

# *Streams of consciousness: river poetry from Heidegger to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe*

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## River Poetry: from Heidegger to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe

John McKeane

If I think of Germany in the night,  
I am jolted from my sleep,  
I can no longer close my eyes,  
and my hot tears flow.<sup>1</sup>

Surprising as it may seem, rivers are a consistent presence in the work of thinkers from Friedrich Hölderlin and Martin Heidegger to Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Other natural features (e.g. mountains, hills, plains, sea) feature in the romantic poetry of Hölderlin or others, but are not taken up with any like the same persistence. And indeed, for Heidegger, Nancy, and Lacoue-Labarthe, rivers take us beyond questions of nature, allowing for the interrogation of notions such as landscape, technology, the specificity of humanity and the presence (or absence) of divinity. If ‘these sinuous lines [...] penetrate territory like nothing else does’, they also penetrate and carry us deep into key 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers’ approach to such topics.<sup>2</sup>

The poetry of Hölderlin is – as it were – the source of this mini-tradition of thinking rivers. He writes hymns dedicated to major European waterways the Rhine and the Danube (under its alternative name the Ister), to the source of the Danube, and to Bordeaux’s Garonne (‘Remembrance’), as well as poems of different genres on the German rivers Main and Neckar, and on ‘The Fettered River’.<sup>3</sup> Now, if one of the more common ways in which rivers become metaphorical is via the trope of *water under the bridge*, speaking to the loss and irrecoverability of what went before, Hölderlin pursues an alternative approach. Instead of loss and dissolution, the flowing of the river represents an increase of breadth and depth, the river rushing onwards to become ever more itself, making a living connection between source and destination. These opposite poles are, as we shall see, conceptualized in various terms – as homely and foreign, modern and ancient, natural and technological, German and Greek, human and divine. With the Danube or Ister in particular, linking as it does the Black Forest and a province of ancient Greece, there is scope for a fruitful encounter between these various declinations of same and other.

The rivers discussed have a raw power that is conducive to both industry and sublimity (as for Scotland’s Clyde: see Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Robert Owen). They provide opportunities for the advancement of geographical knowledge, for instance as

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<sup>1</sup> The first strophe of ‘If I think of Germany in the Night’ by Heinrich Heine. The quotation is given anachronistically but appositely at the opening of the film by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (1977) *Our Hitler: a Film from Germany*, Berlin: TMS film/Bernd Eichinger.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is from a writer associated with Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Jean-Christophe Bailly; Bailly, J.-C. (2011), *Le Dépaysement: Voyages en France*, Paris: Le Seuil, 343. Chapters 24-26 of this work concentrate on minor rivers. All translations from French are mine unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> See Hölderlin, F. (1998), *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger, London: Penguin.

European explorers saw the great African rivers Nile, Niger, and Congo as doing.<sup>4</sup> And they allow or provoke some consideration of the divine (as with India's Ganges and its sacred status in Hinduism).<sup>5</sup> But the rivers discussed by Hölderlin and Heidegger, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are never only powerful, epistemic, or divine. The poet and his later philosophical interpreters use rivers to think through the existential or phenomenological topics of humankind's relation to the world in which we dwell, and the mode of questioning that sets humankind apart.

In addition to the Hölderlin poems mentioned above, rivers see extensive treatment in three of Heidegger's lecture courses on the Romantic: on 'The Rhine' (1934-35), 'The Ister' (1942), and 'Remembrance' (the Garonne poem; 1943). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, for their part, feature heavily in the filmed travelogue *The Ister* (2004).<sup>6</sup> We shall look at the latter's contribution to this film alongside his work *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, before moving to the question of landscapes and homeliness or unhomeliness in Lacoue-Labarthe's writing (specifically the essay 'Le Dépaysagement'). Addressing first Heidegger, then Nancy, then Lacoue-Labarthe, we shall see the multiple and sometimes unexpected ways in which they travel along these philosophical rivers, these streams of consciousness.

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<sup>4</sup> There is a more skeptical reading, which is that they were used to enable colonialism. On the topic, see Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which is discussed by Lacoue-Labarthe, a discussion itself extensively explored in Lawtoo, N. (ed; 2012), *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought: Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*, London: Bloomsbury.

<sup>5</sup> An interlocutor of Jean-Luc Nancy, Divya Dwivedi, has rightly signalled to me the dangers of the sacralization of rivers in the context of contemporary *Hindutva*.

