CHAPTER 4

Materiality

1 Immersion in the Dissolve in *Leviathan*

The expression “You had to be there” offers an easy way out for those unable to verbally convey their experience, often of something hilarious, at other times of something that has made an impression. But there is some truth in the expression. Words can only do so much, even if they are skillfully combined with intonation and timing by a master storyteller who is physically present. It is difficult for words to express an experiential totality that would include smell, sound, light, temperature, mood, and touch. Words on paper are what authors have as their primary, if not only, tool. Filmmakers work in a medium that communicates with us through our senses of sight and hearing. Still, movies cannot convey smells and temperature, nor can they touch you physically in the strict sense of the word.

*Leviathan* (2012), a documentary film directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, is an experimental work about the North American fishing industry. But experimental in what way? And why? Paravel provides us with a clue in Dennis Lim’s review of the film, which also features brief interview clips with the directors: “The film became a physical reaction to the experience of being out at sea.” Paravel’s statement points to the inevitable link between maritime experience and poetics, between being aboard an industrial fishing trawler at sea and the experimental character of the film language in the documentary. Explicitly, Paravel tells us that she and Castaing-Taylor came to associate being at sea with a very corporeal experience, and that they felt compelled to transfer that feeling into the film. Implicitly, her description tells of an experience that was physical in a strange and unsettling way. This is backed up by her co-director, who tells us why they chose to discard 50 hours of land-based footage with fishing industry workers: “‘Once we started filming on the boat, we lost interest in land,’ Mr. Castaing-Taylor said. ‘There was something going on out there that was much more cosmic and profound.’”

The sense of an ontological and epistemological sea change explains why the film had to be experimental.

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and why the directors had to experiment with film language (Figure 16, 17, 18, and 19).

One of the most striking experimental elements of the film is its use of multiple points of view, most of which avoid the traditional human-eye perspective. The soundtrack, almost wordless, also contributes to the film’s originality. There is a deliberate shying away from human gaze and sound and a movement toward a more centrifugal or distributive perception: “It was more corporeal, more embodied than the most frenetic vérité footage,” he said. “There’s
this charge of subjectivity. But at the same time it renounces any directorial intent,’” Castaing-Taylor tells Lim.2 These techniques of sensory experience simulation became possible through the use of small water-resistant action cameras, the so-called GoPro, that were mounted on sailors, fish, trawlers, and other objects to capture the raw images and natural sounds, among them the

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2 Lim, “The Merger of Academia and Art House.”
clanking of metal chains, the splashing of violent waters, and the churning of industrial machines. Sometimes, when the splashing water hits the camera lens, it seems to be splashing us in the eyes.

The directors of *Leviathan* do not tell viewers, “You had to be there,” because the documentary takes you there. You are immersed in the brutally tough life of fishermen on industrial ships; the intense dynamics between fishing trawler, ocean, and sky; the salty forces of waves; and the predatory formations of seagulls. The film violently plunges the spectator into its universe of visual and aural stimuli whose concentration overpowers you and whose fragmentary editing estranges you. Are immersion and estrangement not incompatible? Not in this case. The spectator is simultaneously estranged from a *terra firma* existence and immersed in an unfamiliar oceanic universe. Through the operations of color and light, more specifically the blend of intensified and washed-out colors and a persistent darkness or obscurity, combined with other poetological techniques such as multiple and (humanly and especially nonhumanly) embedded points of view, natural sounds, and nonlinear composition, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel succeed in generating a hallucinatory effect. One critic, unconvinced of the film’s qualities, suggested an alternative title, *David Lynch, Gone Fishin’*. Despite the derogatory intention, that is not too far off. Castaing-Taylor has admitted that while the film “is utterly a documentary, and in the sense that we gave over the camera for part of it, it’s perhaps even more documentary, less mediated by the filmmakers, [...] it also doesn’t feel like a documentary to me. It feels more like a horror film or science fiction.”

Why are the effects of hallucination and estrangement a measure of success when, as Lim remarks, “most documentaries prize clarity”? For two reasons, one ontological, the other epistemological. Being on board a ship in the middle of the ocean (deep-sea fishing has one of the highest mortality rates of any occupation) can, ontologically speaking, be compared to a strange, almost hallucinatory experience. This can be explained not only because of losing firm ground under one’s feet, but also by referring to Stacy Alaimo’s ideas of being “exposed” and “dwelling in the dissolve” as theorized in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (2016). To exemplify, Alaimo refers to persons

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4 Lim, “The Merger of Academia and Art House.”
5 Lim, “The Merger of Academia and Art House.”
affected by the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 as “totally exposed.” In that situation, the human body’s protective membranes, especially the skin, became powerless against surrounding forces, here lethal radiation, penetrating their bodies as if boundaries did not exist. Alaimo’s example shows on a more general level that human bodies, also in less drastic situations, are in constant interaction with a myriad of nonhuman matter that undermines the seemingly solid boundaries between us and it. This happens when we eat food, inhale air, produce vitamin D through metabolism because absorbing sunlight through our skin, or simply by existing in the world. We inhabit this world of constant exchanges, blends, and crossings, not between two sharply separated flanks, human and nonhuman, but between every single agentic component in a relational force field. We dwell in the dissolve, which is the opposite of a hierarchical binary structure with us on one side and nonhuman life and matter on the other.

Leviathan forms and reveals this flatter universe. The images of sky and ocean may suggest a vertical scale of the most extreme heights and depths, but the film advocates that ultimately, seagulls and fish are made of the same substance. When Castaing-Taylor and Paravel zoom in on the furrowed brow of a fisherman, they hold the close-up image for a while so that the human eye of the fisherman increasingly resembles something that belongs to a sea creature. The visual tactic of close-up and retaining the frame conveys a world picture in which humans are being levelled ontologically, becoming closer with other living species. The film is a radical experiment, thematically in that it re-thinks the relationship between humans, nature, and technology by promoting a vision of dwelling in the dissolve, and formally in that it succeeds in conveying this vision through a variety of aesthetic technics of immersion.

2 Forces of Sea and Abyss in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*

In the following, I will continue the discussion of the relationship between humans, nature, things, and technology and of how this relationship can be aesthetically configured by reading Victor Hugo’s *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, first published on March 12, 1866. The three-volume novel was released simultaneously in Brussels and Paris, and while it was received positively and even had bestseller status in the Channel Islands at one point, it gradually fell into obscurity; however, it has recently been acknowledged by a few but important scholars as an important work in the history of the novel.7

In the “Preface,” Hugo frames *Les Travailleurs de la mer* by contrasting it with two of his previous novels, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862). Hugo’s starting point for comparison is “the three struggles in which man is engaged,” but that “are, at the same time, his three needs.” Whereas *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables* depict mankind’s struggles with and needs for religion and society, respectively, *Les Travailleurs de la mer* is a portrayal of mankind’s struggle with and need for nature. To Hugo, in mankind’s struggle with and need for religion, we find a solution in faith that leads to the construction of temples (Notre-Dame); in mankind’s struggle with and need for society, we find a solution in creation that leads to the building of cities (Paris); and in mankind’s struggle with and need for nature, our solution is subsistence in the form of plow and ship (the steamship Durande in *Travailleurs*).

However, with every solution comes a danger against which mankind ought to fight: if faith is one side of religion’s coin, superstition is the other; if creation is one side of society’s coin, prejudice is the other; and if subsistence is one side of nature’s coin, the elements are the other. Faith, creation, and subsistence are anthropocentric solutions, but superstition, prejudice, and the elements are three exterior forces, *fatalities*, that govern our lives: “A triple *ananke* weighs upon us: the *ananke* of dogmas, the *ananke* of laws, the *ananke* of things.” *Les Travailleurs de la mer* is from the outset distanced by its author from religion, faith, temples, superstition, and dogmas (*Notre-Dame de Paris*) and from society, creation, cities, prejudice, and laws (*Les Misérables*); instead, it is linked with nature, subsistence, plow, ship, elements, and things. Cultural anthropological spheres such as religion and society and cultural constructions such as temples and cities are not entirely absent in the novel, but as Hugo indicates in the “Preface,” nature, ship, elements, and things (the exterior fatality) are, together with “the supreme *ananke*, the human heart” (the interior fatality), crucial agentic and almost fatal forces governing the novel’s universe. The question is who gets the upper hand?

