

## LEARNING TO BE IN THE MIDDLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MARDER

*Author of Dump Philosophy: A Phenomenology of Devastation*

**Abstract** The interview begins with the author summarizing his new book, *Dump Philosophy*, in which he gives a phenomenological description of the devastated world we live in today. Hierarchy has been replaced by a levelling process in which the boundaries and distinctions between different regions of being no longer obtain. As he says, “All the world’s a dump.” There is no position outside of the dump that is uncontaminated. In response to the interviewer’s objections, he goes on to say that neither art nor philosophy constitute exceptions to this process. Rather, what we must do is be faithful to the experience of the dump itself and not look for exceptions elsewhere. Even the very air we breathe has become part of the dump in which we exist. We must engage in “...learning to be in the middle...even in and especially if one is in the middle of a dump.”

**Keywords:** aesthetics, art, dump, ecology, environmental philosophy, pollution, world, nihilism, devastation, possibility, hope

### Brief note about the interviewee:

**Michael Marder** is IKERBASQUE Research Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. His writings span the fields of ecological theory, phenomenology, and political thought. He is the author of numerous scientific articles and eighteen monographs, including *Plant-Thinking* (2013); *Phenomena—Critique—Logos* (2014); *The Philosopher’s Plant* (2014); *Dust* (2016), *Energy Dreams* (2017), *Heidegger* (2018), *Political Categories* (2019), *Pyropolitics in the World Ablaze* (2020); *Dump Philosophy* (2020); *Hegel’s Energy* (2021); and *Green Mass* (2021) among others. For more information, consult his website [michaelmarder.org](http://michaelmarder.org).



**Stephen K. Levine (SKL):** *In your book, *Dump Philosophy* (2021), you engage in a phenomenological description of the current state of the world. The picture you paint is one in which we have turned the earth into a devastated condition in which something like a coherent and meaningful world no longer exists. As you say, “All the world’s a dump.” Can you briefly explain what you mean by that and tell us what led you to this conclusion?*

**Michael Marder (MM):** We do not have to look far to find plenty of evidence for the transformation of the world into a dump. The massive emissions of toxins, CO<sub>2</sub>, chemical pesticides, herbicides, and other such substances clog and transform the atmosphere, the oceans, and the soil. Some will point to a fundamental (and essentially Heideggerian) distinction between earth and world, in keeping with which the becoming-dump of the world does not imply the same transformation of earth. But I think that the epoch we are living in is making clear how the fate of the world is tied to that of the earth, no longer reducible to a deep and essentially unknowable source of meaning. The meaningless source pregnant with a multitude of meanings that the earth was is gone: it is not metaphysically untouchable, safe and sound despite rapidly unfolding anthropogenic devastation. If the geological age called, still provisionally I think, the Anthropocene, means anything, it signals the collapse of the earth/world distinction. So, the gargantuan outpouring of industrial pollution into the environment wreaks havoc in the elemental domain and in the webs of meaning called “world” that are not at all autonomous from this domain. But, besides the contaminating substances, we can also spy world devastation in the massive outpouring of information that overwhelms any sort of coherent narratives, in the ever-growing pressure of social networks that multiply relations ad infinitum while nullifying the deeper bonds of relationality, in the flattening of old hierarchical systems of valuations replaced with the desideratum to treat everyone and everything on the same level without allowing for singular judgments of difference. The list goes on. The point is that, though all these tendencies seem to stem from diverse regions of being, they combine forces toward a transformation of the world into a dump,

a mishmash or a soup of meanings that is in itself meaningless. And I am even convinced that the boundaries between these regions do not resist the thrust of the dump: information and toxins, relations, thoughts, non-decomposing artefacts—all are dumped into each other. This, unfortunately, is now the default mode of our “overcoming of metaphysics,” of challenging the similarly unfortunate splits (say, between the body and the mind) by massifying and dumping each of their sides into the other.

