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Sean J. McGrath, *Thinking Nature: An Essay in Negative Ecology*

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Abstract *Thinking Nature* is an essay in negative ecology, written in part to commemorate the deaths nature has died, *pace* Morton, Žižek, and even Latour. We have killed it; what now should we do? How to move forward? The path ahead will require eco-political action, to be sure. But brazen activism without the guidance of contemplative thought, McGrath argues, will not be sufficient to meet the demands of the present. Such a task demands discernment regarding the deeper roots of our ecological crisis, and knowledge of the developments that make possible both the emergence and the collapse of modernity, with its advancements in science and technology.

Keywords Disenchantment ; Ontology ; Philosophy of Nature ; Eco-Anxiety ; Transcendence ; Contemplation

The dawning of the Judeo-Christian tradition shattered previous conceptions of nature as a closed, eternal, and unchanging whole.¹ Its vision of God as infinitely transcendent granted the human a new hold upon reality, a “transcendent vantage point” from which to observe and transform the rest of creation (40). The sense of freedom it brought made possible liberation from what previous conceptions of nature, as eternal and unchanging order, had considered to be of the order of necessity—including subjection to slavery and the absence of social mobility. But the flipside of transcendence is the alienation it inaugurates in those it enlightens, dividing the human from the fabric of a universe with which it was, considered in retrospect, formerly congruous. Modernity marks the advent of a second death:

¹ “Without exaggeration, we could argue that holism is the predominant cosmology of the ancient world. The ancient *kosmos* was not a collection of extended objects or an aesthetic consumable. It was an unobjectifiable, self-normed and self-regulating totality that included everything within it – gods, mortals, nature and culture. The human soul or intellect had no transcendent vantage point from which it could make sense of things. It was merely one part of a greater whole that necessarily exceeded its comprehension, hence the relatively seamless blend of science and aesthetics in ancient philosophy” (40).

If the first death of nature was the Jewish–Christian eclipse of *kosmos* as a normative whole in favour of the assertion of a transcendent God (God over nature), the second death of nature was the denial of both nature and God: no *kosmos* – but no spirit, either. Such is the desperate bleakness of late modernity: neither natural law nor transcendent spirit can save us anymore. ...The fundamental psychological state of the modern is consequently not only disenchantment but also metaphysical *disorientation* (58).

Disenchantment and disorientation combined to beget what McGrath calls *first-wave eco-anxiety*, represented well by Bill McKibben’s concerns in *The End of Nature* (1989). This anxiety “foresaw, with Heidegger, the advent of total technological domination of the globe at the expense of other species, of wilderness and of the sense of meaning that we have derived from them” (64). Deep Ecologists of previous generations sought to overcome this first wave by reviving ancient holisms, re-conceiving nature as innocent, pristine, and divine.

Transcendence was, has been, and is as yet jettisoned in favor of immanence. But awareness of alienation persists, and the contemporary surge of the re-enchantment industry, and profuse attempts to overcome such awareness, present futile efforts to numb ourselves in response. The conceptions of nature revived by earlier generations of environmentalists belie a desire to return to a *kosmos* in which we would be, once again, fully at home. But to deny the human difference and to seek immediacy, whether by means of hallucinogens or by dissolution of the ego in the furor of group or mass psychology, is merely to overcome, for a few fleeting instants, the gap that sets human being apart from the rest of nature—only to return to an even more deeply entrenched nihilism, to disenchantment and frustration.²

The last few decades of environmental thought have seen the development of a radical shift in understanding, with metaphysical conceptions updated to accommodate more recent scientific paradigms. Nature is no longer viably conceivable as a divine Mother who would nurture and protect her lost children if only they’d return to the fabric of cosmic harmony. The apparent chaos of a matter both fundamentally unstable and ultimately unmasterable has brought about a shift in our understanding, with a nature formerly conceived as *heimlich* annulled, collapsing before its negation: *das Unheimlich*.

