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Teaching the Uncanny: A *Dark Pedagogy* for Climate Disruptions

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Abstract

This essay develops the notion of Dark Pedagogy as a framework for responding to climate and ecological disruption. It begins with the claim that climate breakdown exemplifies the metacrisis: a structural condition in which the very knowledge of ecological catastrophe coexists with inaction, denial, or disavowal. Climate disruptions thus reflect not only material devastation but also the erosion of social, political and cognitive frameworks that normally enable collective response. Dark Pedagogy foregrounds the parallel between the metacrisis and the psychological dynamics of disavowal, showing how familiar narratives of progress, harmony and control both obscure ecological realities and perpetuate ineffective responses. Against educational approaches that rely on hope or reassurance, Dark Pedagogy emphasises dwelling with unsettling affects as a means of confronting the uncanny instability of the world, using Giacomo Leopardi's reflections on nature as an exemplary case. Anguish, in this context, is treated not as a symptom to be overcome but as a critical signal: it reveals the fragility of our assumptions, alerts us to the limitations of familiar frameworks and opens a horizon for education rooted in reflection, ethical engagement and attentiveness to the unpredictable, often hostile realities of the current geological era.

Keywords: Anguish; climate education; dark pedagogy; metacrisis; uncanny

Introduction

Responses to climate and ecological disruption can take many forms: denial, conspiracy theories, activism, changes in attitude, and, most commonly, business-as-usual (IPCC, 1990). Despite their differences, these reactions share, most of the time, a common logic, which this essay identifies with the metacrisis: a structure of disavowal, or in its most extreme form, denial. As Jonathan Rowson (2021) argues, the metacrisis manifests in disenchanted worldviews, absent collective identities, self-subverting politics and unmet learning needs, leaving societies unable to act in proportion to what they know. Yet there is something even stranger at work here. Although it can take many different forms (and this essay will explore some of them), the most general – because it can at the same time address the others – is what Alenka Zupančič has termed '(perverted) disavowal': a structure that 'sustain[s] some belief by means of ardently proclaiming the knowledge of the opposite' (2024, p. 7). This mechanism helps illuminate why, even when we know and feel the weight of ecological catastrophe, we can still carry on as if untouched.

I argue that climate disruptions exemplify the metacrisis itself, rather than merely constituting one problematic dimension of a broader ‘polycrisis’ (Lawrence *et al.*, 2024)¹. Ecological collapse does not unfold in isolation: the same forces that drive carbon emissions and mass extinction also corrode meaning, undermine trust and intensify despair. Climate disruptions thus confront us not only with rising seas, extinctions and violent storms, but also with the erosion of the frameworks that once secured our sense of belonging in the world. Horizons of progress, harmony and control – once assumed to be stable – are now exposed as fragile and uncanny, recalling Giacomo Leopardi’s ironic description of *le magnifiche sorti e progressive* (Leopardi, 2010) – the magnificent and progressive destinies – almost two centuries ago.

What to do, then? If, as Rowson suggests, we are ‘in a pickle’ – a metaphor warning against ‘sweet-tasting bypasses’ that conceal the bitterness of our condition – then to educate in times of rupture is to ‘taste the pickle’: to resist bypasses and remain with the sharp, unsettling affects of our predicament. Remaining with these affects means confronting not only our feelings but also the very structures through which we understand and act in the world.

It is in this spirit that I propose what has been termed Dark Pedagogy (Lysgaard *et al.*, 2019; Lysgaard & Bengtsson, 2020)², extending and refining some of its key features, and presenting it as a framework for engaging with ecological awareness, specifically, a dark awareness (Morton, 2016). I develop this framework through four steps. First, I offer an analysis of pedagogies of hope and positive affects, proposing instead cosmic pessimism (Thacker, 2011) as a theoretical stance and entropic pessimism (Li Mandri, 2025) as a practical orientation for acting within the Anthropocene. Second, I examine different modes of disavowal – from fetishist forms that inform certain types of activism to the perverse disavowal underpinning business-as-usual – showing how these rely on idealised notions of nature as harmonious or nurturing, and proposing instead an image of nature as violent, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Third, I turn to Leopardi’s unfinished poem *Ad Arimane* to illustrate this argument, thus making it a concrete example of the concepts explored in the previous sections, developing his vision of collapse and disillusion as resources for ecological awareness. This renders section three both a theoretical reflection and an enactment of those ideas. Finally, I analyse anguish as elaborated by Freud and Lacan, arguing that this unsettling affect is not a symptom to be overcome but a vital signal, indispensable for rethinking pedagogy in times of rupture. As will become clear throughout the essay, its primary

¹The “polycrisis” is typically described as the convergence of multiple, overlapping threats, including climate change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, drought, flooding, soil degradation, resource exhaustion, ocean rise, acidification and warming, plastic pollution and the spread of toxic “forever chemicals” (Ceballos & Ehrlich, 2023). To these ecological emergencies must be added systemic pressures such as peak oil, nuclear war, widening inequality, poverty and homelessness, a rapidly escalating refugee crisis, rising levels of anxiety and suicide, as well as the disruptive impacts of artificial intelligence and the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution. While metaphors such as the “perfect storm” capture the monumental scale of these convergences, they risk implying a short-term or accidental event, whereas the concept of the “polycrisis” underscores their entangled, uneven and long-term character.