**SKL:** *You paint a devastating picture of a devastated world. As you indicate, in Heidegger’s philosophy, “Earth” refers not just to the elemental character of the planet of which we live but is rather an unknowable and inexhaustible source of meaning that supports the historical worlds which emerge on its basis. Are you proposing a fundamental shift in post-Heideggerean thinking? And if so, certain questions arise which it seems to me are difficult to answer. First of all, what is the standpoint on the basis of which you make this claim? How is it that “dump philosophy,” the thinking of the dump which is not itself dumped (i.e., a meaningful form of thinking) is even possible? Secondly, if indeed the world is a dump in which distinctions and articulations no longer are possible, what possible courses of action could we undertake in response to this situation? Would not anything we do become itself part of the dump? In which case, your book would be just another dumped thing, indistinguishable from anything else.*

**MM:** One thesis I defend throughout the book is that nowadays there is no pure standpoint, uncontaminated by the dump. It is pointless to search for this standpoint either in the world of thought, in the realm of the senses, in other-than-human nature, in art, or in social relations. That said, we should not give in to despair or paralysis. Since, as Jean-Luc Nancy noticed in his blurb for the book, *Dump Philosophy* is, at bottom, a treatise on nihilism, I suggest that we follow the path Nietzsche charted with reference to nihilism: rather than simply reject or dismiss it, we ought to deepen it and, then, perhaps, emerge on the other side. The hopes that there are parts (let’s call them “niches”) of the world and of ourselves

somehow immune to the power of the dump are misplaced, and it is these very hopes, I claim, that stand in the way of an honest and level-headed assessment of our dire situation. Thinking is not an exception here: today, there is no thinking that does not take place within the dump—and cognition, too, forms an important part of the dump within us. But, while all thinking is *of* the dump, not all thinking is *for* the dump. The genitive “of the dump” is one of the keys to my book. In this particular instance, I suggest exploring how dumped thinking (*of* but not *for* the dump) can accompany all bodies-minds in their massive and undifferentiated fall, assuming their weight, contending with gravity in the most material sense of the term. And how it might be possible to forge the bonds of solidarity with everyone and everything dumped by identifying with biomass, with the anonymous reduction of life to mass. So, yes! The book is, indeed, a dumped thing, with the proviso of trying to develop a self-consciousness of the dump. Heeding this proviso, we might begin to act not only *within but on* the dump, reshaping it into something else from an interiority devoid of exteriority.

**SKL:** *To go on to another, though related, topic: In his essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger gives a phenomenological account of the work of art as emerging from a conflict between World and Earth. He also says that art is the setting of truth into a work. The truth he is referring to is the meaning of the historical world, a meaning which has been previously hidden before it is revealed by the work. If the distinction between Earth and World no longer exists in the dump, then is art in this foundational sense still possible? This is an especially important question for those of us interested in the possibility of ecopoiesis.*

*Elsewhere, Heidegger quotes Hölderlin, “Poetically humans dwell” (dichterisch wohnet der Mensch). What is dwelling in the dump? How could we live poetically in this condition? And can a poetic or “poietic” response to the dump be at all possible? In *Dump Philosophy*, your text is accompanied by a series of images, some of which seem to show dumped bodies indistinguishable from each other. Moreover, at*

*the end of the book, you present what you call “a poetic appendix: elemental laments,” a series of poetic reflections on the elements in their dumped condition. How is the reader to take these images and reflections? Personally, they give me hope that poiesis is still possible, even in the dump. Would you agree?*

**MM:** Neither art nor thinking are, as I’ve already mentioned, privileged exceptions from the world (or, as I call it, the “unworld”) of the dump: they are imbued with the dynamics of the dump through and through. More than that, art and thinking are possible today only on the condition that artists and thinkers abandon the illusion of being situated somewhere above, behind, or, in any case, at a distance from the reality of the dump. If, as Heidegger maintains, art is a setting of truth into a work, then the dump is what it must illuminate in its truth in the twenty-first century. In the same essay you mention, Heidegger makes another important distinction between the thing — and the work-character of an artwork. Launched into the dump that is nothing short of the name for Being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the artwork is a dumped thing; yet, after the artist is done with it, the thing continues to work, leading a curious afterlife. The question is: how? What are the effects, the workings, of the artwork? What does it do to the dump? Is it added to the already massive and still growing pile, indifferently and undifferentiatedly augmenting the dump? Or does its addition actually clear a bit of space-time within the dump — a strange addition that amounts to subtraction?

