We Receive but What We Give
Barfield, Coleridge and the End of Nature

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As we leave the relative climactic stability of the Holocene and enter a less hospitable geological epoch brought about in large measure by human pressure on earth systems, species, climate and the environment, appeals to nature as a moral source might appear more urgent than ever. Simultaneously, however, many *avante-garde* critical theorists, philosophers, and environmental thinkers have begun to argue that rather than appealing to nature in order to motivate ecological consciousness, we instead ought to dispense with the very concept of nature. Nature, they argue, is neither doing us nor the earth any good. Although set against the backdrop of the emerging Anthropocene, one can view this contemporary dispute as the latest iteration of an argument that has been going on for more than a century about the meaning and legacy of Romanticism. Timothy Morton, for instance, argues that his case for an ecology without nature directly "targets" romanticism, the movement he sees as primarily responsible for shaping our contemporary ecological imaginary and for wrongly teaching us to believe that view of things could change the world.[1]

In what follows, I want to critically consider some of these sophisticated calls to rid ourselves of nature in order to better meet our ecological moment, and I intend to do so in light of a particular episode in the history of Romanticism, namely, Coleridge's publication of 'Dejection: An Ode' on the occasion of Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson. 'Dejection' recounts a crisis in Coleridge's own vocation but also an early crisis in the romantic understanding of nature and so presents a fitting way of entering into contemporary questions about whether the very concept of nature has become maladaptive. Morton's critique of romanticism recalls, in some ways, Owen Barfield's observation that "the Romantic movement has never grown to maturity; and, after adolescence, the alternative to maturity is puerility".[2] As for Morton, so too for Barfield, the entire issue turns around the Romantic approach to nature, but where Morton sees a need to dispense with nature in the name of an ecological politics, both Barfield and Coleridge sees the need to redeem nature by reattaching it to time and history, which is to say, by reading nature and Romanticism as theologically consummated in the Logos.

I. *Dejection: An Ode*

On the morning October 4th, 1802, the day Wordsworth wedded Mary Hutchinson, Coleridge published 'Dejection: An Ode.' It is one of literary history's more profound and bizarre wedding gifts. The personal circumstances

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[1] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature : Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

[2] Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 131.

and poetic origins of the piece are complex: not only was 4 October 1802 the day of Wordsworth's nuptials, it was also the seventh anniversary of Coleridge's own unhappy marriage to Sara Fricker. Moreover, *Dejection* began its life six months earlier when Coleridge penned his verse 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson', the woman (not his wife) with whom Coleridge was tragically in love and the sister of Mary, Wordsworth's bride. The biographical web becomes more tangled the more you pull its the strings, but I want to draw attention not to the biographical but to the intertextual complexity of the poem. For both 'Dejection' and the 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson' must be read as replies to Wordsworth's own poem, substantially begun six months earlier, 'The Ode to Immortality', but not completed until 1804.

Only a few days after he first penned it, Wordsworth recited the four completed stanzas of the *Immortality* ode to Coleridge while the two poets ascended Skiddaw mountain outside Keswick in the Lake District. These four stanzas present Wordsworth's lament for the loss of his "visionary gleam," his apparent inability any longer to find in nature the healing powers it once offered him.[3]

> THERE was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparell'd in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream….
>
> But yet I know, where'er I go,
> That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth…..
> Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

The world Wordsworth describes is resplendent with the nascent glory of springtime, and yet the poet is beset by a feeling of melancholy and nostalgia. While the poet's lament expands to include a broader meditation upon loss, his eventual resolution—perhaps discussed with Coleridge though not yet penned when the two ascended Skiddaw—is to reaffirm the power of nature, not merely as he knew it as a boy when he still was 'Nature's priest,' but rather through the recollection of the poet's own origin in the imperishable eternal Silence, the 'master-light of all our seeing', which in turn allows the rediscovery of the poet's kinship with nature. Though age and suffering may distance us from the wake of glory that attends the world in *our* and *its* youth, nevertheless a 'primal sympathy' continues to bind us to nature, even to induce us to love her all the more now that we no longer love her habitually.

Coleridge's 'Dejection,' for its part, opens with many of the same themes but

[3] Wordsworth's poem echoes the opening lines of Coleridge's *The Mad Monk* (1800):
There was a time when earth, and sea, and skies
The bright green vale, and forest's dark recess,
With all things, lay before mine eyes
In steady loveliness…

takes a darker turn. In itself, this is hardly surprising. Wordsworth had always been the more diurnal poet, Coleridge the more lucubratory. A preference for the world at night, however, did not prevent Coleridge in other works from communing *through* the translucent appearances of nature *with* the mind that lies behind nature, such as one finds in the uncontrived meditations of *Frost at Midnight,* or the narrated moments of lunar grace in *The Ancient Mariner.* In *Dejection,* by contrast, the stars, the sky, the moon, though beautiful as ever, mutely and lifelessly confront the poet.