### 2.1 **Humans and Things**

*Les Travailleurs de la mer* is closely associated with Victor Hugo’s nineteen-year exile (December 11, 1851–September 5, 1870), the majority of which he spent on Guernsey in the Channel Islands after also having lived in Brussels and on Jersey. The novel began to incubate during a two-week holiday on the tiny
island of Sark in the summer of 1859, and it was written between June 1864 and November 1865. *The Toilers of the Sea*, set on Guernsey and in its surrounding archipelago, is a strange, composite, and undecided novel in both a thematic and formal sense. On the one hand, written as a traditional plot-driven story involving human protagonists, it is a story of failed romantic love, human isolation, deceit, and financial ruin. On the other hand, composed in some sections as a treatise on natural history and in others as philosophical essay, it is a poetic portrayal of organic forces and inorganic potencies undermining or supplementing human agency. The novel’s critical reception has often ignored these thematic and formal ambiguities and has instead focused on the human protagonists and the themes of the human-centered storyline. In many readings of the novel, “the supreme ananke, the human heart,” carries more weight than nature, things, and the elements.

In a comparison between Hugo’s novel and Conrad’s *The End of the Tether*, J. H. Stape notices their mutual concern “with marginality and alienation, with the betrayal of trust, heroic self-sacrifice, and the encounter with a hard fate.”9 Stape focuses on themes rooted in individual man and his relationship to his fellow humans or nature. Switching media, Gustave Doré’s two illustrations for the 1867 English editions of the novel, “The Last Breakwater” (Figure 20) and “The Fight with the Devil-Fish” (Figure 21), subscribe to the same line of thinking with their emphasis on Gilliatt, the heroic romantic outsider. By foregrounding Gilliatt, sharpening his profile, and blurring everything around him, Doré accentuated his principal role.

In contrast, the majority of the thirty-six illustrations made by Hugo, which he never specifically intended for *Les Travailleurs* but nevertheless incorporated into the original 1866 manuscript, portray scenes in which humans are either absent or, if present, invisible and backgrounded. Hugo’s drawings, exemplified below by “Naufrage” (Figure 22) and “La Pieuvre” (Figure 23), demonstrate his attentiveness to nonhuman elements and their potency.

In “Naufrage,” the technique of misting or obscuring applies not only to the surrounding ocean and sky but also to the ship in the center of the image, making a comparison with Turner’s style in *Snow Storm* inevitable. Hugo’s fascination with unruly matter and stuff was not limited to the represented vision; it also manifested in his choice of materials of representation. Graham Robb informs us that Hugo supplemented the traditional materials of charcoal, graphite, ink, gouache, and gum with substances such as blackberry

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juice, caramelized onion, burnt paper, soot from the lamp, toothpaste, and—according to Georges Hugo, Victor’s grandchild—saliva; there have been hints of even less respectable materials: “Anyone who investigates the origins of a new style should expect to find a mess. Hugo scribbled, smudged, scratched and toyed. He was a lover of substances and textures—inanimate and

human."¹⁰ Hugo’s vision of shipwreck, which cannot be characterized as a harmonious relationship between all parts nor as a transcendent spirit merging
the diversity of elements, brings to mind Deleuze's phrase: “Ontologically one, formally diverse.” The misty quality draws all elements closer to each other on

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an ontological level, although the individual shapes are discernable. The contrast between Doré’s and Hugo’s devil-fish images is as obvious as that between “The Last Breakwater” and “Naufrage.” The former centralizes Gilliatt; the latter excludes him.
However, even Hugo was wavering. If a large portion of his thirty-six illustrations suggests a world in which humans are reduced to minor ripples on the oceanic canvas of universal history and, as a result, depict nature and the inorganic matter of human constructions (e.g., ships) as forceful and dynamic actors, then the genealogy of the novel’s title seems to point in the opposite direction. With the original tentative title, *L’Abîme* (*The Abyss*), Hugo signaled a disanthropocentric thinking like that depicted in his illustrations. To Hugo, “the abyss,” a concept used several times in the novel, refers to immeasurable oceanic depths and mysteriously vivacious caverns, that is, to concrete physical places. Together with expressions and sister concepts such as “somber force beneath,” “darkness,” “invisible world,” “irreducible obscurity,” “immensity,” and “shadows,”12 “abyss” also refers to the innermost workings and enigmatic mechanisms of life, matter, and the universe as such. Hugo’s preferred title thus emphasizes a world of relational forces in which human agency is only one force, energy, or effect among many others. But with Hugo’s switch of title from *L’Abîme* to *Les Travailleurs de la mer*—a switch insisted upon by the publishers of Lacroix, Verboeckhoven et Cie in Brussels for commercial reasons—it could be argued that a more anthropocentric world picture is heralded, one in which “the human heart” reigns supreme.

It seems a fair assumption that the eponymous toilers, or, perhaps more appropriate, *workers* of the sea are humans, more specifically, the “weather-wise” sailors and semi-amphibian persons mastering “sea gymnastics”13 such as Mess Lethierry, Rantaine, Sieur Clubin, and Gilliatt. This assumption is not wrong. Besides, the title has an air of First International (1864–1876) and Émile Zola about it. The naturalism of the latter was on the verge of a breakthrough with the publication of *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and, especially, of the second edition published the following year that included Zola’s foreword in which he introduces naturalism for the first time.14 However, it is important to dismiss the idea of a collective novel relating the everyday tasks of fishermen in the mold of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* or Hans Kirk’s later *Fiskerne* (1928; *The Fishermen*), although portrayals of these people do appear in glimpses in the novel’s introductory part (first added in 1883). It could also be argued that with *travailleurs* Hugo maintains a reference to the broader forces and energies of maritime life forms and organisms including crabs, rocks, steamships,

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octopuses, and seaweed, all of which are oceanic workers in their own right as they influence and uphold or destroy the ecology of the sea.

That the workers (in plural) of the title perhaps refer more to nonhuman than human actors is supported by Hugo’s decision to portray the mariners as loners and isolated individuals. This choice was determined in part by the modernization of maritime life, a theme that runs through Hugo’s novel and is most clearly expressed through the Durande’s success in outmaneuvering the island’s sailing ships. “The telos of La Durande,” Margaret Cohen states in her labor-oriented reading of the novel, “is the vast, depopulated container ship of the turn of the twenty-first century.” The themes of sail versus steam and of technological development unites Hugo with Melville, Verne, and Conrad, but Hugo’s mariners are strikingly different from the mariners hailed by his three colleagues.

Melville focused on and emphasized the values of collaboration and community on board sailing vessels; Conrad did so too, or, in the texts dealing with life on board steamships, he bemoaned the decline of those values; Verne followed a similar trend, although in his case the reader was invited on board a submarine. Admittedly, the Nautilus is captained by an isolated individual, but Nemo depends on and encourages teamwork on board his underwater vessel. In Melville, Ahab’s charisma, thoughts, and deeds set him radically apart from his crew, but in large portions of the novel Ishmael is oriented towards the collective work of the crew. Ahab, if endowed with superhuman characteristics, is never praised for them as Gilliatt is. In Conrad, no such supermen sailors exist. Outsiders such as Marlow and MacWhirr are not celebrated because of their heroism, craft, skills, and cunning; instead, they are ordinary men, some of whom are endowed with a gift of seeing a modern world in the process of becoming disenchanted and telling about it. MacWhirr is a special case, not really able to see, certainly not to tell, but in a way, he is celebrated because of heroic deeds made possible by his composure, yet also portrayed sufficiently ludicrous to disqualify him as a hero in the mold of Hugo’s outsider-hero. Gilliatt has more in common with Robinson Crusoe, also with Hemingway’s old man, but Gilliatt is not a reader of the Bible like Crusoe, and instead of comprehending the values of the civilization he has just left, Gilliatt discovers the immanent immensity of the universe that he affronts, and which engulfs him.

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The indecisiveness or disagreement in relation to the choice of title and the ambiguity of the meaning of travailleurs/toilers in the final title sustains a stimulating tension between anthropocentric and geocentric (and hydrocentric) propensities in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. This is backed up by the novel’s formal qualities. On one level it is a traditional and plot-driven story of (disillusioned and failed) romantic love between an orphaned outsider, Gilliatt, and a sweet, pretty, and carefree girl, Déruchette (a diminutive form of Durande, the one the daughter of Lethierry, the other his steamship). On another level, the novel contains long passages that turn away from the anthropo-story, some of which are best characterized as natural history, travel guide, anthropological treatise, philosophical essay, or aesthetic manifest, others as technological handbook, craftsman user manual, or nautical compendium. Plot, human deeds, and interpersonal relations take center stage in most of the novel, but frequently and for quite long stretches this anthropocentric world picture with its period belief in societal progress, human agency, and personal liberty is challenged or even undermined. This happens when Hugo zooms in on a plethora of nonhuman forces and energies attributed to organic and inorganic matter alike, which activate temporalities that are different from traditional human-centered temporalities. Examples of “vibrant matter,” as Jane Bennett calls it, are seasons, clouds, fog, wind, flowers, grass, granite, foam, waves, seaweed, reefs, underwater caverns, engines, and a steamship. In that sense, *The Toilers of the Sea* contradicts Jeffrey J. Cohen’s claim in *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015) that “a narrative in which it might figure as something more than an ancillary device, a protagonist rather than a prop, has yet to appear.” Hugo’s novel is precisely such “a multifaceted narrative of cross-taxonomic relation”\(^\text{17}\) in which stone, most notably in the shape of a reef, the Douvres, but also the deceptive mirages and formless formations of granite, rocks, and cliffs along the eroding coastline, plays a crucial and actively plot-shaping role.