I agree with Heidegger that dwelling is only possible in a clearing. For complex and necessary reasons, Heidegger saw this clearing, in all its finitude, as a clearing in the woods, in hylomorphically conceived matter that loomed large over it. Nowadays, dwelling is possible in a clearing in the dump. My hope is that the words (whether philosophical or poetic or both) and the images of *Dump Philosophy* contribute to such a clearing, which, at any rate, cannot be a private escape route. In other words, our task is not to look for the still livable pockets of the world, of thinking, and of art somehow untouched by the force of the dump. I recommend delving deep into the intolerable and increasingly prevalent condition of our contemporaneity, facing it and facing

ourselves in it, and then introducing something into it that would immanently interfere with its ongoing operations.

**SKL:** *Your last sentence seems important to me. We have to find ways to allow for clearing in the dump. I'm not sure, however, that we would agree on what these ways might be. In your book on Heidegger, you indicate that in his thinking, the finite existence of the human being can be characterized as a "gathering — gathered" one (Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology Politics, 2018). In other words, we are not only beings that take over or appropriate what is other than us, but we ourselves are gathered in historical time. There is thus a necessarily receptive element in human existence. We are not Masters of the Universe, but we are capable of responding to what is given. My way of putting this is to say, "poiesis is always possible." The dump seems to me to be the final form in which human existence based solely on appropriation takes place. We are ourselves dumped by our dumping of the world. However, as you say, we can still delve deeply "into this intolerable condition," face it, and introduce "something into it that would immanently interfere with its ongoing operations." How can we do that?*

*Here is where I believe we would differ. It seems to me that there are many ways in which we already incorporate a receptive element into our practice. Art-making is one of them. The artist does not create ex nihilo, as an omniscient and omnipotent deity would. In my own experience of art-making, I find that writing poetry, for example, is a matter of being open to receive the words which I may then shape into a final form. Though I often begin with an impulse, an image or an idea, the poem goes its own way, sometimes quite surprisingly. Similarly, novelists often find that their characters say and do things which are very different from the initial conception that brought them into being. The same is true for modes of performance, whether they be music, dance or theater.*

*Otherwise, we end up with something like socialist realism, in which both form and content are dictated by the central committee or, today, an ideology based on a pre-determined conception of identity.*

*This is also the case in therapeutic practice. In my own experience, both as therapist and client, I have to let go and receive what is coming. If I try to shape the experience in terms of a predetermined goal, it never works. The perspective of the Ecopoiesis journal stems from this acknowledgment of the receptive quality of our existence. The creative and expressive modes of therapeutic practice become models for understanding our relationship to the earth. Again, we cannot mould the earth according to our will. If we try to do so, the result will be the dump that you describe so well.*

*There is also an element of surrender in ecological practice that we neglect at our peril. There are in fact many in the field of environmental thought and action who recognize this. For example, in the August 9 issue of The New Yorker magazine, there is a profile of the landscape architect Kate Orff. She is said to be "...at the forefront of an emerging approach to climate resilience that argues we should be building with nature not just in nature." Orff explicitly rejects a "romantic view that we should just let nature take its course... That doesn't take into account the damage we've already done." In other words, we have to face the dump and find ways to allow clearing to emerge. I would characterize this framework as a mode of what Heidegger calls Gelassenheit, a letting-be that, as Paul Celan says about poetry, "La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose" ("Poetry no longer imposes, it exposes"). It allows for something to come to presence. I also think of this in terms of the Taoist concept of wu-wei or non-action, a way of doing that follows rather than commands. The "cosmotechnics" of Yuk Hui aims for a conception of technological diversity based on*

