Environmental Awareness and the Design of Literature

Edited by

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CHAPTER 5

Environmental Awareness and Geography: Reading Reclus Ecocritically?

Bertrand Guest

Abstract

By discussing recent attempts at reading French geographer Élisée Reclus from an eco-critical perspective, this contribution emphasizes his holistic and dialectic vision of man and nature. A reception study of his work enlightens early fragmentation and rejection of his thought, in that it has been a critical approach to either capitalist or marxist prometheism. Those subversive insights combined with historical awareness and knowledge appear to be the very reason for his revival since the 1970s. This geographical approach explains the blended phenomenon of human oppression of man together with the destruction of the Earth. Reclusian socialism constantly involves the Earth, in such way that one cannot defend nature against man, nor can one do the reverse. If the unity of the geographical and anarchistic aspects is not called into question any more, we still need to reread Reclus as a poet and as an environmentalist, the author of a characteristically global depiction of the cosmos, a perceptive and experimental inquiry on time and space and an essayist’s meditation on man’s progress and regress, all in one.

Keywords


...
Our new world is growing around us, as would a new flora under the garbage of the ages.¹

ÉLISÉE RECLUS, L’Anarchie 31

One cannot help but notice the revival, some even say the “renascence” (Dunbar 123) of Reclus’s works, illustrated by the international conference in Lyon in 2005. As could seem surprising for a French-centered readership, French reviews are all quite recent, and are part of a rediscovery which started with Béatrice Giblin and Yves Lacoste’s Hérodote issue in 1981. Although there may seem to have been few English-language readers until recently—as the anecdote about Italo Calvino’s tale “Un pomeriggio, Adamo” suggests, the Italian referring to Reclus, who is replaced by Kropotkin in the English translation (Calvino 1958: 24; 1957: 15)—they actually gave a strong impulse to Reclusian studies, promoting transdisciplinarity in order to renew critical approaches. One can consider in particular the decisive part played by English-language studies in emphasizing the environmental concern of this nineteenth-century libertarian and geographer. Gary S. Dunbar’s book, and Marie Fleming’s The Geography of Freedom, were, for a while, the only English-language studies of Reclus’s political philosophy. In 2004, John P. Clark and Camille Martin gave an introduction to selected writings of Reclus in the United States, stating that “Reclus’s strongly holistic account of natural processes often prefigures contemporary ecological analyses” (23). Their “Introduction to Reclus’ Social Thought” is part of a very strong debate between upholders of Reclus’s role as a forerunner of modern ecology, and those denying it, such as the French geographer Philippe Pelletier (1998, 2009), who affirms that Reclus was not an organicist thinker and basically has nothing to do whether with social or deep ecology. Considering that the ecocritical perspective remains a typical English-language take on the matter, only slowly emerging in French, the anglo-saxon approaches to Reclus’s works might be the very ones which first underlined Reclus’s ecological awareness. However, French writer Joël Cornuault, who

¹ When unspecified, all French quotations are given in our English translation, followed by the original text if necessary. “Notre monde nouveau point autour de nous, comme germerait une flore nouvelle sous le détritus des âges.”
founded the *Cahiers Élisée Reclus*, the first periodical to re-publish a number of texts by the anarcho-geographer, wrote a sequence of ecocritically-oriented monographs in the 1990s (1995, 1999). These essays emphasized the Reclusian dialectic between rationalism and romanticism, encyclopaedism and aestheticism, scientism and poetic impulse. In a few words I would like to sketch a history of a particularly muddled reception, and think about the way ecocritical readings—whether or not they make Reclus an environmentalist—have renewed the studies about his writings for the past two decades, possibly putting an end to a characteristically splitted reception between purely anarchistic interpretations and purely geographical ones.

**Early Rejection**

The least we can say is that Reclus was not a mainstream scholar. His first reception therefore consisted in a form of deliberate oblivion. His anarchism, including his part in the Commune insurrection and his support of the “Terreur noire” in the 1890s, but also his idea of teaching—he saw nature as a better teacher than school—made him look suspicious in the eyes of almost all academic geographers, except for a few peers from Leipzig, as is visible in this review of *L’Homme et la Terre* (*Man and the Earth*):

> Such were the clarity of exposition, the novelty of insights, the poetry of descriptions, an enthusiastic tone not excluding precision, that the book conquered cultivated men from the beginning and made his author the initiator of a new science. It appeared as geography’s *Discourse on Method*.2

The history of geography, though, never fully acknowledged Reclus as one of its distinguished figures, preferring Vidal de la Blache as the founder of French-style human geography. Béatrice Giblin regards it as unfortunate that Reclus should have been “erased,” a proposition that Dunbar does not agree with (1978: 129). Yet there is no doubt that his political radicalism prevented

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him from being acknowledged by academic geographers, in France and even in Brussels where in the end he was denied a chair. He made geography a tool to criticize powers, which explains his marginalization at a time when this discipline only had duties as a handmaiden to governments, providing them with maps and charts to make war. Ironically, Reclus’s subversive insights, highly critical of past and present politics, appear to be the very reason for his revival since the 1970s. Until that moment, skipping Reclus’s works was finally the best way to get around the difficulties they were creating, and, especially, to avoid the very question of capitalism oppressing men and destroying the Earth, or of the vanishing link between man and nature in modern societies. Social criticism by the anarchistic geographer is always concerned with possible ways of inhabiting the world. Fundamentally, Reclusian socialism and political concern constantly involve the Earth.