The most clear-cut example of a longer section in which the traditional anthropocentric plot is supplanted by a nonanthropocentric plot predominantly governed by nonhuman forces is the novel’s first chapter, a sort of overture, “The Archipelago of the Channel” (p. 5–55). Other examples are “Book I: The Reef” (p. 239–81), “Sub Re” (p. 289–94) and “Sub Umbra” (p. 294–99) from “Book II: The Labor,” and “The Winds From the Ocean” and “The Combat” from “Book III: The Struggle,” all of which are part of the novel’s second and middle part, “Gilliatt the Cunning.” In “The Archipelago of the Channel,” examples

abound of an object-based historiography and anthropology showing Hugo’s preoccupation not merely with thinking of and with things but also with rendering thought thing-like: we are thus presented with disanthropocentric history (e.g., “The Atlantic wears away our coasts. The pressure of the current from the Pole deforms our western cliffs”), geological survey (e.g., “Granite to the south, sand to the north; here sheer rock faces, there dunes”), and elemental-biological determinism (e.g., “The wind carries away miasmas and brings about shipwrecks”).

Tellingly, this introductory chapter did not feature in the first English translations of the novel and became part of the English edition only with the first complete translation published in 2002, the bicentenary of Hugo’s birth. Nor did it feature in the 1866 French original due to editorial decisions, which overruled the author’s intention of including it as an overture; it was not included until the “ne varietur” edition that Hetzel-Quantin published in 1883 as volumes xi and xii in Œuvres complètes, two years before Hugo’s death. The exclusion of “The Archipelago of the Channel” during the first seventeen years of the French edition and during the first 136 years of the English edition explains the focus of the critical reception on the novel’s human-centered plot elements and themes concerning its Byronic hero. It also accentuates Hugo’s uncertainty regarding the relationship between the agentic powers of humans and nonhumans.

Reading Hugo’s novel today, one is struck by passages comprising unmistakable anthropocene features and remarkable affinities with flattened ontologies characterized by human-nonhuman equality and a more dispersive agency. In his “Introduction” to the 2002 unabridged English translation of The Toilers of the Sea, Graham Robb claims that Hugo’s introductory chapter “is still the best general guide to the Channel Islands.” By asserting its continued relevance more than a century after its composition in May 1865, Robb opens up a question of the chapter’s vision of archipelagic temporality, implying a layer of stasis or an extremely slow rhythm of barely perceptible changes. “The Archipelago of the Channel” evolves on an entirely different time scale than traditional novelistic plots. It is not restricted to the lifespan of an individual or the timeframe of two or three generations but operates within the time of human history or on the vaster scale of lithic or geological time: “The configuration of an island changes over time. An island is a construction by the ocean. Matter is eternal; not its aspect. Everything on earth is being perpetually moulded by death: even extra-human monuments, even granite. Everything changes shape, even the

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18 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 5, 6, 20.
shapeless. Edifices built by the sea crumble like any other. The sea, which has built them up, also demolishes them.”

Such temporality affects the chapter’s speed of action. In some passages, Hugo describes the immensely slow biological, geological, and hydrological processes of coagulation and change in the nonhuman world as these processes stretch out over millennia. In other sections, Hugo morphs into a cultural anthropologist and registers the slow sedimentations and transformations of human customs, languages, and practices on Sark, Guernsey, and Jersey over centuries. Three examples: “Each man is his sovereign, not by law but by custom”; “Since the seventeenth century these islands have had fraternal feelings for the whole world; they glory in hospitality. They have the impartiality of a place of asylum”; “These peoples have preserved from their earlier activities as smugglers a proud liking for risk and danger.”

Importantly, Hugo’s cosmology does not propose a bifurcation of the human and inhuman domains despite their respective calculable and incalculable temporalities. As Cohen persistently maintains in *Stone*: “the lithic is not some vast and alien outside. A limit-breaching intimacy persistently unfolds.”

If the ecological project entails thinking beyond anthropocentricity and thus requires amplified historical and geographical scales, Cohen observes that such expanded frames risk emphasizing separations at the expense of material intimacies. In both eco-theory and object studies, much critical writing on the inhuman is animated by an ardor for an unpeopled world. While the project of this book is dianthropocentric, assuming a world irreducible to its human relations and not existing for any particular purpose, its methods stress alliance, continuity, and mutual participation over elemental solitariness and human exceptionalism.

As we shall see, Hugo struggles with this tension between alliance and bifurcation, but even if the tension remains unresolved in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, the insistent presence of nonhuman actants such as saltwater, rocks, crabs, and wind makes the novel one of the greatest meditations on a universe of vibrant matter.

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At certain moments in the novel, Hugo challenges the idea that humans (and humans aided by their technological inventions) occupy the central position in the world, contrary to the worldview that dominated during ages of Enlightenment (think of Kant’s confidence in rationality) and Romanticism (think of Fichte’s pure idealism): “these Trinacrias are immune to reshaping by man,” the narrator reminds us. There exist dimensions of the world that are immune to human interference. The challenge to anthropocentrism is executed partly through Hugo’s verbal and visual creation of scenarios devoid of humans, partly through his depictions of scenes comprising human action, but in which human agency is then compromised through its entanglement with nonhuman forces that either resist or assist it. But there are also instances in which Hugo reverts to a more conventional anthropocentric belief in scientific progress, moral perfectibility, rationality, and human freedom characteristic not only of the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism, but of the traditional understanding of modernity as such: “A geological formation that has at its base the mud of the Deluge and at its summit the eternal snows is, for man, a wall like any other: he cuts through it and continues beyond.” It is this tension between a human-centered world picture and sophisticated acknowledgements of the nonhuman world’s unruliness and impact on humans and history that will be my focus in what follows. To anticipate, we will examine how Hugo, partly as an outcome of his personal experiences of being existentially and bodily exposed to the archipelago of the Channel Islands, is on track to reveal and produce a flattened ontology and to foresee the Anthropocene, and that he also sometimes backtracks and returns to what he must have felt as the more confident thematic and formal frameworks of anthropocentrism and the novel of what-happened-next.

To create a solid platform from which to read the novel, I will continuously entangle it with concepts from the materialist theories of thinkers such as Jane Bennett (“vibrant matter”), Bill Brown (“a sense of things”), Jeffrey J. Cohen (“stone”), Maurizia Boscagli (“stuff”), and Stacy Alaimo (“exposed”). These scholars share a resistance toward anthropocentrism and a dual belief in the agentic impacts of nonhuman forces operating in nature, bodies, and artifacts and their capacity to act as powerful counterweights to the narcissistic impulses inherent in human language and thought.

24 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 52.
25 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 50. For a discussion of modernity as defined by rationality, progress, and freedom of the individual, its three most determining concepts, see Dag Østerberg, Det moderne: Et essay om Vestens kultur 1740–2000 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1999), 11–12.
2.2 Vital Materialism

First things first. The form of materialism employed here is not the one linked to philosophers such as Marx and Adorno, who were proponents of an egocentric materialist thinking in which matter was always a sign of a hidden human agenda, often imperialist, capitalist, and oppressive. Admittedly, such materialism would function well as an underlying assumption in a reading of Les Travailleurs de la mer. Legitimate foci could be topics such as 1) the corruptive influence of money between human business partners; 2) the decisive influence of money on marriage plans; 3) the fetishization of material objects such as steam engines and steamships; 4) the significance of steamships in the global circulation of goods; 5) the significance of the division of labor on board the steamships as compared to the sailing ships; and 6) the role of technology in the human illusions of progress, mastering nature, and gaining wealth. However, a different form of materialism emerges from vitalist thinkers such as Lucretius, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze, none of whom were ever really occupied with the historical materialist ambition of analyzing the workings of human power to disclose social hegemonies. Instead, they articulate a materialism made up of nonhuman, thingly forces and are occupied with the material agency of biological bodies and technological artifacts. To my knowledge, a new materialist approach has not yet been applied to Hugo’s novel.