²This essay is a direct filiation of Dark Pedagogy as developed by Lysgaard *et al.* (2019), whose main idea I deeply share: namely, to explore the consequences of recent debates within the speculative realist turn for central aspects of environmental education. Although their approach aligns closely with my own aims, it differs in medium. While Lysgaard, Bengtsson and Laugesen ground their work in the horror genre of literature, I do not limit myself to any specific genre. In my case, dark refers to the object of inquiry – it can be found across a wide range of literary and artistic expressions – but also to the feelings provoked in the ‘learners’ by the objects of inquiry. Moreover, *Dark Pedagogy* situates itself inside the Philosophy for Children (P4C) practice and can engage with virtually any stimulus for discussion. Finally, while this essay connects my educational framework with the theme of climate crisis, which serves as my starting point for developing the framework, I intend to expand the objects of inquiry in the future to include other areas such as psychological, sociological and political issues. The approach of Lysgaard and Bengtsson is closely tied, as the authors explain, to the Didaktik tradition of Central European and Scandinavian pedagogical thought, to which I also adhere in certain core values. At the same time, I am deeply inspired by a pedagogical perspective influenced by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, for which, as Michela Dianetti has insightfully noted, teaching is ‘educational but non-didactic. It is not a lesson with content in the sense of ‘a message’, but rather it can inspire a new orientation of our gaze towards reality’ (2023, 123).

aim is not to offer quick, practical guidance for educators³. Rather, it seeks to dismantle our very patterns of thought before we consider how to approach complex issues such as the climate crisis.

Environmental education has often leaned on metaphors of balance, harmony and interconnectedness, offering reassurance rather than rupture. A dark orientation insists instead on dwelling with what is unsettling: the sourness of loss, the bitterness of complicity, the strangeness of entanglement. By attending to rupture rather than smoothing it over, Dark Pedagogy acknowledges the cracks in our ontological, ethical and epistemological assumptions instead of concealing them.

Dark Pedagogy rejects notions of progress and the reliance on positive affects that underpin much of contemporary education, proposing instead a pedagogy rooted in what has been termed 'cosmic pessimism' (Thacker, 2011). In a rapidly changing world, a pessimistic approach centres on deconstruction, critical engagement and open-ended inquiry over conclusive answers⁴. It aims to dismantle assumptions rather than construct perfect systems (Leopardi, 2013). By adopting this approach, education can begin to equip individuals with the tools to confront the uncertainties and complexities of the current geological era, fostering deeper awareness of the entanglements between human and non-human worlds. Dark Pedagogy can help students grapple with ecological anxiety by embracing the 'darkness' of ecological realities as a site of ethical and intellectual engagement. It offers a framework for processing and responding to feelings of loss and uncertainty and for critically analysing the socio-political and economic structures that contribute to ecological crises.

If disavowal can be understood as a self-defence mechanism that conceals our involvement in the larger symbolic structures that have led to climate and ecological catastrophes, then this paper presents anguish as the sentiment that disrupts these same ways of understanding our world, a necessary path to a renewed conception of reality. Anguish has often been treated as a symptom of an anomaly in the subject, something that requires a reorganisation of one's worldview. Lacan, however, offers a different perspective. For him, following Freud, anguish is a signal, a signal of the Real, knocking at our door, dismantling our comforting illusions about the world. It is the affect that arises when the very coordinates of meaning collapse.

Against positive affects: Cosmic and entropic pessimism

As mentioned in the introduction, Dark Pedagogy rejects the notions of progress and positive affects that underpin much of contemporary politics and, consequently, pedagogical frameworks. Setting aside the most obviously problematic positions – such as faith in technological salvation or quasi-religious belief in progress, which rest on a superficial conception of science, which in turn underpin even conspiracy theories – there remains something equally troubling in approaches that foreground hope and love as the sole forces of resistance. It is this problem that I now address in order to develop, in response, cosmic pessimism as a theoretical stance and entropic pessimism as its practical complement.

³On this aspect, some very promising work is being carried out, inspired by the key ideas put forward by the creators of Dark Pedagogy. I refer primarily to Jukes and Riley (2024), who explore the darker dimensions of the concept of time, and to Saari and Mullen (2020), who examine the darker aspects of the concept of place.

⁴Although I will not present the specific methodology in this paper, I still want to emphasise that it's deeply connected to the Philosophy for Children core methodology, the CPI (Community of Philosophical Inquiry). According to its founders, Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, education should not consist in passively filling children's minds with information. Rather, children learn through active exploration and critical thinking. Philosophy becomes meaningful when children develop the ability to think for themselves and seek their own answers to life's important questions (Lipman *et al.*, 1980, 83). My perspective is strongly aligned with recent approaches to P4C, such as the one proposed by Dianetti and Elvis (2025), which focuses on the Weilian idea of selfless attention. Sharing this orientation, and together with Dianetti, Elvis and Dr Nora Ward, I co-founded a research collective, AIRE, which aims to transpose the ideals of a Weilian ethics of attention (closely resonant with the aim of Dark Pedagogy, namely looking towards what we usually tend to avoid or ignore) to contemporary issues such as the climate crisis and social injustice through the P4C approach.

Maria Ojala, in her foundational essay on hope and its relation to ecological catastrophe, distinguishes between ‘blind’ hope, which involves denial of the most traumatic consequences of climate disruption, and ‘constructive’ hope (Ojala, 2012). A Spinozist perspective already reveals the ambivalence of hope: it is a passion that combines an element of joy with something dubious (Spinoza, 2018, p. 219). Fear, its opposite, is similarly ambivalent but bound to sadness. In this sense, if hope is still preferable to fear, both ‘blind’ and ‘constructive’ hope nonetheless carry an unavoidable dimension of illusion.

To say that hope contains illusion is not to reject illusion itself. On the contrary, we need some forms of illusions – as even Lysgaard and Bengtsson, in their foundational work on Dark Pedagogy, recognise, noting how our current society ‘seem to be fixated on the powers of insight and reason’ (2019, p. 26) – and the ones most obsessed with not-being deceived are the most problematic of all: conspiracy theorists. As Lacan reminds us, *‘les non-dupes errent’*: those who believe themselves free of illusion are the most deceived (1974). As Lysgaard and Bengtsson clearly show, the relationship between this fixation on insight and knowledge and denial’s (individual and collective) features can be understood with the metaphor of the Möbius strip, ‘where the inside is inseparable from the outside’ (2019, p. 27). What is at stake, then, is not illusion as such, but the specific configuration Ojala presents that calls for closer scrutiny: not as a tension with some dimensions of reality, but as a displacement of it. She traces constructive hope to three sources: positive reappraisal, which risks softening the gravity of ecological collapse by turning it into a matter of perspective; trust in external actors, such as technology or organisations, which may foster passivity by shifting responsibility away from collective political engagement; and belief in everyday actions such as recycling, which can encourage good intentions but may also obscure the structural drivers of climate disruption, including extractivism and fossil capitalism. In this way, constructive hope risks reproducing the very ideological displacements that climate pedagogy ought to resist. It is precisely this particular form of hope, rather than its illusory dimension per se, that risks reproducing the very ideological displacements climate pedagogy ought to challenge.

