II–VI, 124.

through them to another equally formal *this*, another *now*, another *here*. Sense-certainty converts time and space themselves into dumps with interchangeable instants and places, commensurate in their overall insignificance.

Pure abstraction is a heap, unshaped by the work of determinate negation. Nowhere is this more glaring than in the case of numbers purporting to express lawful relations among properties. In the role of the principal tools for understanding reality, numbers are piled “in this heap,” *in diesem Haufen*, to which they reduce the reality in question (*PhG* sec. 290). At issue is not quantity as such, but the concept-free abstraction that directly translates qualities into numeric values instead of engaging in the arduous dialectic of quantity and quality. A formula is a pile of variables, presupposing that “properties, as existing [*als seiende*], are just lying there and are then taken up” into it. The formula’s inflexible mathematical lawfulness “demonstrates the abolition of all lawfulness [*die Vertilgung aller Gesetzmäßigkeit darzustellen*]” (*PhG* sec. 290). This rigid arbitrariness of an ideality severed from existence is our existence, a digital dump of ones and zeros.

Nothing has changed since Hegel’s diagnosis with the introduction of big data, save for the scope of “the abolition of all lawfulness.” Increasing by the minute, falling on us and with us, the information dump lets one category, quantity, override the rest. Set over and against existing properties, it throws a challenge to existence, which is part of another category, modality. In our implacable blooming, buzzing confusion, we are assailed not so much by our “eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once,” as by the formless information poured onto them from whichever direction. Within their material limits, the senses buckle under the boundless stream of data, crushed under the weight of numeric ideality. Sense-*uncertainty* (that is, disorientation when confronted with the information dump) replicates and aggravates Hegelian sense-certainty that spins the world of the interchangeable *thises*, *heres*, and *nows*, aloof to their transient instantiations.

The senses are also under relentless attack by the sensory stimuli themselves. Be-moaning light and sound pollution, deeply engrained in contemporary urbanism, is commonplace. The situation has gotten so bad that the state of Idaho in the US has decided to create a “dark sky reserve” in order to safeguard its remarkable conditions that make the interstellar dust clouds of the Milky Way visible on a clear night.⁹ Less frequently we deem our senses themselves polluted. For, isn’t “light pollution” a euphemism for the pollution of human, animal, and plant vision? Doesn’t this coy expression build on an ancient analogy between the inner luminosity delimited in the eye and the immeasurable light of the element, notably fire? Is the exteriorization of pollution meant to reassure us that we are the islands of inner purity in an ocean of environmental contamination?

The formulation *light and sound pollution* could not be more misleading: it is our senses that are desensitized to subtler cues by the intense stimulation they receive, or,

9. Ridler, “Idaho Hopes to Bring Stargazers to First US Dark Sky Reserve.”

rather, fail to receive. Moreover, city dwellers can grow so accustomed to this state of affairs that they will not notice it, nor everything it retracts from the field of perception, anymore: perceptual thresholds shift upward as radiant energy and strong vibrations are dumped on sense organs nonstop. Just as the foulest parts of the global dump dodge decomposition and do not smell of rotting, and just as the dump's companion affect is the apathetic *whatever* . . . , not the sentiment of horror and shock, so the most disturbing quality of its impact on sensation is imperceptibility, not insufferable hyperstimulation. Out of sight (out of hearing, smell, taste, touch) out of mind. But sight, the other senses, and the mind have long turned into dumps, which explains why subtler stimuli are unnoticeable, piled up and covered over there.

Also unremarked is the pollution of the sensorium beyond its visual and auditory registers. The way the glow of bright city lights causes twinkling stars to recede from sight is comparable to how sugary and salty foods prevent the palate from appreciating the more delicate flavors. The overpowering scents wafting from perfumes or candles induce the same reaction in the olfactory system. It could well be that the tactile sense, which philosophers berate for its material anchoring in comparison to the distance senses of vision and hearing, is the last bastion of differentiation. That said, in touching, too, we have drastically narrowed down the field of what can or should be touched. As we spend much of our time caressing the smooth and glassy touchscreens of "smart" phones and tablets, it remains to be seen or touched on what this phenomenon might do to tactility.