*this understanding. He finds a different thinking of techne in terms of the aesthetic sensibility which gave rise to the mountain-water (shan-shui) images of classical Chinese landscape painting, as opposed to the representational character of Western art (Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, 2021). In *Dump Philosophy*, you explicitly reject this turning East as another form of philosophical romanticism (although you do allow for the possibility of “cross-cultural conversations” to come into being if the participants are intimately familiar with more than one tradition, which I find to be the case for Yuk Hui and also for François Jullien, who makes a similar argument in his many books).*

*Finally, I find in your own earlier work on “vegetal being,” the phenomenological ontology of plants, based on the receptivity of plant existence and the concomitant capacity for cultivation, a “cautious hope for the future,” for a new beginning that would allow for the cultivation and sharing of life which is eliminated in the biomass of the dump (Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*, 2016, p. 216). Do you still have such a hope?*

*I hope you will forgive this long excursus into an alternative way of conceiving of a possible response to our situation, a “clearing in the dump” that would bring new growth. With some temerity, I invite you to respond.*

**MM:** Indeed, the dump is an outcome—and an extreme one at that—of the illusion that the world around us can be mastered, manipulated at will, its portions discarded thereafter. This sort of attitude boomerangs back to us, who are not at all separate from the abused world, and is magnified manifold in its effects. When, as you rightly note, I write that “we are the dumped dumpers,” I am referring exactly to this development. I also agree that a receptive practice counterbalances a lopsidedly appropriative way of behaving and sheds light on the other half of human constitution: not only as gathering, but also as gathered. But my questions, in turn, would be: What or

who is being received in our receptivity to others and to the world? And where does reception take place? I know that the reception you invoke exceeds the confines of knowing and that to specify its content or form—let alone to specify them *in advance*—is a self-defeating, futile, and counterproductive endeavor. On the receptive end, one awaits what does not quite show itself on the horizons of expectation. And yet, it would be naïve to think that either the received or the receiving is protected from the dynamics of the dump and of dumping; that with the right attitude and practice one can stand at a distance from the all-pervasive dump; that one can be or become an island of purity in an ocean made of massive debris.

I think that we need to dig deeper than reviving the nearly forgotten or repressed half of human experience, which is our openness (or “openness,” as I put it in my book on Heidegger) to the world. Most of all, because the attitude of unlimited mastery is not *just* an attitude: the history it has enabled has accrued a series of material consequences that are here to stay, in some cases for millennia to come. It would be irresponsible to turn our backs on this predicament and, ultimately, on ourselves who are a part of it. The very form of possible experience (not in a transcendental Kantian sense, though in that sense as well) is to be reinvented, painstakingly, within the all-encompassing unworld of the dump. Facing the dump is also facing ourselves—in and as it. I have designated this process with what is perhaps now an old-fashioned Hegelian word, “self-consciousness.”

Let’s take, or receive, the example of breath. Inhaling, we receive a bit of the atmosphere in ourselves without appropriating it—there is no choice but to exhale. What is received, though, comes laced with the best and the worst (oxygen and vegetal exhalation, as well as exhaust fumes and airborne viruses or bacteria). Receptivity invariably means receiving also the dump within, in an interiority that immediately turns inside out, exhaling. The same happens at the psychic level, in spiritual pneumatology, across Hebraic, Greek, and Roman traditions that understood at least one aspect of the soul on the basis of breath. Psychic life receives the dump within itself as much as our lungs and bronchioles do. Whomever we follow, whatever we follow, the real possibility of following them into the dump, of being dumped, is unavoidable. So

much so that it is not just a possibility but, in the best of cases, the supplement to something or someone else. Why, then, should we not take an honest look at our situation?