What Lysgaard and Bengtsson describe as the ‘positive aspect of denial’ (2019, p. 25), which for them is ‘the reason why we don’t just jump off a cliff or lie down and wait to die’ (2019, p. 25), raises several difficulties. First, Freudian psychoanalysis has shown that denial can have significant repercussions in the Real in multiple forms, which makes it challenging to treat it as straightforwardly beneficial (Freud, 1957a, 1957b, 1961). Psychoanalytic practice is premised on bringing what has been repressed into consciousness in order to expand the subject’s capacity to act. Moreover, what they characterise as denial appears closer to disavowal, which is related but not identical. Their emphasis on the capacity not to be paralysed also does not fully address what we need to confront in the context of the climate crisis. It is therefore unclear whether this is the kind of ‘positive’ stance that is pedagogically desirable.

Both paralysis and what they call a positive form of denial seem to share a structural difficulty in relation to reality: the former involves seeing only one thing, while the latter involves seeing everything except that thing. Later in their argument they acknowledge that denial ‘presents poor ways of dealing with these problems’, and that such responses may serve to preserve a conventional ‘narrative of reason and progress in the face of hyperobjects and wicked problems’ (2019, p. 29). They also note that ‘rarely do simplistic ideas and concepts severely influence these monstrous wicked problems’ (2019, p. 29). This concession, however, invites a further question: should such simplifications guide our educational commitments? Are we not obliged, as educators, to recognise the complex relations between belief, affective response, reason and insight and to aim to cultivate an orientation towards complexity? These may remain aspirations, but to set the bar significantly lower seems to risk compromising the very aims of education and offers, paradoxically, a more dispiriting outlook than the alternative.

Moreover, it is less clear why we should apply the same term to more ‘constructive’ approaches. Actions seeking to confront climate disruption can take many forms: they may be reparative, involve a broader comprehension of reality, or adopt a more critical and doubtful stance towards

existing structures, sometimes leading to revolt, even in violent terms. To treat these heterogeneous responses under the same label risks neutralising their differences. This is why I remain sceptical about maintaining the same label, hope, as Ojala does, for two distinct orientations towards reality. Moreover, I struggle to embrace a politics of hope in the face of irredeemable losses, suffering and injustices. In this respect, pedagogies centred on hope risk operating as ideological displacement. Instead, I propose two complementary forms of pessimism: cosmic pessimism, which aims at reorienting our theoretical horizon, and entropic pessimism, which guides practical engagement within collapse. Yet if one still wishes to preserve the pragmatic force of hope, it may perhaps be reframed as a ‘desperate’ or ‘tenuous’ hope, one that survives only in close proximity to despair.

Cosmic pessimism, as developed by Thacker (2011, 2015), differs from moral pessimism (the belief that it is better never to have been born) and metaphysical pessimism (the view that this is the worst of all possible worlds). Cosmic pessimism instead aims at thinking the unthinkable: a planet not only indifferent to humanity but capable of existing without us, an effort to think what resists thought. It is not the effort of imagining some distant catastrophe or apocalypse, which is actually easier to think because, as Zupančič explains, ‘our future (even if imminent) death seems less scary than the idea of our existence, our being as it is now, possibly constituting a scam – because it bears on our present (and past) reality rather than on our future reality’ (2024, p. 17).⁵ This is not directly linked to a ‘fear of fearing’, but rather to what in psychoanalysis is the dynamic of the doppelgänger: to face ‘the possibility of our (present) non-reality and non-existence, the fact that it could be that we are not’ (2024, p. 17). Cosmic pessimism is the recognition that what we once called “the world” is only the world-for-us, suddenly revealed through climate collapse as the Planet: not merely a world-in-itself – the Earth – but a world-without-us. It requires confronting the unsettling possibility that our existence, as we understand it, might be fundamentally precarious or illusory. This revelation destabilises the anthropocentric and progress-driven assumptions underpinning traditional education, exposing their limits in addressing the volatile and interconnected realities of the geological present. Any attempt to grasp the world-in-itself either transforms it into the world-for-us or confronts its fundamental ungraspability: it is the Planet – the world-without-us – that bites back.⁶

Dark Pedagogy builds on this recognition. Our current ecological and climate crises reveal a deeper level of complexity and entanglement that traditional educational approaches fail to address. Dark Pedagogy aims to remain at the stage of absurdity, incomprehensibility and the weird. If, as Thacker observes, ‘the world is increasingly unthinkable’ (Thacker, 2011, p. 1), thought must still confront this unsettling reality. Planetary climate disasters originate from human activities, yet they also emerge as unpredictable, non-human events. This duality – both human-caused and beyond human control – compels the educational realm to question its

⁵It is perhaps not accidental that Maurice Blanchot described the apocalypse as disappointing (1997). Catastrophism – and more broadly the fascination with apocalyptic scenarios, disasters and their spectacle – does not counteract disavowal but rather helps to sustain existing socio-economic arrangements. The end of the world functions less as a rupture than as a theatrical backdrop, a stage against which everyday life proceeds uninterrupted. On this point, see (Zupančič, 2024).