Such awareness has, perhaps surprisingly, resuscitated faith in the will to mastery, and in science and technology to provide last-ditch hope for the salvation of life on earth. But facing such Promethean challenges, over an inhumanly vast timescale, the inescapable failure of human efforts has disseminated the *second-wave eco-anxiety* characteristic of Dark Ecology:

If first-wave eco-anxiety is motivated by the fear that the “moral order of nature” will become totally technologised, second-wave eco-anxiety is tormented by the opposite fear. What if our technology breaks down, no longer works to keep nature in control? A different concept of nature lies at the root of this latter fear, one decidedly less cozy. The greenhouse effect, extreme weather and super-viruses hold before us the prospect of a nature that breaks with and out of the grid. No longer a safely managed consumable, nature becomes, once again, something that consumes us. First-wave eco-anxiety is obsessed with such technology-precipitated problems as over-population, pollution and engineered dystopias. Second-wave eco-anxiety focuses on the failure of technology in the face of unmasterable, inhuman, horrific nature (67).

² “But every effort to forget ourselves, every descent into some pre-personal ersatz *unio mystica* – psychedelics, mosh pits, radical protests, war, sex, or just plain drunkenness – is followed by the painful return of distance we thought we had abolished and, with it, moral anxiety, either in the form of regret or, even more simply, sorrow that the *unio* was so temporary, and to that degree a lie” (91).

So Morton is absolutely right: nature, conceived Romantically as a symbol for the pristine, harmonious whole from which we've been exiled, is dead. On the other hand, Latour is also and equally right: nature conceived as an order of empirically discernable facts wholly distinct from value-laden thinking, to which the scientist alone has direct interpretive access, or as manageable matter, wholly submissive to the human will, is also dead. Both the Dark Ecologists and Latour proclaim the death of nature, then, and with two differing conceptions of "nature" in mind. Both opt for the path of the modern Nietzschean in response, eschewing metaphysics and ethics alike. They turn instead to that final frontier of progress: radicalized eco-politics. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

But rather than regress to acts of eco-political desperation—or worse yet, to eco-fascism, as some have advocated—and rather than unqualifiedly turn back to embrace the scientific and technological products of the very will to mastery that got us into the present mess, McGrath kicks against the goads of environmental pragmatism as a response to second-wave eco-anxiety. The activist, he argues, must become a contemplative, and vice versa: "...we need the eco-activist and the eco-contemplative to be the same person: we need contemplative environmental activism and contemplative environmental politics so that the ecological thought can sink in and become ecological *practice*" (141). Despite the precarity of our historical moment, and the stifling aura of desperation wrought by a second wave of eco-anxiety, we simply cannot countenance the trendy, two-pronged temptation to jettison metaphysics and morals. We need a contemplative eco-politics willing to engage with the possibility of resuscitating both of these.

To embrace eco-politics without ethical underpinnings and without metaphysical speculation would be to hasten our final defeat, marking the beginning of the end of all the living, whose continued existence now depends on our willingness to take responsibility for the abuses our species has wrought. We must muster the courage to spurn anxiety-driven, anxiety-inducing lives of unmitigated consumption and unprecedented waste, reappraising, among other things, what it means to be economically or otherwise successful. What's called for, therefore, is a contemplative eco-politics at once ethically and metaphysically mindful, willing to mine the untapped resources of our intellectual and spiritual tradition, and open to adopting alternative conceptions of what progress, scientific inquiry, and technological advancement might entail.

We are *thinking nature*: nature become self-conscious Spirit, nature that thinks. We are not just reasoning, but indeed contemplative animals. Coupled with affirmations of a common, ordinary ground, readers will find no denial of the human difference here. Quite the contrary: McGrath parses the difference, and the nature of "nature," with recourse to a hermeneutic distinction between signs and symbols.³ As symbol—and a historically recalcitrant symbol, at that—nature is capable of surviving the extinctions of outmoded and outworn conceptions. False idols fall, that truth might arise from their ashes:

Nature in the Anthropocene sinks back into the *meon*, the place of possibility, not because it is meaningless and we must now get on with other concepts, but because, as an excessively meaningful or fundamental symbol, it is now giving birth to a new sense, an *Anthropocenic* sense, in which "nature" means neither the cosmos that nests us in interconnected spheres of meaning (and by nesting us, denies the *anthropos* its specific difference), nor the mechanism that excludes the *anthropos* as its Big Other. As neither sign nor (scientific) term but rather non-discursive symbol, nature is now able to survive the extinction of one or

³ See chapter 2, "Nature is a Symbol, but of What?"

another of its senses. The question remains: what can nature mean today? What new meanings does the symbol of nature give rise to in the Anthropocene? (20).