After years of condescension and oblivion, geographers, whatever their previous stances, started rediscovering Reclus, writing about his radicalism as an anarchist, though not always connecting his thinking about space, including human geography and philosophy of nature, to his politics. The main problem when reading Reclus might be the presence of essential incompatibilities amongst his readership.

Fragmenting Reclus’s Work

As Reclus finally emerged out of rejection, the major discrepancy lay between two distinct receptions which allegedly did not match: the geographical restoring to favor and the political interpretation, pursuing the tradition of an anarchistic reading of Reclus (see Gonot), although this approach has not been endorsed by the academic world. This split long structured Reclusian scholars, the Nouvelle Géographie Universelle being read by geographers, while anarchistic followers focused on the many political essays published in several issues of the Revue des deux mondes, among others. A political reception in fact appeared long before the late twentieth century, but only marginally. According to Gary Dunbar, “it is said that Stalin had derived his basic notions about environmental influences from Reclus” (1978: 126), an idea which makes us wonder what he found in Reclus that was in accordance with his own conceptions. Chinese intellectuals in Paris after 1905 were also imbued with anarchistic writings by Reclus and Kropotkin, but it is Latin American revolutionaries who probably tried best to implement those theories. Yet, for sure, it is not the ecologist who has been read politically, but rather the libertarian or the socialist. Each scholar was reading his or her own Reclus, so to speak.
In fact, Reclus’s works belong at the same time to nearly all human sciences and to poetics and should be read as such, for he was, along with Alexander von Humboldt, one of the last scholars and writers to see no boundaries between these various domains, nowadays strictly separated from one another. In the nineteenth century, the idea that geography could be at the same time poetry and philosophy did not frighten geographers, at least the Romantic ones: science and literature were not mutually exclusive, until Baconian science made them so in America, and “science positive” in France. Reclus probably counted himself among “men loving poetry and science at once” (Reclus 1995: 16, my translation). The problem of his reception therefore goes far beyond an epistemological clearing of his name, meant to acknowledge him at last as the true founder of French-style geography, that is to say, a real scientist, in spite of the fact that he was an anarchist, a poet and a free thinker. What ultimately matters is the intrinsic unity of his political, geographical and ecological insights, that is to say, the need to understand his “global” (Giblin) or “synthetic” (David Stoddart, Marie-Claire Robic), maybe even his “integral” and “holistic” (Clark), perspective.

Narrative Biographism

From a literary point of view, biographism, as a tendency to explain a body of work by its author’s biography, is a very common take on things, but in Reclus’s case, it has been sharpened both by oblivion and by fragmentation, so that critics are inclined to narration. The strongly biographical aspect of criticism may lead to the conjecture that throughout the history of the readings of Reclus, the main points of interest—conceptually—have been missed, as though the sole purpose of said criticism were to pull this thinker out of oblivion, not to understand the integrity of his thought as contributing to an analysis of the world we still live in. Furthermore, Reclus’s biography in a sense is the only thing everybody can agree on, before each critic takes the risk of fragmenting his thought. It does not concern only novelists or independent writers fictionalizing a life which was indeed very adventurous (Chadrak, Sarrazin).

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3 According to Joël Cornuault (1999: 11, my translation), “Élisée Reclus’s works have been read geographically. Politically. Both simultaneously. At a time when scientific literature seems to go back to literary expression, it is not forbidden to read it poetically.” (“On a lu les œuvres d’Élisée Reclus géographiquement. Politiquement. Les deux à la fois. À un moment où semble s’amorcer un retour de la littérature scientifique vers l’expression littéraire, il n’est pas interdit de les lire poétiquement.”).
The first Reclusian scholars were in a sense biographers, from his nephew Paul Reclus to many contributors to his Élisée and Élie Reclus: In Memoriam. Even today, to a certain extent, it looks as though no criticism is possible unless it is a biographical one. Jean-Didier Vincent recently updated the biography of Reclus, asserting that he was a geographer, an anarchist and an ecologist at the same time (Vincent 2010). Béatrice Giblin, one of the major contributors to Reclusian studies, who edited, and wrote an introduction to, an abridged version of L’Homme et la Terre (Reclus 1998b), cannot do otherwise but to tell his life first. We cannot understand how he became a geographer and an explorer—nor the emergence of his philosophy of nature—without considering his Irish and American exile after 1851, a direct consequence of his political beliefs. The lack of global perspective in reading Reclus still constitutes a major difficulty: if the unity of the geographical and anarchistic aspects is not called into question any more, some refuse to read him as a poet and as an environmentalist, even if biographies for the most part depict such a man. It is the consistency of his life, but, just as importantly, the consistency of his thought and work, which matters. Reclus was a scholar and an outlaw, a traveller and a writer, a man of experience, enacting what Laura Dassow Walls calls a Humboldtian program—“explore, collect, measure, connect” (1995: 134)—considering all things together, societies, men, ways of inhabiting the world, and of perceiving and dealing with nature.

