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On the Meaning of Being Alone with Nature: Sylvain Tesson's Ecocritical Sincerity and Ecopoetic Sensuality in *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*

Hannes de Vriese

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STUDIES IN LITERATURE, CULTURE,
AND THE ENVIRONMENT 1

Daniel A. Finch-Race /
Stephanie Posthumus (eds)

French Ecocriticism

From the Early Modern Period
to the Twenty-First Century



PETER LANG
EDITION

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French Ecocriticism

This book expounds fruitful ways of analysing matters of ecology, environments, nature, and the non-human world in a broad spectrum of material in French. Scholars from Canada, France, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States examine the work of writers and thinkers including Michel de Montaigne, Victor Hugo, Émile Zola, Arthur Rimbaud, Marguerite Yourcenar, Gilbert Simondon, Michel Serres, Michel Houellebecq, and Éric Chevillard. The diverse approaches in the volume signal a common desire to bring together form and content, politics and aesthetics, theory and practice, under the aegis of the environmental humanities.

The Editors

Daniel Finch-Race is undertaking a Teaching Fellowship at the University of Southampton after completing his PhD at the University of Cambridge. His primary research entails ecocritical interpretations of nineteenth-century poetry in French and Italian. His publications include a co-edited volume about textures in French contexts, a co-edited issue about eco-poetics in nineteenth-century France, and articles about Baudelaire, Dante, Rimbaud, Tennyson, and Verlaine.

Stephanie Posthumus is Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill University. Working in the field of contemporary French literature, she has published numerous articles on philosophies of nature and ecology, and on representations of landscapes, environments and non-human animals.

French Ecocriticism

STUDIES IN LITERATURE, CULTURE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Hannes De Vriese

On the Meaning of Being Alone with Nature: Sylvain Tesson's Ecocritical Sincerity and Eco-poetic Sensuality in *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*

Abstract: In the 2011 travelogue *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*, Sylvain Tesson relates a six-month retreat on the banks of Lake Baikal in Siberia. This autobiographical piece of literary nonfiction – motivated by a disgust with Parisian society that is considered to be morose and artificial – celebrates the beauty of pristine nature, and describes the benefits of a humble life in the wilderness. In view of the genre, themes and general configuration of Tesson's text, a filiation with Thoreau's *Walden* (to which Tesson refers) is obvious, yet there are marked differences in Tesson's narrative: the seasons have little influence on the activities of the narrator, and there is no account of efforts to work the land, or of any engagement with natural cycles. Instead of depicting a vision of independence and harmonious co-existence with nature, the book indulges in hedonic exoticism and sensuality that arise from contact with the wilderness. The ecocritical dimension of Tesson's text centres on the revelation that the narrator's retreat is more of an eco-poetic parenthesis than an ecological utopia. Although Tesson ponders the relations of man towards animals and nature, his experience of the wild – designated as provisional and unstable – is subject to irony and criticism, reflecting what may be a typical French suspicion towards ecological thought, as critics including Alain Suberchicot and Pierre Schoentjes have observed in the works of thinkers (Luc Ferry) and writers (Jean-Christophe Rufin). This chapter broaches the subject of how French literature responds to ecocritical thought and writing that has – until quite recently – been associated with the anglophone world.

Key critics of the representation of environmental preoccupations in French literature attest that the North American origins, methods and ideological commitments of ecocriticism have hindered its uptake in France. Pierre Schoentjes notes that *l'écocritique peine à trouver une place en France. Plusieurs obstacles se présentent [ecocriticism encounters difficulties in finding a place in France. Several obstacles present themselves]*.¹ Schoentjes distinguishes between different causes, some practical – most major works of ecocriticism have not been translated into French – and others that result from deeper cultural and theoretical

1 Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu: essai d'écopoétique* (Marseille: Wildproject, 2015), 22 [unreferenced translations are mine].

divides, particularly from the general suspicion of the French academic world with regard to cultural studies.² Another obstacle to the proliferation of the environmental humanities has been identified by Lawrence Buell, who speaks of critics dismissing ecocriticism due to ‘the suspicion that it might not boil down to much more than old-fashioned enthusiasms dressed up in new clothes.’³ In the field of French literary studies, a critic who undertakes the analysis of nature-writing might be seen as simply replicating studies conducted on, say, landscapes in the work of Julien Gracq (1910–2007), Provençal nature in the writings of Jean Giono (1895–1970), or the Romantic *sentiment de nature*.

French scholars interested in ecocriticism are confronted with the lack of a clearly defined French corpus.⁴ American literary studies, on the contrary, recognise *nature writing* as a genre with a prestigious lineage originating with Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), and including several successful contemporary authors such as Barry Lopez (1945–), Gary Snyder (1930–), Annie Dillard (1945–) and Wendell Berry (1934–).⁵ Environmental writing as a genre is largely absent from French publishing, and most major publishers do not offer collections of fiction (or creative non-fiction) about environmental concerns. In 2013, Seuil (Paris, 1935–) founded a new collection, ‘Anthropocène’, with an environmental scope.⁶ To date, works published in the collection include pieces relating to the humanities and the social sciences, but lacking a literary dimension. Certain publishers, including Wildproject (Marseille, 2009–) and Gallmeister (Paris, 2006–), specialise in environmental fiction, but their catalogues chiefly consist of American authors translated into French.

