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## **Reconciliation with Nature:**

### **Adorno on Reason, Nature, and Critique**

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#### **Abstract**

In this paper I interrogate the actuality of Adorno's concept of nature in the light of the contemporary environmental crisis. In particular, I try to understand what happens to the critical force of Adorno's concept of nature if we accept that a decisive turn has been taken in the domination of nature. I articulate two key aspects of Adorno's critical theory that I think are important resources for thinking in a time of potential environmental catastrophe, which are the themes of a dialectical understanding of reason and nature and the theme of "lifeless life." I then question whether two key mediating concepts in Adorno's dialectic, namely the concepts of self-reflection and self-preservation, need to be rethought. Finally, I consider how the concept of a reconciliation with nature, a concept central to the first generation of the Frankfurt school, can be thought anew in an era marked by ever increasing human domination of nature.

#### **Keywords**

Nature, critique, reason, self-reflection, reconciliation

The notion that human impact on the environment is now geologically embedded in every aspect of natural life has

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been accompanied in critical discourses with an “end of nature” thesis. Human impact upon the environment has reached such a level of inscription within the body of nature, that there is nothing that can be named as natural anymore.<sup>1</sup> Some theorists argue that this is a historical end of nature; we have reached a point at which human impact on the environment is so embedded in nature, that we cannot discern any trace or remnant of the natural, of that which is not shaped by human praxis. Other theorists argue that the idea of the natural as separate from the human is a chimera, lodged in a Cartesian worldview, that separates human reason from the natural world, when there has always been an array of forces that construct the world we live in, and these cannot be artificially, or even analytically, separated into the natural as opposed to the social.<sup>2</sup>

One of the key distinctive aspects of Adorno’s philosophy is a thoroughly reworked concept of reconciliation that views it not as a merging of subject and object but as the possibility of a form of life in which otherness is respected in its difference; a form of being “at home” with that which is other to human agency, intentionality and instrumental use.<sup>3</sup> Reconciliation is glimpsed through the possibility of a liberated

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<sup>1</sup> Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: Kairos PM press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a good summary of these various positions see Simon Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature in Environmental Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015). The theorist who has most consistently argued for the impossibility of ever separating the natural from the social is Bruno Latour. For a representative example of his arguments specifically related to the Anthropocene, see Bruno Latour, “Agency at the time of the anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no.1 (2014): 1–18.

<sup>3</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

relationship with nature, both internal and external nature, and nature is defined as that which is not completely dependent on human agency. Thinking of the actuality of Adorno’s work, in the context of environmental philosophy, is therefore immediately a confrontation with any notion of an “end of nature” thesis. If one defines nature, along with Kate Soper as that which is “independent of human activity” in the sense that it is not a “humanly created product,” then this concept for Adorno has both a materialist and a critical importance.<sup>4</sup> It has a materialist importance in the Marxist sense that history is a record of the production and reproduction of life in the context of a struggle with nature. It has a critical force, in the sense that a peaceful relationship with nature is at the heart of an image of what a reconciled life beyond capitalism could be. Importantly for the first generation of the Frankfurt school this image of nature is tied up with an aesthetic comportment towards the natural.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis of an “end of nature” has often been allied to a thesis of an “end to critique.” This is particularly apparent in that current of thought most closely allied to progressive understandings of ecological catastrophe. I am thinking here of a strand of thinking in new materialism and object-oriented philosophy that is united by a hostility to critique. In contemporary philosophy, there have been numerous attempts to engage with objects or materialities in novel and interesting

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Adorno’s writing on the concept of natural beauty in T.W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1997). See also, the key essay by Herbert Marcuse “Nature and Revolution,” in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

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ways.<sup>6</sup> These philosophical currents are explicitly configured as a move away from critique and towards concepts of construction, composition and mapping rather than deconstructing the social sphere.<sup>7</sup> For various reasons, the project of critique is to be overcome in the turn to a new ontology of objects that demands a refusal of traditional critical questions in favour of the more affirmative notion of constructing or composing assemblies of objects.<sup>8</sup>

In response to such an anti-critical turn to materiality, life and objects, I want to return to some core truths of critical theory by articulating what I think are two centrally important themes when thinking Adorno's concept of nature.

