Light on the Dark Mountain: An essay–review

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In this essay-review, the author considers the *Dark Mountain manifesto* and the movement it inspired, including both the later work of Paul Kingsnorth and especially that of Dougald Hine in his book *At Work Among the Ruins*. He then goes on to examine related recent work: a chapter by Maggie Nelson and, at more length, *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* by Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen. His sympathetic exegesis co-exists with noting a serious omission in all this work, the lack of an overtly ecocentric dimension.

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Uncivilisation. The Dark Mountain manifesto was published in 2009 (see https://is.gd/JE5hUw). Co-authored by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, it started a notable cultural movement including festivals, a series of books and a stream of articles and blogs. My concern here is partly to evaluate that movement but more to understand its significance. What was the impulse behind it? And how has that continued to play out? To that end, I shall start with the manifesto before turning to the recent book by one of its two co-authors, Dougald Hine: *At Work in the Ruins* (2023). Then we shall consider two other recent works on the same subjects: one a chapter in Maggie Nelson's *On Freedom* (2021) and the second *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* by Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen (2022).

Both the original impetus of *Uncivilisation* and many of its effects were strongly literary, so let's begin by considering them in that perspective, starting with the metaphor of the Dark Mountain itself. It comes from a brooding and vatic poem by Robinson Jeffers, "Rearmament", which finds "a tragic beauty" in "the dance of the / Dream-led masses down the dark mountain". Yet the image invoked by *Uncivilisation* is of an ascent. Now a manifesto isn't a tract, but it's curious. (What were the masses doing up there, anyway? And why would we want to replace them?)

The manifesto is nonetheless a fine piece of rhetoric which effectively conveys some important insights. One is that both individually and collectively, it is a good idea from time to time to pause and take stock, to look behind and

'down' rather than compulsively onward and upward. It is also deeply salutary to acknowledge the extent to which 'Western' (now global) civilization, whatever its achievements, is the principal driver of ecocide and is therefore unsustainable as such. *Uncivilisation* bravely calls out our ruling denialism. Finally, its authors realised early on, and disavowed, the corporate and managerial takeover of much of the environmental movement, bringing with it a dismaying complicity with business-as-usual.[1]

Alongside these signal virtues are some problematic issues. One is the strange lack of acknowledgement, required not by pedantry but honesty, of predecessors and elders (too many to name). The path up the Dark Mountain is not a broad highway but neither is it anything like as lonely and untraveled as the authors make it out to be, which makes one suspect a pose of lonely originality.

Part of that omission is the absence of philosophers. This matters only because *Uncivilisation* would have benefitted from more (as William James once defined metaphysics) of "the obstinate effort to think clearly" (James, 1890: 145). For example, its authors invoke Jeffers's 'inhumanism' as, approximately, the rootedness of humans in nature as a whole. But in Jeffers's own case, that sometimes slipped into a deep misanthropy (something which, reading his war poems, it is impossible to doubt). Perhaps what is meant, then, involves the 'non-human', referring to all the vast world of nature which is not specifically human. But that could set up a pernicious opposition between the two, when humans are clearly human animals. So maybe it should be supplemented with David Abram's (1997) important term, the 'more-than-human': that which non-human nature and humanity share, although the former in vastly greater measure.

I am not trying to sort out these tangled threads here. I only want to point out that such ideas matter, because they don't all take you to the same place; plus, not doing so may make it easier for someone else to take them in a direction you don't like. And I wonder if one reason for the tangle is tacit anti-intellectualism. I hope not, because it is absurd to conflate hyper-intellectual analysis with thinking, when the latter is as natural as feeling, breathing or walking. So too with the related prejudice against the metropolitan, whether populace or mindset; the rural is just as often a mare's nest of ignorance, brutality and bigotry.

But the deepest problem with *Uncivilisation* is that its occasional swipes at "human centrality" look like tokenism, given the fact that it is almost entirely concerned with human well-being or otherwise. In practice, ecocentrism is peripheral here where it should be central, leaving untouched anthropocentrism – an exclusive concern for humans, attended by chronic self-involvement.