The sensory dump is a desert, the one we harbor within. Our peculiar dilemma is that of impoverishment through surplus. In Plato's sun analogy, the source of visibility was a generous and giving excess that offered light and life, luminosity and warmth—in a word, incandescence—at the price of being absent from the field of the visible. Our sun is the radiance of the earthly—not the heavenly—city that, itself visible, plunges the shimmer of celestial bodies into invisibility. Salt and sugar are the flavors du jour (which is to say *de nuit*) of the postmetaphysical sun, their assault on the palate masking other tastes. They are the essential and toxic ingredients of "junk food,"¹⁰ a term that corroborates the general logic of ingested pollution. More and more, the stuff of our senses is detritus when "too much" of something—of one thing—implies "too little" of everything else, a contraction in the range of what our bodies meaningfully receive from the outside. Our receptor cells are becoming garbage receptacles, by now crammed full of sensory trash.

We have managed to turn the senses against themselves by pitting a light against lights, a sound against sounds, a flavor against flavors, an aroma against aromas. The tendency is toward a blatant simplification in the field of possible experiences owing to the eclipse of multiple stimuli by one or two that outshine, outsmell (and so on) the rest. We live in the state of a *sensory underload* when dominant sensations muscle out

10. On the toxicity of sugar refer to Lustig, *Fat Chance*, 257.

those that lay a weaker claim on our capacity to attend to the other and to ourselves. The massive fall of a stimulus rarefies the senses and, making them abstract, voids their own discernments. In this way, the dump produces the senses as the facsimiles of a disembodied mind, even if, in this capacity, they will never live up to the expectations of conceptual thought they are prompted to emulate. The dice loaded against them, the senses are subject to further devaluation and abuse.

Rather than input sites for information to be processed by our minds, the senses are the crux of our embodiment, the synergistic interfaces of consciousness and the world that *give rise* to consciousness and the world, which is not the same thing as reality. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has it, “The sensible is what is apprehended *with* the senses, but now we know that this ‘with’ is not merely instrumental, that the sensory apparatus is not a conductor, that even on the periphery the physiological impression is involved in relations formerly considered central.”¹¹ The diminution of the sensible diminishes who we are, as opposed to what we come to possess. The squashing of the senses by the stimuli dumped onto them is the quashing of our being. A “merely instrumental” interpretation of apprehending the sensible *with* the senses (prior to its instrumentalization, this *with* betokens the synergy of primordial sociality) is an early warning sign of ontological impoverishment. Retaining the *with*, the new logic of the senses denies them the preposition’s articulatory effects and dissociates consciousness from the world. Disarticulation is the noxious energy of the dump that bears on, penetrates, and wreaks havoc in the sentient body.

The receptivity of our sensorium to the finest discernments and to massive bombardment by the crudest stimuli that interfere with them is the poisoned gift of existence, the *pharmakon* of psychic life. Blaming modernity or capitalism is futile; the potentialities of embodiment themselves mold the senses into (potential) receptacles and ultimately the trash bins of experience. Light, flavor, sound, scent, and touch pollution result from tremendous discharges of a stimulus exclusive of others and dumped wholesale on all those in its vicinity. Obesity that is down to a regular consumption of junk food is a conspicuous cellular and tissue-based archive of the dump, with fat deposits supplying “objective” evidence for the ingestion of an impoverishing surplus.

With rare exceptions (e.g., the proposed dark sky reserve in Idaho, itself linked to plans to promote tourism in the state) pragmatic and functional concerns outweigh worries with the ontological facets of sense ecology. Granted, the illnesses noise and light pollution induce, from insomnia and depression to hypertension and ischemic disease, impair our physical and psychological well-being. But the aesthetic damage they inflict is irreducible to pedantic, aestheticist laments about the ugliness of mass-produced and -consumed material reality. The dump takes charge of “the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière), trawling the previously visible into invisibility, the previously audible into inaudibility, and so on. The pollution of the senses imprisons the body in

11. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 11.

itself, with the overpowering stimuli for jail fences. At the extreme, it robs the subject of its world. On the outward side, the fences it erects are wedged between the body and a body, sentient flesh and a cadaver. Inwardly, they redraw cognitive and perceptual maps, promoting an impoverishing simplification in the course of what purports to be the age of complexity.