I have been also devoting plenty of time recently to considering the relation, if a relation it is, between vegetal ontology and the ontology of the dump. In *Dump Philosophy* I do say that the dump takes over some of the key features of the Greek *physis* and of growth, but it is, once again, a very partial imitation because what is missing from it are the processes of decay and metamorphosis. (In this sense, the attitude and practice of mastery without receptivity mirror a predilection for growth without decay, which is not only the illusion of neoliberalism with regard to the economy but also the main disruptive force when it comes to ecology.)

It seems to me that the Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who lived almost a thousand years ago and about whom I've recently written in *Green Mass: The Ecological Theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen*, (2021), can give us some clues as to this strange conjunction. Hildegard's thought, or, better, her vision, identified two poles of existence: *ariditas* and *viriditas*. *Ariditas*, which is a part of her non-moralistic notion of sin, is the drying up of the world, its exhaustion in a desert-like state, wherein all are reduced to the impassive moulds of their identities. Nothing more and nothing less. *Viriditas*, conversely, is the greenness (or "the greening green," as I translate it from Latin) that signifies the ever-rejuvenating, self-renewing capacity of creation, the overflow of finitude with future life. This is the crossroads in Hildegard's theology and in our ecology. With biomass, to which plants and all organic beings whether living or dead have been reduced, *viriditas* has been harnessed for the purpose of augmenting *ariditas*. Obviously, its harnessing can never be complete, and the enlivening excess of *viriditas* will find other outlets, but the self-renewing capacity of finitude is not infinite; it is rather fragile, its continuation uncertain (Hildegard was well apprised of this). When in *Dump Philosophy* I experiment with a possibility of identifying with biomass, consisting primarily of plants and of vegetal life, I keep seeking a new beginning in unpredictable growth and, even more so, in decay, which is crucial to the severely disrupted metabolisms of all sorts, from the planetary to the psychic.

**SKL:** *I find your discussion of air and breath quite interesting, especially in light of what you write in the chapter, "Sharing universal breathing," in your book, Through Vegetal Being. You write there about your severe seasonal allergies and how these were greatly aggravated by the air pollution produced by the factory located just near your neighbourhood as a child in Moscow. You then talk about an encounter with a yoga teacher in India and his meditative practice of a "cultivation of breath" through slow breathing, and you go on to say that, like plants, "...we must become conduits for air, channeling it through ourselves rather than relating to it as a resource." Of course, breathing meditation has become another thing that we have dumped, mixing it in an indiscriminate way with other self-help programs. No matter how much we practice it, the air we breathe will still be toxic today. Nevertheless, it seems to me that although there is no air anywhere which is devoid of pollution, there are still places on earth which are more or less so. I am writing this on the island of Martha's Vineyard, in a house and neighborhood surrounded by trees. The air here is much more breathable than what I normally encounter in my home in Toronto. Can we not take this into account in our built environment, dealing with the intolerable pollution of many of our cities, as well as finding spaces in which to breathe? I am also reminded, of course, of the murder of George Floyd and his refrain "I can't breathe!" which has become a motto for Black Lives Matter groups in North America and elsewhere. These are political issues as well as economic and ecological ones.*

*We could go on with this discussion, I'm sure, but perhaps the differences between our perspectives have become clearer to the reader. I still think that it is not only possible but absolutely necessary to act in ways that counter the dump, to develop new forms of practice based on the receptivity of poiesis rather than on a praxis that*

*attempts to dominate all that is. This is perhaps “a cautious hope,” and we must always be on guard against the unintended consequences of our actions lest they contribute to the catastrophe as well.*

*Finally, I would like to bring our vis-à-vis to a pause, if not a halt, by asking you to explain what you meant when, in your presentation of Hildegard of Bingen, you end by “...seeking a new beginning in unpredictable growth and, even more so, in decay...” In the rather bleak presentation that you provide of our world today, I am encouraged by your acknowledgement of the possibility of such a new beginning. How can “unpredictable growth and... decay” make such a “turn” or “Kehre,” to use Heidegger’s word, possible?*