The paths of Kingsnorth and Hine have subsequently diverged. I want to concentrate on Hine but first a few words about Kingsnorth. Almost ten years ago he embarked on a career of experimental fiction, but running alongside this he maintains a stream of online essays and blogs, still very much in the mode of the journalism from which he and Hine describe themselves as recovering.

Not long ago Kingsnorth publicly converted to Orthodox Christianity with the same acute sense of dramatic timing as his repudiation of environmentalism; for Kingsnorth not only presents the collective as personal, but the reverse. He recently identified AI ChatGBT as the anti-Christ or Satan (not Stan, as I just typed). I myself am on record (Curry, 2013) as an advocate of animism, understood as a principled habit of acknowledging agency and subjectivity wherever they show up and regardless of whether the other party is technically alive or not. So why not this time? Because it seems to me that Kingsnorth is not practising animistic encounter or ontological openness but enlisting the technology demon as an actor in a pre-determined narrative of eschatology which comprises one of the most deranged parts of Christianity.

Perhaps an age gets the metaphoric monster it deserves. Now it's AI; in the 1980s it was 'the selfish gene', something which (as Mary Midgley tirelessly pointed out) is incapable of being either selfish or unselfish, or of feeling, desiring or thinking, strictly speaking, any more than is a machine. Also, haven't human beings already demonstrated beyond any doubt that they are capable of royally screwing things up without any supernatural help? So it seems unnecessary, and probably unhelpful, to introduce the latter into the picture. Fear gets ramped up alright, but hardly clarity. And it too easily lets the humans who are responsible for it off the hook ('Satanic AI made me do it').

Dougald Hine has taken the Dark Mountain project in a very different direction, and I turn now to his *At Work in the Ruins* (2023). While this rich and complex work can be taken to represent the continuing life of that project, it stands firmly on its own two feet.

Integral to Hine's stance is a move from being someone who, for fifteen years, was best known for talking about climate change, to someone who has now rejected that role. The reasons are well worth noting. One was Hine's experience of the pandemic in Sweden, which resisted much of the tendentially authoritarian governmental reaction to public panic elsewhere, and contributed to his scepticism about science extended beyond its proper bounds. (This point is not a denial of the reality or seriousness of the virus but an openness to questions about how it was handled.) Part of the lesson to be learned is to refrain from equating questions about our knowledge of a virus that only emerged in 2020 with rejecting the decades of painstaking collaborative work that have gone into climate science.

Another major reason for Hine's change of heart is the way science itself has evolved and mutated, so to speak. The potential value of much scientific research is not in dispute. Furthermore, as Hine points out, in "certain branches of science, especially those which take place outdoors, there is a tenderness of attention to places and creatures which [...] it's hard not to call love" (2023: 73). Yet as he adds, once the observations pass through the mill of the production of scientific knowledge, what remains becomes something else not without potential value and importance, but of a very different kind. Often it is then taken to confirm what Max Weber called the chief engine of disenchantment, with nature no less than ourselves: the belief "that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (1991: 139). This is disastrous

because enchantment, properly so-called, is not a delusional spell but rather a truthful apprehension of the other's intrinsic value; but for this, modernity and its project of mastery has literally no use.

Another part of the problem is that science is increasingly expected to supply answers to questions – notably political and ethical – for which it is constitutionally unsuited. It can only do so by claiming an authority in matters which are insusceptible to scientific analysis, and disguising as objective description what are actually public interventions. The resulting scientism is an ideology, not itself scientific, which attempts to replace the "exercise of judgement" (Hine, 2023: 42). And we know from the work of Michael Polanyi that in practice, science itself cannot avoid judgement.

As Weber (1991: 143) pointed out a century ago, science "presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is worth being known [... But] this presupposition cannot be proved by scientific means. It can only be interpreted with reference to its ultimate meaning, which we must reject or accept according to our ultimate position towards life". Thus, to quote Hine (2023: 86), "science doesn't tell us what to do, it gives us information on the basis of which [partly, I would add] judgements have to be made".