Since the “popular ‘discovery’ of ecology has given a special cachet to radical or activist geographers” (Dunbar 1978: 128), the discrepancy in Reclus’s reception actually moved from a separation between anarchists and geographers to a new antagonism: ecocritical interpretation is not established in the eyes of all.

(Re)interpreting Reclus

We are now going to discuss recent attempts at reading Reclus from an ecocritical perspective, which to a large extent contributed to his most recent revival. Nowadays an interdisciplinary approach to his works seems to emerge, that is at last able to go beyond discrepancies in Reclus’s reception, and recover the multifaceted dimension of his work. Above all, the ecocritical reading of Reclus has the advantage of offering a comprehensive interpretation of a body of work which itself is comprehensive: La Terre, and later L’Homme et la Terre, attempted a synthetic description of the world, just as Kosmos (1845–1862) by Humboldt was an attempt at a physical description of the world (“Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung”). More than ever, Reclusian studies seem
to focus on the essential link between Reclus’s thinking about nature and his analysis of society. The awareness of holistic thought within the works of Reclus is gaining ground among scholars and the development of ecocriticism, with its focus on the relationship between human and non-human worlds, may finally allow Reclusian insights into the cosmos to recover their initial consistency. There is obviously much to be rediscovered in *Histoire d’un ruisseau* and *Histoire d’une montagne*, often presented as books for the layman, “too poetical to please geographers and too geographical to be approved by poets” (Cornuault 1995: 13), and of course in *L’Homme et la Terre*, Reclus’s last and probably most important work, a gigantic essay on man’s interaction with various natural habitats, the motto of which specifies that “Man is Nature that gets aware of itself” (2). Gary Dunbar reports that *Histoire d’un ruisseau* was Reclus’s favorite amongst his own books. This “praise of minor vegetal, animal, mineral and geographical phenomena” (Cornuault 1995: 15) brings to mind Thoreau’s *Journal*, which may be seen as an effort to capture the wholeness of the natural world through “the maze of phenomena” (Thoreau 1949: xi, 273), and constitutes an epic poem of the stream just like Whitman wrote an epic poem of the grass. In the eyes of geographers, the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* has always been Reclus’s *magnum opus*. But it is in *L’Homme et la Terre* that we encounter Reclus as a philosopher, and also as the true poet and stylist that he is. So much so that the publisher, Hachette, clearly dissuaded him from stating his political theories in the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle*, whereas *L’Homme et la Terre* expounds a global depiction of the world based on sensible experience, a synthesis mixing scientific description of the human and natural world, philosophy of history, and an essayist’s meditation on man’s progress (“progrès”) and regress (“régrès”).

I sketched out a new book in which to display the conditions of the soil, the climate, and the whole environment [*ambiance*] where the events of history unfolded, in which the agreement between Man and Earth should appear, in which the actions of peoples would be explained, in a cause and effect relationship, by their harmony with the evolution of the planet. […] We are allowed to trace back into time each period in the lives of peoples in relation with the changes in milieus, to observe the combined actions of Nature and Man himself, as reacting on the Earth that formed him.4 (1905–1908: i, 5–6)

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4 *Je dressai le plan d’un nouveau livre où seraient exposées les conditions du sol, du climat, de toute l’ambiance dans lesquelles les événements de l’histoire se sont accomplis, où se montreraient l’accord des Hommes et de la Terre, où les agissements des peuples s’expliqueraient, de
As such, it was at first despised by geographers as sociology and history, as for instance by Jean Brunhes in 1934: “Je préfère ne pas parler ici de l'œuvre posthume de Reclus qui contient d'intéressantes vues géographiques mais qui est surtout histoire ou sociologie” (1, 38). This paradoxical marginalization of Reclus's real opus magnus by early-twentieth-century geographers partly explains the misunderstanding that still opposes contemporary geographers to non-geographers, and among the latter, to ecocritics in particular. Pelletier thus blames ecocritics for their ignorance of geography’s prior concern about the relationship between nature and society, implying that Reclus wrote about it as a geographer, not as an early ecocritical writer. One could answer that Reclus did not write about nature like any geographer, for he was fighting determinism and the Vidalian naturalization of the region, without, for all that, denying natural influences on mankind, nor the tangible consequences of the sentiment of nature: just as Ritter and Humboldt had done, he was studying nature itself as well as its perception by man, whose importance he constantly underlined. His works deserve both global interpretation and comparative study, to shed light on their universality.