**MM:** What I describe, at the limit of the capacities of phenomenological description, in *Dump Philosophy*, is a predominant tendency that is, certainly, proceeding unevenly and is still nowhere near its completion. The becoming-dump of the world does not happen to the same extent in every place, but it does drag the very notion of placeness into its abyss. Further, the tipping point, to which I refer early on in my book, is the switching around of terms in the relation between the rule and the exception: if, until fairly recently, it seemed that patches of pollution besmirched our otherwise pristine planet, now the rule is that of a massive pollution of every ecosystem, with comparatively less polluted exceptions here and there. And, since we are dealing with a tendency (hence, something by its nature dynamic), it is reasonable to conclude that, going forward, there will be more and more homogenization of the dump, leaving less time and space for occasional exceptions to its merciless advance.

Now, the entire wager of my project is that we should not seek these ever-rarer exceptions to the general rule, but should instead delve into the rule’s starkest instantiations in order to tease out the “mechanics” and the “logistics” of the dump. Along the same lines, I discourage a search for solutions, tempting as it may be, precisely in exceptional niches, such as places where we can breathe relatively fresh air. As I put it at some point—I am paraphrasing here—the business of exceptional experiences sells a lie, because what

sort of an experience is it when the (material and transcendental) form of experience has been devastated?

The issue of air, which we’ve touched upon several times in our conversation, is particularly sensitive and important for the very reasons you cite: in addition to lethal pollution, it is now laced with other life-threatening particles (airborne viruses) and imbued with political significance in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of police. In a sense, Covid19 has contributed to the dumpification of air because the pandemic has made its sharing and shared cultivation all but impossible. Necessary as they are, the masks are the devices of privatization: they restrict the circulation and sharing of air, which, precisely as a vital non-resource, was at the basis of my dream of “elemental communism” at the time of the correspondence with Luce Irigaray, which yielded *Through Vegetal Being*.

That said, the possibility of doing something in the dump that would, perhaps, change the dump from within also emerges rather clearly with respect to air. How is it to practice slow breathing in Delhi or in Chengdu (cities with air pollution that struck me as truly intolerable when I stayed there), say, as opposed to the parts of North America and Europe, where we are currently writing and breathing? What does it mean to engage in the cultivation of breath not within the luxury of relatively free breathing but within a sense of suffocation? And, wherever we are, what does it feel like to turn ourselves into the conduits of air, while sensing and knowing that we become the conduits of what I baptise as aerodump? This is the practical and theoretical hinge I have been alluding to: as the conduits of air, we channel the dump through ourselves, but, in channelling it this way, we contribute to a micro-breakdown of its mechanics and logistics.

And I believe that, with the more-than-example of air, I am addressing your closing question about the possibility of a “turn” and “a new beginning.” As you can see, such a beginning cannot signify a break with the past, starting from a clean slate, of which various thinkers dreamt at the dawn of modernity. It implies, on the contrary, mending all sorts of severed connections between growth and decay, inhalation and exhalation, life and death. It means, also and thereby, learning to be in the middle—the vegetal *and* existential position par

excellence—even and especially if one is in the middle of a dump. The task is not an easy one, because it can only be discharged by each singly, by each in relation to the other and to others, and by all: at psychic and economic, political and ethical levels. But the zero point is for us to realize where, when, and how we are, acknowledging our situation in its bleakness, as you put it. Every future possibility of movement and rest will derive from there.

Interviewer:

**Stephen K. Levine** — *Ph.D., D.S.Sc, REAT, Professor Emeritus, York University (Toronto, Canada), Founding Dean of the Doctoral Program in Expressive Arts at The European Graduate School (Switzerland)*

## Reference for citations

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