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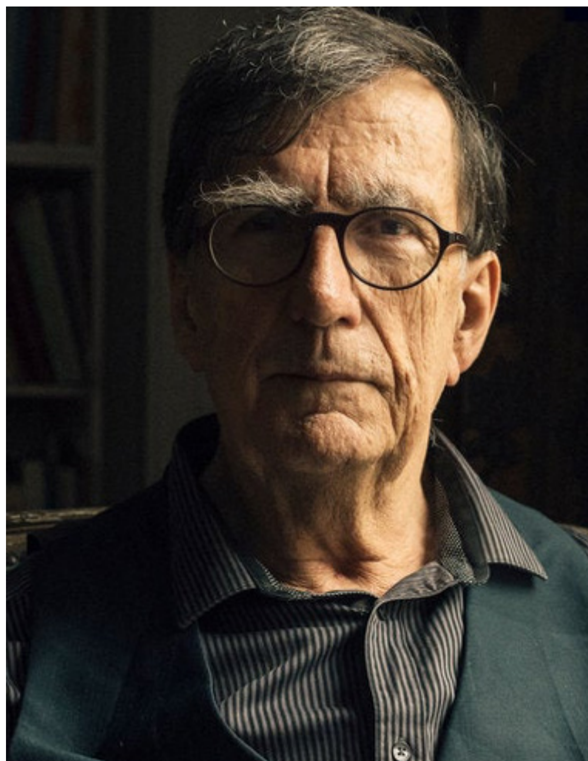

Bruno Latour

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I last saw Bruno on July 11. He was leaving Paris the next day for his country house, before the usual French date for the start of a summer vacation period (Bastille Day), since *les canicules,* the French term for heatwave, or the "dog days", if one deciphers the Latin etymology of this word, were about to overwhelm Paris. The weather was defining the schedules for most of us, if not all. We dined with Latour and his co-author, Nikolaj Schultz, at a Lebanese restaurant not far away from Bruno's apartment. I was interested in discussing the arguments of their last book on the ecological class in detail; they were more interested in what was going on in Ukraine. Hostilities in Europe, unimaginable just a couple of years before, seemed to have canceled out all climate change concerns for the time being. A conversation on the possible immediate doomsday for humanity as a

result of nuclear warfare made discussing the prospects of its eventual decline and death thanks to global warming a concern of secondary importance.

Before we parted, I asked Bruno a usual, crass professional question, "What are you working on these days? What are you writing about?". He responded: "I am not writing. I am reading. Do you know *La Grand Mort* by Rilke?". I was startled, since I never heard Bruno mentioning Rilke before. I could not easily continue the conversation since even though Rilke was one of the key figures of the pantheon of modernist authors (Anna Akhmatova would have called him one of those whales on which 20th century literature rested, although she usually singled out Proust, Joyce, and Kafka to be these three whales) whom one was supposed to know, but reading in the original was beyond me after only three years of unwanted university German classes. Having come home and searched the Internet, I easily found the relevant lines from the third part of Rilke's *Book of Hours*;

> O mon Dieu, donne à chacun sa propre mort,
> donne à chacun la mort née de sa propre vie
> où il connut la mort et la misère.
> Car nous ne sommes que l'écorce, que la feuille,
> mais le fruit qui est au centre de tout
> c'est la grande mort que chacun porte en soi.

A new translation of this poem into English renders the original German verses as

> O Lord, give each of us our own death
> a dying that is born of each life,
> our own desire, our purpose, love, dearth.
> For we are only rind of fruit, and leaf
> The great death, which each of us contains,
> Is that fruit round which all world turns. [1]

Rereading this part of the *Book of Hours* now, after Bruno's death, one is pushed to primitively find the key to the last days and hours of Bruno's life. Rilke wrote about the Great Death that develops within each of us during our life, and to which everything important in our life is connected. However, most of us do not see this fruit fully ripen by the time we reach our death; in other words, we do not bring it to fruition when we die. Instead, we die the death that is not our own, we do not meet our own death, i.e., this Great Death. This is why we fear to die, because our own, sweet death is not given to us at the end of our life. We die an alien, unwanted death, and we do not give birth to the Great Death we carry within us. Susan Ranson's translation renders the original German with the help of a metaphor of a caesarean that did not deliver a baby:

> We stand, Lord, year on year in your garden

1. Rainer Maria Rilke (2008) *The Book of Hours*, trans. Susan Ranson, Rochester, NY: Camden House, pp. 163–165.

> Your trees for nurturing a sweet death;
> But by the harvest we have grown sere,
> And like the woman you have struck barren,
> Close down, false to our promise, fruitless.
> …
> Surely we have whored with eternity
> And we come to childbed to bring forth
> Only the stillborn foetus of our death…
> …
> So die we all, like so many whores,
> In labor pains, and from caesareans[2].