Recent publications seek to fill this gap in the French critical landscape. An issue of *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* [*Critical Review of Contemporary French Fixxion*] from 2015 attests to an increasing interest in environmental questions in contemporary French literature and criticism. In the issue, some critics offer a new approach to well-known authors – Michel Houellebecq;

2 Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu*, 23.

3 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 2–3.

4 Pierre Schoentjes, ‘Texte de la nature et nature du texte: Jean-Loup Trassard et les enjeux de l’écopoétique en France’, *Poétique* 164 (2010), 477–94.

5 Alain Suberchicot, *Littérature américaine et écologie* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002); *Littérature et environnement: pour une écocritique comparée* (Paris: Champion, 2012).

6 Christophe Bonneuil, ed., ‘Anthropocène’, *Seuil* (10 October 2013) <<http://www.seuil.com/collection/collection-618>> [accessed 26 May 2016].

Philippe Jaccottet; Michel Deguy⁷ – while others examine the environmental writing of forgotten writers, such as Pierre Gascar.⁸ The majority of the collection deals with a younger generation of writers – Marie-Hélène Lafon; Marie Darrieussecq; Éric Chevillard; Hubert Mingarelli⁹ – in a way that heralds an important place in literary studies for French environmental writing. As I argue in my contribution to the issue,¹⁰ it is possible that French literary criticism will follow a path similar to American literary criticism¹¹ in affording more careful attention to francophone environmental writing.

Despite the fact that an increasing number of French authors reflect upon nature and environments in their work, texts rarely engage in political reflection; French literature thus tends to demonstrate little ecological and political commitment. This could be the result of a certain reluctance within French society, which is arguably mistrustful of political environmentalism. Philosopher and politician Luc Ferry perfectly embodies French scepticism with regard to ecological thought. In *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* (1992), Ferry criticises various aspects of environmental ideology, highlighting historical connections between environmentalism and totalitarianism (Nazism; Stalinism).¹² Throughout the book, Ferry expresses disapproval about certain forms of ecological thought, directing strong criticism towards deep ecology.

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- 7 Emily McLaughlin, 'The Practice of Writing and the Practice of Living: Michel Deguy's and Philippe Jaccottet's Eco-poetics', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 38–48.
 - 8 Sara Buekens, 'Pour que l'écologie supplante le nationalisme: l'esthétique de Pierre Gascar', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 49–59.
 - 9 Stephanie Posthumus, 'L'Habiter écologique et l'imaginaire paysan chez Marie-Hélène Lafon et Michel Serres', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 100–11; Thangam Ravindranathan, 'Un hérisson peut toujours arriver', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 71–80; Marie Cazaban-Mazerolles, 'La Poétique écologique profonde d'Éric Chevillard', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 60–70; Sylvie Vignes, 'Hubert Mingarelli: nostalgie et quête d'une eau de source', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 28–37.
 - 10 Hannes De Vriese, 'Écritures antillaises entre géopoétique et éco-poétique: sur la nature des cataclysmes chez Patrick Chamoiseau et Daniel Maximin', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 11 (2015), 16–27.
 - 11 Ursula K. Heise, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 121.2 (2006), 503–16.
 - 12 Luc Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique: l'arbre, l'animal et l'homme* (Paris: Grasset, 1992), 35.

In the spy novel *Le Parfum d'Adam* (2011), Jean-Christophe Rufin echoes Ferry's critique of environmentalism, cautioning the reader against ecological terrorism, which is considered as an extreme of deep ecology.¹³ Rufin sheds a negative light on environmental activism, which Ferry disdainfully calls 'la nébuleuse écologiste'.¹⁴ In *Le Parfum d'Adam*, American secret agents work to thwart a group of terrorists planning to eliminate the entire Third World population by spreading a new cholera virus. Utilising the characters and codes of a Hollywood thriller, Rufin shows the dark side of ecogism.

Contemporary French fiction does not roundly condemn environmentalism. Alice Ferney's *Le Règne du vivant* (2014) offers a fictionalised biography of the environmental activist Paul F. Watson (1950).¹⁵ Ferney paints a laudatory portrait of Watson's controversial personality in the guise of Magnus Wallace, the central character, who starkly contrasts with Rufin's Ted Harrow, also meant to represent Watson, but in the mode of a dangerous fanatic who acts as a mercenary for the wealthy super-villain Allistair McLeod. By presenting two opposing portraits of Paul Watson, French fiction becomes a forum for debate. Alice Ferney opts to use fiction as a means for expressing political engagement:

Je rends hommage à des militants controversés et je leur donne raison. On reproche aux 'éco-terroristes' d'être dangereux, mais ce sont souvent eux qui sont assassinés. À travers ce livre, je m'engage à leurs côtés.