This truth has been voiced by, among many others, Mary Midgley (2001: 49) – "Asking for more science and less of something else is itself a social and political move" – and Paul Feyerabend (1987: 31) – "the choice of science over other forms of life is not a scientific choice". Its abuse in recent years by right-wing populists does not make it any less true. But it also remains largely ignored by those claiming the mandate of liberal democracy and objectivity. As Hine (2023: 46) says, the "promise of replacing the messy exercise of judgement with the cleanliness of calculation comes back in new forms".

Hine's disillusionment with science as policy has another, more proximate cause. Climate change, as it is represented, lends itself readily to quantitative measurement and instrumental calculation in a way that cuts off its moral/ethical dimension at the knees. Thus it has come to be framed by a techno-science which is compliant with the demands of capital whose interest is not ecological sustainability – the ultimately determining condition – but its own financial sustainability. Bringing this point home, he mentions being contacted by someone with a background in policy and economic development, then moved onto start-ups '"with a health-care focus"', and was now '"looking to pivot to climate change (with a hybrid policy and entrepreneurial bent)"' (2023: 22). (This language left me feeling nauseous.)

Hine sees two paths from where we are. One is the big path of large-scale efforts of management, control, surveillance and innovation, oriented to sustaining existing trajectories of technological progress, economic growth and development; it combines elements of Brussels, Silicon Valley, Wall Street and the City, and the White House, together with elements of the equally anthropocentric Promethean Left, and now 'ecomodernists'. (The last frankly strike me as particularly questionable in a crowded field, not to mention Orwellian. The term makes as much sense as 'blackwhite' or 'squarecircle'.)

In the chilling words of the recent UN 'Stockholm+50' Declaration, which Hine quotes, we must move "toward the establishment of a governance system to effectively manage human interactions with the Earth System" (https://is.gd/9DhgH8). Note the appropriation and instrumental redirection of systems theory, as is already well underway in the form of 'ecosystem services'; the evidence-free assumption that human beings are capable of managing themselves, let alone the Earth; and the icy Foucauldian language of impersonal governmentality. The logic seems to be the same as for 'sustainable growth': since the alternative doesn't bear contemplating, it must be true. Next up, as things worsen, the ultimate doomed gamble: geoengineering. Anything but stop, learn and change course, abandoning delusions of control for humility, admitting the reality of limits, letting go, slowing down and downsizing in all possible ways.

This path is the urge to use the ecological crisis it has helped create "to turn our planetary home and all those share it with [...] into an object of global management and control, and all in the name of 'saving the world'" (2023: 101) Hine's insight here is impeccable. (That includes his intelligent recourse to the earlier path-finding work of Ivan Illich, among others.)

Hine's small path is very different, comprising not one but many, "made by those who seek to build resilience closer to the ground, nurturing capacities and relationships", for a future that may look constrained now but is still worth living and retains unsuspected possibilities (2023: 19). As Jan Zwicky (2023: 95) puts it, "We are left to attempt meaningful moral gestures as individuals and small communities rather than as voting members of large national polities" – which includes, I would add, working with local non-human communities. The political value involved is thus not an unrealistic quasi-universalist unity, resulting in a false and potentially coercive pretence, but principled, practical and non-anthropocentric solidarity.

These small paths reject the destructive logic of the market and extractive industrialism, whether economic, cultural or otherwise. By the same token, they are not about making something happen but helping to create the conditions in which what needs to happen can do so of itself, as it were, and can therefore be trusted. It is about "salvaging what we can [...] while learning what we can from the many other ways humans have made life work", not least indigenous wisdom (Hine, 2023: 107). I am reminded of the late lamented Teresa Brennan (2003: 165): in the course of a passionate and intelligent prescription to return to local and nonspecialized economies, "To say that we need to 'go back, slow down' will be portrayed as anti-progress. But progress lies in straining the human imagination to its limits in cleaning up the mess – while retaining the information that mess has yielded".

It is impossible to evade the fragility of hope. In a provocatively-entitled chapter towards the end of his book, Hine talks about 'How to Give Up' as a necessary precondition for the sober realism that is now needed. We have already lost so much. As he says, "To wake up to the world as we find it is to wake into grief" (2023: 194; *cf.* Buhner, 2022). This is a thread from the original Dark Mountain manifesto that has proved its continuing worth.