⁶While cosmic pessimism directs attention to the Planet as a world-without-us, recognising the limits of human-centred frameworks, this insight has direct implications for education, particularly science education. Even well-intentioned efforts to engage students with the natural world can remain constrained by prescriptive or anthropocentric assumptions. As the editors of *Reimagining Science Education* argue, “While most of what has been taught, theorised, and practised in science education is not so problematic, it is the prescriptive and walled-in aspects of both science and science education that prevent broad pedagogical, methodological, and ethical connection” (Wallace *et al.*, 2024, p. 3). Scientific teaching can foster meaningful approaches, such as justice-focused, inquiry-based learning, while simultaneously marginalising Indigenous knowledge and alternative ways of knowing. This tension exemplifies the broader challenge for pedagogy: to cultivate an awareness of complex, interconnected ecological realities without reducing them to manageable narratives or human-centred frameworks. Dark Pedagogy, in this sense, seeks to maintain attention to the weird, the incomprehensible and the ungraspable, resisting the flattening tendencies of conventional science education.

practices, models and assumptions⁷. The natural world can no longer be portrayed as something entirely at humanity's disposal. Current educational systems remain anchored in anthropocentrism and speciesism. These frameworks, as Jason Wallin notes, reveal that 'the image of the future posited educationally has fallen out of sync' with the external world (Wallin, 2016, p. 2). Pedagogies that emphasise interconnectedness are necessary but insufficient, since they can inadvertently suggest that relationships between entities are linear, harmonious, or equal. In reality, ecological relations are complex, asymmetric and often antagonistic. The survival of one species may entail struggle with others: viruses with their hosts, bacteria competing for resources, predator-prey dynamics, or human-perceived 'pests' disrupting crops and ecosystems. Even mutualistic relationships involve intricate dependencies and trade-offs. No ecological relation is simple or fully controllable.

All beings belong to the ecological web, and humans are inseparably entangled within it. Yet interconnectedness does not imply homogeneity. As Georges Bataille argues, individuality itself arises from this primal intimacy: the very conditions that bind us into a web of ontological continuity, also generate difference, opening an abyss (Bataille, 1987). Unique forms of life emerge from relational entanglement, often in antagonistic or unpredictable ways. Confronting this duality – our inextricability from the whole and our irreducible individuality – is, according to Bataille, always accompanied by anguish, as we will explore. Recognising this is vital for education, since it highlights the limits of pedagogies that presume harmony and affirms the need for approaches such as Dark Pedagogy, which embrace complexity, conflict and the ethical demands of entanglement. The 'dark', then, points to an ontological reality: a world not made for us, not centred on us, never reducible to our categories. Dark Pedagogy does not seek reconciliation or clarity, but cultivates the ability to remain with this ontological strangeness, to accept that existence is unstable, indifferent and at times hostile.

Entropic pessimism translates this recognition into practice. Developed through my reading of Leopardi (Li Mandri, 2025), it affirms the inevitability of loss and decay while insisting that not all losses are the same. Drawing on the laws of thermodynamics, which state that within an enclosed system energy inevitably diminishes until no energy remains to sustain life, it also recognises that every use of energy influences entropy and can therefore be judged as more or less reasonable expenditure. In other words, if we are destined to lose, we can nevertheless lose differently. Behind certain logics of expenditure we must discern logics of sacrifice and sacrificability that are no longer acceptable. Entropic pessimism therefore opens a field for differentiated engagement with socio-economic structures and for pedagogical practices that prepare us to act within ecological collapse.

Although cosmic pessimism and entropic pessimism present some alternatives to engage with suffering and injustices produced by climate catastrophes, we still need to explore more in detail the dynamic at play within many different reactions towards this crisis. In the next section, I turn to the mechanisms of disavowal and denial, examining how these psychoanalytic concepts illuminate our responses to disturbing realities.

Waking up to keep dreaming: The logic of disavowal

As it should now have become clearer, the orientations labelled as hope-inspired (whether 'constructive' or otherwise), as well as those that involve business-as-usual, are to be understood as forms of disavowal, albeit in different registers. In the case of business-as-usual, which can be framed as the most extreme form of disavowal, it's knowledge itself that has become a fetish, leading to a 'perverted' disavowal. As Zupančič explains, 'the precipitated knowledge (the

⁷This is because ecological realities and climate are profoundly influenced by non-linear feedbacks (Andrews *et al.*, 2012), making them highly complex and challenging to comprehend. This does not imply an ontological dualism but rather highlights deeper and more intricate levels of interconnectedness that we must acknowledge.

awareness of how things really stand) makes it possible for us to ignore what we know and even to actively support what we know to be wrong' (2016, p. 422). This paradox can be further illuminated by another psychoanalytic concept that helps explain our responses to disturbing realities: the nightmare. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud briefly discusses a case that Lacan would later examine in greater detail.

A father, exhausted after many days and nights watching over his sick child, lay down in a nearby room after the child's death, leaving the door open to see into the room where the body lay surrounded by candles. An elderly man had been asked to keep vigil and prayed beside the body. After some hours of sleep, the father dreamed that his child appeared at his bedside, touched his arm and reproached him: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'. Awakening, the father saw light from the other room, rushed in and discovered that the watchman had fallen asleep and a candle had toppled over, setting fire to the wrappings and scorching the child's arm (Freud, 1958, p. 509.)

As Zupančič observes,

The dream comes up with something traumatic enough to achieve what the real fire was not able to do: to wake the father up. [...] what takes place in the dream wakes the father up, so that he can go on dreaming. Namely, and as also provocatively suggested by Lacan, it often happens with dreams that *we wake up so as to go on dreaming*. This is particularly true for nightmares, and generally true for the dreams in which a real appears that is more real, more traumatic and shattering than our everyday reality. So, in response we wake up (to reality), and proclaim to be awake, in order to be able to continue to dream – that is, to continue to exist more or less untouched, unscathed by the real that has just appeared. Which is why the real nightmare is precisely one from which we cannot wake up (2024, p. 12).

This logic is evident in our responses to ecological collapse. Consider, for example, a catastrophic oil spill. Public reactions often involve outrage, grief, or fear, yet within hours we return to our routines: commuting, shopping and depending on oil-derived products without pause. This dynamic illustrates Zupančič's notion of 'perverted disavowal': we loudly proclaim what is wrong while simultaneously relying on, and reproducing, the very conditions that make it possible. She writes:

The zeal with which we jump up and react, reach out, express concern, outrage, solidarity, is of course laudable, but it also often carries in itself a surplus dimension of serving its own purpose, as well as the purpose of disavowing the fire that bears on the real in the Lacanian sense. Attending to this other fire is obviously not an easy task, and it can happen only in a collective way, which makes it all the more difficult to imagine (2024, p. 13).