<sup>6</sup> I will try to distinguish typographically between the Ister (the river itself – the Danube), 'The Ister' (Hölderlin's poem), Heidegger's lecture course on 'The Ister' (Hölderlin's poem), and *The Ister* (the film featuring Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe which addresses at once river, poem, and lectures). For full references, see below.

## 1. Martin Heidegger: the Same through the Other

It is impossible to learn the dates of Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin's river poetry without questioning their relationship to nationalism and national-socialism: 1934-35 on 'Remembrance', 1942 on 'The Ister', 1943 on 'Germania' and 'The Rhine'.<sup>7</sup> Does the first lecture course show any signs of reconsideration, following his resignation of the rectorship of Freiburg University earlier in 1934? How did the lectures given at the height of WWII relate to the Nazi project (he remained a member of the party until 1945)?<sup>8</sup> Quite apart from their author's abhorrent politics, the lectures show a strange blindness: even as he discusses Greek thinkers, and analyses phenomena applicable across the Western world, there is barely any attempt to make the conclusions relevant for readers located in different traditions. The radical thinking of being-in-the-world without any determination, was in fact already determined by its author as German thought, for the Germans.

We shall look at the 1942 lecture course on 'The Ister', partly due to its alignment with the film featuring Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, but also due to the complex interactions with otherness it proposes. In the eponymous poem, Hölderlin compares the Ister (or Danube) and the Rhine: both rise in the mountains, close to one another. The Rhine for its part 'has gone away / sideways', plunging down into the plain, irrigating and making fertile (of which more later). As for the Ister, it 'cling[s] to the mountains, straight', and rather from rushing downstream, it moves so slowly, dwelling and whiling, that it 'seems / to travel backwards'. This causes the poet to speculate that 'I think it must come from / the East' (this is what led the 2004 film to start at the Black Sea and travel upriver). These opposing characteristics, as well as the epic scale of the two rivers, cause Heidegger to refer to them as *the* rivers: standing for and containing within themselves all the possibilities of the river.<sup>9</sup>

The ultimately German horizon or destination of Heidegger's thinking does not mean that there is any simple refusal to consider or encounter otherness (that refusal, when it comes, is invested with all Heidegger's philosophical weight, making it all the more repellent). The encounter with otherness is precisely what Heidegger sees taking place in Hölderlin's poem. The thought that the Ister might flow backwards, importing foreignness from faraway lands, chimes with the multiple mentions of exotic lands in his river poetry.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, M. (2000), 'Remembrance', *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller, Amherst: Humanity; Heidegger M. (2014), *Hölderlin's Hymns 'Germania' and 'The Rhine'*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U. P.; Heidegger, M. (1996), *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U. P. References to the latter are henceforth abbreviated HHI.

<sup>8</sup> Such questions have had even greater urgency since the publication of *The Black Notebooks* in 2014; see Di Cesare, D. (2018), *Heidegger and the Jews: the Black Notebooks*, trans. Murtha Baca, Cambridge: Polity. Di Cesare notes the disturbing values given to landscapes by Heidegger: the German forest, weald or *Wald* as the secluded home of thought, and the desert, a space of the vacuity and rootlessness he associates with Judaism. See Di Cesare's work, passim, but in particular the passage on the notion of 'without world', 161ff.

<sup>9</sup> The Danube and the Rhine are in fact only the second and 11<sup>th</sup> longest in Europe, but the rest of the ten longest are in Eastern Europe and likely were not considered by Heidegger.

<sup>10</sup> Both the Neckar and the Main are said to long for Greece; the Garonne in 'Remembrance' is associated with India; 'At the Source of the Danube' mentions Ionia, Arabia, Asia, and the Caucasus; and the poem 'The Ister' itself refers to two foreign rivers, the Alpheus (Greece) and the Indus (of the Indian subcontinent). See Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, op. cit.

In turn, this can be understood as part of a wider Romantic thinking of *Bildung*, with an encounter with foreignness representing a formative experience.<sup>11</sup> This is the context in which Heidegger writes that ‘The Ister *is* that river in which the foreign is already present as a guest at its source, that river in whose flowing there constantly speaks the dialogue between one’s own and the foreign’ (HHI 146). It is important for this dialogue to exist in order for what is one’s own not to be a simply closed, unknowing identity or sameness (an idiocy, according to the etymology).<sup>12</sup> In Heidegger’s formulation, ‘the Ister satisfies the law of becoming homely as the law of becoming unhomely’ (HHI 164). This is to say that the greater one’s experience of or connection to the foreign, the more fully one is able to become oneself. The Ister, flowing backwards from the Black Sea – a province of ancient Greece – shows this process in action, irrigating Germany with its own dialogical becoming.