Seeing that the aesthetic domain is incomparably broader than aestheticism would admit, individual reactions to the unbeing that besieges and indwells us will be nugatory. Some among us might be sufficiently privileged and wealthy to seek private escape routes from the inner and outer dump, be it in the quiet of meditation classes or the pleasures of gourmet dining. These niche solutions constitute an upscale market of experiences at a time when the material form of experience has been decimated. They sell a lie, anaesthetizing their buyers to the operations of the dump. Aleksandr Pushkin had an apt designation for it: a feast in the time of plague. “As we lock ourselves indoors when the prankster Winter comes, / So we will do when the Plague approaches! / Candles we’ll light and wine pour, / Merrily drowning our minds in it. / And, throwing feasts and balls, / We will glorify the kingdom of the Plague.”¹²

In the oblivion of our inebriated minds, we forget that what is being dumped, and dumped on, is being itself. The dumped is *what is*, all of it. Of course, being cannot be seen, touched, heard, smelled, or tasted; being and radioactivity are somewhat similar in this respect (what a terrifying thought!), though ionizing radiation can be measured using special devices, such as the Geiger counter, while being cannot. And yet, the senses are, up to a point, our guides to ontological domains, a little like Virgil whom Dante follows through the circles of hell and the purgatory, or Beatrice who leads him through paradise. Can we rely on their guidance today, when radiation, microscopic water contamination, and airborne toxins elude the sensory register? On the one hand, marked out and steered by the senses, the contemporary path ends abruptly in the dump with its disorientation and lack of discernment. On the other hand, not insightfully following the senses is walking straight into the dump. Our polluted senses signal that the two hands (on this clock of the world; on this world-clock) are one and the same. The clock strikes midnight.

Ontological Toxicity

The dump is toxic. Were it still possible to isolate its strata, we could enumerate the chemicals that harm living bodies and the elements, classifying them apart from a polluted sensorium, venomous imagination, and virulent intellection. These levels are, nevertheless, intermixed: noxious thoughts and poisoned senses, toxic built environments, social milieus, and contaminated ecosystems merge and reinforce one another.

Flying from every direction, the arrows of toxicity do not discriminate among those they hit in a “toxic flood,” the anthropogenic emission into the environment of

12. Pushkin, “Pir vo vremya chumy,” 378, translation mine.

over 250 billion tons of chemicals a year.¹³ Like the generic stain of the original sin, they do not single out their victims by means of a negative and lethal individuation, an alien intentionality that would aim at *me* as in the case of an animal who, to defend itself, releases poison meant for a particular threatening target. Toxic materials massively fall on and pervade whatever and whomever crosses their innumerable paths. They hit “me” as though I were a lump of flesh not at all distinct from the flesh of a rodent, a cockroach, microbes, or a dandelion. As I undergo traumatic deindividuation, toxicity fleshes itself out. It gives itself a body in my body and a world in every elemental region. Its darts and missiles come from the inside, as well: from my toxic corporeal and psychic interiority—for instance, the desire to cleanse my garden of unwanted intruders. In toxic social and political environments, harassment and persecution proceed along similar lines. The victim is not individuated by victimization; despite varying fetishes, predatory predilections, and degrees of unwanted advances, sexual infringement on women precipitated by toxic masculinity is indiscriminate. And we are all dumped by patriarchy’s toxic order, men and women alike.¹⁴ Toxicity is our unmoved mover, an arrow bent into a circle.

There is probably no other creature in existence more adept at poisoning itself and its lifeworld than the human. So much so that poison now organizes or disorganizes, disorganizes in organizing, both the poisoner and the poisoned. Its positive dimension is destruction creative of mutilated bodies and worlds. The toxicity of the dump is a rag-bag of chemical-laced water, soil, and air; disordered reproductive and endocrine systems; aspirations to infinite growth without decay; energy dreams that bequeath to us depleted (what a misnomer!) uranium sometimes recycled (another misnomer) in munitions;¹⁵ vision debilitated by “light pollution”; skyrocketing cancer rates, or else a proliferation of cells that refuse to die; pesticide- and insecticide-imbued pastures and “forage crops.” But the red thread of the dump’s mangled components is *ontological* toxicity. With this coinage I have in mind that which does not pass and, in not passing, warrants the annihilation, the rapid passing away, of all else. Theological longings for life everlasting, infinite market expansionism, metaphysical constructions of a true unchangeable reality, oncological disease, and radioactive waste are ontologically toxic. At their core is the kind of being that, protecting itself from nothing and eschewing becoming, lapses into the very thing it is so scared of. The being that is, in its total isolation, unbeing, traditionally labelled “evil.”¹⁶