**Was Reclus an Environmentalist?**

Reclus, as Pelletier reminds us, does not use the word “ecology,” which was coined in 1866 by German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, preferring “naturalism” and “mesology” to refer to the description of natural environments as interrelated wholes. But this does not mean that he was not, in a way, studying ecology and announcing ecocritical concerns and approaches. A number of scholars have pointed “similarities between Reclus’s concerns about the environment and questions being raised by contemporary ecologists” (Fleming 1988: 24). He was one of the first thinkers in human geography unifying physical and economic data with a view to studying interactions between man and its natural environment. To be more precise, the French word “milieu” used in his books (“environment” is transferred into French by Vidal around 19215)

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5 The *Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé* dates the first French use of “environnement” in its ecological meaning from this 1921 quotation: “Mais, si l'on réfléchit à tout ce qu'implique ce mot de milieu ou d’environnement suivant l'expression anglaise, à tous les
does not make man step out of the natural world and consider it as an object. Reclus does not dissociate man from nature, pointing instead to their cohabitation and dialectical interaction, that is to say, man and nature’s consubstantiality or “humanity-in-nature” (Clark 2004: 20). On the one hand, man has to emancipate from nature’s constraints to achieve freedom, on the other hand becoming aware of his involvement and responsibility in nature’s harmony. As “the conscience of the Earth,” he learns that every progress implies possible regressions. To read Reclus globally, we would have to measure carefully his part in the complicated relationship between geography and ecology, as regards the dialectic of nature and society.

The action of man gives [...] the surface of the Earth the greatest diversity in aspect. On one side the former destroyed the latter, on the other it improved it; according to the social state and progress of each people, it contributes either to degrading Nature, or to embellishing it. Standing firm like a passing traveller, the barbarian plunders it; he exploits it forcefully without giving back, through culture and diligent attention, the goods that he pillaged; he even ends up devastating the country he inhabits and makes it unfit to live in. Properly civilized men, in the understanding that their own interest merges with the interests of all and that of Nature itself, act quite differently. [...] Once become the ‘conscience of the Earth,’ that man who is worthy of his mission endorses, through that dignity, a share of responsibility in the harmony and beauty of the surrounding nature.

Jean-Didier Vincent stresses the environmental concern of Reclus, who closely associates man and environment in what may be described as social geography. He reminds us of his readings of Naturphilosophen (99), whose insistence on

filinsoupçonnés dont est tissée la trame qui nous enlace, quel organisme vivant pourrait s’y soustraire?” (Vidal 7).

6 “L’action de l’homme donne [...] la plus grande diversité d’aspect à la surface terrestre. D’un côté, elle détruit, de l’autre elle améliore ; suivant l’état social et les progrès de chaque peuple, elle contribue tantôt à dégrader la nature, tantôt à l’embellir. Campé comme un voyageur de passage, le barbare pille la terre ; il l’exploite avec violence sans lui rendre en culture et en soins intelligents les richesses qu’il lui ravit ; il finit même par dévaster la contrée qui lui sert de demeure et par la rendre inhabitable. L’homme vraiment civilisé, comprenant que son intérêt propre se confond avec l’intérêt de tous et celui de la nature elle-même, agit tout autrement. [...] Devenu la ‘conscience de la terre’, l’homme digne de sa mission assume par cela même une part de responsabilité dans l’harmonie et la beauté de la nature environnante.”
human sensitivity toward nature allows mankind to be seen as belonging to the Whole, and of his close friendship with Patrick Geddes,7 another upholder of “think global, act local.” I would like to suggest that what makes the deep unity of Reclus’s thought, including anarchism and geography, has to do with environmentalism, in so far as it connects the various parts and aspects of the Earth one with another, and with ecology, in that it contributes to a scientific description of milieus.

Given the innovative aspect of Reclus’s geography, and its relevance to the current state of affairs, one may make him one of the fathers of modern ecology. Modern ecology, which is too vague, if not too confused epistemologically speaking, would benefit from turning towards Reclus’s scientific and libertarian geography. It is a matter of closeness, if not of affinity. [...] G.P. Marsh, the great American geographer, author of Man and Nature (1864), whom Reclus introduced to Europe and who is at the root of the creation of Natural Parks in the U.S., mentions that ‘his descriptions of Nature’s face and of the visible action of physical forces [...] form a continuous comment on geographical principles.’

VINCENT 2010: 178

The fact that Marsh was exchanging letters with Reclus from 1868 to 1870, and prefacing an American edition of The Earth,8 suggests the environmental concern of Reclus’s works, which, according to John P. Clark, “expanded social geography beyond the conventional limits of the geographical into a comprehensive worldview” (2004: 15), and are at the same time “a powerful contribution to introducing this more ecological perspective into anarchistic thought” (19). Reclus’s works, he continues, have a great deal in common with social ecology. As far as “social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all

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7 Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) was a biologist, sociologist, philanthropist and pioneering town planner who founded the Collège des Écossais in Montpellier. Linking space, education, society and evolution together, he advocated social town planning and nature conservation.