Even when some action is undertaken, it is typically relegated to a fragmentary part of the picture, while the larger structures that sustain the problem remain unquestioned. This has been termed 'fetishist disavowal'. Let us return to the example of the catastrophic oil spill. A fetishist reaction will likely treat it either as an isolated problem or as the only real problem: for instance, stopping the use of fossil fuels is seen as the sole necessary action, and everything else will be assumed to fall into place. The main distinction from *perverted* disavowal lies in their respective logics of avoidance. In *perverted* disavowal, the subject uses knowledge itself in order to ignore it: we know perfectly well, yet we act as if we did not. In *fetishist* disavowal, by contrast, an object (the Lacanian *objet a*) functions as the pivot that sustains both knowledge and action. Rather than ignoring what we know, we organise our awareness and practices around a fetishised point that gives the illusion of mastery. This logic is particularly common in certain strands of environmental activism, where climate and ecological breakdowns are framed as the result of (a) a single isolatable problem (for example, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere), which in turn can be the

outcome of (b) the degenerate actions of humans who are destroying an otherwise perfect and harmonious order.

Fetishist disavowal relies on Lacan's notion of 'imaginary *jouissance*'. As explained by Todd McGowan, imaginary *jouissance* 'allows the subject to remain securely rooted in its symbolic identity; it respects symbolic barriers, even as it offers the subject the illusion of transgressing them, which is why it doesn't threaten the stability of the symbolic order' (2004, p. 71). Fetishist disavowal creates a fantasy: a wholeness, a unity that has been lost (Nature with Capital N), that can be regained only if we act in a certain way (vegetarianism or veganism; stop using fossil fuels to switch for renewable energies; stop using plastic; etc.). While all these actions are necessary and extremely virtuous, they nonetheless don't even scratch the surface of the structures surrounding climate and ecological breakdowns, if taken singularly. This is also why *Dark Pedagogy* doesn't aim to engage with certain types of 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018) or 'solastalgia' (Albrecht *et al.*, 2007) feelings, which, according to Lucas Pohl and Erik Swyngedouw, often posit that 'the world prior to climate change, or even "Nature" more generally, is posited as some-Thing, which provided us with a sense of wholeness and completeness which is now lost' (2023, p. 6). As they explain:

'The fantasy screen that nurtures the imaginary enjoyment of environmental activism circles around a particular fantasy of what "Nature" is (Stavrakakis, 1997, 1999), articulated through signifiers like equilibrium, adaptation, resilience, socio-ecological inclusion and harmony (Swyngedouw, 2018a). The fantasy of "Mother Nature" is still a performative figure in environmental politics today' (2023, p. 6).

If perverted disavowal allows us to acknowledge catastrophe to go on ignoring it, and fetishist disavowal allows us to act while remaining bound to the symbolic structure that produced the catastrophe in the first place, here, in contrast, appears another sense of the 'dark' that *Dark Pedagogy* wants instead to engage with: dark awareness. Ecological awareness, as Timothy Morton describes it, is 'dark': it resists and disrupts our conventional ways of understanding natural phenomena (Morton, 2016). In this sense, it is not a way of mastering ecological realities but by really being unsettled by them. It wants to interrupt the comfort of waking up in order to go on dreaming, exposing us to the inescapable dimension of ecological awareness. It is dark, first, because in attempting to comprehend ecological realities we resemble detectives discovering that we ourselves are the criminals. Second, it denies the fantasy of reconciliation: recognising our interconnectedness does not dissolve the strangeness or absurdity of these realities; rather, it teaches us to coexist with absurdity and antagonism. Third, it insists on the traumatic dimensions of ecological reality, forcing us to confront the shocks, traumas and cataclysms that have made life possible.

The logic of disavowal, which can be understood as a defence mechanism, shows why ecological awareness is inescapably dark: it undermines our sense of innocence, reveals our entanglement in what we denounce and forces us to face realities that exceed our control. At the same time, the logic of the fetishist disavowal shows that it is no longer possible to rely on metaphors of balance and harmony to describe the natural world. To confront ecological realities is, after acknowledging our role as criminals, to confront the violence and ruptures of reality itself, allowing yet another veil that conceals reality to fall away.

Contemporary climate disasters driven by global warming sit uneasily with any harmonious conception of nature. Rising temperatures, desertification, sudden storms, tornadoes, tsunamis: all exhibit violence, unpredictability and uncontrollability that cannot easily be reconciled with an image of ordered serenity. While exacerbated by anthropogenic factors, these elements are nonetheless intrinsic to natural systems themselves. The categories of 'harmony' and related notions such as "order," "beauty" and "equilibrium" are therefore reductive if we are to take seriously the actual functioning of natural systems, whose causal relations are more complex than

such categories can contain. Climatic disasters, moreover, are often the unintended outcome of human actions, and every attempt to remedy them entails significant unpredictability due to the feedback processes of these systems.

For these reasons, I argue that a more fruitful (and more realistic) ecological perspective is one in which nature is understood as an order that incorporates disorder, as in Leopardi's vision: an order in which evil is not accidental but constitutive. This perspective also brings into sharper focus the practical implications of *entropic pessimism*. In the following section, I turn to Leopardi's unfinished *Hymn to Ahriman*, where this figure gives poetic form to this entropic horizon, compelling us to rethink pedagogy in light of a world where destruction is not an anomaly but the ground of existence itself.

Ahriman, or the sovereign of evil

Ahriman is the spirit of evil in the dualistic religion of Zoroastrianism, where it stands opposed to the spirit of good, Ormazd, but with equal power. In Leopardi's fragment, however, only Ahriman appears. In the sole completed portion of the hymn, he is invoked as 'King of things, author of the world, arcane malice, supreme power and supreme intelligence, eternal giver of evils and ruler of motion'. What remains beyond this passage are fragments and preparatory notes, one of which reads:

I do not know whether this makes you happy, but look and rejoice, etc. Contemplating eternity. Etc. Production and destruction. Etc. To kill it gives birth, etc. The system of the world, all suffering. Nature is like a child who immediately undoes what it has made. [. . .] The savages and primitive tribes, under various forms, recognise only you. But civilised peoples, etc. call you by different names: Fate, Nature and God. But you are Ahriman, you are the one who, etc. (Leopardi, 2010).