But why is such a theory analytically fruitful? Because vital materialism strongly resonates (without converging seamlessly) with the world picture emerging in Hugo’s novel where—as Bill Brown has remarked on a more general note—“our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism,” and “the human interaction with the nonhuman world of objects, however mediated by the advance of consumer culture, must be recognized as irreducible to that culture.” A similar line of reasoning can be found in Maurizia Boscagli’s Stuff Theory (2014): “The older materialism insists that under the system of capital every object is always already commodified; the new materialism insists on the fungability of matter and on the plasticity possible at the moment of subject-object interaction.” Again, The Toilers of the Sea legitimates a reading focusing on consumption and commodities, on capitalist money culture (Lethierry’s business, Rantaine’s theft followed by Clubin’s

theft, Gilliatt’s poverty versus Ebenezer’s inherited fortune). However, Hugo also proposes a genuine material-elemental cosmology of greater ontological importance and epistemological depth in which the human and nonhuman become entangled.

An important objective in vital materialism is to patch together the human-made slit in the world between “dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” and to encourage us to pay attention to “the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations.” Bennett’s project of mattering humans and of humanizing or vitalizing matter, also essential in Brown’s thing theory, entails philosophical consequences and spurs politico-ethical benefits. Along with a flattening reconfiguration of the relationship between humans and nonhumans and between organic and inorganic matter resulting in “a more distributive agency,” vital materialism promotes “a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body.” Bennett’s formulations on the philosophical and political projects of vital materialism are pertinent gateways into Hugo’s novel. At times, the narrator conveys images of a world in which an active-effective Gilliatt confronts seemingly passive objects—a steamship, its engines, waves, winds, reefs, seagulls—and cunningly exploits their law-governed mechanisms. To survive, or not to survive, that is the question. Gilliatt’s conviction of his heroic qualities, his self-reliance as Emerson would say, is mandatory here. It is a seductive idea of the role and ability of humans in the world. But to environmentalists then and

The fiction of human exceptionalism is dangerous, says Bennett, because “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”

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28 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii, ix, xiv.
29 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv.
30 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.
now, this idea also facilitates and legitimizes potentially destructive behavior against the planet. To a certain extent, Hugo seems aware of this. At other times, the narrator introduces perspectival changes from ego-point of view to geo-point of view, from the perspective of Gilliatt to that of a subterranean current of microbiological energies and forceful matters. Through these multiple points of view, the narrator introduces blue and green sensibilities and reveals the illusory nature of an egocentric universe.

One way to illustrate this duality within the novel is by comparing Stape's summary of the plot (quoted, although in abridged form, from Graham Robb's 1997 biography *Victor Hugo*) with a passage from the novel itself. First Stape/Robb:

a reclusive Guernsey fisherman called Gilliatt falls in love with the daughter of a local shipowner. The shipowner, Mess (Monsieur) Lethierry, has two passions: his daughter, Déruchette, and his steam-ship, *La Durande*. The latter is deliberately run aground by its trusted captain, Clubin. The captain's plan is to fake his own death and steal the 75,000 francs he was carrying back to Lethierry. The passengers and crew abandon ship, admiring Clubin's selflessness ... Only then does it dawn on the hypocrite that he has struck the wrong reef and is marooned, not on Les Hanois, a mere mile off the coast, but on the lugubrious Douvres, a full 5 leagues from Guernsey. But before the sea can claim him, a mysterious, rag-like thing moving swiftly underwater grabs him by the leg and pulls him to his death.

Back on Guernsey, the shipowner's daughter offers her hand to anyone who can save the ship. Gilliatt sets off and spends the larger part of the novel dislodging the steamer from the two stone pillars of Les Douvres [...]. At the end, Gilliatt returns in triumph to find that Lethierry's daughter is enamoured with an Anglican vicar. He relinquishes his prize, removes the last obstacle to the marriage, and, sitting in his rock armchair, watches the newly-weds sail over the horizon as the tide washes over him.31

Then Hugo:

There are vast movements of heavenly bodies, the family of the stars, the family of the planets, the pollen of the zodiac, the *quid divinum* of

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currents, emanations, polarizations, and attractions; there are embraces and antagonisms, the magnificent flow and ebb of a universal antithesis, the imponderable at liberty amid the centers; there is sap in the globes, light outside the globes, there are wandering atoms, scattered seeds, fertilization curves, meetings for coupling and for combat, unimagined profusions, distances that are like dreams, dizzying movements, worlds plunging into the incalculable, prodigies pursuing one another in the shadows, a mechanism in permanent operation, the breathing of spheres in flight, wheels that can be felt turning; scholars make conjectures, the ignorant believe and tremble; things are there, and then withdraw; they are unassailable, they are out of reach, they cannot be approached. We are convinced to the point of oppression. We are faced with some mysterious dark reality. We can grasp nothing. We are crushed by the impalpable.32

Before commenting on the two passages, this comparative exercise raises a question. Is comparing two different sources, one a critical reading, the other the novel, problematic when trying to figure out what the novel is about? No, because my point is not to show that Stape's summary is wrong, and the novel is wiser than the critic. Stape's condensed selection of Robb's even longer summary and discussion (which, admittedly, shows in passages excluded by Stape a refined sensitivity toward Hugo’s nonhuman universe and formal transgressions) is an adequate summary of the anthropocentric plot level in the novel. An objection to Stape's summary could be that the implicitly human-centered approach covers only half the truth about the novel. This other half can be sensed in the passage by Hugo quoted above in which a different plot level is summarized. This is the plot level of the nonhuman, yet vitalist material universe of cosmic scope.

In Stape’s trimmed summary, the focus and starting point are the human characters (Gilliatt, Mess Lethierry, Déruchette, Sieur Clubin, Ebenezer) and intersubjective themes (love, passion, fraud, heroic deed, disappointed love, self-sacrifice, marriage, and suicide). Yes, we also learn about the Durande (intentionally not italicized in the novel to signal its humanoid quality), but the summary refers to the steamship as a mere vehicle for human transport under human control. Stape never mentions the archipelago and the steamship as protagonist-actants. The introductory chapter is bypassed in silence, and the 60,000-word, 134-page depiction of Gilliatt’s entanglement with nature and technology at the Douvres is reduced to less than two lines.

A different plot unfolds in the passage quoted from the novel. No humans feature until the last few lines where “we” are crushed. The perspective is initially cosmic yet embedded. As the narratorial gaze gradually zooms in on the human world, the epistemological register morphs from knowledgeable planetary and galactic perspectives to a human point of view unable to grasp the universe or anything in it. The world is a buzzing force field of active and reactive intensities, of antithetical movements and propensities, of flux and stasis. No beginning-middle-end, just middle. It is a world simultaneously made up of the immense and the minuscule—planets and atoms, stars and seeds—and of wheels continuously turning and mechanisms constantly running. At one point Bennett says, “I want to highlight what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things.”

This could also be read as Hugo’s intention in writing *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. He often refers to “the shadows,” “a mysterious dark reality,” and in the passage above he highlights the darkness, sheds light on shadows, so readers can contemplate a world of vibrant matter, material agencies, and nonhuman things. Hugo’s visions into the impalpable inner workings of the universe reveal they are oppressive and threaten to crush us. They may not destroy us as living creatures, but they destroy our illusions of human sovereignty and exceptionalism.

### 2.3 **Endings and Narrators**

To determine the novel’s commitment to vital materialism, its position between egocentric and geocentric world pictures, it is helpful to compare it with *Moby-Dick*, more specifically the endings and choices of narrator. We have already discussed Melville’s ending with its apocalyptic vision of a posthuman world triggered by a combination of human hubris (Ahab’s) and whale-driven revenge (Moby Dick’s): “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”

These closing lines follow a scene in which the *Pequod* and its crew members in their respective whaleboats—Ahab, Tashtego, Stubb, etc.—are all swallowed up by the ocean. *Les Travailleurs* ends similarly with the ocean slowly engulfing the human protagonist: “At the same moment the head disappeared under the water. There was now nothing but the sea.” As in Melville’s novel, there is a vision of nature’s survival and continuity combined with man’s downfall.