In line with this, whilst we might expect a lecture-course on rivers by a nationalist or Nazi philosopher to underline the importance of the landscapes of the homeland, this is not the case. The rivers do not act as straightforward symbols of anything (for example national character or German exceptionality). He writes that ‘these river poems are not simply depictions of landscapes, which evidently they are not intended to be. [...] the river poems cannot be poems “about” rivers, in which the rivers are already familiar in their essence and are taken as images or emblems signifying something else’ (HHI 26). Rather than being an affirmation of homeliness, these rivers – and the Ister in particular – stage a dialogue between, and mutual enlightening of, home and foreign.

As such, the rivers discussed have a strange status in Heidegger’s thought: he makes it quite clear that they are not to be read symbolically, loaded with metaphysical freight in the classic tradition of Western philosophy, made to stand in for something they are not, or to represent abstract concepts. In this sense, he tells us that Hölderlin’s poems *really are about rivers*, rather than rivers as a way towards something else. However, inasmuch as the rivers lead their own existence, pursuing their own specificity heedless of the rest, they do provide a pointer as to how humans might exist. To see how this works, first of all it is necessary to say what rivers are not. Heidegger does this as follows: ‘[rivers] are not gods. They are not humans. They are not occurrences of nature, nor are they parts of the landscape. Nor, indeed, are they ‘symbolic images’ of the ‘earthly journey’ of human beings. To say what the rivers in each instance are *not* [...] is of some help’ (HHI 33, emphasis original). It is indeed helpful to recap what rivers are not, in Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin: they are not a straightforward expression of the German homeland, they are not part of a landscape, they are not symbolic, they are not metaphorical or metaphysical. Whilst such an interruption of or resistance to such modes of reading is frustrating, and might tip over into obstructiveness if

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<sup>11</sup> See Berman, A. (1992), *The Experience of the Foreign : Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. S. Heyvaert, Albany: SUNY Press.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger quotes another Hölderlin poem to make this point:

‘[...] at home is spirit  
Not at the commencement, not at the source. The home consumes it.  
Colony, and bold forgetting spirit loves’.

In other words, staying at home, remaining fixed in sameness and not encountering the other, ‘consumes’ spirit, exhausts its resources. The quotation is from a draft of ‘Bread and Wine’ (HHI 126).

pursued indefinitely, Heidegger continues the passage as follows: ‘Initially, what emerges is that any determination of the essence of the rivers must appear alienating. Our claim is this: the river is the locality of the dwelling of human beings as historical upon this earth’ (HHI 33). This seems to be suggesting that rather than participating in the lofty but ultimately fragile constructions of metaphysics, a thinking of rivers allows human beings to fully inhabit or dwell in their specificity, rather than aspiring to align themselves with either divinity (as religion would have us do) or nature (as various branches of stoicism have it).<sup>13</sup>

What then, in Heidegger’s eyes, is this specificity of human existence? In the lecture course he often dramatizes the delivery of the point (e.g. ‘Whatever is their own is that to which human beings belong and must belong if they are to fulfil whatever is destined to them, and whatever is fitting, as their specific way of being’, HHI 21). Here we are confronted with the classic Heideggerian theme, familiar to readers of *Being and Time*: human beings are the beings for whom their existence is a question. We have no determined or fixed nature, but must locate it in and through a *being-in-the-world*, with the truth of that situation not being a formal *adequatio* (a correspondence to some pre-existing reality), but a living *aletheia* (a revelation or remembering), an attunement to what really is, to what is really the case.

Nature is often taken to represent this real state of things. But for Heidegger this is a false construction, one that fails to take account of the world in which we humans live, having built it for ourselves (a process that is anything but over). This is what places the topic of technology at the centre of his lectures on Hölderlin’s ‘Ister’ poem. This is literally the case, with two sections on the poem itself bookending a middle section looking not at the German poet, but at Sophocles’s *Antigone*. At one point Heidegger explains this in terms of the foreign (the Greek) being needed at the heart of the homely (the German) in order for the latter to fully be itself. But the most important characteristic of the notions discussed is surely not their Greekness – at least if understood as one national identity among others. Instead it is the fact that the section of the *Antigone* discussed is that sometimes known as the ‘Ode to man’, praising the latter’s various technological achievements (ploughing, ensnaring birds, hunting, farming, navigation, governance). Whilst these activities can of course be seen as a form of metaphysical domination or rationalization of nature – and sometimes are by Heidegger –, in the right conditions a thinking of them allows what is proper to mankind, what he calls our destination, to emerge.<sup>14</sup> If such a thinking is to emerge, it must pass through what the chorus in the *Antigone* mentions at its outset:

Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing  
More uncanny looms or stirs beyond the human being.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Kofman discusses this in ‘The Comedy of Stoicism’ (La Comédie du stoïcisme), using Nietzsche as a spur to expose the human, all too human horizons of those who claim to be following nature; see Kofman, S. (1979), *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique*, Paris: U.G.E., 165-87.