Take the desire for immortality, which envisions individuation without finitude, life without death, a disjunction as nonsensical as neoliberal growth without decay. Is the secular iteration of this desire not premised on the conviction that, were it to be

13. Cribb, *Surviving the Twenty-First Century*, 201.

14. I owe this insight to Doreen Mende.

15. Burger and Slotte, “United Nations Environment Programme Results,” 250.

16. Eagleton, *On Evil*, 16.

fulfilled, I (or, at best, I and those closest to me) would be rescued from the clutches of death, though the entire world perish? Certainly, the underlying conception of who or what I am is paramount here. If you are convinced that this body you call yours is of the essence, then cryopreservation is a way to act on the desire to be immortal. If consciousness matters most, then it is imperative to save it on a durable substratum, to upload its data onto a supercomputer or some such. Both solutions posit a practical separation of the mind from the body and of the I from the world, so that the former participant in each would-be relation could outlive the latter.

The religious horizon for eternal life was a perfect community of other righteous souls reconstituted in the yonder of heaven. In their turn, those languishing in hell were isolated from each other by their horrific punishments and sufferings. The secular vision of immortality saves, in the guise of an ideal, the hellish image of an alienated individual, cut off, in the first instance, from certain facets of itself. Ontologically toxic, it hampers the passing of a given body or mind and sanctions the destruction of their disposable existential *wherein*—the world and the body, respectively. One's reluctance to pass away "for good" belongs with the logistics of the dump where heaps of isolated debris shun rotting. As does a cancerous growth, in which a group of cells rebels against finitude, maintains itself intact past its due, multiplies the quicker the less differentiated it is, invades other tissues and organs, and leads the organism to its demise. In aggressive tumors, the loss of cellular structure and function, massive cell division, undifferentiation, and metastatic extension to other parts of the body are the clone characteristics of the dump. Truth be told, before they spread beyond their original site, malignant growths are the metastases of the dump in the oncological patient's body. Cancer is a physical, physiological vehicle for ontological toxicity. The disease gives birth to death by concretizing immutable and at the same time highly mobile, volatile being in biology, and so emptying actual being into unbeing.

Toxic substances are dumped into rivers and lakes, the atmosphere and the soil. Their repercussions are also dump-like, whether they contribute to the "global cancer epidemic"¹⁷ or indiscriminately contaminate the organisms that imbibe them through their membranes. In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson refutes the argument that herbicides should be the weapons of choice in a *targeted killing* of unwanted plants. Although the toxicity of these substances is ramified according to varied biochemical, physiological, genetic, and metabolic scenarios, their effects do not comply with the nominalist boundaries of natural classification systems: "The legend that the herbicides are toxic only to plants and so pose no threat to animal life has been widely disseminated, but unfortunately it is not true. The plant killers include a large variety of chemicals that act on animal tissue as well as on vegetation. . . . The herbicides, then, like the insecticides, include some very dangerous chemicals, and their careless use in the belief that they are 'safe' can have disastrous results."¹⁸

17. American Cancer Society, "Rising Global Cancer Epidemic."

18. Carson, *Silent Spring*, 34–35.

The “careless use” Carson decries depends on a projection of the alienated I, severed from the environment, onto the world at large and its inhabitants. The credo in the background of thoughtless and insensitive use is that the intended targets of herbicide’s toxic arrows are self-contained; that only that which is unwanted is caught in its crosshairs; that harmful chemicals do not bind to and poison also the cultivated plants; that their impact beyond the flora is negligible; that their aerial spraying, misting, or spreading by means of rope wick applicators or blanket wipers does not contaminate the air, the water, and the soil. Carelessness is the practical and psychological reverberation of the indifference ruling the day and the night (better, the nocturnal day) in the dump.

Reliance on toxins with hopes of controlling environmental processes and interactions, ensuring cleanliness, or regulating agricultural production is itself uncontrollable. “Toxic flood” transmits the gist of this uncontrollability by singling out one element, water, gushing with irrepressible force. The cleansing power of the aquatic element, symbolizing religious and physical purity,¹⁹ all but evaporates: water is no longer the milieu wherein every evil and impurity may be diluted, but liquid excess suffused with the immensity of the problem. More precisely, the extant version of *every* element is a dump for toxic materials: the aerodump filled with smog; the hydrodump impregnated with runoff, sewage, and plastics, including those still frozen in the melting Arctic ice; the pyrodump of global warming; and the geodump with growing deserts, spent nuclear fuel storage facilities, industrial traces in geological strata, and heaps of debris. The geological era of the Anthropocene (*geology* itself may be an anachronism once the *logos* of the earth has been bulldozed into the geodump) is but a drop in the sea of elemental metamorphoses into the world, or the unworld, of the dump that toxicity makes-unmakes.