Je n'ai pas une âme de militante. Dans la vie, je me tais; mais un livre, c'est une voix. Je joue le jeu.¹⁶

[I honour controversial activists, and I agree with them. 'Eco-terrorists' are criticised for being dangerous, but it is often them who are killed. With this book, I take up their cause.

I do not have the soul of an activist. In life, I keep quiet; a book, however, is a voice. I play the game.]

According to Ferney, the novel is a space for activism. Her position resembles the views of certain Francophone authors:¹⁷ Patrick Chamoiseau does not hesitate to

13 Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le Parfum d'Adam* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

14 Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique*, 33.

15 Alice Ferney, *Le Règne du vivant* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2014).

16 Alice Ferney and Chloé Thibaud, "'Je rends hommage aux éco-terroristes': entretien avec Alice Ferney', *BibliObs* (20 November 2014), <<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20141119.OBS5507/alice-ferney-je-rends-hommage-aux-eco-terroristes.html>> [accessed 26 May 2016].

17 Jean-Loup Trassard is different because he outlines his political views in press articles, and reserves fiction for portraits of a rural humanism without an explicit political commitment. Jean-Loup Trassard, 'Arrêtez le massacre', *Le 1 95* (24 February 2016),

give voice to political, historical and ecological commitments in fiction,¹⁸ as well as in essays and pamphlets.¹⁹ Environmental literature is becoming a key genre in contemporary French literature, potentially appealing to a larger readership.²⁰

After Walden Pond, Lake Baikal

Given the increased attention that ecocritical writing and thought is garnering in French literary studies, Sylvain Tesson's travelogue *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* (2011), relating a six-month retreat on the banks of Lake Baikal in Siberia, is a particularly promising text. Tesson, motivated by disgust with a Parisian society that he considers gloomy and artificial, writes the piece of autobiographical nonfiction to celebrate the beauty of pristine nature, and describe the benefits of a humble life in the wilderness. The genre, themes and general structure of Tesson's text suggest commonality with Thoreau's *Walden*, and American nature writing more generally. The passage of time has little influence on the activities of the narrator, though, and the author makes no account of working the land or engaging with the cycles of nature (despite the changing seasons structuring the narrative). The book, instead of depicting an ideal of autonomy and a life in harmony with nature, indulges in hedonistic exoticism and sensuality that arises from contact with the wilderness.

The ecocritical dimension of Tesson's text merits scrutiny because the narrator's retreat is less an ecological utopia than an eco-poetic parenthesis. In her contribution to the eco-poetically themed issue of *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* from 2015, Stephanie Posthumus offers an overview of two modes of analysing representations of nature and environments: ecocriticism adopts an explicitly ecological politics to analyse matters ranging from corporeal issues to toxic landscapes;²¹ eco-poetics emphasises the aesthetic and formal dimensions

<<http://le1hebdo.fr/numero/95/arrtez-le-massacre-1469.html>> [accessed 26 May 2016]; *L'Homme des haies* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

- 18 Patrick Chamoiseau, *Biblique des derniers gestes: roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); *Le Papillon et la lumière* (Paris: Rey, 2011); *L'Empreinte à Crusoé* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
- 19 Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant, *L'Intraitable Beauté du monde: adresse à Barack Obama* (Paris: Galaade, 2009)
- 20 For an observation of a similar trend in British literature, see Jamie Doward, 'Hawks, Butterflies, Coasts And Footpaths: How Nature Writing Turned to Literary Gold', *The Guardian* (22 March 2015), <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/22/nature-writing-literary-gold>> [accessed 26 May 2016].
- 21 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Lawrence Buell, 'Toxic Discourse', *Critical Inquiry* 24.3 (1998), 639–65.

of literary and artistic representations of nature.²² Posthumus rightfully asserts that 'la position de la critique littéraire n'est jamais neutre, jamais désengagée',²³ and Tesson's work points to a tension between these two positions that requires further attention.

The incipit to Tesson's novel closely resembles the beginning of *Walden*, suggesting a debt to the Thoreauvian project:

Je m'étais promis avant mes quarante ans de vivre en ermite au fond des bois.

Je me suis installé pendant six mois dans une cabane sibérienne sur les rives du lac Baïkal, à la pointe du cap des Cèdres du Nord. Un village à cent vingt kilomètres, pas de voisins, pas de routes d'accès, parfois une visite. L'hiver, des températures de -30 °C; l'été des ours sur les berges. Bref, le paradis.²⁴

[I had promised myself that before turning forty I would live as a hermit in the depths of the woods.

I settled for a six-month period in a Siberian cabin on the shore of Lake Baikal, at the tip of North Cedar Cape. The nearest village is seventy-five miles away, no neighbours, no road access; now and then, a visit. During winter, temperatures below 30 degrees Celsius; during summer, bears on the shores. In a word, paradise.]