8 “On serait autorisé, au vu du caractère innovant et très actuel de la géographie de Reclus, de faire de lui un des pères de l’écologie moderne. Celle-ci, actuellement trop diffuse, sinon confuse sur le plan épistémologique, aurait intérêt à se rapprocher de la géographie à la fois scientifique et libertaire de Reclus. On parlera de voisinage, sinon d’affinité. [...] Le grand géographe américain G. P. Marsh, auteur du livre Man and Nature (1864) que Reclus a fait connaître à l’Europe et qui est à l’origine de la création des parcs naturels aux États-Unis relève que ‘ses descriptions du visage de la nature et de l’action visible des forces physiques [...] forment un commentaire ininterrompu des principes géographiques.’”

of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems” (Bookchin 2007: 19), no one can deny that Reclus was highly aware of this connection. He explains for instance that the development of ugly suburbs results from the greed of owners:

Unfortunately this overflow of towns towards the outside always implies that the countryside is spoiled: not only do all sorts of rubbish clog the space comprised in between cities and fields, but worse still, real estate speculation takes hold of all the charming sites in the vicinity, divides them into rectangular lots, encloses them in monotonous fencing walls, and then builds pretentious, petty houses by the thousands. For the wanderer strolling along the muddy paths of that so-called countryside, nature is represented solely by clipped shrubs and flowerbeds, that are to be seen through the railings.

Reclus 2002b: 65

Dunbar, however, notes that Reclus and Marsh “were on parallel courses, appreciating of each other’s work but not borrowing their essential ideas” (1978: 45). Whereas the geographer clearly advocated a (harmoniously) humanized Earth, the ecologist “stressed the destructive effects of man’s occupancy more than his constructive effects” (44). As far as he was interested in man’s interactions with nature, Reclus was abreast of the ecology of his age, though not defending nature against man (he was for instance fighting neo-malthusianism). Whether he really was a forerunner of ecology, Giblin and Lacoste only took it as a hypothesis, whereas Clark asserts it, and Pelletier denies it, though “closeness” or “affinity” is obvious.

Universal Work and Holistic Vision

Reclus’s approach to nature is marked by the idea of freedom, as showed by the frequent use of the expression “libre nature” [free nature]. It also has a tinge of

10 “Malheureusement ce reflux des villes vers l’extérieur ne s’opère pas sans enlaidir les campagnes : non seulement les détritus de toute espèce encombrent l’espace intermédiaire compris entre les cités et les champs ; mais, chose plus grave encore, la spécula-

tion s’empare de tous les sites charmants du voisinage, elle les divise en lots rectangulaires, les enclôt de murailles uniformes, puis y construit par centaines et par milliers des maisonnettes prétentieuses. Pour les promeneurs errant par les chemins boueux dans ces prétendues campagnes, la nature n’est représentée que par les arbustes taillés et les massifs de fleurs qu’on entrevoit à travers les grilles.”
wholeness to it, which one may call universality or sense of cosmos, brought to mind by a deep need of communication with all lifeforms: “Even when on his own, the bearer of knowledge must shout and reveal his treasure to the birds in the air, to the stars, to all of nature” (1905–1908: vi, 460–462). Animals are often seen as models or partners, in which respect Reclus places himself in the Darwinian tradition that considers man as part of a continuum which involves them, as in this note about China:

In many a river of the inner regions, the free alliance—that treats man and bird on equal grounds—has not been violated yet in favour of the stronger. Also, leagues have frequently been agreed upon, not for food, but for defence, notably against snakes. (1905–1908: vi, 155)

“L’Homme et la Nature—De l’action humaine sur la géographie physique,” a review of *Man and Nature* by George Perkins Marsh (1864), which Reclus wrote for the *Revue des deux mondes*, gives a list of endangered species and environmental risks to which the planet was already exposed. This essay bears testimony to a kind of cosmic awareness in Reclus’s mind, as he advocates nature preservation:

Amongst the races of birds the extinction of which man must undoubtedly blame himself for, one must mention the *Alca impennis* from the Faroe Islands, the dodo of Mauritius, the Reunion Ibis, the Madagascar *Æpyornis*, the *Dinorsis* of New Zealand. Besides, the disastrous consequences of the annual slaughtering of birds in hunting countries are a matter of fact. Owing to the inane intervention of Man, the tribes of insects, ants, termites, locusts are set free from the birds that waged war on them, and increase in number to the point of becoming in their turn genuine geographical agents.

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11 “Même seul, il faut que le porteur de la connaissance crie son trésor aux oiseaux de l’espace, aux astres, à la nature entière.”

12 “En mainte rivière de l’intérieur, l’alliance libre — parts égales entre l’homme et l’oiseau — n’a pas encore été violée au profit du plus fort. Des ligues se sont aussi conclues fréquemment, non pour la nourriture, mais pour la défense, notamment contre les serpents.”

13 “Parmi les races d’oiseaux dont l’homme doit sans doute se reprocher aussi l’extinction, il faut citer l’*alca impennis* des îles Feroë, le dodo de Maurice, le solitaire de la Réunion, l’*æpyornis* de Madagascar, les *dinorsis* de la Nouvelle-Zélande. En outre, on connaît les résultats déplorables que la tuerie annuelle des oiseaux a produits dans tous les pays de chasse. Délivrés, grâce à l’intervention insensée de l’homme, des oiseaux qui leur faisaient
One notes the ecological reasoning of this text, delineating the impact of individual evolutions within the whole habitat. What Reclus calls “agent géographique” is in fact an ecological agent, which suggests how his conception of geography was framed by ecology.