First, there is dialectical method, more specifically the critical inflection of such a method that is negative dialectics. Dialectical thinking appears outmoded in a contemporary theoretical arena that emphasises an inability to think the separation of reason and nature, and utilises concepts of entities being enmeshed and entangled, alongside the rather curious notion of the distribution of agency. However, a dialectical understanding of nature is central to the notion that

one cannot think nature without thinking about reason and vice-versa. One has to think the non-identity of the identity of reason and nature, and think the identity of reason and nature as an unfolding historical practice. Such a dialectical understanding of nature immediately raises the question of reason, of what reason has become and what reason might be in the future. The question of reason is rarely raised in the turn to materialities and to life; in fact the material turn in philosophy can be configured as a hostility to theory. Colebrook has written of this return to bodies, materialities and affects as “reaction formations or last gasps.”<sup>9</sup> These “last gasps” are a return to a tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* that finds a response to the failure of reason in a turn to that which is other than reason; life in all its energetic forms. This then leaves the discourse of reason to the rather moribund discussions of post-truth politics that rely on a conception of reason as positivist evidence or naturalist hard-wiring. Martin Jay has characterised the early Frankfurt school as attempting to stake out a position between *Lebensphilosophie* and positivism and it appears this position is still needed.<sup>10</sup> Adorno's critique of historical reason can provide such a position.<sup>11</sup>

This dialectical critique of historical reason is supplemented with an experiential, one is tempted to blasphemously say an existential, understanding of lifeless life, of a “life that does not life” to use the phrase from Ferdinand

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of this work see Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–248.

<sup>8</sup> I have spelt out an Adornian inspired critique of object-oriented ontology in more detail in my article “A Preponderance of Objects: Critical Theory and the Turn to the Object,” *Adorno Studies* 1, no.1 (2017): 13–30.

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<sup>9</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change Is Not Really Human,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 193.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Jay, *Reason After its Eclipse: On Late Critical Theory* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press), 83.

<sup>11</sup> For a description of Adorno's work as a critique of historical reason see Espen Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Kürnberger that serves as Adorno's epigraph for *Minima Moralia*. Throughout his work, Adorno offers an account of experience as petrified, as lifeless and this is particularly exemplified in an experience of nature, that itself is viewed as fatally sick, in the image of a *facies hippocratica*, the face of one who is about to die. This is a conscious construction, a way of emphasising a particular fateful manner in which reason and nature have developed but it is also premised upon the notion that a delineation of a negative state of affairs might allow the possibility of something different to arise, that "consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite."<sup>12</sup> The standpoint of redemption is the one that fashions the world of nature as lifeless and petrified. This image of lifeless life, within and without, is also, completely passé. In the affective and material turn of theory, we are confronted with an abundance of life, of agency multiplying and overflowing any conceptual ordering. Colebrook puts it well, when she writes that it is precisely at the point when "life, bodies and vitality have reached their endpoint and face extinction [...] [that] theory has retreated into an affirmation of life."<sup>13</sup> The idea of lifeless life is an important theme to resuscitate at a time of potential environmental catastrophe.

If these are the two core themes that I wish to return to as key truths of critical theory, then I want to supplement this account with some critical points that reflect from the current situation of environmental crisis back on to Adorno's work. I will outline two critical points which concern key mediating concepts in Adorno's understanding of the dialectic of reason and nature; namely self-preservation and self-reflection. For

<sup>12</sup> T.W Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E. F. N Jephcott (London: Verso, 1997), 247.

<sup>13</sup> Colebrook, "Not Symbiosis, Not Now," 193.