Hine (2023: 32) cites John Michael Greer's helpful distinction between a problem and a predicament. And modern mainstream culture has a huge investment in seeing only problems with solutions, even in such obviously inappropriate cases as death. Hine rightly finds our fear of "the quiet fact of our mortality" (2023: 28), and the attempt to convert it into a fixable problem, deeply implicated in our skewed approach to the natural world (including ourselves as natural beings), especially given that all life depends and feeds on death. What this predicament requires is to live lives worthy of others' sacrifice – not as industrial commodity, but as bio-existentially unavoidable – which "is not just a moral aspiration [...] but a practical necessity for any culture that wants to stick around" (2023: 35). Pivot to that!

Now I want to extend the picture by considering two other recent works which tackle the same subjects. There is striking common ground with that of Hine, which I take to be an encouraging sign of something distinctive and real that is compelling the attention of such varied observers and similarly shaping their conclusions.

The first book is Maggie Nelson's *On Freedom* (2021), although I am only going to address her discussion of climate change. Whatever the merits of her book in general, this chapter stands out. She recognizes that the climate issue is uniquely inexorable and sweeping, such that mitigation and adaptation – both – are all that is rationally left to do; and that looming not far behind is the possibility of self-caused human extinction. But she also rightly avers that nonetheless, "catastrophizing about the unknowable future is not a very productive or happy-making activity, and does surprisingly little to strengthen our capacity to cope" (2021: 200).

I commend Nelson's chapter for its effort to reconfigure freedom, in the light of climate change, by "ceasing to conceptualize it as the defying of limits, and reimagining it as the practice of negotiating with the various material constraints that give our lives shape and possibility" (2021: 183). Although what about the lives of all the others? And surely moral constraints, distinct from material ones but inextricably entangled with them, are just as important?

Nelson also puts her finger on a point whose pain is inseparable from any possible healing: "What we fear is coming for our planet or species" – or other species, who have equal claim to this planet – "is what we already know is coming for us and everyone we love. That's hard" (2021: 207). It is. For me it impels the reflection that the unchecked fear of death, and the resulting attempt to avoid it at all costs, leads to blaming life itself – ecological, embodied, messy and personally finite – and thence to the attempt to destroy life and replace with something else, something shiny, supposedly invulnerable and even immortal. We can already see this in the psychotic fantasies of the tech billionaires and their transhumanist epigones, as well as the trans-activist attempt to destroy the reality of biological sex (*cf.* Curry, 2020, 2024; Stock, 2021). All emerge from the same insane stable of our times: boilerplate anthropocentrism, will-to-power and biophobia linked with blind faith in technology.

In their book *An Inconvenient Apocalypse* (2022), Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen engage in a refreshingly calm and careful analysis of (as the subtitle

says) *Environmental collapse, climate crisis, and the fate of humanity*. They are painfully aware of their position as middle-aged white professional male Americans, but we can leave it to the new police to check their identities and proceed to what they have to say.

Their starting-point is that "we take seriously the biophysical limits of the ecosphere and human limits" (2022: 4); that is, the genetic constitution of the human animal. (How refreshing to find an intelligent affirmation of the fact of human nature, after the academy threw out that baby with the essentialist bathwater.) Such a premise is as promising as it is unpopular, and they stick to it, unfolding all the important implications as they go. We live in a time of fervid denial of limits, shared more-or-less equally by the Right and what's left of the Left, and it is invariably accompanied by "a fundamentalist faith in technological solutions" (2022: 22) – 'faith' being the operative word. But as Jackson and Jensen say, wishing something "to be possible, simply because the alternatives are difficult to imagine – let alone achieve – does not make it possible" (2022: 23).

It is also encouraging to find listed ten "catastrophic risks" (2022: 10) requiring urgent attention, of which anthropogenic climate chaos is only one. Jackson and Jensen rightly recognize that no matter how important it is, the last must not be allowed to monopolize the agenda at the expense of egregious human overpopulation (another victim of denialism even, shamefully, among many environmentalists), collapsing biodiversity and mass extinctions, chemical pollution and other threats. These are all effects of the underlying problem, runaway human overshoot: "too many people consuming too much stuff in the aggregate" (2022: 51).