> And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;
> Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
> Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
> In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
> I see them all so excellently fair,
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

It is as if Coleridge were gazing at the world on one of our now omnipresent screens, or less anachronistically, as if he were watching the world through an artificial lens or even just a window.[4] In other words, Coleridge finds himself in a Cartesian world of representation and vacuous actuality. Just as Wordsworth found the etiology of his own state in the loss of 'the visionary gleam,' so Coleridge locates the heart of his alienation from nature in a visionary divestment:

> But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
> Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
> But oh! each visitation
> Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
> My shaping spirit of Imagination.

Indeed, one might read the entire crisis of 'Dejection' as a crisis of the imagination – more particularly, a crisis of the primary imagination -- but this crisis is more than a merely subjective crisis: it seeps past the putative bounds of the skin-encapsulated ego and reverberates through the world, shattering nature herself. "O Lady! We receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does nature live: / Ours her wedding garment, ours her shroud!" These the most famous lines of the poem are often taken to express Coleridge's rejection of Wordsworth's continuing faith in nature, represented perhaps by Wordsworth's wedding—Nature does not possess the salubrious power Wordsworth attributes to it;[5] Nature itself is in jeopardy and afflicted, maybe

[4] On which, see 'The Harp and the Camera,' one of Barfield's essays, in Owen Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning : And Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (San Rafael, Calif.: Barfield Press, 2006), 74-89.

[5] J. Robert Barth, "Coleridge's Dejection: Imagination, Joy, and the Power of Love," in *Coleridge's Imagination : Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Pete Laver, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 184.

even broken, dying, shrouded.

To be sure, there is a tremendous amount of autobiography in this poem, even more so in the original verse letter, but what we encounter in the published version of *Dejection* is not only testament to a crisis in Coleridge's life, but might also be read as the announcement of a crisis in the *romantic construction of nature*, a construction that arguably has done more to shape our environmental and ecological ideals than any other cultural artifact of the last three centuries.

In *Dejection*, at the very moment when the Romantic approach to nature was first being forged, when also the grand Romantic concept of the creative imagination was first beginning to be articulated, Coleridge subjects both the concept and the experience of nature itself to interrogation. By doing so, Coleridge becomes in many ways our contemporary, for the irony of our globalized ecological moment is that today as never before, precisely when we find ourselves increasingly invoking nature even in questions of geopolitics, nature itself seems to be at an end. What Coleridge faced alone beneath a silent moon and before a hostile approaching storm, we seem to face collectively. The Wordsworthian enchantment, warm green politics and eco-spirituality of late-twentieth century romantic environmentalism have given way in recent years to a more melancholy, ironic, and dejected ecological philosophy and critical theory. To these sophisticated new ecological critics, nature is as much a burden as a blessing—indeed, they claim that the concept itself may very well have become maladaptive. Perhaps, they intimate, it always was. Accordingly, on this view, rather than seeking a new and improved concept of nature, we ought to divest ourselves of the concept entirely. In the name of ecology, let us be rid of nature.

II. On the End(s) of Nature

When European and American writers, scholars, and activists began to wrestle with questions about environmental and ecological ethics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they largely did so by appealing to a unified concept of nature as a given, intelligible, moral and biophysical whole that we might save, manage, preserve, cultivate or return to. In both theory and practice, this is a disjunctive view of nature. Formally, nature is defined as that which is other than culture. Materially, at the level of practice and policy, this construction of nature lies behind environmental strategies that prioritize wilderness or that seek to preserve boundaries between pure nature and the influence of human culture and technology. Although especially pronounced in modernity, the idea of nature as essentially corrupted by the supplement of culture is a venerable one—it goes back at least to Ovid and Hesiod—and it is often operative on both sides of the environmental debate: whether nature is something to mastered and possessed, or protected and preserved, it is still nature conceived in contrast to human culture. And yet, although such a picture continues to dominate much popular and political culture, Coleridge and Wordsworth resisted such a division and sought instead to re-integrate

nature and culture.

In recent years this disjunctive idea of nature as defined essentially by its contrast with culture is increasingly contested on at least three fronts. First, the modernist concept of nature as has been thrown into question by recent historical, sociological, and philosophical work, especially in the field of science and technology studies. Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, Annemarie Mol, Karen Barad and Bruno Latour are representative figures here, each in their own way arguing that the modern bifurcation of nature elides the dynamic, relational paths and practices that produce the hybrids, nature-cultures, flows and relative stabilities that constitute or disrupt the world of which we also are a part. According to these accounts, there is no principled dualism between social theory and the sciences because agency and sociality are not confined to culture but are instead widely distributed throughout the others ignored by anthropocentric approaches. Put otherwise, the supposed boundaries between nature and culture are culturally produced and so subject to continual renegotiation and transgression.