Adorno, the key mediating concept in the historical unfolding of the dialectic of reason and nature is that of self-preservation. But what can self-preservation mean in a time when the manner in which we have preserved humanity threatens its own extinction? Can self-preservation still be configured as a preservation against nature, or is it now a preservation against a newly to-be-feared humanised nature, in the form of forces that arise through the impact of human activity and consequent upon global warming? Adorno generally writes as though the dialectic of enlightenment has reached a point at which we could potentially organise society in such a way that self-preservation is no longer an issue, but is he rather too much of an optimist here, given the human impact on the environment? Closely allied to this complex of questions around self-preservation is the question of self-reflection, as for Adorno, it is in a kind of awakening, a reflection on myself as a "part of nature," that the possibility of a different non-dominating history can unfold, but this possibility, the possibility of a "blissful contemplation of nature" is premised on the overcoming of the demands of self-preservation.<sup>14</sup> Reconciliation with nature lies in the possibility of an overcoming of domination through an aesthetic relationship with nature. Simon Hailwood has characterised this overcoming of domination as maintaining a sense of nature as different and alien. Reconciliation does not mean overcoming estrangement from nature but living alongside nature in its difference, accommodating oneself to the natural

<sup>14</sup> For the phrase "I, myself, am part of nature," see T. W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 103. For the discussion of the "blissful contemplation of nature," see T.W. Adorno "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 267.

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world and not instrumentalising or appropriating the natural world for human ends.<sup>15</sup> Marcuse characterises this comportment as aesthetic in the sense of a range of qualities that lie in being passive, receptive and surrendering to the other, and such qualities are a precondition of freedom.<sup>16</sup> However, as both Marcuse and Adorno recognise, such an aesthetic comportment towards nature relies upon a mastery or domination of nature. Adorno writes that where “nature was not actually mastered, the image of its untamed condition terrified.”<sup>17</sup> Does the newly humanised, yet inhuman force of nature in the Anthropocene, discount any notion of the possibility of escape from mythic fear that an enlightened self-reflection promises?

### The Dialectic of Nature and Reason

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer outline a transformation from a mimetic form of self-preservation that is predominant in primitive societies, to a self-preservation that arises through the intensified domination and use of nature in enlightenment thinking and practice. Mimetic practices animate the natural world and attempt to adapt the human organism to the natural object in order to ward off the threat of nature. This is a completely entrapped form of mimesis, that can only maintain self-preservation through the transfer of human powers to the

natural world.<sup>18</sup> With the increasing rational control and use of nature, there is a promise of the escape from such a mythic fear, but Horkheimer and Adorno famously argue for a return of mythic fear at the heart of enlightenment thought. Enlightenment is “mythical fear radicalised,” as in the attempt to ward off all threats to life through the rational control and domination of nature, nothing is allowed to remain as external or non-identical to the human subject.<sup>19</sup> The pursuit of self-preservation as an end in itself produces three forms of domination, of objects (external nature), of relationships between people and of relationships of individuals to themselves (internal or bodily nature). This pursuit of self-preservation becomes systematised with the rise of capitalism and of the commodification of these three elements of living as processes of absolute fungibility, where everything is exchangeable and usable. Life becomes both object and subject of a process of petrification in the service of self-preservation. The process of separation from nature, in the name of self-preservation is necessary. There is no nostalgia for a return to an animistic fearful mimetic relationship to nature. Therefore, nature cannot be affirmed in itself. However, the promise of enlightenment thinking, is the promise of a thought which would enable self-preservation without domination. The possibility of living is itself only raised through the separation from nature, but if it is to preserve itself as living, it must relate to the material as that which escapes all conceptuality and all identification.

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<sup>15</sup> Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature*, 130. See also, Simon Hailwood, “Estrangement, Nature and the ‘Flesh’,” *Ethical theory and Moral Practice* 17, no.1 (2014): 71–85.

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 74.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

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<sup>18</sup> Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2–34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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Adorno's account of reason is significant in the manner in which reason is seen as an achievement and a defeat. It is only through the necessary separation from nature, that a being capable of self-consciousness arises and is enabled to "step back" from the domination of mythic enthrallment encapsulated by nature. However, in this "stepping back" from nature, reason is constituted as self-authorising and tolerating no heteronomy.