<sup>14</sup> A criticism of modern technology specific to rivers can be found here: ‘The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station’ in Heidegger, M. (1977), *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, London: Garland, 16.

<sup>15</sup> English translation of Heidegger’s translation; HHI 58.

The uncanny, *ta deinon* or *das Unheimliche*, is what defines mankind, and finds expression in the technology that it alone creates. The Greek term translated here is sometimes rendered as ‘the monstrous’, and the German *Unheimliche* is cognate with the English ‘unhomely’ (although ‘uncanny’ is often used as the translation because it better recreates the German’s double sense of something being strange, but also strangely familiar).

In addition to framing this discussion of technology, Hölderlin’s poem explicitly discusses technology (and its attendant questions: humankind’s construction of a world, and the uncanniness of that world). Rivers in general provoke the statement that

[...] here we wish to build  
For rivers make arable  
The land.

As previously seen, the Rhine is shown going away from the mountains – the line ‘not for nothing rivers flow / through dry land’ suggests that the river is somehow destined to fulfil the land by making it fertile. The final strophe of the poem then contains the lines

But the rock needs incisions  
And the earth needs furrows,  
Would be desolate else, unabiding

These Hölderlinian lines are clearly attractive to Heidegger, as they depict the river as a site of nature, but also as allowing humans to undertake technological activity (and we think of everything from breweries to mills to hydroelectric dams to nuclear power stations, but perhaps most emblematically, the industrial-Romantic project on the Clyde at New Lanark). Rather than seeing agriculture (and behind it technology in general) as the imposition of a rational plan, the lines suggest that it is a response to what is already there, arising from it, in a strangely familiar way, as it were recasting the statement given by nature as a question. The river is both of the land, and always flowing to (or from) an elsewhere. It is a supplement, without becoming transcendent.

For Heidegger, then, ‘the river “is” the locality that pervades the abode of human beings upon the earth, determines them to where they belong and where they are homely [*heimisch*]. The river thus brings human beings into their own and maintains them in what is their own’ (HHI 21). Humans are uncanny, unhomely, *unheimlich*, or monstrous, because they live in a world of betweenness: between nature and technology, between animals and gods, having characteristics of all and yet belonging entirely to none.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, communing with otherness, but linking that other to the same, rivers can be understood not as fully divine, but as demigods. In a feat of dazzling bravura, Heidegger abandons the slow pace adopted in much of this lecture course to collapse the categories at this point. If humans occupy this

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<sup>16</sup> Major thinkers nonetheless go against this reading: Emmanuel Levinas arguing that Heidegger’s opposition to metaphysics leads him to a version of paganism, and similarly Jean-François Lyotard, who states: ‘Heidegger-Hölderlin’s god is merely pagan-Christian, the god of bread, wine, earth, and blood’. See Di Cesare, *Heidegger and the Jews*, op. cit., 176, 240.



middling world, then poets (and Hölderlin's river poems) are particularly important in understanding this human being, because humans and poets and rivers each represent, to different degrees, this middling world. In Heidegger's words, 'the demigod, the river, the poet: all these name poetically the one and singular ground of the becoming homely of human beings as historical and the founding of this ground by the poet' (HHI 154). He puts these phenomena all on the same level, in a way that is no doubt challenging for many readers, but nonetheless reveals what was motivating the previous lengthy discussions. The demigod, the river, and the poet are all figures of betweenness: each one is an Other, but in Heidegger's words, 'this Other who is needed' (HHI 156). This is to say that they do not remain austere and remote in their otherness, but in the fact of being needed, enter a relation. It is this sense of relationality that is explored by Jean-Luc Nancy with his thinking of world.