Many things have been said about Reclus's vegetarianism and opposition to meat-eating, whose essential link with his anarchistic thought probably lies in his fight against all forms of domination. First published in *Le Magazine international* in 1897, the essay “La grande famille”—a masterpiece of Reclus's ethno-geography, using references to other cultural eras than Greek or Judaeo-Christian—presents alternative possibilities of living with animals:

> Whereas we now think of education and domestication as a form of subduing when it comes to beasts, primitive man envisaged those as brotherly association. He regarded these living beings as companions, not as servants, and indeed beasts—dogs, birds, snakes—had come towards him in cases of shared distress, especially at times of floods and thunderstorms.

*Reclus* 2002c: 131

Let us consider what the anarchist Johan Most wrote about his encounter with Reclus in New York: “His eyes penetrate the universe and give one the feeling that one is, in the struggle for the emancipation of the workers, in unity and harmony with cosmic forces” (Ramus 1927: 124–125). “His spirit of nondomination,” Clark adds, “extended beyond human beings to all other creatures and, indeed, to nature as a whole” (2004: 13). Thinking about the “infinite pantheism” that “perceives an immense solidarity between all that lives” (Rothen 1927: 145), I would like to add that the holistic perspective does not necessarily imply obscurantism or religion (as feared by some scientific readers). Reclus was indeed a protestant—his father was a minister—and even studied theology in Montauban with his brother Élie, but he literally escaped from school and clearly renounced religion as he became an anarchist, eventually writing anticlerical essays. In spite of this, one might notice, in his prophetic tone and pantheistic sentiment of nature, remains of secularized natural theology.

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14 “Tandis qu'à l'égard des bêtes nous parlons aujourd'hui d'éducation ou de domestica
tion dans le sens d'asservissement, le primitif pensait fraternellement à l'association. Il voyait dans ces êtres vivants des compagnons et pas des serviteurs, et en effet les bêtes — chiens, oiseaux, serpents — étaient venues au-devant de lui dans des cas de commune détresse, surtout aux temps d'orage et d'inondation.”

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Reclus, furthermore, shares Thoreau’s Humboldtian “rational holism” (Walls 1995: 60–70), which combines globally extended care and plural approach (consciously following Humboldt, Reclus is usually writing from a geographical, historical, sociological and anthropological standpoint). Reclus is holistic for at least two reasons: he combines diverse points of view and he praises “solidarity” between man and the Earth, as in this passage from “L’Homme et la Nature” (1864: 762):

A Humboldt, a Ritter, a Guyot have all established by their works the solidarity of Man and Earth. The idea at the root of the inspiration of the famed author of the *Erdkunde* as he was composing his great encyclopædia on his own, the finest geographical monument of all time, is that the Earth is the body of Mankind, and Mankind, in turn, is the soul of the Earth.\(^{15}\)

“In a manner reminiscent of Carl Ritter, Reclus stressed the mystical bond between man and nature” (Dunbar 1978: 43). Reclus’s presumed mysticism is one of the most debated questions: how, some critics wonder, could an anarchist, a materialistic geographer, a scientist criticizing religion, remain a mystic? Let us remember that his father was a minister, and that he himself studied theology. If he distanced himself from religion, one can imagine that he did not turn his back on any sense of the Sacred, and that he did not choose materialism and class struggle against spirituality and nature-mysticism. Why then would he regard nature as the great educator? How would one explain his praise of preserved natural areas where men can rest and learn, far from the oppression inflicted by the different forms of power, as in this passage from an article published in the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1866?

Therefore we may joyfully greet this generous passion that leads so many men—even, shall we say, the greatest—to roam the virgin forests, the marine beaches, the mountainous gorges, to visit nature in all places around the globe where it has preserved its primal beauty. One feels that, lest intellect and morale should dwindle and vanish, one must at all cost balance the vulgarity of so many awful and mediocre things which the narrow-minded identify as the expression of modern civilisation, by the

\(^{15}\) “[…] les Humboldt, les Ritter, les Guyot ont établi par leurs travaux la solidarité de la terre et de l’homme. L’idée-mère qui inspirait l’illustre auteur de l’*Erdkunde* lorsqu’il rédigeait à lui seul sa grande encyclopédie, le plus beau monument géographique des siècles, c’est que la terre est le corps de l’humanité, et que l’homme, à son tour, est l’âme de la terre.”
sight of the greatest sceneries of the Earth. The direct study of nature and the contemplation of its phenomena become, for any complete man, one of the essential elements of education. (2002b: 66–67)\textsuperscript{16}

The whole of Reclus’s works can be seen as reflecting a balance between scientific knowledge and a mystical sense of nature:

Humboldt and Goethe were the godfathers of this duality—the double aspect of Elisée the rationalist scholar keen on the physics of the earth and at the same time the romantic lover of Man and Nature. Out of the ancient embers of a puritanical conscience that nothing could ever smother, a religion of man and the earth was rising, from which he would derive his beliefs and commitments.

\textit{Vincent 2010: 99}

Reclus was of course thinking about social progress: the real center of his works is mankind. The originality of his philosophy, however, is the dialectical interaction of mankind with nature, so that each term is linked to the other. Thus, more than the distinct object of a comparison with nature, man is as “a part and parcel of Nature,” as Thoreau said in “Walking” (2007: 185), seen as continuous with and belonging to nature, by the effect of an analogical link with the mutual dependance of body and soul.