Even the self-reflective statement "I, myself, am a part of nature" is premised upon the possibility of a separation from nature, a withdrawal that is the result of a process of domination. This means that any notion of a reconciliation with nature must in some sense sublimate domination without a complete identification of reason and nature; there must be the possibility of a relationship to nature that retains nature's non-identity without the context of threat.

Simon Hailwood gives an interesting account of estrangement from nature that builds upon phenomenological insights drawn from the work of Merleau-Ponty and on Axel Honneth's account of reification. Hailwood's account in many ways complements and builds on Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the domination of nature and the manner in which a distorted sensibility has formed through the instrumental use of nature and that overcoming such distortion requires a concept of reconciliation that is "at home" with difference.<sup>20</sup> Drawing on Honneth's work on reification, Hailwood articulates four elements of estrangement from nature.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hailwood, "Estrangement, nature and the 'Flesh'," 71–85.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 74. For Honneth's account of reification see Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For my earlier critique of Honneth's concept of reification, see Alastair Morgan, "The

Firstly, there is what he terms a "distortion of sensibility and praxis irreducible to cognitive errors."<sup>22</sup> We don't just ignore ourselves as part of nature or take a perspective on our lives that abstracts from the natural world, but in the process of an enlightenment premised on abstraction and the control and use of internal and external nature, our sensibility is fundamentally distorted. This is what Marcuse terms a "mutilated sensibility" that has been impacted by advanced capitalism "down into the instinctual and physiological level of existence."<sup>23</sup> Something has gone deeply awry, to the point of mutilation, in the way that we are able to experience ourselves as natural beings dependent upon a natural world.

Despite this very deep distortion of our natural lives, Hailwood's second point is that we are "always already involved" in nature. There is no sense in which as a natural, embodied being I can withdraw completely from dependence on the body or dependence on the natural world and Hailwood's third point is that this dependence is foundational and pre-reflective. It is not that we take a stance towards involvement but that our involvement is primordial, affective and engaged.<sup>24</sup> To emphasise these two related points, Hailwood draws on the late work of Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*, and particularly the concept of flesh. He interprets this concept as a move to emphasise a non-anthropomorphic sense of an anonymous life dependent upon a reciprocal exchange between sensibility and nature. Such an

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'living entity': Reification and Forgetting," *European Journal of Social Theory* 17, no.4 (2014): 377–388.

<sup>22</sup> Hailwood, "Estrangement, nature and the 'Flesh'," 74.

<sup>23</sup> Marcuse, "Nature and revolution," 61–63.

<sup>24</sup> Hailwood, "Estrangement, nature and the 'Flesh'," passim.

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affective exchange is fundamentally passive and reciprocal.<sup>25</sup> Estrangement from nature occurs when we take a stance towards nature that ignores its “more than human character” or treats it as stuff to be manipulated for human ends.<sup>26</sup> This is what Hailwood means by his fourth component of estrangement from nature, which he terms, following and adapting Honneth, a “misrecognition” of nature.<sup>27</sup> The concept of recognition seems forced in this context, as the central component of a different relationship to nature is not one of recognising some form of the self or enlarged notion of the self in nature, but a way of losing the ego in a contemplation that follows nature rather than appropriates it to some end, even the end of self-gratification.

Hailwood’s account is interesting in the many resonances with early Frankfurt school theory.<sup>28</sup> He fails to acknowledge two key and complicating factors about his understanding of a reconciliation with nature. First, he neglects to emphasise the extent to which overcoming nature is consequent upon the domination of nature. As we noted earlier the possibility of a different way of relating to nature, a more aesthetic comportment towards the natural world, is dependent upon a history of domination, of overcoming the threat of nature in order to acknowledge its difference in a non-threatening manner. This history of domination, however, is sedimented within the human psyche. An awareness of and accommodation to nature, rather than its appropriation,

requires both the historical possibility of such a transformation, allied with what Marcuse terms an “emancipation” of the senses. Self-reflection, then, demands a radical transformation rather than just a personal awakening to nature. As Hailwood recognises, it is not enough just to retire to the woods, but what is demanded for a different relationship to nature is both the historical potential of an overcoming of the “struggle with nature” and the possibility of a radically new sensibility.<sup>29</sup>