Second, appeals to nature as opposed to culture have been thrown into jeopardy by the world-historical effects of science and culture themselves. The American Wilderness Act of 1964 defined wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain".[6] But where is this 'untrammeled' nature today? Human activity has left such a mark and our presence has grown so ubiquitous that we are now rightly described as a 'geoforce.' We have transformed something like 50% of the land surface of the planet; we consume nearly a quarter of the biosphere's annual production of biomass; and we catch and utilize more than half of all accessible fresh water. We have changed the climate. On this planet, at least, we seem to have become the gatekeepers of nature. Accordingly, some have proclaimed the 'end of nature',[7] while others speak about the advent of the Anthropocene.[8]

The writer and environmental activist, Bill McKibben, for example, claims that so long as environmentalists could view nature as something pristine, they could view it as sacred: nature was something given, it had an identity that was and should remain beyond our control, like God or justice. But we have brought that view of nature to an end: nature is now something we manage, "a category like the defense budget or the minimum wage, a problem we must work out".[9] For McKibben, nature is constituted by its independence from the human, an independence now shattered by the ubiquity of human presence:

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[6] J. Baird Callicott, "Contemporary Criticisms of the Wilderness Idea," in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On : Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 356.

[7] Paul Kevin Wapner, *Living through the End of Nature : The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

[8] Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015).

[9] Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Random House trade pbk. ed. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 239.

> We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.[10]

In what follows, I want to focus on a third challenge to the resilience of the concept of nature: a critique largely stemming from literary ecocriticism and critical theory. One of the hallmarks of much recent green critical theory is a thorough interrogation and even abandonment of the concept of nature itself. Philosophers and ecocritics alike have pointed to the historicity of our concepts of nature, their geographical particularity, social contingency, imaginative and even theological supplementation. Critical understanding, so the argument goes, requires that we displace the unified, holistic concept of nature so often invoked in environmental and popular scientific writing with a recognition instead of multiple socially constructed concepts of nature.

But if this is the case, if the nature to which environmental discourse putatively appeals, is itself a kind of culture, then why continue to use the term at all? Moreover, the problem may go well beyond the epistemic slipperiness of ideas of nature. In a series of influential books and articles, Timothy Morton has argued that the concept of nature so central to nature writing and classical environmentalism, the concept to which green moral and political movements so regularly appeal, is itself an ecologically invidious concept, one that impedes genuine ecological thought. Ecological thought, *the* ecological thought as Morton understands it, is the simple recognition that everything is connected.[11] As Morton writes:

> When we think the ecological thought, we encounter all kinds of beings that are not strictly 'natural.' … [It is] a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise—and how can we so clearly tell the difference? The ecological thought fans out into questions concerning cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and the irreducible uncertainty over what counts as a person.[12]

To think ecologically in this manner, for Morton, entails abandoning the concept of nature. "The idea of 'nature'," writes Morton, "…will have to wither away in an 'ecological' state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture,

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[10] Ibid., 58. McKibben's writing and organizing have been enormously influential, some environmental writers raise concerns about his conceptual scheme. Andreas Malm, for example, while allowing that McKibben rightly laments the end of certain natural conditions, argues that McKibben's claim that nature itself has come to an end relies on too purist a definition of nature, a nature defined by its absolute separation from human culture and society. See Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm : Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London ; New York: Verso, 2018), 30.

[11] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

[12] Ibid., 8.

philosophy, politics, and art."[13] What is this idea that has proven so insidious? It is the idea of nature as a thing or a view of things: nature as scenic, which is also to say nature as seen, as other. Even when the human appears absent from some landscape or wilderness, perhaps especially when the human appears absent, this remains an anthropocentric view of nature for it revolves around the human as subject, the perceiver, leaving nature in the place of objectified other. Such anthropocentrism confounds ecological thinking which refuses to place the human being over against creatures and instead seeks to recognize our kinship with all beings.

> Ecology can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, "over yonder", called Nature. Yet thinking, including ecological thinking, has set up "Nature" as a reified thing in the distance, under the sidewalk, on the other side where the grass is always greener, preferably in the mountains, in the wild.[14]

Although this anthropo-aesthetic framing may have been acquired over nearly two million years of human evolution centered upon the African savannah,[15] Morton sees its consummation in 18th and 19th century views of nature that remain deeply influential among green thinkers even today. The problem, moreover, is not only that these views of nature imply an aesthetics but also a concomitant ontological and epistemological separation of the human from the more-than-human worlds. The ecological mesh is a blooming, buzzing multeity that always exceeds the wholes and singularities into which we try to collapse it. Invocations of nature tend to mire us in problematic holisms that Morton increasingly berates as theological, the cognitive artifacts of agricultural religion(s) in the ancient Near East.