This essay does not yet attempt to declare what the re-enlivened symbol, *nature*, must come to mean for us. Rather, negative ecology seeks to ignite the first flames of a project that invites future collaboration, firstly and foremostly recognizing what nature is not. *Thinking Nature* seeks to lay the groundwork for, or provide prolegomena to any future metaphysics of nature. In doing so it heeds one road not taken at the advent of modernity: the Renaissance neo-Hermeticism which provided the conditions that made modern scientific and technological advancement possible, and which was jettisoned in history's siding with the Cartesian exaltation of human thought to the seat of transcendence.

Carolyn Merchant's book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) was the first to proclaim the death of nature. In it Merchant presents Renaissance Hermeticism as an alternative to the early modern scientific project, a path which led not to unbridled mastery but to renewed awareness of the mystery of Being. With a few key qualifications, McGrath endorses this move. Modernity, he maintains, is characterized for worse and for better by *critique*, *control*, and *calculation*. What's needed is not the rejection of these, and a return to pre-modern conditions, but rather their re-appropriation by means of an attitudinal shift. The future of our planet depends upon our willingness to adopt the attitudes of *contemplative critique*, *contemplative control*, and *contemplative calculation*.

Renaissance Neo-Hermeticism provides a noteworthy model of what this transformative vision has looked like in practice. The Hermetics labored in service of holistic conceptions of progress—material and spiritual, economic and ecological—by masterfully blending together the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. They were fully committed to the transformation of matter for the betterment of earth, and its inhabitants, but also and equally to the transformation of the soul of the one who labors in their service. Neo-Hermetic science demanded cultivation of the virtues, that one might resist temptations to use *knowledge of* in the service of *power over*—temptations which early modern science all too eagerly embraced.

The Neo-Hermetics, and the German mystics they influenced, were, of course, direct sources of insight for both Schelling and Heidegger. And Heidegger's critique of the technological attitude, contrasted with the notion of *Gelassenheit* he reclaims from Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme, corresponds to his distinction between calculative thinking and meditative thinking. The problem with Heidegger isn't his Romanticism, McGrath argues, contra Morton and Dark Ecology. The real problem is his "abjuring of morality" (102). Seeking to re-graft the German-mystical—and, beneath this layer, Neo-Hermetic—theological roots that Heidegger had severed, and sundering Heidegger's eschewal of ethics and subsequent political failings from this more robust understanding, McGrath argues that *Gelassenheit* provides the rudimentary attitude which prepares the thinker and the activist alike to integrate and engage in contemplative eco-politics.

It's not that *Gelassenheit* has been tried as a political attitude and found wanting; such a project was never truly ventured. By contrast with Spinoza's monistic holism, and in response to the Cartesian exacerbation of human alienation, the Neo-Hermetics affirmed and indeed revered nature without denying *more-than-human* transcendence. The robust notion of *Gelassenheit* developed in Eckhart and Böhme, inspired in part by their Renaissance predecessors, models an attitude of reverence which recognizes the gift-quality of existence. These harbor the

potential to transform the modern will to mastery, providing a few of the tools we'll need for rethinking ethics and metaphysics in the Anthropocene.

Thinking Nature is, in a word, holistic. Not *holist*, but holistic. It's the outcome of an impressive armament of interconnected research projects and a battery of relevant training, cultivated over a career just beginning to fully bloom. In it McGrath draws upon a decade of scholarship on Heidegger, another decade of pioneering scholarship on Schelling, a variety of published essays on the German mystics, theosophists, medievals, and Renaissance Neo-Hermetics who influenced them, doctorates in philosophy and theology, religious training in the Discalced Carmelite tradition, psychoanalytic training in the Jungian school, and insights gleaned from time spent at the helm of an ENGO called *For A New Earth (FANE)*. *Thinking Nature* is born of the integration of contemplation and activism.

References

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