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33 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.
There are also important differences. First, the ending of *Moby-Dick* is not the passage just quoted, but an epilogue written by Ishmael explaining what happened after the sinking of *Pequod* and the perishing of its crew. Melville’s choice of a dramatized narrator necessitates the survival of this narrator-character. A narrator meeting his death at the end would have a problem of reliability regarding all that has been narrated up until that death. An exception could be if his manuscript was found and published by someone else, but in Ishmael’s case that would be near impossible because of the place of the shipwrecking. For the sake of reliability, found manuscripts are usually framed by another story explaining how the manuscript was found and why it has been published. In *Moby-Dick* there is no such frame. Another and more pertinent problem in Ishmael’s case is that he has told large parts of his story in retrospection, from a narratorial vantage point set after the story ends with the foundering. Melville’s choice of narratorial strategy ultimately compels the survival of his narrator. Throughout the novel Ishmael is a very human narrator-character with person-bound perspectives on, engagements in, and experiences with life and life at sea. Although Melville inconsistently oscillates between *vision avec*, *vision par derrière*, and *vision du dehors*, the narratorial perspective is mostly linked closely with Ishmael as character (*vision avec*). If Melville’s novel hints at a posthuman world dominated by nonhuman matter, forces, and energies, this hint is nevertheless articulated by a human survivor. Ishmael gets the last word.

Victor Hugo chose a different enunciatory tactic. Instead of a first-person narrator, he opted for a third-person narrator. It could be argued that this narrator very often does not even act as a human being but rather as a sort of nonhuman observer employing a perspective close to and embedded in the world of vibrant matter. The choice of third-person narrator allows Hugo to let his human protagonist die without violating any internal narrative logic. Ishmael survives, Gilliatt drowns. In that sense, *Les Travailleurs* proposes a more radical quarrel with anthropocentrism than *Moby-Dick*. In Melville’s version: “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago”—except that we would never know this if we were not told so by the narrator-character, and except that it does so, “rolled on,” parallel with the survival and continuous life of this same protagonist-narrator. So, only posthuman to a certain degree. In Hugo’s version: “There was now nothing but the sea.” End of story.

Or is it? If Melville relativizes his novel’s posthuman and nonhuman signals through the necessary survival of Ishmael, Hugo’s opposite treatment of Gilliatt does not mean the annihilation of the human world as such. When Gilliatt, resigned to losing Déruchette and even actively contributing to her marriage with Ebenezer and their subsequent escape on the *Cashmere*, chooses to end
his own life by allowing the rising tide to engulf him, he not only sees as his last vision in life the Cashmere slowly disappearing into the horizon and thus carrying off Déruchet and Ebenezer to a presumably happy life together, but he also meets his destiny by an act of free will. In that sense, the novel's last words, at first glance unequivocally signaling a posthuman and nonhuman world, are, as in Melville’s case, relativized by Hugo. Still, it makes sense to distinguish between Melville and Hugo. While Ishmael survives, Gilliatt perishes; and while Melville employs a human first-person narrator, Hugo opts for a more-than-human third-person narrator. Both the destiny of the protagonist and the enunciatory tactic point to the radicalism of Hugo’s project.

The theme of (human) effacement staged by Hugo at the end of Les Travailleurs is in fact a recycling of the novel’s beginning, which introduces the same theme. Gilliatt’s transient existence and the ephemerality of the human condition are captured in a beautiful and evocative scene in which Déruchet writes Gilliatt’s name in snow, a fragile substance unsuitable for any lasting inscription whatsoever. That the name “Gilliatt” is doomed to dissolve in the melting snow is a harbinger of Gilliatt’s drowning in the rising tide at the end of the novel. It is also a metafictional commentary on the precarious durability of texts, although this play on textual and personal annihilation is countered by Hugo’s description of the Douvres rocks, which form a giant H for Homme or for Hugo. The repetition of human effacement underlines the novel’s devotion to the theme of geocentrism, but it also has formal implications. The similarity between beginning and end means that Hugo replaces traditional novelistic narrativity and sequential structure with an order of simultaneity “that cancels the double rule of events and chance.”

With the implication that Hugo's enunciatory strategy is better capable of simulating (and thus transporting the reader into closer proximity with) a nonhuman world of material forces, his narrator is nevertheless still bound to and by human language and its latent narcissistic constraints whenever he attempts to convey the energies and dynamics of matter. How does Hugo solve this paradox of suggesting the potency of the nonhuman and expressing it as a human and in a human language? More specifically, how does Hugo go about “the task of developing a vocabulary and syntax for, and thus a better discernment of, the active powers issuing from nonsubjects”? Bennett suggests that it requires “a certain willingness to appear naïve or foolish,” but according to her, this is an entirely legitimate strategy since the awareness of vital materiality she seeks to bring to life “already found expression in childhood experiences of a

world populated by animate things rather than passive objects.” Consequently, she urges us “to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world.”

This rhetorical strategy, if viable, is good news to authors and literary scholars. For centuries writers have been attempting to breathe life into their surroundings through metaphors and analogies, perhaps more often their natural surroundings (e.g., forests, animals) than their environments of inert matter (e.g., rocks). However, Bennett has not solved the paradox. Anthropomorphism can be seen as a means of creating echoes of human agency in nonhuman matter, but it could just as well be considered yet another anthropocentric strategy. It is not certain that Bennett is aware of this, although she comes close to admitting it here: “Though the movements and effectivity of stem cells, electricity, food, trash, and metals are crucial to political life (and human life per se), almost as soon as they appear in public (often at first by disrupting human projects or expectations), these activities and powers are represented as human mood, action, meaning, agenda, or ideology. This quick substitution sustains the fantasy that ‘we’ really are in charge of all those ‘its.’”

It is unclear whether Bennett sees the relation between anthropomorphism and, for example, “represented as human mood.” But representing matter—whether granite, steamships, or storms—as human moods (something Bennett has a negative opinion of) is one way of anthropomorphizing the nonhuman world (of which Bennett has a positive opinion). The problem is that such a strategy “sustains the fantasy that ‘we’ really are in charge of all those ‘its.’” The conclusion is that anthropomorphism is an extremely delicate balancing act; to successfully perform it, the writer evokes the vitality of matter and reaffirms anthropocentrism.

Les Travailleurs de la mer teems with anthropomorphisms. This is no coincidence. The question is whether they feed egocentrism or whether they simulate the vitalist dynamics of a subterranean world of matter. This is where the choice of narrator and narratorial perspective becomes important. Which experiential technique does Hugo’s enunciatory strategy represent? How does he convey the fictional universe?

Early on in “The Archipelago of the Channel,” the narrator employs a martial discourse to convey the war-like relationship between nature and people in Guernsey. Human-built “fortifications” are “invaded by sand and attacked by the waves,” although some “little houses” are in fact “capable of withstanding a

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37 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, ix, xiii, vii, xvi.
38 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, x.
cannonball,” just as “windmills” are “dismasted by storms.” The narrator talks of rabbits “setting man at defiance” with the help of their “friend the ocean” that “isolates them”: “Fraternal relations of this kind are found throughout nature,” the narrator concludes. In a description of rock formations along “the formless coast,” the narrator constantly anthropomorphizes the formations into images of “a tripod,” “a lion,” and “an angel,” first seeing “a smile,” then “a distorted grin.” The sections on coastal rock formations, compared in their architectural design to Caliban rather than Venus or the Parthenon, that is, to human figures or human-built constructions, comprise an entire aesthetic theory on beauty and the sublime. These anthropomorphisms serve a dual purpose: they familiarize alterity, the natural and animal worlds otherwise ungraspable for humans, by investing it with recognizable patterns; and they invigorate these nonhuman worlds by assigning them humanoid purposes. Familiarization and invigoration are anthropocentric endeavors that paradoxically intend to disanthropocentricize the world by dispersing agency into the nonhuman world.