## 2. Jean-Luc Nancy : Producing the Uncanny

Do Hölderlin's rivers run through Nancy's world? We shall look at Nancy's contribution to the film *The Ister*, in which the section featuring him uses Hölderlin's line 'here we wish to build' as its title. Indeed, we shall see that his contribution focuses to a large extent on technology, and in so doing is also a response to Heidegger and his reading of Hölderlin. The thinking of rivers as demigods is also germane to Nancy's interests in the withdrawal or deconstruction of a direct relation to the sacred. According, we shall see Nancy recounting the shift between two types of politics: that based on a firm mythological foundation, and that based not on *muthos* but on *logos*, which is without firm foundation, and therefore constitutes what he means by world. In this sense, he picks up on Christianity's disparaging habit of referring to the world or what is worldly: 'the Christian sense of *world* as that which precisely lacks all sense or has its sense beyond itself'.<sup>17</sup> But rather than demonstrating the limited or unfulfilling nature of the world, this lack of any beyond is precisely what is interesting for Nancy: it is not just a question of setting concreteness in opposition to abstraction, but of seeing how this concreteness can be gathered into a supplementary world or worlding (a supplementarity that is weaker than full-blown transcendence). In order to explore this a little further before coming on to the film *The Ister*, let us briefly look at Nancy's work *The Creation of the World or Globalization*.<sup>18</sup>

This work takes as its starting-point the observation that, with *mondialisation* (the term is preferable to globalization, as it also means a worlding), questions of technology and economic rationalization are no longer confined to the West alone. This is to say that by extending its technologico-rational approach to all corners of the world, the West has also ceased to exist as a particular area of that world. As we have seen, Heidegger denounced the earlier stages of this process in the name of a thinking intended for the Germans alone (as spiritual leaders of Europe or the West), and on the basis of Hölderlin poems that refuse conceptuality and metaphysics in favour of *really*, i.e. non-metaphorically, being about rivers. For his part, Nancy does not have any such solid foundations on which to base a resistance to *mondialisation* – for him, this process has long since eroded any such foundations, and that to seek to return to them would be a treatment more harmful than the disease. Nonetheless, two notable definitions of world that he gives in this work do retain strikingly Heideggerian language. The first ties world to the question of inhabiting:

a world is only a world for those who inhabit it. To inhabit is necessarily to inhabit a world, which is to say, to do more than sojourn there: it is have one's place there, in the strong sense, which makes it possible for something to properly take place [*avoir lieu*]. To take place is to arrive properly-speaking, it is not only to 'nearly' arrive, and

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy, J.-L. (1997), *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, London: University of Minnesota Press, 54, emphasis original. See also the chapter 'Touching', which is particularly important; 59-63.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, J.-L. (2007), *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. David Pettigew and François Raffoul, Albany: SUNY Press. The citations below are my translations direct from the French version, as under the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, the English translation was not readily available; Nancy, J.-L. (2002), *La Création du monde ou la mondialisation*, Paris: Galilée. References to this French version are henceforth abbreviated as CM.

it is not only ‘coming about’ [*se passer*]. It is to arrive as something proper, and appropriately, at subjectivity (CM 35-36).

This is to say that to inhabit is more weighty than simply to sojourn or stay in a given place; it is to arrive properly as a subject, and to arrive at that status of subjecthood. In turn, this is said to be necessary for there to be world: ‘a world is only a world for those who inhabit it’. In other words, there is no world if we are just sojourning ephemerally, but only if there is (in)habitation by subjects. Although deprived of its reference to a particular locality, the model here is strikingly Heideggerian. Similarly, a little later, Nancy provides a formulation that removes world from the sort of direct representation that the earlier thinker denounces as metaphysical:

the world has withdrawn from the status of possible representation. A representation of the world, a vision of the world, means assigning a principle and an end to the world. Which is to say that a vision of the world is in effect the end of the world that is seen, sucked in, absorbed and dissolved in this vision (CM 38-39).

This is to say that to represent world is to posit that it has already come to an end, that one is able to stand outside it and capture a stable image of it. This is impossible, because we are always-already and always-still within the world, not separate from it but at most providing a way for the world to relate to itself (to give itself sense, in Nancy’s term). The subjecthood previously mentioned also means to be subjects in the world, not subjects standing outside it. This is where the literalness of Hölderlin’s river poems can act as a guide: for we are also literally here, now, not in some abstract evertime from which we could look back on the world and on ourselves.