> We are afflicted not only by social conditions but by the ways we think them, which depend often on a set theory that thinks wholes as greater than the sums of their parts. Such a theory turns wholes—community, biosphere (Nature), the universe, the God in whose angry hands we are sinners—into a being radically different from us, transcendentally bigger, a gigantic invisible being that is inherently hostile to little us.[16]

Against such "explosive" holisms, Morton stumps for a vision in which wholes are recognized as real but ontologically less than the sum of their parts. Ecological thinking and acting is neither about immanence nor transcendence, but subscendence, the idea that wholes are inherently unstable, porous, but nevertheless real things made up of other equally real, porous, unstable things without end. Ecological thinking, politics, and action is not about returning to, protecting, or communing with the mysterious, imagined whole of nature (or 'Nature'), but rather about nonviolent co-existence with and attunement to

[13] Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 1.
[14] *The Ecological Thought*, 3.
[15] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 107-09.
[16] Timothy Morton, *Humankind : Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), 1-43.

other beings: existing alongside, in, and with the strange strangers (humans, plants, animals, inorganic things, etc.) with whom we share the planet.[17] One might call this an ecology of meta-coexistence, which is to say, coexistence with coexistents, an embrace of the initially horrifying fact that we are always mired in the mesh of other beings from whom we issue and with whom we abide, beings who live in us, beings in whom we live, beings upon whom we feed and those who indeed feed upon us.[18] Beyond the picturesque, an ecology without nature necessarily embraces the relations of predator, prey, and parasite, all acting in, through, and upon us.

Although Morton finds the image of nature we must reject exemplified in Romanticism, Morton also finds seeds for an ecology without nature in other strands of the Romantic tradition from the relentless interrogation of the first-person and the ambiguities of subjective experience to the radical embrace of the uncanny and nonhuman exemplified by the blessing of the sea-snakes in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.[19] Wordsworth, for his part, often expresses sentiments akin to Morton's ethics of co-existence, as for instance in the *1805 Prelude*:

> To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,
> Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
> I gave a moral life—I saw them feel,
> Or linked them to some feeling. The great mass
> Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
> That I beheld respired with inward meaning.
>
> (*1805* III. 121 ff.)[20]

But where Romanticism characteristically presents itself as seeking to overcome the subject-object divide through a transformation of the subject, Morton's approach seeks to overcome this divide by showing that what we call nature has never, in fact, been natural. Misled by an aesthetic concept of nature, we look for ecological paradigms in the ruins of Tintern Abbey and the glaciers of Mont Blanc, but nature (if we can use that term) is found equally in Fukushima, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or the commercial real estate lying half-empty in the midst of a pandemic. As Steven Vogel puts it, rather than thinking like a mountain, we need to think like a mall.[21]

In many ways, Morton's critique echoes longstanding debates about the concept of wilderness and its place in environmental thought and action.[22] However, where central figures like William Cronon argued that in

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[17] *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 60; *Ecology without Nature*, 114.

[18] "Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012).

[19] "Coexistence and Coexistents: Ecology without a World," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. eds. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Pres, 2011).

[20] I am grateful to Graham Davidson for this reference.

[21] Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall : Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015).

[22] On which see, J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, *The Wilderness Debate Rages On : Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

championing wilderness environmentalists were returning to the wrong nature—a dualistic nature apart from humans and so a nature in which it is inherently impossible to imagine an ethical, resilient, mutually beneficial human presence[23]—Morton thinks by contrast the rot lies in nature itself. In this aspect, Morton's most salient predecessor is surely the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek. Commenting upon an account of a visit to the volcano Askja and the geothermal lake Viti in the snow-covered central highlands of Iceland, Zizek, like Morton, dismisses the impulse to find in the landscape a symbol of nature as that encompassing reality that exists somehow prior to us: the Earth as the great ancient one who preceded our advent and will outlast our waning. But, asks Zizek:

> Should we not apply here the fundamental lesson of Kant's transcendental idealism: the world as a Whole is not a Thing-in-itself, it is merely a regulative Idea of our mind, something our mind imposes on the raw multitude of sensations in order to be able to experience it as a well-ordered meaningful Whole? The paradox is that the very In-itself of Nature as a Whole independent of us is the result of our (subjective) synthetic activity'…[24]

The impetus to find in nature or Nature some revitalizing connection, some renewal of one's genial spirits, some primal experience of the Earth wrapped in awe, glory, a fair luminous cloud—all of this is dismissed as ideological illusion, albeit a transcendentally necessary illusion or Lacanian 'fundamental fantasy' against which we must always be on guard if we are not to succumb to its reveries. Accordingly, Zizek asks: "What if the true materialist position starts (and, in a way, ends) with the acceptance of the In-itself as a meaningless chaotic manifold?"[25]

Meaninglessness is precisely the right term here for the world that Zizek and Morton alike describe is one in which an irreducible chasm separates all things from their conceptualization, symbolization, and intelligibility.[26] As Zizek writes, "At end, "we must learn to accept the real of the ecological crisis in its senseless actuality, without charging it with some message or meaning".[27] Whether in the register of Lacanian-inflected dialectical ontology of Zizek or the Object-Orientated-Ontology of Morton's later writings, the picture is jarring: the problem of alienation is not merely one of subjects transcendentally divided from objects, but rather of all things irreducibly mingled with and infinitely unintelligible to all other things. This unapproachability and inaccessibility accounts for the uncanny and anxious character of our existence especially in the midst of the ecological crisis for the ecological awareness it

[23] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), pp.* 1, no. 1 (1996): 17.
[24] Slavoj Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 443.
[25] Ibid., 444.
[26] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry : An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 35.
[27] Ibid.

forces upon is precisely what shakes our symbolic edifices to the core.