Ahriman stands for nature. The reality depicted in the hymn is one in which the human is not relevant, but instead is *solo una menomissima parte dell'universo*, 'only a tiniest part of the universe' (Leopardi, 2017, p. 323). In another work, nature itself speaks to a man who accuses her of being insensible to human needs. Her reply to this accusation is glacial:

Did you perhaps imagine that the world was made for your sake? Know then that in my works, my arrangements and my operations, except in very few cases, I always have had and still have an intention directed to something entirely different from either the happiness or the unhappiness of human beings. When I offend you in any way or by whatever means, I am not aware of it, except on the rarest occasions [. . .]. And finally, even if it were to happen that I extinguished your whole species, I would not notice it (Leopardi, 1982, pp. 195–197).

What nature is, in Leopardi, is particularly complex, and scholarship continues to debate the essential meanings contained in the word, as well as how to reconcile such a stark view with the more general love for the natural realm – a biocentric view – that Leopardi consistently displays. To explain this last point, I must go back a little.

Leopardi's encounter with a reality entirely alien to human desires and will does not occur immediately. Before arriving at the conception of nature suggested in *Ad Arimane*, he explores a range of possible solutions to the problem that torments him: how to account for the existence of evil and suffering. In the initial phase of his thought, nature appears as a benevolent mother, a harmonious system oriented towards the happiness of living beings. Evil is interpreted as accidental, not inherent to this system, and dependent only on humanity's transgression of its natural limits. At this stage, original sin provides, for Leopardi, the perfect explanation of the world's condition: spirit exceeding matter, breaking the natural order. Leopardi, alongside Hegel,

is one of the very few to read original sin in this way, although with diametrically opposed conclusions⁸. The thirst for knowledge, the growing power of reason over the other human faculties, had led humanity out of a condition that might be called ‘blessed’, which Leopardi names the ‘primitive’. A stark opposition is thus established between nature, understood normatively as humanity’s original condition, and reason, as the corrupting force of an otherwise perfect order.

The difficulty, however, is that over time the attempt to justify nature becomes increasingly untenable in light of ever-new evidence of its guilt. For years, Leopardi strives to find explanations that might exonerate nature. From this early phase, through a series of intermediate positions (too numerous to examine in detail here) he eventually arrives at a position that is in some sense the opposite. If reason has succeeded in advancing and expanding its power, then this possibility must have been inscribed in humanity from the beginning. There is no ‘right’ condition, no predetermined path. The teleological framework collapses, leaving Leopardi before a desolate, horrific scene.

A return to a primitive, original state was never a real option, for no such origin ever existed. Evil is not accidental, nor is it merely the outcome of human choices. The nature once praised and cherished by Leopardi reveals itself for what it has always been: a malignant entity, wholly indifferent to our suffering. It continues to exhibit order, but this order is no longer harmonious, at least in a superficial sense: suffering and evil are inscribed within it as necessary laws governing all living beings, and even inanimate entities. This is the stage of Ahriman.

This conception emerges from Leopardi’s polemic with Rousseau and his theory of the accidental nature of evil. Rousseau maintains that evil derives solely from the choices of humanity, thereby preserving an image of nature as original and innocent. Leopardi, by contrast, writes, commenting on a passage from Rousseau:

Indeed, it is precisely the order in the world, and the recognition that evil belongs to that order, that the order could not exist without evil, which renders the existence of evil inconceivable. Animals destined as nourishment for other species. The innate envy and hatred of living beings towards their fellows. [. . .] Other evils even graver and more essential, which I have noted elsewhere in the system of nature, etc. We more easily conceive of accidental evils than of regular and ordinary ones. If there were disorders in the world, evils would be extraordinary, accidental [. . .]. But what epithet are we to give to that reason and power which includes evil in order, which founds order in evil? Disorder would be far preferable: it is varied, changeable; if today there is evil, tomorrow there might be good, even all good. But what hope remains when evil is ordinary? That is, in an order where evil is essential? (2013, pp. 4510–4511).

It is from the final questions Leopardi poses in this passage – ‘What epithet are we to give to that reason and power which includes evil in order, which founds order in evil?’ – that the *Inno ad Arimane* must be read⁹.

⁸For both Leopardi and Hegel, original sin lies in the rebellion of spirit against body, though their respective philosophies draw this insight toward almost opposite conclusions. Leopardi dwells on the issue of whether ‘the desire to know and discern good and evil’ should itself be considered an evil. Religious apologists, he observes, deny this (2013, pp. 396–397), yet the biblical narrative undermines their position, since the very capacity for such discernment is bestowed as a divine punishment. From a theological perspective, it remains highly problematic to explain how knowledge of good and evil can simultaneously function as both a punishment and a divine attribute. Leopardi gestures toward an answer in the *History of the Human Race*, where Truth, dispatched by Jupiter as a chastisement, discloses beatitude to the gods but, for humans, serves only to expose and constantly remind them of their misery (1982, pp. 42–44). It is also noteworthy that Leopardi’s interpretation of original sin was first mobilised as a critique of the Romantic ideal of human perfectibility. Adam’s transgression, he writes, is a ‘sin of pride, which seems to me to be repeated precisely by those who claim that humankind is perfectible’ (2013, p. 397). For further discussion, see M.A. Rigoni, *Il senso del peccato originale in Leopardi e in Hegel*, in id., *Il materialismo romantico di Leopardi* (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2018), pp. 73–82.

⁹It should be stressed that, in his ferocious critique and denunciation of the malignity of nature, Leopardi never succumbs to simplistic conclusions. Even in the *Zibaldone*, he refuses to draw arbitrary deductions, and he does not claim that ‘the existing universe is the worst of all possible universes, replacing optimism with pessimism’ (2013, p. 4258).