While reading the original German verses along with a faithful English translation by Ranson, we encounter the following vision. God can send an individual into this world who will have a mission of offering an example of the Great Death to the world. He will "await the hour, when he is due to bring forth death… alone and rustling like a green garden, and gathered in from far." In other words, this envoy of God will be "our own's death bearer" (*Tod-Gebärer* in German), a promise that all of us a capable of this as well, even if we do not usually possess this super-quality of dying a Great Death, of bringing it into full fruition. A calling of a true poet is to glorify this mission of the Great Death messenger, and laud this messiah[3].

The statement that Rilke thought about death throughout all of his life would be banal. Citing examples of his verses explicitly concerned with death would be easy. Shortly before his death, Rilke wrote to the Polish writer and translator Witold Hulewicz on November 13, 1925, saying that the "*Affirmation of life-AND-death appears as one in the "Elegies".* To grant one without the other is… a limitation which in the end shuts out all that is infinite. *Death* is the *side of life* averted from us, unshone upon by us: we must try to achieve the greatest consciousness of our existence which is at home in *both unbounded realms, inexhaustibly nourished from both …* The true figure of life extends through both spheres, the blood of the mightiest circulation flows through *both: there is neither a here nor a beyond, but the great unity* in which the beings that surpass us, the "angels", are at home.

…[W]e must introduce what is *here* seen and touched into the wider, into the widest orbit. Not into a beyond whose shadow darkens the earth, but into a whole, into the *whole*"[4].

Heidegger cites this letter in his 1946 lecture "What Are Poets For?", given on the 20th anniversary of Rilke's death. He does not quote the same excerpt exactly, but rather the one that precedes the one that I have cited. For Heidegger, it is important to state that death stands in the way of a totally human, all-too-human drive for the objectification of the world. Together with Rilke, Heidegger stresses that animals or plants do not encounter the

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2. 167.
3. 169–171.
4. *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke (1948)* vol. 2: 1910-1926, trans. Jane Bannard Green and M. D. Herter Norton, New York: W. W. Norton, pp. 373–374.

world as a world of objects. They are let into the Open of this world, they dwell in it. Modern human beings, by contrast, treat the world as standing before or in front of them. Humans consider the world to be a picture, a representation, so that they live "in front" of the world-picture rather than in the world. The Latin roots of the word "object" illuminates this condition: a thing considered as an ob-ject is an entity ejected in front, opposite and against a human being, it is something to be gazed at, analyzed by this gaze and then dealt with in an instrumental way. Moderns come to treat the world as a sum of producible objects in front of them, and life is understood as a generation and distribution of goods: every thing turns into a material for a self-assertive production or its result. Rilke's poetry is important to Heidegger because it reminds him of the non-objectifying, non-instrumental relationship with the world that true poets share. However, in a civilization oriented towards the betterment of human lives through material production and the accumulation of amenities, death is becoming something negative. Together with Rilke, Heidegger proclaims that we again need "to read the word 'death' without negation"[5].

Bruno Latour was a multi-faceted thinker, and while wearing his philosophical attire, he made fun of Heidegger's critique of technology and modern civilization in *We Have Never Been Modern*. However, Heidegger's lines bring our attention to Rilke's verses that Bruno was reading before his death: animals and plants die differently from the way we do it, because they are open to the world differently. Rilke wrote:

> Lord, we are poorer than the poor beasts
> Dying their blind death. For we have all
> Less than entirely died. Send us the One
> Who guides into our hands the precious skill
> To bind life in espaliers, where May
> Comes early, and the year's fruit advances.
> …
> Or is my arrogance too much? Are trees
> In the end better?[6]

In other words, beasts and plants do not fear their deaths; they are not trembling from the fact that the coming end might be not their own proper death. However, if the humans were able to cultivate their proper, Great Deaths within themselves, their impending factual deaths would not send shivers down their spines as not their own, alien, and alienated deaths. So, how can one cultivate such a Great Death within oneself?

Heidegger quoted the 1925 letter from Rilke to Hulewicz on the unity of "life-AND-death" because Rilke's late poems departed from the intensely Christian stance of his early poetry towards an interest in the transfiguration of the things of this world. Thus, his very specific relationship with death went hand-in-hand with a non-objectifying relationship with things. As Rilke wrote (Heidegger cited the last part of this excerpt):

5. Martin Heidegger (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row, pp. 105–122.

6. *The Book of Hours:* 167.

"Nature, the things of our intercourse and use, are provisional and perishable; but they are, as long as we are here, our property and our friendship, co-knowers of our distress and gladness, as they have already been the familiars of our forbears. So it is important not only not to run down and degrade all that is here, but just because of its provisionalness, which it shares with us, these phenomena and things should be understood and transformed by us in a most fervent sense. Transformed? Yes, for it is our task to imprint this provisional, perishable earth so deeply, so patiently and passionately in ourselves that its reality shall arise in us again "invisibly". *We are the bees of the invisible. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l›Invisible*"[7].