> Without a world, there is no Nature. Without a world, there is no life. What exists outside the charmed circles of Nature and life is a charnel ground, a place of life and death, of death-in-life and life-in-death, an undead place of zombies, viroids, junk DNA, ghosts, silicates, cyanide, radiation, demonic forces, and pollution. My resistance to ecological awareness is a resistance to the charnel ground. It is the calling of the shaman to enter the charnel ground and to try to stay there, to pitch a tent there and live there, for as long as possible.[28]

A charnel ground, of course, is an open-air site where bodies, usually human bodies, are left to putrefy and decompose. To face this, even to embrace this, is what Morton means by ecological awareness: the acknowledgement existence on earth is like this, like being plunged into the emergency room of a hospital.

> People are dying everywhere. There is blood and noise, equipment rushing around, screams. When the charm of world is dispelled, we find ourselves in the emergency room of ecological coexistence.[29]

The death of Nature, like the end of the world, has already happened, but there is no apocalypse, no revelation of the meaning of it all after the end.[30] Or rather, the revelation is simply that there never has been any meaning to it, no end towards which we are moving, no ontic logos in which the cosmos participates. For Morton, at least, this isn't exactly a disenchanted universe, for influences, lines of force, and a variety of nonlocal attunements and resonances link us to one another and all things in varying ways and degrees.[31] Within the ecological mesh we are subject to something like the animal magnetism Franz Mesmer described.[32] And this, in turn, may give rise to caring for other beings, the strange strangers all about us, and so to a genuine ecological politics of nonviolent coexistence. But you will not be able to say why you should care, for care is a kind of affect, appetite, or style for which there is no why, no meaning; there is just the mesh.[33]

The meaninglessness, once recognized, cannot remain safely outside us, for no stable duality of inside and outside is possible. Shifting our focus from the geological to the genetic, Zizek points to the way in which human activity has not only transformed terrestrial systems but has also begun to take hold of the levers of nature in its very depths. As Zizek writes:

> [T]he main consequence of the scientific breakthroughs in biogenetics is the end of nature. Once we know the rules of its construction, natural

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[28] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects : Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Posthumanities (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 126.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Morton, *Being Ecological*, 155. 155

[31] See ibid., 57-134.

[32] Ibid., 80.

[33] Ibid., 124.

> organisms are transformed into objects amenable to manipulation … nature is no longer "natural," the reliable "dense" background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic manner.

For Zizek, the paradigm case of this is biogenetics which reduces the human psyche itself to an object of manipulation. "By reducing man to just another natural object whose properties can be manipulated," writes Zizek, "what we lose is not (only) humanity but nature itself". [34]

Zizek's remarks had been anticipated already in the work of Owen Barfield decades earlier. Throughout his writings, Barfield consistently draws attention to a kind of history of disenchantment or alienation, from a world suffused with meaning to one in which the world is scoured of its interiorities, the last traces of spirit existing fragilely within human subjectivity alone but waning even thence. In one of his later essays from the early 1970s, entitled 'The Coming Trauma of Materialism,' Barfield argues that the modern chapter of this alienation proceeds in three phases: the alienation or radical separation of human culture from nature, followed by the alienation of human beings from their bodies, and finally the alienation of human beings from their minds. As Barfield writes:

> The vaunted progress of knowledge which has been going on since the seventeenth century, has been progress in alienation. The alienation first of nature from humanity which the exclusive pursuit of objectivity and science entails was the first stage. And it was followed with the acceptance of man himself as a part of nature so alienated, by the alienation of man from himself. This final and fatal step in reductionism occurred in two stages. First his body and then his mind. Newton's approach to nature was already by contrast with older scientific traditions, a form of behaviourism. And what has since followed has been its extension from Astronomy and Physics into Physiology and ultimately Psychology.[35]

While Zizek and Barfield agree on many of the contours of this history insofar as both see its salient mutations taking place at a deeper register than that available to the history of ideas alone—put aside whether one thinks of this register in terms of ideology, imagination, the unconscious, or passive habits of thought—nevertheless, they differ starkly in their respective evaluations of this history. For Zizek, as in a different way for Morton, the ecological shock of the Anthropocene obviates the distinctions that in previous eras permitted us to believe in persons, in human nature, in nature itself. Alienation is greeted as a kind of emancipation from the transcendental illusions of cosmic meaning. By contrast, Barfield is concerned to resist the modern demythologisation of nature, which he sees in a Coleridgean vein as bound up with misguided

[34] Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 435.
[35] Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning : And Other Essays*, 216.

attempts to reduce everything to a combinatorial story in which anything real must be understood in terms of elementary particles and fundamental physical forces, both of which can be described mathematically and formally rather than poetically and qualitatively—the world as a 'meaningless dance of atoms' as Barfield puts it elsewhere.