Similar reasons are given in the first paragraph of Thoreau's work:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there for two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.²⁵

Both writers begin by explaining how their writing is meant to be an account of their retreat. Before reflecting on the experience, both men identify the geographical terms of their seclusion: Thoreau resides in the woods a little over a mile from the town of Concord; Tesson is miles from any form of civilisation. Akin to Thoreau, Tesson chooses a cabin situated in a landscape composed of trees and water, echoing the desire of the modern man who wishes to escape from society, as Yi-Fu Tuan observes in *Topophilia*:

22 Nathalie Blanc, Denis Chartier and Thomas Pughe, 'Littérature & écologie: vers une éco-poétique', *Écologie & Politique* 36 (2008), 17–28 (21); Daniel A. Finch-Race and Julien Weber, 'Editorial: The Ecocritical Stakes of French Poetry from the Industrial Era', *Dix-Neuf* 19.3 (2015), 159–66 (161–3).

23 Posthumus, 'L'Habiter écologique', 101.

24 Sylvain Tesson, *Dans les forêts de Sibérie: février-juillet 2010* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 9 [hereafter F].

25 Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (New York, NY: Dover, 1995), 1.

Today the cabin in the forest clearing remains a powerful lure to the modern man who dreams of withdrawal. Three other natural settings have, at different times and places, appealed strongly to the human imagination. These are the seashore, the valley, and the island.²⁶

In the pocket edition of *Dans les forêts de Sibérie*, the cover image makes another connection with Thoreau's legacy by showing a photograph of the Russian cabin, which is very similar to iconic representations of the cabin in which the American author resided. Tesson's project presents itself as a re-enactment of Thoreau's retreat, but is a more radical experience, as shown by the incipit that emphasises increased remoteness and extreme temperatures. Tesson opts for his retreat from civilised life to be an exotic adventure, whereas Thoreau's project had a more domestic undertone.

The similarities between the sojourn near Walden Pond and the one on Lake Baikal are striking; it seems that Tesson models his retreat and story on the writing of the man considered by many to be the founding father of ecological thought in America. *Walden* is part of Tesson's 'liste de lectures idéales composée à Paris avec grand soin en prévision d'un séjour de six mois dans la forêt de Sibérie [list of ideal reading material, very carefully drawn up in Paris for the purpose of a six-month stay in the forests of Siberia]' (F 33). In this respect, *Dans la forêt de Sibérie* appears to be a model of French ecocritical nonfiction.

Out of the world

Tesson's travels to Russia represent an escape from modern consumer society. A scene in a Russian supermarket at the beginning of the book symbolises the reasons that have led Tesson to leave the civilised world for the Russian wilderness: 'quinze sortes de ketchup. À cause de choses pareilles, j'ai eu envie de quitter ce monde [fifteen kinds of ketchup. Such things have driven me to want to leave this world]' (F 21). The needless variety of the Heinz brand, mentioned twice on the same page, comes to represent the pervasive influence of global consumerism, which extends from great conglomerations such as Paris and New York to the smallest towns of the Russian tundra. Tesson responds to this uncomfortable truth with disgust and disillusion.

Tesson's worldview is a Manichean one, divided between the pristine Siberian wilderness (where events take place over the course of the narration) and landscapes that have been altered and disfigured by human society and industrial

26 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), 115.

activity. Throughout the book, Tesson compares and contrasts memories of his urban life with his time on the untouched and lonesome shores of Lake Baikal. The following list enumerates several reasons for his departure:

RAISONS POUR LESQUELLES JE ME SUIS ISOLÉ DANS UNE CABANE
 J'étais trop bavard
 Je voulais du silence
 Trop de courrier en retard et trop de gens à voir
 J'étais jaloux de Robinson
 C'est mieux chauffé que chez moi,
 à Paris
 Par lassitude d'avoir à faire les courses
 Pour pouvoir hurler et vivre nu
 Par détestation du téléphone
 et du bruit des moteurs. (F 118)

[REASONS FOR WHICH I HAVE ISOLATED MYSELF IN A CABIN
 I was too talkative;
 I wanted silence;
 Too much late mail and too much people to see;
 I was jealous of Robinson;
 It's better heated here than at my place
 in Paris;
 I was tired of having to shop;
 In order to be able to yell and live naked;
 Because I hate the telephone
 and the noise of engines.]

The author describes his feelings of disgust and alienation when he was in the city. He not only needs to flee consumerist profligacy, but also superficial social niceties, noise and pollution. The civilised world is associated with degradation and decay.

Tesson aligns himself with Arne Næss's thesis that overpopulation is a major strain on the earth's ecosystem. In *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique*, Ferry passionately criticises the position of the father of deep ecology, which he considers to be a form of *anti-humanism*.²⁷ Likewise, Rufin highlights the possible abuses of ecological Malthusianism.²⁸ Tesson, on the contrary, takes the side of deep ecology, not by referring directly to Arne Næss, but by quoting the speech made by Claude

27 Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique*, 157.