In his chapter in *The Ister* entitled ‘Here we wish to build’, Nancy gives something like a lesson to the camera, interspersed with footage from the travelogue up the Danube (Ister), and with on-screen quotations from Heidegger’s lecture course on the Hölderlin poem.<sup>19</sup> He is careful to distinguish the importance placed on the river from a straightforward Romantic mythologization of nature: the river is not directly sacred, nor is it part of any nationalistic landscape. Instead, Hölderlin and Heidegger’s thinking is tied in with a narrative of the West (presumably in its extended form) as lacking any direct mythological foundation: ‘The beginning of the West is also the beginning of a question of the institution, or of foundation [...]. The question of foundation appears as a question at the moment when foundations have disappeared.’ This situation is contrasted to that of the empires of early recorded history (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, the Hittites). Of these, Nancy states that ‘Empires in this sense are precisely the orders of a clearly-given foundation. The empire always has its foundation behind it, it is founded by the gods, it has always been there, and its order is installed once and for all.’ He takes the advent of technology to be responsible for this shift away from *muthos* or mythology: technologies such as writing, navigation, numeracy and accountancy, up to and including sophistry and philosophy, mean that the world of *muthos*

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<sup>19</sup> The quotations that follow are my transcriptions from Barison, D. and Ross, D. (2004), *The Ister*, Fotzroy: Black Box. The film features Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Bernard Stiegler, and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

becomes a world of *logos*.<sup>20</sup> This is to say that rather than relying on what was given by nature, up to and including the presence of the gods, mankind stepped into a new dispensation: the discourse or logic of *logos* meaning that the surrounding world would no longer just be that given by nature, but that shaped and created by technology. Instead of everything conforming to its own nature, pursuing its own destination or destiny, this notion of things being destined to certain ends would be questioned and overturned. In Nancy's words:

*technè*, to say it in one word, is what has no end, it is *savoir-faire* towards some given thing, but precisely this thing is not given, it must be produced. And perhaps the entire history of the West as a history of technology, is the history of an endless end, of the endless production of new ends, which means also the absence of ends.

In addition to this line of thinking's general applicability, it can also be applied more locally to the way in which Hölderlin and Heidegger, to whom Nancy is responding, are interpreted within the history of ideas. For it would be difficult for these figures, with their thinking of the Ister (Danube) river as the site of humankind's move from *muthos* to *logos* by way of technology – a thinking of 'an endless end [...] [an] absence of ends' –, to be interpreted as allowing only Romantic or nationalistic readings.

This can be seen most of all in the conclusion at which Nancy arrives in this mini filmed lecture, having insisted on the distinction between between the known and accepted foundations and goals of a mythologically-based society or politics, and the unknown, shifting, or absent foundations and goals of a technological, discursive society: one in which nothing is a given. Speaking of this second dispensation, here is Nancy:

[in the logical world] the production of the proper doubtless has an aporia behind it, an aporia of violence, and before it, a confrontation with the foreign [*l'étranger*] and with total or absolute foreignness - *das Unheimliche* or *das Unheimische*. This means that, with the West, with what we can call philosophical – or politico-philosophical – technology, there appears an institution which is the endless demand or search for a proper that can only ever be presented via a foreignness to itself.

In other words, in a mythological world (or rather place, for it is not fully a world in Nancy's sense) the 'proper' or one's own is given, available, recognised as such. In the world of *logos*, on the other hand, because this properness has none of these characteristics, it must be produced artificially, and there is an unavoidable element of violence in doing so. This has direct political consequences: any attempt to draw on a foundation myth, in the modern world, is also a writing or creation of that myth (or in Lacoue-Labarthe's term, a fiction of the political). In short, if it is to explore and question its true status, this modern world must

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<sup>20</sup> This term is famously untranslatable – Barbara Cassin glosses it as follows: 'If we look up *logos* in a Greek-French dictionary, we find a mass of equivalents: "discourse, language, tongue, speech, rationality, reason, intelligence, foundation, motivation, proportion, calculation, account, value, report, recounting, narrative, thesis, reasoning, argument, explanation, statement, proposition, definition, term", etc.' ; in Cassin, B. (2016), *Éloge de la traduction – compliquer l'universel*, Paris : Fayard, 39.

instead prepare for a ‘confrontation’ with ‘*das Unheimliche* or *das Unheimische*’: the uncanny or the unhomely. This is why in Nancy, rivers – and particularly the Ister – are the occasion less for a mythologizing, Romantic, nationalistic approach to landscape, than for what has been called *le dépaysement* or *le dépaysagement*. Let us explore these terms further with Lacoue-Labarthe.