One can argue that much of the strange appeal of Zizek or Morton's approach to the contemporary ecological crisis lies largely in the combination gloominess and irony, disgust and humour, horror and camp they evince throughout their writing, responses that seem somehow appropriate to the magnitude of the challenges before us. But what do such approaches leave us with? Having abolished both nature and the human and barred the windows of the world against the influence of any superindividual meaning, communicability, intelligibility, or order—no reasons can be given for the ethical responsibility and reverence we rightly owe other creatures. Despite protests otherwise, doesn't this ontological flattening render the world more susceptible to the exploitation and commercial capture that have brought us to this fraught ecological moment? Morton might be right that reverence and a kind of love for other beings arises spontaneously when not blocked by various ideological, psychological, social or economic impediments—but shouldn't such moments of awareness invite us to think more deeply about the metaphysics implied in these experiences of radical reverence and regard for the other? Moreover, if our minds participate in no world of meaning, no basic source of intelligibility and rightness, then what justifies the extraordinary intellectual effort and confidence required to believe in the meaninglessness of the world? Why should we trust the deliverances of our reason if our own minds, too, are catastrophically alienated?

III. *From Dejection to Joy: The Rebirth of the Symbol*

Such thoughts bring us to a crisis not unlike the one Coleridge confronted in *Dejection.* While the immediate personal context leading to the poem's creation was Coleridge's complex relationship with Sara Hutchinson, the published version transposes this personal struggle into a critical interrogation of the romantic experience of nature itself. In earlier poems like *Frost at Midnight*, Coleridge lyrically celebrated the the "shapes and sounds intelligible" seen and heard through the beauties and particularities of nature, all of which form an eternal language, one that the poet imagines anticipates his son being able to hear and so to recognize God speaking "Himself in all, and all things in himself." But in *Dejection,* the poet permits himself to wonder whether all of that hadn't been mere illusion. Coleridge had as much capacity for tarrying with the darkness as Zizek or Morton, much of which is on display in this poem. And although Coleridge does directly discuss the concept of nature as historically contingent and culturally constructed, seeds of such thought are present already in his observation that "in our life alone does nature live" and "I may not hope from outward forms to win, the passion and the life, whose fountains are within".

In Stanza II, the poet describes himself unmoved while gazing at the western sky as evening descends. The horror is not that the sky is somehow itself disgusting or threatening, but rather that it is beautiful and unaffecting.

> And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;
> Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
> Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
> In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
> I see them all so excellently fair,
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

In one of his most perfectly realized essays, 'The Harp and the Camera', Barfield sought to understand such experience through the metaphor of the camera which he contrasts with the familiar romantic metaphor of the Aeolian Harp. While the wind harp sings only insofar as it is porous—the air coursing through it—the camera functions only by capturing the world inside itself and projecting its own point of view onto the lens within. Our eyes, of course, do this as well and the camera well captures this immediate experience of seeing. But mere seeing is precisely what so horrifies Coleridge in *Dejection*. Barfield argues that "camera is a *caricature* of imagination, although it is a true emblem of perspective".[36] Imagination, as a synthetic and creative power, is living, but mere seeing is only life-like, it yields an undead world, a horrifying parody of life.

> It used to be said that the camera cannot lie. But in fact it always does lie. Just because it looks only in that immediate way, the camera looks always *at* never *into* what it sees. I suspect that Medusa did very much the same.[37]

Camera-like, the poet stands before an apparently empty world, the correlate of his own interior emptiness. The argument of the following two stanzas presents the poet coming to recognize that "in our life alone does Nature live." This is sometimes read as an act of resignation and a repudiation of the naïve romantic belief that nature itself could be the sort of language celebrated in *Frost at Midnight*. In Stanza V of *Dejection,* however, the poem takes an unexpected turn. Rather than reflecting upon dejection, Coleridge gives us an ode to joy and now finally a proper matrimonial hymn. For Coleridge, joy is the name of that which unites the mind in us to the mind in the world.

> Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,
> Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
> Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower

[36] Ibid., 83.
[37] Ibid.

A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud --0
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud --
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms [our] ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

As often in Coleridge, the biblical references are unmistakable, not only to the wedding of heaven and earth in *Rev* 21:1, but also to *Isaiah* 65:17-19:

See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and *rejoice* forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a *joy*.
I will *rejoice* over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

This eschatological power of joy is bound up, for Coleridge, with *the shaping power of the imagination*. Already in 1802, having recognized the problem posed by the bifurcation of the world into subject and object—an interior world of meaning and life, on the one hand, and external world that was true but bleak and meaningless, on the other—Coleridge begins to see that the way through lies precisely in the imagination and its capacity to give birth to the symbol.