28 Rufin, *Le Parfum d'Adam*, 407.

Lévi-Strauss upon receiving the Premi Internacional Catalunya in 2005.²⁹ The problem of human demographical growth surfaces when Igor, a Russian friend of Tesson, confides his distress because he and his wife cannot conceive. The narrator considers fertility problems to be an advantage from an ecological viewpoint:

Je n'ose le consoler en lui disant que la termitière humaine est pleine à craquer. Que Claude Lévi-Strauss désignait comme des 'vers à farine' les milliards d'humains entassés sur une sphère trop étroite et constatait que nous étions en train de nous intoxiquer. Que le vieux maître, inquiet de voir la pression démographique mettre la Terre sous tension, 's'interdisait toute prédiction sur l'avenir', lui qui était né dans un monde six fois moins peuplé. (F 233–4)

[I do not dare to comfort him by saying that the human termite mound is more than full, that Claude Lévi-Strauss used the term 'mealworms' for the billions of humans crowded together on a too narrow sphere, or that he noted how we are poisoning ourselves. Nor dare I say that the old master, worried when observing how demographic pressure has become a strain for the Earth, 'forbade himself to make any prediction for the future'; he who was born in a world six times less populated.]

In line with Lévi-Strauss, Tesson's pessimistic worldview – the globe is overpopulated and on the edge of environmental collapse – suggests that bearing children is not a good idea.

Portraying the planet as a sort of human termite mound not only leads to practical considerations about food supply and waste production, but also induces an aesthetic malaise, at which Tesson hints in the passage about his disgust regarding Heinz ketchup. It is the proliferation of human beings that contributes to the expansion of bad taste:

La ruée des peuples vers le laid fut le principal phénomène de la mondialisation. Pour s'en convaincre il suffit de circuler dans une ville chinoise, d'observer les nouveaux codes de décoration de La Poste française ou la tenue des touristes. Le mauvais goût est le dénominateur commun de l'humanité. (F 29)

[The rush of the masses toward ugliness was the main characteristic of globalisation. It becomes evident when moving through a Chinese city, when observing the new design code in French postal offices, or tourists' clothing. Bad taste is humanity's common denominator.]

If globalisation and its tendency to standardise the tastes of the masses offend the author's aesthetic sensibilities, Tesson is doing no more than restating the kind of

29 Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'L'Etnòleg enfront de les identitats nacionals', *Generalitat de Catalunya* (30 March 2005), <http://web.gencat.cat/web/.content/03_GENERALITAT/PIC/documents/pdf/discurs_levi_strauss.pdf> [accessed 27 May 2016].

dissatisfaction with industrialisation that can be found in the work of David H. R. Lawrence (1885–1930). After reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), the narrator criticises industrial (and post-industrial) societies that, because of their obsession with progress, lose something vital: 'c'est l'agonie du monde. "L'Angleterre industrielle efface l'Angleterre agricole". Constance sent une sève monter dans sa chair; elle comprend que le progrès désubstantialise le monde [the world is in agony. "Industrial England blots out agrarian England". Constance feels lifeblood running through her veins; she understands that progress alters the world's substance]' (F 121). Tesson yearns for a place where he can be true to himself, and free from society. He wants to express his disenchantment with contemporary society, and rediscover the essence of the world, away from landscapes disfigured by mankind.

Only the empty mountain landscapes of Lake Baikal allow Tesson to reconnect with what can be considered the cosmic order of the world. He proposes to divide global space into two narrow categories – inhabited or untouched:

Ces montagnes n'offrent rien qu'une profusion de sensations à éprouver sur-le-champ. L'homme ne les bonifiera jamais. Dans ce paysage sans promesse, écartelé de grandeur, les calculateurs en seront pour leurs frais. [...] Aménageur, passe ton chemin, regagne la Toscane! Là-bas, sous les ciels tempérés, les paysages attendaient que l'homme les façonne en campagne. Ici, dans cet amphithéâtre, les éléments règnent pour l'éternité. Il y eut des luttes dans les temps magmatiques, à présent, le calme. Le paysage, repos de la géologie. (F 282)

[These mountains offer nothing but an abundance of sensations to be felt in the moment. Man will never improve them. In this landscape without promises, wide open with magnificence, every plot or plan is defeated. [...] Move on, developer, return to Tuscany! There, under temperate skies, landscapes wait to be moulded by mankind. Here, in this amphitheatre, the elements reign for eternity. There were struggles in magmatic times; at present, calmness. The landscape is geology's rest.]

As far as Tesson is concerned, even beautifully shaped bucolic landscapes are to be considered part of modern society's wrongdoings. He does not admire Tuscan landscapes, entirely developed by man, and seeks pristine landscapes that contain the possibility of a mystic experience of nature.

Wilderness and transcendence

Having the potential to provide a mystic experience is the basis of another opposition between Paris and Lake Baikal: the civilised world is profane; the wilderness holds the possibility of transcendence. Tesson writes: 'j'ai quitté le caveau des villes et vécu six mois dans l'église des taïgas [I left the urban vaults and lived for six months in the church of the taiga]' (F 228). By transforming the Russian mountains into a church, Tesson thinks of nature and landscape in religious terms.

Tesson's preoccupations go beyond the practical considerations of pollution, social obligations, and the lack of good taste of the masses. He engages with a more spiritual way of thinking about nature, which is, as John Gatta explains, a fundamental feature of contemporary environmental thinking:

The current ecological crisis must be understood, I think, not as an array of technical problems but as a genuine crisis of spirit and imagination. Since religion deals in ultimate questions, while our culture's literature embodies its deepest hopes and fears, an interfusion of both disciplines should cast light on this major issue of our time.³⁰

According to Gatta, the search for transcendence in nature writing reveals the complexity of the environmental crisis, which is more spiritual than it may appear. Religious motifs in Tesson's book echo this idea.