The introduction of the Durande reminds us of Hugo’s technique of blurring in his etching “Naufrage,” and it happens through anthropomorphizing the ship:

Sometimes in the evening, after sunset, when night mingles with the sea and twilight invests the waves with a kind of terror, there could be seen entering the harbor of St. Sampson, menacingly churning up the water, a shapeless mass, a monstrous form that whistled and spluttered, a hideous thing that roared like a wild beast and smoked like a volcano, a kind of hydra slavering in the foam and trailing a wake of fog, hurtling toward the town with a fearful beating of its fins and a maw belching forth flames. This was Durande.40

We must acknowledge the anthropocentrism inherent in this passage since someone is communicating the tableau to us. But we can then ask what kind of tableau is communicated? There is a humanoid purposefulness in nature and an ability to produce emotion or affect as when “twilight invests the waves with a kind of terror.” Otherwise, the focus is on the steamship. Apart from not being italicized (traditionally, italics signals that the name refers to a ship and not a person), Durande is attributed with intentions or at least with having certain effects on anyone seeing or hearing it/her enter the harbor: she is shapeless, monstrous, and menacing because noisy. In describing her aural and

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39 Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, 6, 8, 12, 13, my italics.
visual outlook, the narrator borrows qualities from both organic (animal) and inorganic (geological) nature: she roars like a wild beast and her funnel emits smoke like a volcano. The dual registers are repeated with hydra and fog, fins and flames. The narrator commingles humanmade technology and nature in the form of organic and inorganic matter. Metaphors and analogies conjure up a world picture of correspondences which serve the narrator in his attempts to break down the barriers between three nonhuman spheres—technology, organic nature, inorganic nature—to create a flatter ontology in which they all spring from the same substance.

2.4 Fooling and Receiving Mercy

So far, my approach to the question of egocentrism (aided or hindered by technocentrism) versus geocentrism has seemingly been informed by a logic of either/or. But vital materialism is less concerned with adversaries than with forces and energies affecting each other through support or opposition, each following its own tendency, but hooking up with others in temporary groupings. Humans are not necessarily in opposition to artifacts and nature, though they can be. They coexist on a horizontal rather than on a vertical plane. Intimacy outweighs incongruity, association trumps separation.

Near the end of Les Travailleurs, Gilliatt performs miraculous deeds by surviving in hazardous natural surroundings while at the same time dismantling the wreck of the Durande and salvaging its steam engines, funnels, and propellers. A potent anthropocentrism is evident when Gilliatt exclaims to the abyss, “Fooled you!”41 Hugo’s lone romantic outsider hero and superman mariner is a modern Faust or Prometheus conquering nature and emulating the divine. Gilliatt’s triumphant outburst follows his solitary ten-week ordeal and his survival of a relentless and ferocious hurricane. When Gilliatt is victorious in a subsequent encounter with a giant octopus trying to suck his body dry of blood, human dominance over nature, animals, and inert matter seems secured.

But just when Gilliatt is ready to return to land, something unexpected happens, which strikes him with terror: his paunch leaks, ultimately leaving him “at the mercy of the abyss.”42 Hugo’s anthropocentric project in which he “wanted to glorify the work, the will, the devotion, all of which makes man great,”43 exemplified through Gilliatt and his superhuman efforts, is shattered. Gilliatt falls back on a more horizontal plane of unruly stuff:

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41 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 343.
42 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 368.
For the first time Gilliatt felt helpless and at a loss. An obscure fatality was now his mistress. With his boat, with the engines of the Durande, with all his toil, with all his success, with all his courage, he was now at the mercy of the abyss. He had no means of continuing the struggle; he was now purely passive. [...] The makeshift contrivance for stopping the leak was now within the power of the sea. How would this inert obstacle behave? The fight was now to be carried on by this contrivance, not by Gilliatt; by a scrap of material, not by human will. [...] The matter was now to be determined by a struggle between two mechanical quantities. [...] He was now merely a spectator of his fate [...]. He had hitherto been the directing intelligence; now, at this supreme moment, he had given place to a mindless resistance.44

His anthropocentric “Fooled you!” is replaced with a more compliant “Have mercy!”:

For two long months the consciousnesses and providences that exist in the invisible world had watched the contest. On one side were ranged the vast expanses of the ocean, the waves, the winds, the lightning, the meteors, on the other one man; on one side the sea, on the other a human soul; on one side the Infinite, on the other an atom. There had been a battle. And now perhaps this prodigious effort was to be wasted. This extraordinary heroism was to be reduced to impotence.45

Mercy is an act that can only be bestowed upon us from the outside and something larger than us: “Defeated by the immensity, he was making his submission.”46 But this is not the time and place in the novel where Gilliatt meets his death by allowing the tide to engulf him as he watches the Cashmere disappear in the horizon. Not only does Gilliatt manage to survive the hurricane and kill the octopus, but he also succeeds in returning to the harbor of St. Sampson with Mess Lethierry’s steam engines and his 75,000 francs, a deed that signals a resurrection of the novel’s anthropocentrism (and in a certain sense, Gilliatt’s suicide merely contributes to this anthropocentrism).

So, what happens between Gilliatt’s discovery of the leak and his arrival in St. Sampson? How does Gilliatt survive after he “felt his whole being dissolving in the cold, in fatigue, in impotence, in prayer, in darkness, and his

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44 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 368.
45 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 370.
46 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 370.
eyes closed”?

His killing the devilfish, the *pieuvre*, and his withstanding the hurricane are made possible through a combination of luck, skill, experience, and cunning. However, his ultimate survival after having faced the leak and the hurricane turns out not to be an act of human will. When Gilliatt begs for mercy, he receives it. But how? From what source? The answers can be found in the following quote:

Some hours passed.

The sun rose in all its brilliance. Its first ray lit up a motionless form on the summit of the Great Douvre. It was Gilliatt.

He was still stretched out on the rock. This naked body, cold and rigid, no longer shivered. The closed eyelids had a pallid hue. It would have been difficult for an observer to decide whether it was a living body or corpse.

The sun seemed to be looking at him.

If this naked man was not dead, he was so close to death that the least cold wind would be enough to carry him off.

The wind began to blow, a mild, life-giving wind: the spring breath of May.

Now the sun was rising higher in the deep blue sky; its rays, falling less horizontally, took on a tinge of red. Its light became heat. It enveloped Gilliatt.

Gilliatt did not move. If he was breathing it was with a faint respiration that would barely tarnish a mirror.

The sun continued its ascent, now shining less obliquely on Gilliatt. The wind, which had originally been merely mild, was now warm.

The rigid naked body was still without movement, but the skin now seemed less pallid.

The sun, approaching the zenith, fell vertically on the summit of the Great Douvre. A prodigality of light streamed down from the sky, and was joined by the vast reverberations from the serene ocean. The rock began to warm up, and conveyed some of its warmth to the man.

A sigh stirred Gilliatt’s chest: he was alive.

The sun continued its caresses, which were now almost ardent. The wind, which was already the wind of midday and of spring, drew close to Gilliatt, like a mouth breathing gently on him. He moved.

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The sea was ineffably calm. Its murmur was like the lullaby of a nurse cradling a child. The waved seemed to be rocking the reef to sleep.

The seabirds, now familiar with Gilliatt, fluttered anxiously above him—no longer with their former wariness but with an air of tenderness and sympathy. They uttered little cries, as if calling to him. A seagull, which seemed fond of him, was tame enough to perch near him and began to talk to him. He seemed not to hear. It jumped onto his shoulder and gently pecked at his lips.

Gilliatt opened his eyes. The birds, pleased but still shy, flew off.

He stood up, stretched like a lion awakened from sleep, ran to the edge of the summit platform, and looked down at the defile between the two Douvres. The paunch was still there, intact. The plug had held: the sea had probably not troubled it much. All was saved.48

While it is possible to read a religious or spiritual force or spirit into the scene, I would argue that the language, largely a language of anthropomorphisms, points in a more material-ecological and cosmic direction.

Before examining the passage in closer detail, we will briefly discuss how three prominent scholars have read the novel and Gilliatt’s struggle with the Infinite. Surprisingly, none of them pay any attention to the crucial scene that begins with the leak and ends with “All was saved.” Instead, they focus on the preceding scene during which Gilliatt succeeds in dismantling the Durande and transferring engines, funnels, and propellers onto his own paunch after many challenges. To Victor Brombert, Gilliatt’s heroic engineering deeds make *Les Travailleurs* into an “allegory of salvation and rebirth” in that the “engine is literally ‘delivered.’”49 Gilliatt’s efforts also legitimize Margaret Cohen’s attention to individual labor and marine craftsmanship,50 but Cohen does not seem interested in the importance of what Brombert recognizes as Hugo’s “cosmic choreography” in which every “atom is the worker of the inconceivable, the incommensurable work.”51

In his biography of Victor Hugo, Graham Robb remarks that “*Les Travailleurs de la mer* can be read in several ways and tamed to a gentle allegory.” Robb lists four such readings, the first being rooted in the author’s comments: “Hugo claimed that it showed the final victory of Prayer over ‘that most formidable of despots: the Infinite.’” The second allegorical reading considers the novel a

metaphor for the nineteenth century, suggesting that the novel’s English title would benefit from “workers” because of its political connotations instead of the more poetic choice of “toilers,” while emphasizing the novel’s preoccupation with technical progress, creative genius, and hard work overcoming the ghastly inertia of the material world. In that sense, Gilliatt’s engineering project—to conquer gravity—becomes a symbol of the spiritual mission of freeing oneself from the burden of original sin. The third reading sees the novel as “the only great memorial in Hugo’s work to his second daughter: a huge, obsessive monolith looming over the tidier, poetic mythology arranged around Léopoldine.”