In this quote, one can easily recognize what Latour was also doing. First, as he said in an interview, his text on "Irreductions" (on the irreducibility of one thing to another) was an early manifesto — perhaps a bit too Nietzschean (or Deleuzian?) — on how to deal with the variegated beings found in the world. This text had paved the way for a mature book on the modes of existence that he wrote about for almost 40 years. Second, the last years of his life were dedicated to caring about this perishable or ending Earth (if one can translate in such a way Rilke's term *hinfällge Erde*), so that it will arise again, transformed, and transfigured as Gaia. Third, his revealing insistence that modern techno-science is all based on apparatuses of visualization offers us a heretofore-invisible truth of what we are all doing when we are doing modern science.

The use of the word "transformed" in Rilke's last excerpt comes from the word *verwandelt* in the German original. *Verwandlung* in German means not only transformation (like in the title of Kafka's famous short story about Gregor Samsa that Bruno repeated in his last book on the consequences of lockdown), but also the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ as it is described in Matthew XVII:2. The term is also used as part of the church doctrine of transubstantiation (*Wesenverwandlung*), asserting that during the Eucharist, bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. I should stress that the doctrine of transfiguration and the corresponding *theosis* (deification) as a goal for the life of humans is one of the central tenets of the Orthodox Christian Church[8]. It is well known that Rilke wrote his *Book of Hours* under the strong influence of his two visits to Russia in 1899–1900 in the company of Lou Andreas-Salome. He experienced an ecstatic transformation during a long and ornate Easter service in a Moscow church. After this, he sometimes called Russia his second Motherland and uncritically supported the statements about the simple Russian folk as a unique people carrying God in their hearts, harboring religious feeling in all its purity. During these visits he met Tolstoy, writing in his diary in 1900 that Tolstoy fought with a dragon called life with the vain hope of vanquishing it[9].

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7. The phrase in French means "We ceaselessly gather the honey of the visible, to store it up in the great golden beehive of the Invisible." *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Volume 2: 1910-1926: 374. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* 1975: 128.

8. Timothy Ware (1964) *The Orthodox Church*, L.: Penguin, pp. 230–231, 239–242.

9. Azadovskii Konstantin (2011) *Rilke i Rossiia,* Moscow: NLO, p. 70.

Bruno's popularity in Russia is perhaps explained by this transfigurative, quasi-theological drive. Of course, his PhD on the exegesis of sacred texts and Charles Peguy was always important for Bruno in the way he treated reality, or in the way he constructed his objects of study, and on how he related to things that allowed him to not treat them as objects. However, few Russians, if any, read Bruno's articles on the pragmatics of religious speech acts, or his thesis on Peguy. However, Bruno's transfigurative approach to things was always appealing to the Russian audience. I remember once, when Harry Collins, a longtime friend and Bruno's competitor in science and technology studies, was teaching at the European University at St. Petersburg, he retorted to a group of bewildered local students: "Please, stop quoting Latour! I thought I was coming to St. Petersburg, but I came to Brunograd!".

Bruno loved Russian literature. I remember how he was impressed by Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate*. This book is also about the life-death whole, of course, but another writer, Tolstoy was his explicitly favorite figure that helped him re-describe (should one say — transfigure?) the epochal breakthrough of the natural sciences in *The Pasteurization of France*. Rilke was part of a similar infatuation with Tolstoy, whose interests, first, in nature and, second, in the life-and-death whole he mentions in a letter to L. H. from November 8, 1915: "…his enormous experience of Nature (I hardly know anyone who so passionately devoted himself to studying Nature) made him astonishingly able to think from a sense of the whole and to write out of a feeling for life which was so permeated with the finest particles of death, that death seemed to be contained everywhere in it as an odd spice in the strong flavor of life…"[10].

Rilke then adds that Tolstoy, who depicted the fear of death lurking or suddenly awakening in the souls of many of his characters with such finesse, was afraid of death himself. Tolstoy's grandiose lasting achievement was that he composed a fugue of fear, or constructed a whole tower of fear. Bruno did not leave us a hint on whether he became a true Rilkean or whether he feared an impending end. However, if he did fear it, I should finish with Rilke's words about Tolstoy that apply to the grandeur of Bruno as well: "the force with which he experienced and admitted the very extravagance of his own fear may — who knows — at the last moment have changed over into unapproachable reality, was suddenly this tower's sure foundation, landscape and sky and the wind and a flight of birds around it"[11].

Памяти Бруно Латура

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10. *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Volume 2: 1910-1926: 150
11. 151.