Gatta observes that American nature writing – his main object of study – maintains a strong interest in the sanctity of wilderness, even though completely untouched landscapes have become extremely rare. This is even more true in a European context. In *Recours à la 'nature sauvage'* (2007), Robert Hainard cites comparable examples of unspoiled landscapes in Europe – the list is extremely short:

La Suisse possède encore quelques hectares de forêt vierge, mais je les connais surtout en Yougoslavie. Ce sont des forêts de montagne, évidemment. Elles sont de parcours faciles, mais toujours dans des endroits difficiles et vallonnés. Je connais aussi celle de Białowieża en Pologne. En France on trouve des forêts de fayards dans le Massif central, et quelques forêts très sauvages dans les Pyrénées, comme celle du Soussouéou en haute vallée d'Ossau.³¹

[In Switzerland, a few hectares of virgin forest subsist, but I know more of such things in Yugoslavia. They are mountain forests, obviously. They encompass easy routes, but always situated in difficult and hilly terrain. I also know the forest of Białowieża in Poland. In France, there are beech forests in the Massif Central, and some very wild forests in the Pyrenees, such as the Soussouéouan forest in the upper Ossau Valley.]

An avid alpinist, Tesson well knows how rare untouched nature is in Europe. As an author living in western Europe, it is necessary for him to travel in order to encounter natural landscapes that are not embedded, as a sort of shrine, within civilised territory. A key trait of nineteenth-century nature writing, this fascination with the 'wild' continues to influence contemporary authors. Despite the rareness of untamed landscapes – perhaps because of it – writers assign sacred value to the wilderness. As Gatta explains:

30 John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), viii.

31 Robert Hainard, *Recours à la 'nature sauvage'* (Bats: Utovie, 2007), 36–9.

Although virtually nothing we encounter on the planet can now be regarded as outside the sphere of human influence, one can at least identify organisms and processes that seem relatively 'wild' – that is, beyond immediate human control. The sacred, too, traditionally names a reality apart from workaday culture, a category of existence outside the bounds of human control and rationalization.³²

Tesson experiences transcendence only in the forests around Lake Baikal; he thus reproduces a traditional trope that is part of the heritage of American nature writing.

The travelogue is marked from the beginning by a transcendental desire. Tesson starts the novel by staging the journey to the lake as the inauguration of a life-altering experience: going to Lake Baikal means 'changer de vie [changing life]' (F 22). The author drives over the frozen lake in order to arrive at the cabin – a dangerous and impressive feat that resembles a ritual of initiation:

Rouler sur un lac est une transgression. Seuls les dieux et les araignées marchent sur les eaux. J'ai ressenti trois fois l'impression de briser un tabou. La première, en contemplant le fond de la mer d'Aral. La seconde en lisant le journal intime d'une femme. La troisième, en roulant sur les eaux du Baïkal. Chaque fois, l'impression de déchirer un voile. L'œil regarde par le trou de la serrure.

J'explique cela à Micha. Il ne répond rien. (F 24)

[To drive on a lake is a transgression. Only gods and spiders walk on water. Three times, I had the impression of breaking a taboo. First, when contemplating the bed of the Aral Sea. Second, when reading a woman's diary. Third, when driving on the waters of Lake Baikal. Each time, I had the impression of ripping a veil, of looking through a keyhole.

I explain this to Micha. He does not answer.]

Whilst going across the lake, Tesson is under the impression that he is usurping a privilege of the gods. He considers his action to be a transgression, a means to unveil a truth – another dimension of reality that should not be known to man. His companion Micha remains silent, underscoring the momentousness of the event.

From then on, the sojourn on the lake's shores is considered a religious retreat; it pleases Tesson to think of himself as a kind of religious hermit. He associates his disgust regarding city life with the *horror mundi* of the Desert Fathers of early Christianity:

Au IV^e siècle, les Pères du désert devenaient fous de solitude: ils ne supportaient plus la moindre intrusion. Ils refluait au fond des déserts, s'enfouissaient dans les grottes. Leurs réserves d'amour se vouaient à un monde vide de leurs semblables. Dans les banlieues, parfois, un type tire une volée de plombs dans un groupe de jeunes, au pied d'une tour. Il finit en entrefilet dans *Le Parisien*, puis derrière les barreaux. (F 45–6)

32 Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, 9.

[In the fourth century, the Desert Fathers became obsessed with loneliness: they could no longer withstand the slightest intrusion. They withdrew far into the desert, and confined themselves in caverns. Their reserves of love were vowed to a world lacking their kin. From time to time, a guy in the suburbs shoots at a group of youngsters in front of a housing building. He ends up being briefly mentioned in *Le Parsien* [*The Parisian*], then in jail.]

The stress and the discomfort of living in a crowded society lead to a *coup de folie* – a resentful act of madness such as murder. For Tesson, seclusion brings peace, understanding and spiritual fulfilment.