It seems that I have become part of the surroundings; I feel as if I am one with the floating aquatic plants, one with the sand swept along the bottom, one with the current that sways my body.

\textit{History of a river, English translation quoted by Clark 2004: 24}\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} “C’est donc avec joie qu’il nous faut saluer maintenant cette passion généreuse qui porte tant d’hommes, et, dirons-nous, les meilleurs, à parcourir les forêts vierges, les plages marines, les gorges des montagnes, à visiter la nature dans toutes les régions du globe où elle a gardé sa beauté première. On sent que, sous peine d’amoindrissement intellectuel et moral, il faut contre-balancer à tout prix par la vue des grandes scènes de la terre la vulgarité de tant de choses laides et médiocres où les esprits étroits voient le témoignage de la civilisation moderne. Il faut que l’étude directe de la nature et la contemplation de ses phénomènes deviennent pour tout homme complet un des éléments primordiaux de l’éducation […]”

\textsuperscript{17} “Il me semble même que je suis devenu partie du milieu qui m’entoure, je me sens un avec les herbes flottantes, avec le sable cheminant sur le fond, avec le courant qui fait osciller mon corps...” (Reclus 1995: 137).
If those lines are clearly inspired by the Romantic aesthetics of man’s merging into the whole of nature, we need to understand the Reclusian conception of man and the Earth as a dialectical one: man is naturally transforming the Earth, as the Earth determines him. As Clark specifies:

Nature thus shapes humanity at the same time that humanity reshapes the natural world. While modern civilization has devoted much attention to the latter side of this dialectic, the power of humanity to transform nature, it has exhibited little concern for humanity’s moral responsibilities in its interaction with nature. (2004: 27)

Reclus intends to describe this dialectic, without taking sides, hence the wavering as to whether he is an ecologist or not. In his eyes, artefacts are also naturalized as parts of the Earth, in which respect Reclus blamed neither cities, nor technique. This is a decisive point differentiating his proto-environmentalism from later deep ecology.

In his discussion of the impact of man upon nature, he stressed not only the destructive effects, like his American contemporary George Perkins Marsh, but also the constructive efforts. Like his Christian mentor, Carl Ritter, Reclus thought of the Earth as the home of man, a place created for man’s use and enjoyment. Instead of always desecrating the Earth, man often improves it (Dunbar 1978: 42–43). In doing so, Reclus is rereading the biblical cosmology of human stewardship over the Earth, as seen in Genesis:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (i, 26) […] And the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. (ii, 15)

In the eyes of the anarchist geographer, the part of mankind in this double narration of origins is to be interpreted rather as keeping stewardship than as “dominion.” He even praises partnership with animals in primitive societies, association, brotherhood and careful education.

Anthropocentric Care for Nature

Rather than an ecocentric or a biocentric perspective, it seems that Reclus developed an anthropocentric, but careful, approach to nature. He “expounds
a theory of social progress in which human self-realization and the flourishing of the planet as a whole can finally be reconciled with one another” (Clark 2004: 20). There is little doubt concerning Reclus’s globally anthropocentric perspective, even within those of his works which are most penetrated by the romantic sense of nature:

If one ever manages to use freshwater fish domestically to produce flesh in sufficient quantities for the nourishment of all, then of course it shall be an object of contentment since all inferior forms of life are devoted to the sustainment of human life; but then there will be no other possibility but to look back with nostalgia on the era when all these animals swam freely. (1995: 151)\(^{18}\)

The geographer believes in progress and science, even if he dialectically couples progress with possible regress. Yet he did not remain attached to a purely anthropocentric perspective, as he wished “full unification of the civilized with the uncivilized.”\(^{19}\) I have already underlined his praise of man’s harmonious interaction with nature. As a matter of fact, he stressed interactions and dialectics: his philosophy is therefore not centered at all. So-called bio-centrism or eco-centrism is in fact a very problematic notion because it suggests that there is still a center of the universe, even though biocentrists claim the contrary. Clark makes Reclus a biocentric thinker: “What is striking about his viewpoint is the degree to which he could transcend many of the dominant ideas of his century in shifting from an entirely human-centered to a more earth-centered perspective” (2004: 23), which Pelletier diametrically contradicts:

Not only Haeckel’s “ecology,” but Isidore Geoffroy’s “ethology” (1859), Saint-George Mivart’s “hexicology” (1880), E. Ray Lancaster’s “bionomics” (1889), without even mentioning Thomas Huxley’s “physiography,” which he appreciates but also criticises alongside Kropotkin, all these disciplines claiming novelty and heralded by neologisms must have sounded too naturalistic to Reclus, too oriented in one direction detrimental to human dynamics, too remote from his position which nowadays

\(^{18}\) “Si jamais on arrive à domestiquer complètement les poissons d’eau douce et à manifester ainsi de la chair à volonté pour l’alimentation publique, certes il faudra s’en réjouir, puisque toutes les vies inférieures sont encore employées à sustenter la vie de l’homme; mais on ne pourra s’empêcher de regretter le temps où tous ces animaux nageaient en liberté.”