Geology without *logos* should, nonetheless, have a special place in our age’s self-understanding. Before the toxic flood (where is Noah’s ark in it?), the earth was a synecdoche of the fourfold, an element that stood for the elements as a whole. After the uncontrollable unleashing of toxins and carbon emissions, the earth onto which everything falls continues to serve as a model for pyro-, hydro-, and aerodumps. Satisfying an old metaphysical yearning, all is materially becoming one and the same. Exactly when we disconnect from the earth (whether it refers to agricultural soil, the land, or the planet), the elements are earthified in a garish substantiation of the semantic link that exists in English between pollution and *soiling*. They converge on infertile silt, fecundating nothing but death: dense with the charred, polymerized, and polycondensed remnants of fossils from vast underground deposits; heavy metals; nitrogen and phosphorus; nitrates and plain garbage.

Gaia, the Greek for *earth*, also connoted a certain density, albeit in a region supportive of human dwelling and prepared to receive the dead.²⁰ The opaqueness the

19. For more on the clandestine theology of water, see Patton, *Sea Can Wash Away All Evils*.

20. Sallis, *Logic of Imagination*, 147.

elements have borrowed from the earth recalls the antiphenomenality of the Heraclitean *kechumenon*, haphazardly poured out, piled at random, and blanketed over. Obscurity reigns where it does not belong: in the transparent abysses of water and in the expanses of air that no longer lets the light of the sun or the stars pass through, trapping heat in the atmosphere and tearing asunder the two “powers” of fire, the luminous and the thermal. Ontologically toxic, the elemental dump ousts the elements from their regions, unfastens them from each other and each from itself. Last but not least, the dump is—in contrast to the earth that has imparted opaqueness to water, air, and fire—too volatile to support anything. Yet, it does eagerly take in the dead.

MICHAEL MARDER works in the fields of phenomenology, environmental philosophy, and political thought. His most recently published books are *Energy Dreams: Of Actuality* (2017), *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics* (2018), and *Political Categories: Thinking Beyond Concepts* (2019).

References

- American Cancer Society, “Rising Global Cancer Epidemic,” <https://www.cancer.org/research/infographics-gallery/rising-global-cancer-epidemic.html> (accessed February 4, 2018).
- Burger, Mario, and Henri Slotte. “United Nations Environment Programme Results Based on the Three DU Assessments in the Balkans and the Joint IAEA/ UNEP Mission to Kuwait,” in *Depleted Uranium: Properties, Uses, and Health Consequences*, edited by Alexandra C. Miller, 239–58. New York: CRC Press, 2007.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Fortieth Anniversary Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Cribb, Julian. *Surviving the Twenty-First Century: Humanity’s Ten Great Challenges and How We Can Overcome Them*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017.
- Eagleton, Terry. *On Evil*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Ponderings II–VI, Black Notebooks 1931–1938*, translated by Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1961.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.
- Lustig, Robert. *Fat Chance: Beating the Odds against Sugar, Processed Food, Obesity, and Disease*. New York: Penguin, 2013.
- Marder, Michael. *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. “Thus Spoke Zarathustra.” In *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, 103–439. New York: Penguin, 1982.
- Patton, Kimberly. *The Sea Can Wash Away All Evils: Modern Marine Pollution and the Ancient Cathartic Ocean*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr. “Pir vo vremya chumy.” In *Collected Works in Ten Volumes*, edited by D. Blagoy et al., 371–82. vol. 4. Moscow: State Literary Publisher, 1960.

- Ridler, Keith. "Idaho Hopes to Bring Stargazers to First US Dark Sky Reserve," *US News*, September 15, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/idaho/articles/2017-09-15/stargazers-eye-the-nations-first-dark-sky-reserve-in-idaho> (accessed February 4, 2018).
- Sallis, John. *Logic of Imagination: The Expanse of the Elemental*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Sherratt, Thomas, and David Wilkinson, *Big Questions in Ecology and Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Zabala, Santiago. *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.