### 3. *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Rivers Draining Landscape*

This is a thinker who engages extensively with Hölderlin's river poetry, both through and against the influence of Heidegger's readings. Indeed, across his work multiple documents in multiple genres address the interaction of place and thought: for instance his contribution to the film *The Ister*, concentrating on the concentration camp Mauthausen, located next to the Danube. But there is also his translation of 'Andenken', Hölderlin's poem on the Garonne at Bordeaux and the subject of a Heidegger lecture course, a translation which eschews the title's normal sense of remembrance and instead emphasizes the literal *an-denken*: 'Je pense à vous' (I am thinking of you). A reading of this translation with footage of the Garonne constitutes the short film *Andenken/Je pense à vous*. Beyond this, no fewer than three further films feature Lacoue-Labarthe engaging with the notion of place: *Voyage à Tübingen*, concentrating on Hölderlin's secluded, troubled existence in a tower above the river Neckar for nearly 40 years; the *Entretiens de l'Île Saint-Pierre* see Lacoue-Labarthe in dialogue with Jean-Christophe Bailly by Lake Geneva (and elsewhere); and *Altus* is a travelogue about the *hauts-lieux* of European spirit, featuring the Vosges, Sils-Maria in the Alps, Jena, and Tübingen again.<sup>21</sup>

Although many of the locations featured might seem apt for a post-Romantic thinking of landscape and inspiration, and although Lacoue-Labarthe does write extensively on Romanticism, his approach is a different one. He does not wish to marvel at the grandeur of epic landscapes, but instead to consider the horror of the deeds committed by those who claim to be inspired by this European spirit. This is how the section on the concentration camp at Mauthausen by the Danube takes its place, Lacoue-Labarthe speaking of a Europe that is no longer inspired, but short of breath, emphysemic (not a little dramatically, he drags on a cigarette as he does so). Indeed, given all his work on Hölderlin, rivers, landscapes, and so on, we might have expected these questions to feature more heavily in his section of the film. Instead, the fact he concentrates on technology and on Heidegger's failure to recognize the gravity of the Holocaust speaks to a growing distancing from Heidegger in Lacoue-Labarthe's mind. Although he had dedicated many publications to the philosopher, the concepts of being-in-the-world, existence as a question, 'whiling' (HHI 162, 163, 164), and so on, were increasingly contaminated by a conception of dwelling that was not only exclusive to the Germans, but murderously, genocidally so. In thus rejecting Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe also rejects all notions of a landscape in which one might dwell (and this should be remembered, after the *Black Notebooks*: rejecting Heidegger means not just a

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<sup>21</sup> Barison, D. and Ross, D., *The Ister*, op. cit; Baudillon, C. and Lagarde, F., 'Entretiens de l'île Saint-Pierre', featuring Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Christophe Bailly and Baudillon, C. and Lacoue-Labarthe, Ph., 'Andenken', both in Baudillon, C. and Lagarde, F. (2011), *Proème de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe*, Montpellier: Hors œil; Baudillon, C. (2013), *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Altus*, Montpellier: Hors œil; Deutsch, M. (2009), *Voyage à Tübingen: un Portrait de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe*, consulted online at <http://www.filmsdocumentaires.com/films/434-philippe-lacoue-labarthe> on 2 November 2010. It must be said that *Voyage à Tübingen* is in many respects mawkish, showing a Lacoue-Labarthe suffering from the illness that affected him, and revolving around Hölderlin's madness in the German city in a teleological and mythologizing way.

single figure, but also everything that resembles his thought, even in very different contexts, including our own).

We can follow Lacoue-Labarthe's thinking by looking at a short text named 'Le Dépaysagement', which has two immediate interlocutors: the first is photographer Thibaud Cuisset, whose publication featuring interspersed photos of barren scenes in Namibia and Iceland is prefaced by Lacoue-Labarthe's text.<sup>22</sup> In this light, *dé-paysagement* would be an *un-landscaping*, an emptying-out of the activities that traditionally define a landscape – ones that are apparently bucolic but in fact already technological and rationalizing. The second interlocutor is Jean-Christophe Bailly (who also had that role in the film mentioned above), a regular collaborator of both Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, and author of *Le Dépaysement : Voyages en France*.<sup>23</sup> The title of this travelogue evokes being *dépaysé*, lost, disorientated, not at home, literally un-countried. It also responds to the German terms *das Unheimliche* and *das Unheimische*; Bailly speaks of the difficulty of national identity for a member of the '68 internationalist generation, who came to write this book of passages through France (rather than a book about France) only much later in his career. In other words, the classic symbols of Frenchness for him provoke not homeliness but a sense of unhomeliness or unease.