### There is No More Nature

For Adorno, there is no affirmation of nature itself as beneficent. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes of an experience of natural beauty which is a consciousness of “nature’s wounds”; such a consciousness, is both an awareness of the domination of nature and the frightening mythic elements within nature.<sup>30</sup> It is only when nature has been dominated that it can be viewed as beautiful. The notion, written about by Timothy Morton, of some kind of “intimacy with a plenitude of other lifeforms” that is promised in a turn against the subject in the age of the Anthropocene, downplays the manner in which nature itself blindly produces suffering in the name of life.<sup>31</sup> There is a wonderful passage in W. G. Sebald’s poem *After Nature*, in which he is writing about the paintings of the German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald. He

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>28</sup> Hailwood discusses Adorno in some detail, although mainly through some secondary literature. Strangely, he doesn’t refer to Marcuse’s work. See Hailwood, *Alienation and Nature*, 130–136.

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<sup>29</sup> Hailwood notes ironically that one reading of his critique would be that one “had better pack as few things as possible and go somewhere less humanised.” He recognises that this is not a solution to impending environmental catastrophe, see Hailwood, “Estrangement, nature and the ‘Flesh,’” 84.

<sup>30</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy Morton, “From Modernity to the Anthropocene: Ecology and Art in the Age of Asymmetry,” *International Social Science Journal* 63 (2012): 39.

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describes the “panic-stricken kink in the neck” that is seen in the paintings as:

[...] the extreme response of our bodies to the absence of balance in nature which blindly makes one experiment after another and like a senseless butcher undoes the thing it has only just achieved. To try out how far it can go is the sole aim of this sprouting, perpetuation and proliferation [...].<sup>32</sup>

One central understanding of nature in Adorno’s work is nature as myth, as representing a context of delusion and enthrallment that itself causes suffering. However, this mythic element of nature can itself be a source of beauty if experienced in a manner which is not threatening to life. Adorno writes of the song of the robin following a rain shower as a source of beauty, within which something threatening lurks, yet is sublimated.<sup>33</sup> Nature is neither good in itself nor evil, but with the increasing domination of nature arises a “second” nature that forms a lifeless background to abstract, instrumentalised reason.

In the early essay on *The Idea of Natural History* Adorno cites Lukács’s phrase, referring to second nature as a “charnel-house of rotted interiorities.”<sup>34</sup> This second nature represents a scene of human domination where all that can be experienced as natural, both within the subject and without, is felt as a rotting pile of human intentionality and meaning. If we have

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<sup>32</sup> W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: The Modern Library, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, 66. I am indebted to one of the peer reviewers for pushing me to be more nuanced and dialectical in my reading of Adorno on nature here than in the earlier draft of this piece.

<sup>34</sup> T.W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* No. 60 (1984): 118.

reached a stage where there is nothing “beyond the subject” but that the world becomes just a distorted reflection of human domination and intentionality, then there is no escape from the myth of constitutive subjectivity. The attributes that Adorno refers to as components of a suppressed yet potentially emphatic concept of reason, namely attributes of spontaneity, responsiveness and contemplation, can only be felt if there is something “other” than the human to elicit a response.

Contemporary discourses of materialism emphasise notions of distributed agency and a “metamorphic zone” where reason and nature no longer have any meaning as separable concepts.<sup>35</sup> The world is replete with “quasi-subjects” acting and sharing agency with other subjects, as Latour writes. For Latour, the notion of “mastery” of nature is as obsolete as the fear of being “fully naturalised.”<sup>36</sup> He writes that the “composition” of a political assemblage, a political matter of concern or crisis situation, cannot be configured as that of a separation into two hostile parties, one of which (the subject) is animated and has agency and the other (nature) which is mute and dumb. For Latour, the notion of “living in the epoch of the Anthropocene” means that we have to recast agency as a set of overlapping forces and entities, and try to understand these entities in as differentiated a manner as possible. Timothy Morton has written of an understanding of every “entity” in the universe as “ruthlessly at work reifying every other object to suit its own nefarious ends” and of the naming of the period of the Anthropocene as the moment in which humans are “infected from within by the objectness of objects.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Morton, “From Modernity to the Anthropocene,” 40–46.