Leopardi's rejection of the idea of a perfect system and of teleology mirrors the epistemic and ethical challenge posed by the structure of disavowal. His horrific realisation exemplifies the principles of dark awareness: confronting reality without attempting to master it. Moreover, his final reflections on the place of humans in this picture capture the essence of entropic pessimism. If humanity is, from an ontological point of view, innocent, it is not from a historical point of view. Loss is an eternal law of nature, but humanity has chosen to replicate only the most violent and extreme features of nature, instead of opting for a more compassionate and reasonable way of dealing with its ephemerality, loss and fragility. This is why, in one of his last poems, Leopardi chose some verses from the Gospel of John as the opening epigraph: 'And men chose darkness rather than light' (John 3:19).

Anguish, or that uncanny feeling

Once every attempt to absolve nature has collapsed, Leopardi encounters it – always from the standpoint of the individual, it is worth recalling – under the sign of the uncanny, in the Freudian sense. The uncanny is the experience of something that appears both familiar and strange at once. In German, *unheimlich*, literally 'not at home'. As I'm about to explore, it is the uncanny, or, in the Lacanian reflections, anguish, that can disrupt previous stable symbolic structures and familiar ways of understanding the world. Although I have previously relied on Spinoza when discussing specific passions, here I distance myself from one of his central claims. Unlike Spinoza (2018, p. 263), I do not think that genuine knowledge is always accompanied by joy or by an increase in power. On the contrary, I believe that positive affects do not necessarily possess the same force as certain negative affects. Let us now see why.

The term *unheimlich* evokes both the familiar, intimate and hidden, as well as the concealed or repressed. The prefix *un-* not only negates but also suggests the return of something once known and close, excluded from consciousness, and now reappearing in a distorted, unsettling form. The uncanny is not the fright provoked by the utterly unknown, but the discomfort that arises from the uneasy proximity of something we once considered our own. It is a dissonance within familiarity. Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*) links this feeling to childhood and magical-supernatural beliefs, repressed by the rational adult. The uncanny arises when the adult encounters something 'that ought to have remained [...] secret and hidden, but has come to light'. Freud explains:

We – or our primitive ancestors – once believed in the reality of these possibilities; we were convinced of the reality of these processes. Today we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted this mode of thinking, but we are not entirely secure in our new convictions; the old beliefs still live on in us and are lurking for confirmation. Now, as soon as something happens in our lives which seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny (1953, p. 301).

As should already be clear from the analysis of disavowal, belief does not disappear with the acquisition of knowledge. On the contrary, the two remain inextricably intertwined. It is therefore impossible to fight for environmental causes on the basis of knowledge and data alone; affects must also be engaged. Leopardi offers a striking example of this, particularly because his vision of nature shifts over time and is always accompanied by different emotional registers that demand close analysis.

A reading of the uncanny in Leopardi's concept of nature is possible precisely because he constructs a "mythological vision" as a form of knowledge that survives beneath, and despite, modern secularisation (Camilletti, 2013). If reason – and thus Leopardi's rational thought – presents nature as a blind mechanism of production and destruction (as in the opening of the

Inno, where ‘like a child, it immediately undoes what it has made’), totally indifferent to life and suffering (as in the *Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander*), the mythological vision instead portrays nature as a living entity with incomprehensible purposes. Leopardi’s reflection shifts three times: from nature as a benevolent, living mother at the outset, to a rationalist conception of nature as a blind mechanism of generation and destruction, and finally back to a living nature, now uncanny because malign, filtered through the lens of rational awareness.

Freud’s account of the uncanny highlights how repressed or excluded content can return in unsettling form. In Leopardi, however, the encounter with nature’s indifference is not repressed but disavowed. As Zupančič notes, disavowal differs from repression: it does not remove the extraordinary or disruptive fact from reality but keeps it fully present while altering its meaning. Where repression pushes such knowledge out of ordinary reality, disavowal keeps it in view yet ‘de-realises’ it, transforming what is potentially game-changing into something acknowledged but rendered manageable. In this sense, Leopardi’s vision of a blind, indifferent nature is both confronted and recognised, yet its full existential and moral implications are simultaneously neutralised. This enables humans to preserve a sense of continuity – a status quo – even when faced with a reality that is hostile and fundamentally indifferent.

Lacan links the *unheimlich* to the loss of the *heim*, the symbolic ‘home’ of the ego. The ego is constituted within the *heim*, but the *heim* itself is located in the Other. It’s a void that makes subjectification possible. At times, however, something emerges where nothing should appear. As Lacan writes:

Supposing that, as happens, it reveals itself for what it is – that is, supposing that the presence elsewhere that makes this place an absence reveals itself – then it becomes the king of the game, it seizes the image that sustains it and the mirror image becomes the image of the double, with all that this entails in terms of radical strangeness. To use terms that take on meaning in opposition to Hegelian ones, it makes us appear as objects, in that it reveals the non-autonomy of the subject. (Lacan, 2004, p. 53)

Here, the familiar suddenly reveals itself as *radically* strange. We see ourselves no longer as subjects but as objects, exposed in our non-autonomy. As Mark Fisher notes, ‘there is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was’ (2016, pp. 11–12). This is precisely the relationship Leopardi stages with God-Fate-Nature – one that also resonates with contemporary climate phenomena. The same process seems to take place in Morton’s analysis of the climate crisis as a ‘hyperobject’ (2013). Just as Lacan shows the *unheimlich* disrupting symbolic stability, Morton’s hyperobjects disrupt conventional spatial and temporal frameworks, producing uncanny effects.

Hyperobjects are viscous, dispersed, non-localisable entities, too vast to perceive all at once, yet with which we are intimately entangled. We can only glimpse them peripherally, while looking elsewhere. Hyperobjects generate anxiety because they shatter classical notions of space and time. We no longer inhabit a Newtonian world of empty, neutral space but layered, uncertain, deeply non-human ones. Hyperobjects remind us that the local is already uncanny, that there is no longer a stable ‘here’.