What does Lacoue-Labarthe say about *paysage* and *dépaysagement*? He starts by making a clear distinction between a landscape as a human creation, and unadulterated nature (that which from Romanticism on has been seen as a better indicator of real or authentic existence). In his words,

[A landscape] is always homogeneous, it has its own identity: its vegetation and fauna, its contours and the shape of its land, the nature of its ground and the way it is divided up, the architecture of its habitat, the way people speak there and their customs. This is obviously without forgetting its climate and its light, the air one breathes there; even, just as much, the type of activity that predominates there. It is a land that is essentially inhabitable, and inhabited: habitual too, familiar.<sup>24</sup>

This suits perfectly the discussion of rivers as what makes the land arable, allowing for a large number of agricultural and industrial techniques, and responding the quasi-mystical sense in which Hölderlin stated that 'the rock needs incisions'. As he continues, Lacoue-Labarthe softens or even erases the distinction between this sort of mainstream human activity, and the Romantic defences of nature that are often attempted in opposition to this activity. Yes, nature is pushed to the margins of exploitable land, but this is only a temporary stage: 'until such time as [...] a late Romanticism invents an exoticism of elsewhere and a sense of the picturesque, both based on this brute nature'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, a Romantic love for nature is not an act of insubordination against technological exploitation, but instead a more refined version of it, a way of extracting cultural value where no other form of material

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<sup>22</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Ph. (2005), 'Le Dépaysagement' in Lacoue-Labarthe (2009), *Écrits sur l'art*, Geneva : Réel, 249-55.

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit. The river theme is continued by a collaboration this time between Cuisset and Bailly, based around the former's photographs of the banks of the Loire; see Bailly, J.-C. (2001), 'La Loire de Thibaud Cuisset', consulted online on 13 July 2020 at [http://andrea.nfrance.com/~eq26451/texts/Cuisset\\_49-1.pdf](http://andrea.nfrance.com/~eq26451/texts/Cuisset_49-1.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Le Dépaysagement', op. cit., 250.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 250-51.

value is available. In short, a romantic affection for nature – and the tourism associated with it – does not allow for a critique of the planetary dominance of technology.<sup>26</sup>

In view of such an apparently promising external position becoming unavailable, the only possible alternative is to search for what Cuisset used for the title of the photographic album that Lacoue-Labarthe is prefacing: *Le Dehors absolu*.<sup>27</sup> And beyond daffodils and waterfalls, the heritage-industry version of Romanticism, the work of Schelling allows Lacoue-Labarthe to do this. It seems highly significant that he does so by picking up a term that we have already seen passing between the oeuvres of Sophocles and Hölderlin, Heidegger and Nancy (not to mention Freud, who made it most famous): *das Unheimliche*. Lacoue-Labarthe writes:

In the canonical definition that Schelling gives once and for all of *Unheimlichkeit*: it is the revelation of what must not be revealed, and what might secretly lie in this vision of the outside – or of this ‘search for the absolute’ [...]. Before the measurelessness distance of the desert and balancing on its unlimiting limitlessness, before the sky’s incommensurable insubstantiality, in which the ab-solute is sketched out, no subject is operative any more.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, it is not sufficient to simply posit an alternative type of subjectivity, for example Romantic rather than technological: this is still all-too rationalizing, it still brings everything back to the hearth of human activity. Despite the dangers present in a search for the absolute, one must understand this not as a total systematization but instead as a fragmentation or suspension, an ‘ab-solute’. And accompanying Schelling in the article here is perhaps the central figure in Lacoue-Labarthe’s thinking, Hölderlin. We are reminded that it is necessary to recuperate him from ‘Heideggerian overinterpretation’, for instance of his poems on the Rhine or the Ister, and instead consider him overlooking the banks of the river Neckar, during his long internal exile from sanity in Tübingen.<sup>29</sup> Here, we read that ‘Hölderlin constantly came back to the intuition about what he once called “the open”: *dans Offene*. He did so with a disarming simplicity, which is the most just response to the call of the outside’.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, the river should not be seen as a pretext for human technology, nor as some mystical divine otherness. But above all, it should not be limited to given landscapes, even as it continues to run through and shape them. Instead, it undoes the landscape as much as it contributes to it, it leads away from any given locality, breaking down the unity of place, draining it literally as well as figuratively. It is in this sense that we must always remember to speak of *dépaysement* and *dépaysagement*, with Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, and against Heidegger.

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<sup>26</sup> In 2019, Nancy remarked to me that neither he nor Lacoue-Labarthe had written on the Rhine – which after all flows through their adopted home city of Strasbourg, and is heavily laden with cultural associations – because they saw it as a commodified tourist attraction, suitable only for narrated river cruises.

<sup>27</sup> Cuisset, Th. (2005), *Le Dehors absolu*, Trézélan: Filigranes.

<sup>28</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘Le Dépaysagement’, op. cit., 254-55.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



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