These discourses represent the description that Adorno cites from Lukács in the early essay on natural history. When we view nature or the reason/nature assemblage from these perspectives all we can see is a rotting reflection of our own constitutive subjectivity. Everywhere, there is language, agency, contact and teleology; constitutive subjectivity run wild. This is a “charnel-house” because it represents a deadened repository of human reason reflecting nature. Concepts such as agency, that have a meaning through the long history of the dialectic of reason and nature, that are both concepts of domination and of liberation, are distributed like seeds in the wind that lie on barren ground. Lukács writes that this “petrified, estranged complex is no longer able to awaken inwardness”; it is not able to awaken genuine inwardness, because there is nothing that is different from the subject that can touch subjectivity in its difference.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, rather than subjectivity being infected by the objectness of objects, all objects become infected with the categories of subjectivity, and these categories themselves lose the meaning that they have through an account of a separation from nature.

### Nature is “Yet to Come”

Against those theories that attempt to collapse the distinction between reason and nature, Adorno insists on an emphatic idea or image of nature as that which is “not made” by humans, whilst recognising that nature has been thoroughly worked over, constructed and dominated by human beings.<sup>39</sup> The image of nature is the image of a relationship to nature where something that is not identical with the subject is

glimpsed but not completely recognised or identified. It is the idea of a relationship to something different that is encapsulated in the notion of an image of nature, for Adorno, but such an image is highly speculative and ephemeral. As Adorno writes it is a disappearing image whose substance lies in “what withdraws from universal conceptuality.”<sup>40</sup> Such an image of nature is closely tied to Adorno’s changed concept of reconciliation which relies on a contemplative responsiveness to that which is beyond the subject, a way of being at home with the other without annexing it, as he puts it in *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>41</sup> The image of nature is the promise of a reconciled state. In the essay on Hölderlin he writes of an “abandoned, flowing nature that transcends itself, precisely through having escaped from the domination of nature.”<sup>42</sup> Such an image of nature is only possible given a situation in which nature has been dominated and is no longer to be feared. The experience of natural beauty that promises an image of nature, of a “nature yet to come,” is premised upon the object no longer being viewed instrumentally as something to be feared or dominated. What Adorno terms the “palliative, benign, delicate, even the conciliatory element of praxis” that responds to the “object’s neediness” is a responsiveness that can only take place given a completely transformed understanding of the relationship between reason and nature.<sup>43</sup>

At times, Adorno appears to acknowledge that such a transformation is possible, even easy, if one could only escape

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<sup>38</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 64.

<sup>39</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, 62.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>41</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, 191.

<sup>42</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” in *Notes to Literature* vol.2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 130.

<sup>43</sup> Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 265–267.

the “iron cage” of a second nature that extirpates anything that does not resemble constitutive subjectivity. He writes that culture has failed “because it has clung to mere self-preservation and its various derivatives in a situation in which humanity has simply outgrown that principle. It is no longer confined by direct necessity to compulsive self-preservation, and it is no longer compelled to extend the principle of the mastery over nature, both inner and outer, into the indefinite future.”<sup>44</sup> However, there is no Hegelian guarantee of a necessary progress towards an emphatic concept of reason that lies in a changed understanding of what reconciliation means. Such an experience of reconciliation, of being at home with that which is different, is still tentative, ephemeral and suppressed. Nevertheless, there is a hope for the escape from mythic fear.