While Hugo in several poems had mourned and tried (in vain) to reconcile himself with the loss of Léopoldine who drowned in 1843 at the age of nineteen, Les Travailleurs can be read as an ambiguous tribute to Adèle II, who had eloped to Canada to be with her beloved Albert Pinson (who never repaid her affections that eventually morphed into obsession). The final reading suggested by Robb is to consider the novel an allegory for the Second Empire: the wrecked Durande is the ship of State, Clubin is Napoléon III, and Gilliatt is Hugo.

Cohen’s focus on human labor produces excellent readings of maritime novels and prose texts, not least because they always establish a persuasive bond between the theme of labor and its implications for the poetics of the novel. But in her reading of Les Travailleurs, Cohen neglects the cosmic, atomistic perspective in Hugo’s theory of work, in which atoms are not merely a metaphor for humans but also refer to “the consciousnesses and providences that exist in the invisible world.” If Brombert’s reading explicitly articulates this cosmic perspective as a central element, he nevertheless stops his analysis of Gilliatt’s struggles on the reef when Gilliatt delivers the engines. Brombert neglects the fact that not only does Gilliatt deliver but he himself is delivered by external forces.

Robb’s four pathways for understanding the novel are viable readings, but it is necessary to challenge his first suggestion concerning the triumph of religion and prayer over nature and things. One problem with Robb’s reference to Hugo is not his translation from Hugo’s letter to Pierre Véron (dated late March or April 1866), but his use of the word “Prayer,” which is actually nowhere present in Hugo’s letter. Instead of referring to Prayer, Hugo writes that he wanted to prove that “will and understanding are sufficient, even for the atom, to triumph over that most formidable of despots: the Infinite.” This is doubly important. First, Hugo’s letter leaves out religion entirely; second, it emphasizes not

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only human but also atomistic will and understanding as crucial factors in any struggle with what he labels “things.” Another important point in the letter is also that no matter how heroic a struggle and triumphant an outcome, the human heart—here, Déruchette’s love—is always more merciless (implacable) than any abyss: “what escapes the ocean does not escape the woman: I wanted to show that when it comes to being loved, doing everything is vanquished by doing nothing, and Gilliatt by Ebenezer.”53 This important tweak—from Robb’s idea of human Prayer to Hugo’s actual words about human and atomistic will and understanding, and then the relativization of Gilliatt’s triumph because of the mercilessness of Déruchette’s love for Ebenezer—has consequences for Robb’s second allegorical reading. Is it correct that Gilliatt’s hard work ultimately overcomes gravity?

The main reason for the critics’ focus on the human individual and his triumph is their inclination to read the scene (if they read it at all) in which Gilliatt begs for mercy as a mere parenthesis between the scenes of fooling the Abyss/the Infinite and returning triumphantly St. Sampson. However, the lengthy quote above from the two-page chapter “There Is an Ear in the Unknown” is of vital importance if we are to understand the true vision of The Toilers of the Sea. At first glance, Hugo’s vocabulary signals a dichotomic scenario: on one side, activity, movement, warmth, deep colors, and life expressed through the sun, the sky, the sea, the winds, the waves, the rocks, and the seabirds; on the other side, passivity, rigidity, coldness, pale colors, and death, all associated with Gilliatt, who is more corpse than living body. But gradually, the barrier separating the nonhuman elements and the human is penetrated through the force of matter’s vitality, especially the solar energy. What starts out as a scene of incongruity slowly turns into a scene of intimacy in which Hugo mobilizes a “cross-ontological fellowship.”54

The mobilization happens primarily through anthropomorphism. The initial image of a rising, brilliant sun set against the motionless, naked, and cold body of Gilliatt is set in motion by Hugo’s first use of anthropomorphism: “The sun seemed to be looking at him” establishes a connection between the two spheres, initiates a breakdown of the barrier between them, and from then on, as the sun continues to rise and increase the temperature on the Douvres, an intense transfer of life-giving impulses upon Gilliatt begins. At first, Gilliatt is no different from the cold and hard rocks on which he surrendered himself to sleep and possible death. But as the sun rises and gives off its heating rays,

53 Hugo, Correspondance, vol. 11, 537.
54 Cohen, Stone, 8.
the rocks grow warmer and transfer heat to Gilliatt. The wind, too, becomes “a mild, life-giving wind,” then it turns from “merely mild” to “warm.”

Gradually, the entire setting collaborates on what seems an intentional effort to breathe life into Gilliatt. The sea begins to reverberate and simulate the rhythm of the heartbeat, its “murmur was like a lullaby of a nurse cradling a child,” while the “waves seemed to be rocking the reef to sleep” to prevent it from threatening Gilliatt. The only organic matter apart from Gilliatt, the seabirds, now repay his earlier generosity towards them by sending him “tenderness and sympathy,” uttering “little cries, as if calling to him. A seagull, which seemed fond of him, was tame enough to perch near him and began to talk to him [...] and gently pecked at his lips.” This physical touch from an animal is the last in a series of collaborations among vital matters that help bring Gilliatt back to life. It is as if the roles are inverted in Les Travailleurs: The sun, a material phenomenon, is elevated by Hugo to a godlike creature that in close cooperation with its assistants—the winds, the rocks, the waves—incubates the human, an organic phenomenon. Even if we admit that Hugo’s vision includes a God as the ultimate creator and force behind the sun’s life-giving powers, the vision diverges from the biblical idea of human superiority in the realm of the Earth. In Les Travailleurs, nonhumans and humans are entangled, and even if Hugo creates one of the most powerful scenes in literary history of an isolated human’s struggle against and triumph over gravity and the Infinite, he still supplements this scene with one of equal importance, the scene of Gilliatt’s merciful deliverance by benevolent cosmic forces. Antagonism is followed by alliance.

It could be argued that Gilliatt’s triumph over nature and his deliverance of and reclaiming authority over a broken technology as well as the subsequent deliverance of Gilliatt through benevolent cosmic forces are both visions of little significance, because the ultimate triumph is reserved for the human heart, the supreme ananke, and concretized in Déruchette’s love for Ebenezer. The novel’s ending converges well with Hugo’s remarks about the omnipotence of a woman’s love in his 1866 letter to Pierre Véron. However, both ending and letter must be read with certain precautions. Robb’s suggestion that Les Travailleurs can be read as a monument to Hugo’s second daughter Adèle is perfectly legitimate. But the elopement scene in the novel, in one sense a tribute to love, is clouded in ambiguity because of the grief felt by her father over her elopement and the development of her feelings for Pinson that evolved into pathological obsession.

Still, it is possible to buy into the reading that Hugo suggests in his letter, in which he emphasizes that human love conquers all. After his heroic and superhuman efforts, what topples Gilliatt is the marriage of Adèle and Ebenezer and
their presumed happiness. It is true that his suicide is the result of his conscious choice. Whereas his deliverance on the rocks was a result of nonhuman cosmic forces, his suicide is the result of Gilliatt taking his destiny into his own hands. Marriage and suicide confirm anthropocentrism, perhaps even a bourgeois anthropocentrism. However, we must recall the crucial scene in which Gilliatt discovers the potentially fatal leak, resigns himself to his fate, and falls asleep only to wake up refreshed and discovering that the paunch has not sunk. This scene confirms *Les Travailleurs de la mer* as a novel of deep human and non-human entanglements. If the novel is a homage to the supreme *ananke*, the human heart, it is also an acknowledgment of the intimacy that exists between humans, rocks, ships, waves, winds, and birds. The drama of human love does not unfold on a background of inert matter but evolves through constant alliances with vibrant matter.