The distinction between subject and object collapses in both Morton’s spatial analysis and Lacan’s psychoanalytic account: the I finds itself as object, and nature – no longer a passive background – appears as restless, mobile, overwhelming. This is the uncanny dimension of ecology: the recognition that we have never been separate from nature, but that this entanglement now manifests as a threat. Lacan further explains:

The horrible, the shady, the uncanny – all that we translate into French, as best we can, from the masterful *unheimlich* in German – presents itself through skylights. It is because it is

framed that it enters the field of anguish (. . .). You will always find the scene presented in its specific dimension that allows what cannot be said in the world to emerge (Lacan, 2004, p. 81).

What emerges or appears is never the whole of reality, but only brief episodic scenes. It is, Lacan says, like a painting placed within a window frame. Yet what matters is not seeing what is beautiful in the painting, but rather not seeing what lies behind the window. Anguish inhabits what Morton calls ‘the Severing’: ‘a foundational, traumatic fissure between [. . .] reality (the human-correlated world) and the real (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere)’ (2017, p. 13).

In the same way, climate crisis or nature cannot be conceived of in their entirety, but only through singular phenomena. Lacan continues:

Anguish arises when what was already there, very close, at home (*Heim*), appears within the frame. It is the guest, you will say. In a certain sense, yes – the unknown guest who arrives unexpectedly (. . .). The phenomenon of anguish occurs when the *heimlich* emerges within the frame (Lacan, 2004, p. 82).

Anguish, then, is not panic at a generic threat but the eruption of something already there, hidden within the everyday, now forced into presence. It is the arrival of an unexpected guest in the home, not entirely ‘of the home’ yet always already present. Anguish is the encounter with the unassimilable.

What emerges in the uncanny is therefore not foreign but something already present, now exposed. The supposed solidity of ‘what is there’ evaporates. As in Morton’s thought, place is no longer reliable or static. Similarly, Leopardi’s Nature, though always alive, is no longer available or welcoming to humans. It is unstable, shifting, even monstrous. Lacan again:

Only the notion of the Real, in the opaque function that I use to contrast it with the function of the signifier, allows us to orient ourselves. We can already say that the *etwas* in front of which anguish operates as a signal belongs to the order of the irreducible of the Real. It is in this sense that I have dared to formulate before you that *anguish is, among all, the signal that does not deceive* (Lacan, 2004, p. 174, my emphasis).

Anguish and the uncanny are irruptions of the Real into our worldview. Anguish signals that we are not on the wrong path. What emerges – what provokes anguish – belongs to the irreducible Real. It is the *etwas*, the ‘something’, that breaks through, escapes symbolisation and generates the disorientation of the *unheimlich*. The uncanny cannot be fully understood or expressed. As Leopardi writes in the conclusion of the *Cantico del gallo silvestre*, the ‘marvelous and terrifying mystery’ cannot be ‘declared or understood’ (1982, p. 379). The uncanny remains unsaid and incomprehensible.

Conclusory remarks

In Dark Pedagogy, anguish does not constitute a discrete lesson or exercise but functions as a guiding horizon for pedagogical practices. The word “Teaching” in the title of this essay is deliberately provocative, since anguish is not a state that can be induced directly; instead, it signals the boundaries of familiar understanding and invites engagement with what resists comprehension.

As Pohl and Swyngedouw suggest, confronting climate imaginaries requires an ‘*anamorphic gaze*’, a way of seeing that distorts conventional perspectives to reveal the fantasies underpinning our political engagement with climate crisis. Such a perspective may illuminate the real political dimension and expose the structures that perpetuate ineffective climate actions (2023, p. 7).

Moving beyond mechanisms of disavowal, as Žižek describes it, entails a ‘subjective destitution’ (2022): a confrontation with the constitutive emptiness at the core of being. This process, which involves forms of mourning and melancholia (Fletcher, 2018), acknowledges irretrievable losses for which no replacement exists. Through this encounter with destitution (losing attachment to fantasmic notions of a ‘manageable’ nature or a neatly ordered climate), one opens the possibility for a more authentic engagement with the realities of climate change (Pohl & Swyngedouw, p. 7).

Lacan similarly emphasises the dislocated nature of the natural world, describing it as ‘rotten’, a space never fully natural, corrupted by the cultural and symbolic processes in which it is embedded (Lacan, 1974). To confront the collapse of nature as a stable horizon of meaning is, in Pohl’s terms, to confront the uncanny: the moment when any sense of nature as a fixed foundation for society and life is disrupted (Pohl, 2020).

Bataille offers a complementary perspective on anguish and its pedagogical potential. In *Inner Experience*, he presents anguish as central to mystical and ecstatic encounters, arising not from intellectual knowledge but from the dissolution of subject–object distinctions, it ‘assumes the desire to communicate but not complete resolve: anguish is evidence of my fear of communicating, of losing myself’ (Bataille, 1988, p. 53). Experience in anguish is, according to Bataille, the challenge to the very foundations of what a person believes they know about being. This, in turn, recalls his description of anguish as something that ‘lays bare’, which corresponds to his concept of ‘non-knowledge’: a form of understanding arising from inner experience that cannot be fully expressed discursively or assimilated by the rational self, and which stands in contrast to the consciousness of reason. Thacker echoes this approach, emphasising that confronting the vertiginous dimensions of existence and recognising the limits of human comprehension generates a productive discomfort.

In pedagogical terms, integrating Bataille’s and Thacker’s insights aligns with Dark Pedagogy’s ethos: learners are invited to confront the limits of their knowledge, to inhabit the discomfort of uncertainty and to engage with questions that destabilise established frameworks. Such an approach foregrounds the ethical and epistemic necessity of grappling with the unassimilable, cultivating capacities for reflection, vigilance and critical attunement to the world’s unpredictable and often hostile realities. If, as Sevket Benhur Oral observes, ‘the pedagogical rule of thumb is that against all forms of ossification’ (Oral, 2014, p. 471), then we must remember that it is primarily through shock and discomfort that we remain active. It is not by inhabiting comforting zones that we can address our wicked problems.

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