In Stanza VI, the poem gives the lie to the poet's sense that his powers have failed him for here he encounters the wind and the encroaching storm which transforms him, breathing life back into him, and leading the poet to a place of blessing. As J. Robert Barth writes:

> Putting aside the almost solipsistic view of himself and nature, he finally allows himself really to listen to the wind, to allow its power to work in him. At the beginning of the poem, he had projected his own feelings onto the wind—and so could hear only his own depression. This is precisely what had led to his reflection: 'We receive but what we give'. Later, after rejecting this self-centred and self-pitying attitude ('Hence, viper-thoughts!'), he is able to let nature touch him, and he finds that it is healing. Perhaps Wordsworth is right after all.[38]

But, in truth, it is not merely that Wordsworth was right, or that outer forms

[38] J. Robert Barth, "Coleridge's Dejection: Imagination, Joy and the Power of Love," in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Lucy Newlyn, Nicholas Roe, and Richard Gravil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 184-85.

can themselves communicate life and joy, or that the wind Coleridge encounters in the storm proves that he is, in fact, an aeolian harp. The portrayal of the storm is full of violence and horror and the quiet that follows brings the deeply unsettling image of a lost child wailing for her mother. It is not the storm that is healing, but rather Coleridge perceives in this storm an echo of the movements of his own life, and imagines his Lady a capable of doing so all the more. In the alternative ordering of the original verse letter upon which *Dejection* was based, the reflections on Joy immediately follow Coleridge' account of the storm. It is not nature but 'Joy' that is 'the beautiful & beauty-making Power' (l. 312), given only to the pure (as Coleridge imagines Sara to be) in their purest hour (l. 314), Joy is the Power that weds Nature to us and celebrates this wedding with the gift of a new Earth and a new Heaven (ll. 315-16). In this gift, the world is rediscovered as symbol, nature in its capacity for symbolic eloquence, and it is this 'sense of blissful union with the being of nature,' as Barfield puts, that proves healing.[39]

What does it mean to call nature a symbol? In the *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion,* Coleridge declares:

> Symbols are the visible signs of the inward Benevolence or Wisdom- to the pious man all Nature is thus beautiful because its very feature is the Symbol and all its parts the written language of infinite Goodness and powerful Intelligence.[40]

As Coleridge writes later in the final lines of the *Biographia Literaria,* the Universe is the "choral echo" of "the Great I AM" and the "filial Word," the creative Logos.[41] A symbol is, of course, a sign, but a sign that partakes synechdochically (or consubstantially) of that which it signifies. This is what distinguishes a symbol from a mere representation or concept. A representation, like a portrait, presents a kind of external similitude, and so invites definition, while a symbol enjoys an internal relationship with its referent, a real ongoing ontological relation that makes it to be what it is and at the same time to be a symbol. It is, in Coleridge's neologism, tautegorical, it expresses the same thing that it is but with a difference.[42] It non-identically repeats what it symbolizes.[43] Coleridge introduces his famous definition of the symbol in the *Statesman's Manual* amid a discussion about how to interpret scripture. When the scriptures speak of God, Coleridge insists, they do so analogously rather than metaphorically. Aquinas had said as much, but

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[39] Owen Barfield, "Either : Or," in *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 55.

[40] *Lects 1795*, 158.

[41] *BL* II 247-48.

[42] *AR* 206

[43] In his *Lay Sermons,* Coleridge contrasts allegory and symbolism: "Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture- language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses. . . . On the other hand a Symbol (ὁ ἐστιν ἀει ταυτηγορικον) is characterized by the translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligi*ble*; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative." (LS, 30)

Coleridge adds:

> these analogies are the material, or (to speak chemically) the base, of Symbols and symbolical expressions; the nature of which is always tautegorical, that is, expressing the same subject but with a difference, in contra-distinction from metaphors and similitudes, that are always allegorical, that is, expressing a different subject but with a resemblance.

A true symbol issues from a dynamic power which expresses itself in differentiation without sacrificing its prior unity. Coleridge's theory of the symbol draws on the principle of polarity that lies behind nearly all his mature thinking, what he called the "universal Law of Polarity or essential Dualism."[44] As the formulation from the *Biographia Literaria* puts it:

> grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or *find* itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you.[45]

The two polar forces of one power animate and give rise to all life, all nature, and to all mind or spirit. Accordingly, for Coleridge, all of creation comprises one organic whole. Contemporary theorists eager to put the concept of nature in the ecological dock accuse it of being merely the projection of human consciousness, on the one hand, and of enacting an explosive holism that violently suppresses differences while siphoning all values to the imagined top of the hierarchy it both creates and sustains, on the other. But Coleridge's approach, while unabashedly holistic, frustrates such critiques. Nature is the symbol of the generative polarity from which issues both nature and spirit, but this dynamic principle generates difference in the very act of preserving individuality. As Coleridge writes in the *Theory of* Life, "individuality is most intense where the greatest dependence of parts on the whole is combined with the greatest dependence of the whole on its parts…".[46]