### 2.5 Cosmography of Work

The theme of effacement commences and terminates the human storyline of the novel. In Part i, “Sieur Clubin,” Gilliatt’s name is written in snow, and it is only a matter of time and temperature before the traced name and the human footprints vanish. In Part iii, “Déruchette,” Gilliatt commits suicide by drowning. The theme of effacement is also found in the overture of the novel and plays a significant role in the very first lines of the later incorporated and immensely important “The Archipelago of the Channel” that precedes the three parts:

> The Atlantic wears away our coasts. The pressure of the current from the Pole deforms our western cliffs. This wall that shields us from the sea is being undermined from Saint-Valery-sur-Somme to Ingouville; huge blocks of rock tumble down, the sea churns clouds of boulders, our harbors are silted up with sand and shingle, the mouths of our rivers are barred. Every day a stretch of Norman soil is torn away and disappears under the waves.\(^{55}\)

Effacement, deformation, and disappearance are transplanted from the human sphere (Gilliatt) to the sphere of nature in the various shapes of meteorology, geology, and oceanography. The spatial scale is explicitly global (the Atlantic, the Pole, Guernsey), and in the workings of nature we sense a temporal vista that extends over several millennia (the year 709 and “earlier times”
are referred to a little later). Hugo depicts a global system, a material cosmography, characterized by a “tremendous activity” that has “terrible consequences,” for example “erosion,” due to its “power,” “violence,” and “aggression.”

It is a tableau emphasizing how the sheer physical power of the ocean dominates the earth.

Still on the first page, Hugo signals his intention to include both spheres, the human and the nonhuman, in his novel’s world picture, not as two incongruous and incompatible spheres radically separated, but as two spheres operating in great intimacy with each other and with constant “cross-ontological” spillover or overlap: “The industry of the sea, which created ruin, has been succeeded by the industry of man, which has made a people.” However, it soon becomes clear that the structure of destructive nature and constructive mankind also exists in its inverted form of constructive nature and destructive mankind. Apart from the double effacement of Gilliatt, other examples of human destruction and deformation include Clubin’s intentional foundering of the Durande, the unsteady loyalty of the local people and their superstitions and distrust of anything queer. What is of interest here is the vibrant material cosmography created by Hugo in which human intentions and natural forces of destruction and creation work constantly with and against each other in complex entanglements of cosmic scope.

The vision of a dynamic world in which processes of destruction and construction are in incessant motion, clearly inspired by Michelet, is articulated in a longue durée perspective: “The configuration of an island changes over time. An island is a construction by the ocean. Matter is eternal; not its aspect. Everything on earth is being perpetually moulded by death: even extra-human monuments, even granite. Everything changes shape, even the shapeless. Edifices built by the sea crumble like any other. The sea, which has built them up, also demolishes them.” In this scenario dominated by geological forces, mankind plays its part. In some remarkable pages, Hugo anticipates contemporary anthropocene discussions of humanity as a telluric force with earth-remodeling powers: “The sea builds up and demolishes; and man helps the sea, not in building up but in destroying. Of all the teeth of time the one that works hardest is man’s pickax. Man is a rodent. Everything is modified or changed at his hand, either for the better or for the worse. Here he disfigures, there he transfigures. […] man can carve up nature. The scar of human work can be

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56 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 5.
57 Cohen, Stone, 8.
58 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 5.
59 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 49.
Contrary to a wound that heals invisibly, a scar is a lasting visible physical record of past actions, damage, or events.

If scar is a negatively loaded word, Hugo immediately shifts the mood of the argument by focusing on the praiseworthy qualities and accomplishments of man, now cooperating with nature instead of injuring it:

It seems that a certain power of achievement is granted to man. He appropriates the creation to humanity. Such is his function. He has the necessary boldness; one might also say the necessary impiety. This collaboration with nature is something offensive. Man, a short-lived being who is perpetually dying, takes on the infinite. Against all the ebb and flow of nature, against elements seeking to communicate with other elements, against the vast navigation of forces in the depths man declares a blockade. [...] He has his idea of fitness, and the universe must accept it. [...] A universe is a mass of raw material. The world, which is God’s work, is man’s canvas.

Everything limits man, but nothing stops him. He responds to limits by jumping over them. The impossible is a frontier that is perpetually receding.

A geological formation that has at its base the mud of the Deluge and at its summit the eternal snows is, for man, a wall like any other: he cuts through it and continues beyond.

This is humanity imagined as sovereign, assigned the role as the supreme project maker to whom the world is but a stage, an inertia to be overcome. The metaphor of “world as canvas” implicates humanity’s separation from the world. Incongruity is emphasized over intimacy. Hugo comes close to articulating anthropocentrism in its purest form. He goes even further in his eulogy:

Once upon a time he did all this work for Xerxes; nowadays, less foolish, he does it for himself. This diminution of foolishness is called progress. Man works on his house, and his house is the earth. He disarranges, displaces, suppresses, knocks down, levels, mines, undermines, digs, excavates, breaks up, pulverizes, effaces this, abolishes that, and rebuilds with what he has destroyed. Nothing makes him hesitate—no mass, no blockade, no obstacle, no consideration for splendid material, no majesty of

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60 Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, 50.
nature. If the enormities of creation are within his reach he tears them down. This aspect of God that can be ruined tempts him, and he mounts an assault on immensity, hammer in hand. Globe, let this ant of yours have his way.62

If positive words and expressions such as “progress” and “less foolish” signal Hugo’s admiration for humanity, there seems to be a movement in the passage towards irony and critique of our hubristic treatment of earth and our spoiled behavior. This becomes explicit in the following passage:

Let us not, however, exaggerate our power. Whatever man does, the great lines of creation persist; the supreme mass does not depend on man. He has power over the detail, not over the whole. And it is right that this should be so. The Whole is providential. Its laws pass over our head. What we do goes no farther than the surface. Man clothes or unclothes the earth; clearing a forest is like taking off a garment. But to slow down the rotation of the globe on its axis, to accelerate the course of the globe on its orbit, to add or subtract a fathom on the earth’s daily journey of 718,000 leagues around the sun, to modify the precession of the equinoxes, to eliminate one drop of rain—never! What is on high remains on high. Man can change the climate, but not the seasons.63

In the next chapter, we will return to the discussion of maritime fiction in the Anthropocene at length. Clearly, Hugo’s passages here strike chords that resonate with problems and challenges defining the Anthropocene. What vision does Hugo promote here? How does he envision humanity’s planetary role? How far can human agency go?

It is remarkable how close Hugo comes to articulating some of the core dilemmas and by now established truths about mankind’s telluric power. At the same time, it is telling that Hugo situates man’s impotence chronologically before what we now refer to as tipping points. These temporal junctures mark points of no return, characterized by a time before (defined by human actions of telluric magnitude that have produced the tipping points) and by a time after (during which mankind has now become impotent, unable to prevent, halt, or even control potentially fatal processes in the Earth system). In Les Travailleurs, tipping points do not exist, because Hugo sets a limit to the

62 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 50–51.
63 Hugo, The Toilers of the Sea, 51.
powers of human agency: humans may cause climate to change, but we cannot manipulate the seasons; humans may control the detail, but never the Whole; we only decide Earth’s garment, but we have no say in the lines of creation; our sphere is the surface, not the supreme mass.

Hugo is right in many ways. In contemporary discussions of the consequences of the Anthropocene, scientists speak of a record of human actions traceable on the geological surface of the planet. There is nothing suggesting that planet Earth will stop its law-bound rotation around the sun or its volcanic activities no matter how much humans wreak havoc on its climactic system. Today, the greatest fears seem to be an uninhabitable planet and human extinction caused by human actions. Is this a scenario envisioned by Hugo? Not really. Les Travailleurs may be a novel in which nonhuman matter plays a significant role, but Hugo does not imagine human extinction as a result of harmful anthropogenic actions. Arguably, the main difference between Hugo and contemporary worst-case scenario thinkers of the Anthropocene is the introduction of tipping points as markers of points of no return after which the Earth’s evolution may result in an uninhabitable, posthuman planet. Hugo’s idea of a fundamental separation between detail and whole, between surface and lines of creation, has been challenged today with the discovery of the Earth system in which details and surfaces are directly linked with the whole—not in a cosmological-astrological sense, but in a planetary sense. Today, we know that climate change affects seasonal rhythms as we know them today and as they define specific locations. We are also aware that the scars on the earth’s surface inflicted by humans will not only be visible for thousands of years to come, but that they will disturb and perhaps even destroy the ecology of the Earth system.

So, Hugo did not or could not conceive that human actions could be so extensively ecologically damaging that the result would be a posthuman world. Nevertheless, in the novel’s last words there is a commitment to nature, a pledge that signals a posthuman planet. On the new anthropogenic earth in “The Book of Revelations,” “there was no more sea.” In contrast, Victor Hugo envisions an entirely different new world at the end of his novel: “There was now nothing but the sea.” If God eradicated the wet, unruly sea from dry earth in his efforts to create orders and distinctions, Hugo promotes another image of order: “everywhere the profound order of nature’s great disorder.”

64 “Book of Revelations,” The King James Bible, 21.1.