### **One cannot be too afraid of the world, such as it is**

It is this optimism that is challenged by a situation where the human impact upon the environment has unleashed new forces of nature that make nature once more an image of mythic fear. The notion that we have “outgrown” the necessity of self-preservation appears a bitter statement in the light of a situation where human impact on the environment has raised the issue of species survival in a different register. Rather than compulsive self-preservation being forgotten as a once-to-be feared realm of struggle, necessity and fear that could be overcome given the rational organisation of society, we have definitively entered an epoch where self-preservation against nature becomes once more the supreme political task and a

task that precisely does become never-ending, that does stretch out “into the future.” The critical question is, then, how can we prevent another, even more baleful, turn of the dialectic of enlightenment given a situation where fear is still pervasive and present and the demands for self-preservation are necessary and rational. If the possibility of a reconciliation of reason and nature rests on the premise of an absence of fear, then does this notion of reconciliation collapse in the age of the Anthropocene?

The critical force of Adorno’s concept of nature lies in a possibility of overcoming estrangement through a reconciled state which lies in being “at home” with that which is different. Marcuse terms this liberated relationship with nature as a form of “surrender,” a form of “letting be.”<sup>45</sup> He recognises that such a form of surrender is only possible given the historical possibilities of relating to nature in a non-dominating fashion. Only when nature is overcome can we surrender to it. This notion of reconciliation is put into radical question by a situation in which a historicised nature exerts a threatening force back on to humanity due to the rise in global temperatures. Such a threatening force promises a strange reversal of the dialectic of enlightenment whereby the historical conditions of the possibility of reconciliation in Adorno’s and Marcuse’s terms are put into reverse. As Andreas Malm writes: “Expect more gifts of history to be withdrawn, one after the other, primarily from those who never received very many of them in the first place. Historicised nature is pushing back.”<sup>46</sup> If history is put into reverse by a rise in global temperatures that creates new conditions of immiseration,

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<sup>44</sup> Adorno T. W. *Metaphysics. Concept and Problems*, translated by Edmund Jephcott, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), p.129.

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<sup>45</sup> Marcuse, “Nature and revolution,” 69.

<sup>46</sup> Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 219.

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poverty and scarcity then not only the possibility of reconciliation in Adornian terms, but the very concept itself, is put into question. What can a notion of aesthetic comportment towards nature, a notion of surrendering, or “letting go” mean for someone who takes historical materialism seriously. The virtue of Adorno’s and Marcuse’s thinking about a reconciliation with nature is that it is premised upon a serious thinking of historical possibilities, but have our historical possibilities altered so drastically that such a notion of reconciliation must fall?<sup>47</sup>

The possibility of a critical rescue of a concept of reconciliation with nature that lies in an adaptation to the natural world could lie in the transformation of the demands of self-preservation. Self-preservation, rather than being conceptualised as a struggle against nature, could rest on technological innovations of reason that work with and alongside natural forces rather than attempting to dominate and appropriate the natural world. In this sense, an enlarged conception of reason, informed by aesthetic components and an awakened radical sensibility might work with the forces of nature in the name of self-preservation. Marcuse writes joyously of the:

[...] erotic energy of nature – an energy which is there to be liberated, nature, too awaits the revolution! This receptivity is itself the soul of creation: it is opposed, not to productivity but to destructive productivity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> I am indebted to a peer reviewer for asking for further clarity on whether I am questioning the possibility of reconciliation or the very concept itself. I think I have been pushed towards flirting with the latter position.

<sup>48</sup> Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 74.

The binary options of an affirmation of an indeterminate concept of nature’s agency or the blithe hope that reason will somehow save the day through “more, not less Enlightenment thinking” promise an escape from the dialectic of enlightenment but such escapes are illusory.<sup>49</sup> If there is a possibility that a changed relationship to nature could rescue humanity from fundamental environmental degradation and historical regression, then the possibility of that changed relationship has a small window of opportunity. As historicised nature becomes more threatening with rises in global temperature, then the possibility of an adaptive, non-dominating relationship to nature becomes increasingly problematic. What is needed alongside a changed concept of reconciliation with nature that acknowledges nature’s difference is a changed concept of self-preservation that acknowledges and works with our dependence upon nature for survival.

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<sup>49</sup> For the demand for more Enlightenment, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 212.

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