Tesson's retreat is, however, an extremely fragile endeavour, easily disturbed by the slightest sign of human activity. When fishermen playing loud music pass nearby, the religious motif emerges again, as the narrator takes the integrity of his retreat to have been undermined. He compares his situation to the experience of monks forced to guide tourists around a place that is supposed to be a haven of calm and serenity:

Ce que je suis venu fuir s'abat sur mon îlot: le bruit, la laideur, la grégarité testostéronique. [...] Je pense à ces reclus bénédictins contraints de guider les visites touristiques – ces religieux venus enfermer leur foi dans des cloîtres se retrouvent à détailler la règle de saint Benoît à des foules indifférentes. (F 45–6)

[What I have been hiding from invades my island: noise, ugliness, testosterone gregariousness. [...] I think of those Benedictine recluses who are forced to guide tourists – those monks who intended to seal their faith in cloisters end up explaining the Rule of Saint Benedict to unconcerned crowds.]

Religious imagery recurs throughout the book: the stove that heats the cabin is compared to a small divinity – 'un petit dieu qui possède sa vie propre [a small god possessed of its own life]' (F 37) – that claims logs as offerings; an ornithological guidebook published by Delachaux & Niestlé becomes 'un bréviaire consacré à l'ingéniosité du vivant, aux infinies subtilités de l'évolution, une célébration du style [a breviary dedicated to the inventiveness of all that lives, to the infinite nuances of evolution; a celebration of style]' (F 215), giving credence to the idea of a 'nature bible'.

Disenchantments

Tesson's work shares several traits with environmental nonfiction – recurring reflections on the transcendent nature of beauty; denunciations of consumer society and its impact on the environment; a literary rendering of real events – but his ecological and literary project is substantially problematic. According to Schoentjes, Tesson's work is a site of tensions because it expresses political commitment *and* disengaged contemplation:

La tension qui s'observe chez Tesson entre un engagement militant en faveur de l'environnement et la volonté de s'inscrire dans une écriture de la sagesse inspirée par la contemplation de la nature est caractéristique.³³

[In Tesson's work, one finds a characteristic tension between political commitment in favour of the environment, and the desire to comply with a form of literature that seeks wisdom by contemplating nature.]

Schoentjes explains that such contradictions arise because a solitary experience of nature, entailing detachment from any collective responsibility, runs counter to ecological commitment. Tesson does not eschew such inconsistencies; they are a key part of the story's development.

Many of the contradictions of Tesson's ecological project are underscored in the text. When evoking the magic beauty of the lake and the surrounding wild forest, he deconstructs this magic by considering the minimal impact of the panorama on others, especially the Russian inhabitants who have lived there for years:

J'aurai appris qu'on peut vivre près d'une patinoire géante, se nourrir de caviar, de pattes d'ours et de foie d'élan, se vêtir de vison, aller par les futaies fusil en bandoulière, assister chaque matin, lorsque les rayons de l'aube touchent la glace, à l'un des plus beaux spectacles de la planète, et rêver pourtant d'une vie dans un appartement équipé de toute la robotique et de la gadgeterie high-tech. (*F* 158)

[I will have learned that one can live next to an enormous ice rink, feed on caviar, bear paws and moose liver, clothe oneself in mink, walk beneath the trees with a rifle over one's shoulder, bear witness every morning to one of the most beautiful sights on the planet when the first rays of sunlight strike the ice, and nevertheless dream of living in an apartment equipped with robotics and high-tech gadgets.]

The locals do not share Tesson's enthusiasm for the magnificent view, and his wonder eventually begins to diminish: 'les rives du Baïkal me sont à présent trop familières pour me tirer la moindre larme [at present, the banks of Lake Baikal are too familiar to make me shed a tear]' (*F* 228). As time passes, the adventurer's enthusiasm dries up – the pristine beauty of the scenery no longer moves him.

Tesson's story of adventure and ecological consciousness entails elements of disillusionment. When the author uses mystic and religious references to describe his experience, there is the risk that such description may tip into irony. When he compares the lake to 'une patinoire géante [a giant ice rink]', Tesson attenuates the possible sacredness of the site. The sublime, when glimpsed, is always subject to doubt. Religious language tends to be used to designate trivial objects: Tesson, who loves cigars, compares cigar-smoke to incense (*F* 178). When visitors or

33 Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu*, 166.

Russian friends explain their spiritual worldview, Tesson is only able to stomach such 'bouillie spirituelle [spiritual 'nonsense]' because of his childhood religious education: 'un vieux résidu de patience inoculée par dix années d'éducation chez les frères m'aide à supporter la bouillie spirituelle [some residual patience acquired through a ten-year education provided by the brothers helps me to bear this spiritual nonsense]' (F 284). As a result of such a religious background, spirituality is kept at an ironic distance.