Let me add that because of its apparent calculability and fungibility, carbon as the currency of climate change lends itself all too readily to appropriation by global business-as-usual. And that is exactly what we can no longer afford. But as the authors also point out, "Human degradation of ecosystems predates capitalism and will continue after capitalism, unless we develop a deeper understanding of the crisis", an understanding based on what they call "human–carbon nature" (2022: 19), illuminating the way these two analytically distinct phenomena are entangled in lived practice.

In the authors' powerfully precise words, "Attempts to keep the existing systems going" – including existing numbers of people at existing levels of consumption – "will simply accelerate the movement toward collapse and leave future generations with fewer options" (2022: 112). I don't know who is listening but this is one of the most important points which needs to be heard. Ignoring it will only intensify the scale and speed of ecocide and its effects, thus making our survival, let alone future flourishing, even less likely, and – although it goes unmentioned here – that of so many nonhuman others. And the point must be made in the teeth of some who we might otherwise think of as allies, such as ecomodernists like George Monbiot, who use rewilding to justify an ever-increasing intensification of urban human life precisely in order to keep existing systems going.

The overwhelmingly likely human prospect is thus fewer people living with less stuff on less energy. We can choose a path or paths (which will be far from

perfect) or we can be dragged there (which will be dire). To say so is, of course, almost universally politically unacceptable; but to bow to that contingency when attempting to come to terms with biophysical realities, as the authors say, "guarantees collective failure" (2022: 47).

Finally, the authors advise us that "we should take care not to undermine other species' capacity to thrive. It turns out that is self-preservation as well, because when we treat other species with respect we dramatically increase our ability to continue to thrive ourselves" (2022: 120) True, of course, but there is a trap concealed in this point, because it doesn't work if that is *why* we are trying to treat other species well. We will inevitably draw the charmed circle too narrowly, and too precariously when self-interest seems to dictate acting otherwise.

As I hope is clear, the works I have been discussing are thoughtful, passionate and critical. In a way, that makes it the more worrying that something literally vital is missing from all of them. That omission certainly does not invalidate what they do say, but it has to be named nonetheless, and it is this: the entire vast, deep and delicate web of more-than-human life, which includes but so exceeds human beings, receives only passing nods, the barest acknowledgement.

The authors might perhaps respond: Well, we were assuming that. If so, I would say: *Please don't.* It is far too important to take for granted, not to mention gifting the apparatchiks of ecocide with its absence from the conversation. Nor can the authors be allowed the argument that of course the web of life is important, because it supports *us*. This is precisely the instrumental logic used to justify the exploitation and extermination of any life-forms – not excluding human – that are deemed to be useless for 'our' survival, an impediment to progress, and so on. And historically, without for a moment diminishing the seriousness of all the terrible intra-human crimes – genocide, including that of indigenous peoples, slavery, the Shoah, femicide – crimes by humans against the Earth, its non-human peoples and its wild places are at least comparable in both substance and scale, despite being less commonly recognized and acknowledged. So where is the outrage?

Let me put it this way. If you can countenance without shame and rage the fact that humans and their domesticated animals now comprise more than ninety-five per cent of global mammalian biomass, leaving less than five per cent for all wild mammals; and if you can contemplate with equanimity the hundreds of millions of those domesticates that are slaughtered every single day, such that we humans are, for them, 'an eternal Treblinka' (Isaac Bashevis Singer, quoted in Patterson 2002); and if you can know that forests great and small the world over are being cut down or burned without feeling it as you would if the great Gothic cathedrals were being shattered and sacked; and if you aren't deeply dismayed by the anthropocentric – not to say narcissistic – self-involvement of so many human collectives, starting with governments' puerile machismo in competing to be a Great Power, tending towards the ultimate insanity of war (*cf.* Crist and co-workers, in this issue of *The Ecological*

Citizen) – then you don't get it. And if you don't really get it, your analysis too will ultimately fail; and with it, your actions will also fall short by that much more.

Again, someone might respond: Oh, but I do get it! In that case, say it. Loud and clear. Now is the time.

Note

1 See *Bright Green Lies: How the environmental movement lost its way and what we can do about it* (Jensen *et al.*, 2020).

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