\(^{19}\) “l’union plénière du civilisé avec le sauvage” (1905–1908: v1, 538).
would be termed “anthropocentric,” but which he himself named “social.” (2009: 113–114)

However, long before these categories were put up against each other, he was considering points of partition between biocentrism and anthropocentrism, as we can see in this excerpt from his 1895 lecture entitled “L’Anarchie,” even though it was in a context which is more political than ecological:

It is indeed the struggle against all official powers that distinguishes us essentially: each individuality seems, to our eyes, to be the center of the universe, and each has the same right to fulfillment, without the intervention of a power that rules it, rebukes it, or castigates it. (2009: 14)²⁰

What is at stake in this debate about the object that was at the center of his geography, is nothing less than a possible partisan use of Reclus, either by radical ecology, or by town and country planning—the former making him a forerunner of deep ecology though it may be an anachronism, and the latter seeing him as a mere proponent of human growth and power. As nature’s conscience, man only remains the real center of Reclus’s cosmology so long as he pays attention to and proves concerned with other species. Reclus establishes the tenets of what was to become ecocriticism, by removing man from its central position.

As an anarchistic thinker, Reclus deconstructed social laws in order to replace them only by the laws of nature. According to him, mankind cannot achieve independence from nature. It can only get free in conforming to its laws, though it shall not give in and become passive. Human freedom is a dynamic process, but it always makes compromises with nature's constraints. “Our freedom in our relationship to the Earth,” Reclus writes, “consists in acknowledging its laws so as to run our lives according to them.”²¹ Reclus’s environmentalism consists in finding this harmony or balance between natural laws and the human quest for freedom. In this respect it has nothing to do with biocentrism, but as far as it connects Man and Nature, it does not consist in pure anthropocentrism either.

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²⁰ “C’est bien la lutte contre tout pouvoir officiel qui nous distingue essentiellement : chaque individualité nous paraît être le centre de l’univers, et chacune a les mêmes droits à son développement intégral, sans intervention d’un pouvoir qui la dirige, la morigène ou la châtie.”

²¹ “Notre liberté, dans nos rapports avec la Terre, consiste à en reconnaître les lois pour y conformer notre existence” (1868: ii, 623).
We can finally understand Reclus’s vegetarianism and concern for forests in this careful though anthropocentric perspective, and read him as a forerunner of both scientific ecology and political environmentalism. This geographer advocated nature conservation and abided by his principles in his way of life, being a militant vegetarian, just as he advocated social justice and struggled to uphold it:

I have a distinct remembrance of horror at the sight of blood. One of the family sent me, plate in hand, to the village butcher, with the injunction to bring back some gory fragment or other. In all innocence I set out cheerfully to do as I was bid, and entered the yard where the slaughtermen were. I still remember this gloomy yard where terrifying men went to and fro with great knives, which they wiped on blood-besprinkled smocks. [...] I remember one of them bleeding the animal slowly, so that blood fell drop by drop; for, in order to make really good black puddings, it appears essential that the victim should have suffered proportionately. She cried without ceasing, now and then uttering groans and sounds of despair almost human; it seemed like listening to a child.


First of all, the narrator refers to experience, like Thoreau who, “having been [his] own butcher, and scullion and cook, as well as the gentleman for whom the dishes were served up, [...] can speak from an unusually complete experience” (1971: 214). Secondly, he is drawing a comparison between animal and man, which, as we begin to think about it, becomes unbearable. Reclus also complained about pioneers cutting and burning forests as in Histoire d’une montagne, at a time when few people did care about their function in the ecological health of the earth:

[When lumber-jacks] plan their cuts carefully, so as to leave a reserve of wood standing for the following years, humanity can only rejoice over the sight of the new wealth they produce. But, when they cut and destroy the whole forest at once, as though under some frenetic spell, may one not put a curse on them? (1998: 134)\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} “[Si les bûcherons] règlent soigneusement leurs coupes, de manière à laisser sur pied des récoltes de bois pour les années suivantes et à développer dans le sol forestier la plus grande force de production possible, l’humanité n’a qu’à se féliciter des richesses nouvelles qu’ils procurent. Mais lorsqu’ils coupent, détruisent d’un coup la forêt tout entière, comme s’ils étaient saisis d’un accès de frénésie, n’est-on pas tenté de les maudire?”
Reclus’s work might be read as cosmic poetry, as well as materialist theory. As we can see, his human geography is affective as well as scientific knowledge. Avoiding the words of the specialists and escaping at last from any closed category, he was a free thinker seeking after cosmos, an observer of man and nature’s dialectical evolution, a geographer, a writer and a poet at the same time. His description of the world stands “halfway in-between romantic solitude and collectivistic gregariousness” (Cornuault 2008: 49) and develops affinities with environmentalism. It articulates order and disorder, progress and regress, just as it seeks after unification of Man and Nature. Reclus is a thinker whom geography did not draw away from poetry, from romantic nature, toward a narrow scientism. Neither was he drawn away by materialism and atheism from the cosmological “sentiment of Nature.”

Works Cited