The two forces, centrifugal and centripetal, the simultaneous tendencies towards individuation and connection, are neither hypotheses nor yet regulative ideals invented to save or structure our experience of phenomena. Neither, however, as Barfield notes, are they "phenomena among other phenomena".[47] If they were phenomena then they might indeed yield the desultory ecological effects against which Morton and others warn us. For as things alongside all other things in a flat ontology they would provoke those mimetic crises and competitive relations that give rise to the hierarchies of domination and exploitation we rightly eschew. But if they are neither logical nor phenomenal, what are they? They are dynamic and real, constitutive rather than regulative. As Barfield writes:

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[44] F I 94.
[45] *BL* I 297.
[46] TL 574
[47] Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 33.

> These 'constituent powers', as Coleridge calls them … are acts or energies that are 'suspended and, as it were, quenched in the product.' They are the 'inside' of anything to which we can apply the noun *matter* or the adjective *material*.[48]

This is admittedly hard to grasp and requires a profound exercise of the imagination in order to do so: indeed, writes Barfield gnomically, "the apprehension of polarity is itself *the basic act of the imagination*".[49] The principle of separative projection cannot be theoretically grasped by the understanding because every such theory expresses a relationship between spirit and nature, but the principle of polarity governs the relations of spirit and nature themselves. It can, accordingly, be realized, contemplated, or participated, but not represented. For this reason, Barfield insists that the realisation of polarity "was, in Coleridge's view, impossible without praying in aid imagination".[50] It is an odd turn of phrase suggesting, perhaps, that the realisation of polarity – the basic act of imagination – is likewise an act of prayer. As 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,' the Coleridgean imagination participates in the dynamism of separative projection and productive unity that lie behind existence as such. The primary imagination is the unconscious act through which the phenomenal world is subjectively structured, while the secondary echoes but in greater harmony with the conscious will, creating as it were after the manner that nature herself (*natura naturans*) first creates. Coleridge's final comments on the secondary imagination recall the dialectic of the dead-gaze of the camera and the life of the imagination we discovered above in *Dejection*: "The secondary Imagination … is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead".[51]

The imagination is projective, it actively supplements what one receives from the senses, but it is not willful even when, as the secondary imagination, it freely coincides with the conscious will. Fancy, not the imagination, operates according to the designs of an ego that sees itself separate from both the world and the artifacts it leaves behind. But the imagination, while projective like a camera, is also participatory like a harp. Later in the *Biographia Literaria*, commenting on Milton's description of a banyan tree in *Paradise Lost*, Coleridge writes:

> This is creation rather than painting, or if painting, yet such, and with such co-presence of the whole picture flashed at once upon the eye, as the sun paints in a camera obscura.[52]

According to Barfield, in this description, Coleridge has rescued the metaphor of the camera, changing it "from a caricature into a true emblem of the

[48] Ibid., 34.
[49] Ibid., 36.
[50] Ibid., 139.
[51] *BL* I 304.
[52] *BL* II 128.

imagination".[53] How? By reversing the direction of the metaphor. It is not that the camera, or the mind or the imagination, merely projects itself outward, but rather the imagination projects outward only because it participates itself in the light that shines in and through the camera. "The mind is at least not wholly an aeolian harp," writes Barfield.

> For us there must be projection, and the question for [us] is whether it is to be a projection of nothingness or a projection of the sun-spirit, the spirit of light.[54]

Nature will only appear as the symbol that it in fact is only when approached with reverence and a kind of piety, which is to say, only when the subject discovers within himself or herself the same fountains from nature also springs. When our inescapable acts of projection are no longer our acts alone or the artifacts of some transcendental human freedom, but are rather known also to be the acts of nature in us then in our life will nature truly live. Recognizing that nature is not built up around us, but put forth in and through us, we overcome the modern bifurcation of the world into putative human agency and passive (natural) activity. Nature is historicized not by dissolving concepts like Nature and Humanity, but by realizing their unity in the midst of distinction, and thus rescuing nature from the depoliticization about which contemporary ecocritics rightly worry. At the same time, we overcome the mood of dejection that accompanies their refusal of the category of meaning and so arguably rescue the possibility a comportment capable of sustaining the radically new but fragile moral intuitions about the natural world that seem especially important in the face of accelerating ecological challenges. In order, however, to recognize nature as a symbol, those who would do so must risk their own transformation, for the symbol is only perceived in the correlative act of the subject's transformation and porosity to transpersonal meaning. As Coleridge wrote, three years after he penned *Dejection*:

> In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim- glimmering [through] the dewy window, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phænomenon were the dim Awaking of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature/It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is Λογος, the Creator! <and the Evolver!> [55]

[53] Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning : And Other Essays*, 88.
[54] Ibid.
[55] *CN* II 2546