The multiple discrepancies and dissonances in the text indicate the flaws and contradictions of the author's project. Tesson notes, with a degree of self-derision, that the solitary nature of his endeavour is problematic: 'de mon duvet, j'entends crépiter le bois. Rien ne vaut la solitude. Pour être parfaitement heureux, il me manque quelqu'un à qui l'expliquer [from under my duvet, I hear the firewood crackle. Nothing equates to solitude. In order to be perfectly happy, I would simply need someone to whom I can explain this]' (F 160). The lonely retreat in the woods veers dangerously close to disappointment. The project is significantly compromised from the early moment in which Tesson buys large quantities of Heinz ketchup despite being disgusted by the mere presence of the brand in a small Russian town. The Thoreauvian dream of autarchy is jeopardised: Tesson never achieves independence, lives on industrial food (dried pasta, ketchup) brought with him rather than cultivating vegetables, and fails to leave behind modern technology (his laptop and satellite phone).

The retreat appears to be less serious and sincere than Thoreau's undertaking. Tesson's incipit expresses his intention more as a personal challenge than a necessity – the project is based on a vow to live as a hermit in the woods before reaching his fortieth birthday (F 9). The solitary adventure seems rather shallow, as do the author's motivations when settling into his cabin. Tesson is inconvenienced by the bad taste of the masses, and shocked by the Russians' poor sense of interior design. Upon his arrival, the author breaks down Formica panels, tears off linoleum surfaces, and throws out all plastic materials (F 29). He aims to reveal the cabin's woodwork, coated in materials manufactured by the petrochemical industry, but this moment of redecorating or 'home-making' feels more like a bourgeois reflex, transforming the experience into a privilege afforded to an elite few that David Brooks describes as 'bourgeois bohemians'.³⁴

34 David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 11.

Between ecological commitment and eco-poetic aesthetics

As an attempt at ecological commitment, Tesson's project appears to be a failure in many respects. Such a sentiment is expressed by the author:

Le courage serait de regarder les choses en face [...]. La nostalgie, la mélancolie, la rêverie donnent aux âmes romantiques l'illusion d'une échappée vertueuse. Elles passent pour d'esthétiques moyens de résistance à la laideur mais ne sont que le cache-sexe de la lâcheté. Que suis-je? Un pleutre, affolé par le monde, reclus dans une cabane, au fond des bois. Un couard qui s'alcoolise en silence pour ne pas risquer d'assister au spectacle de son temps ni de croiser sa conscience faisant les cent pas sur la grève. (F 196)

[It would be more courageous to face the truth [...]. Nostalgia, melancholia and reverie – which fill Romantic souls with the illusion of a virtuous escape – are considered to be aesthetic ways of resisting ugliness, but they are only a loincloth for cowardice. Who am I? A wimp, made distraught by the world, shut away in a cabin in the depths of the woods. A coward who gets drunk in silence because he does not want to risk witnessing the spectacle of his era, or come across his own conscience while pacing on the shore.]

Tesson, blaming himself for ecological shallowness and Romantic escapism, considers his adventure to be an act of cowardliness. Yet, if *Dans les forêts de Sibérie* appears to be a watered-down version of Thoreau's retreat, Tesson's doubts and ironic self-awareness correlate well with Thoreau's 'protopostmodern sensibility', as explained by David Dowling:

The very essence of the natural process in Thoreau's writing [...] bears a distinctly protopostmodern sensibility, from self-referential pastiche to ecstatic, soaring visionary reveries that crash on the rocks of his neighbors' galling capitalist exploitation of the environment. A sense of optimism always edges against the bizarre, even surreal, effects economic sins that reify the environment as property and raids its resources of timber, ice, and fur to feed an insatiable demand of consumer goods.³⁵

Regardless of whether Tesson succeeds in experiencing an ecological adventure, his travelogue calls into question modern consumer societies. Tesson's self-derision serves as a mirror for his readers, and he develops an ecologically committed perspective in spite of his own scepticism. For Tesson, being alone with nature is a problematic ecological project: his retreat was temporary, and his actions in favour of the environment seem ineffective. Hedonistic and aesthetic pleasures are more effective: 'je ne sais pas si la beauté sauvera le monde. Elle a sauvé ma soirée

35 David Dowling, 'Fraught Ecstasy: Contemporary Encounters with Thoreau's Postpristine Nature', in *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversation on an American Icon*, ed. by F. Specq, L. D. Walls and M. Granger (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 234–48 (236).

[I do not know if beauty will save the world, but it has saved my evening]' (*F* 50). Tesson is subject to doubt and melancholy, which he can only capture by describing 'l'intensité esthétique [the aesthetic intensity]' (*F* 214) of nature's display. By writing about the woods, recounting the choreography of butterflies, and remembering the 'écological sublime'³⁶ of the mountain views, Tesson produces a work of ecopoetics (in the sense that French literary criticism has given to the term).³⁷

Dans les forêts de Sibérie oscillates between an ecopoetic sense of nature's fragile beauty, and an ecological endeavour that is deemed to have failed. This is true of many French literary projects: like Tesson, who chooses to undermine the ecocritical effectiveness of his undertaking, Trassard seeks to separate ecological commitment from fiction. The tension between ecocriticism and ecopoetics is a defining characteristic of contemporary scholarship and thought. Working with different traditions of literary criticism is a productive way of discerning important aspects of environmental writing in French.

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