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Ecological Crisis II: Bill McKibben's The End of Nature

Rembrandts and streetlamps

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Writing from his protected refuge in the Adirondacks, Bill McKibben wants us to consider a new way of inhabiting the world, where human societies are able to restrain their inherent desire of complete world domination through technology and market. Technology enabled a total dominance of the natural world by man, a struggle that is forcefully described in *Moby Dick* through the subject of whaling. McKibben wants us to see that this enablement became a desire, an appetite, and that this appetite –together with its seemingly unstoppable momentum- has become a destructive force.

McKibben spends a good part of the first section of his book “A New Atmosphere” dwelling in the difficulties of getting hold of the complex and elusive causal chain that results in climate change. The urban heat island effect is only one of the examples of phenomena that account for this elusiveness. It consists of the distortions on global temperature measurements due to the concentration of concrete surfaces in urban settlements. It's converse, the “cold island effect”, observed in a region of California where the construction of golf courses caused the global temperature measurement of an area to drop a few degrees, triggers questions on our common sense distinctions between

the measurement and the phenomenon –the map and the territory-. Difficult to measure, alterations of climate pose questions about the construction of scientific truth and its political implications¹; where do we draw the line that separates valuable data from noise? *Who* draws the line? The environment seems to be a ground particularly sensitive to these fundamental questions. Are the golf-courses distorting the measurement and need to be removed, cleaned away from the experiment? Or on the contrary, do they rightly belong to the experimental framework and need to be taken into account? It would seem consistent with McKibben's core idea of putting forward mankind as a transformer –or more precisely, a killer- of nature to regard human interventions in the environment as desirable participants of a measurement, rather than as mere noise. That is not his attitude in this case, for in the description of the “cold island effect” (p.24) he seems to perceive these effects as mere noise indeed. His stance towards the role of man in the changes of the environment is somehow ambiguous; the ambiguity springs perhaps from the sharp distinction between man and nature that he elicits throughout the book in various manners, a distinction that has a theological undertone that becomes explicit in the description of the streetlamp on his beloved forest.

The streetlamp on the forest is the trigger of a long lament for the intervention of man in nature. The idea of “intervention of man in nature” itself puts them in entirely different domains. McKibben's premise is not that the lamp, just as a honeycomb or a beaver's dam or a tree, belongs to nature. Instead, the lamp is –inherently- a negation of it; to put it bluntly, for McKibben human beings come from somewhere else and all they do is a contamination of God's work. A Pollution. Summing up his argument about the presence of God in (an inhuman²) nature, McKibben says “As individuals we can feel

¹ McKibben mentions how MacCracken, describing this complex network of relationships, said “it's like a Rube Goldberg machine in the sense of the number of things that interact in order to tip the world into fire and ice.” (p.26)

² “But we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us- its separation from human society.” (p.55)

desperately alone: we might not have children, or we may not care much for how they have turned out; we may not care to trace ourselves back through our parents; some of us may even be general misanthropes, or feel that our lives are unimportant, brief, and hurried rushes toward a final emptiness. But the earth and all its processes –the sun growing plants, flesh feeding on these plants, flesh decaying to nourish more plants, to name just one cycle – gives us some sense of a more enduring role. “ (p.62)

Certainly, the difficulty of having a monolithic stance towards the causes of environmental change is something that *The End of Nature* conveys very well; as it conveys the deadlocks between a selfish present and an absent future, and between the interest of an industrial ethos and a sensitive attitude towards the world and its resources. McKibben’s questioning of conventional wisdom notions about the inalterability of the global conditions that enable life on earth is often insightful, as is his dismantling of ‘common sense’ misunderstandings of scale in time and space on earth. “We live in the shadow of a number, and that makes it hard for us to see the future.” (p.7) What McKibben wants us to see is that nature, understood as a “certain set of ideas about the world and our place in it” has died and is irretrievable. Nevertheless McKibben’s stance is problematic. His loving portrayal of his bucolic life in the Adirondacks, a “refuge from man” is a sign of his wishes to retrieve a time when the wind came from an “inhuman place” (p.42). When does nostalgia for an uncivilized past become misanthropy? How to advocate a romantic return to nature without being regressive and rendering senseless the whole human race along the way?

The *Bon Sauvage* idea that at times seems to underlie McKibben’s stance as an environmentalist is ambiguous and conservative in the literal sense, and very comfortable if we consider the selfish choices he himself has made³. In his view a Rembrandt is less artificial than a streetlamp or a Warhol painting; Rembrandt becomes the “natural” and

³ If we all lived like McKibben there would be no such thing as “wilderness”.

Warhol the “artificial”⁴. It is in this value judgment that his fight, -and he is sharply aware of it-, becomes a losing bet with history⁵.

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⁴ “The comparison is like hanging Rembrandts next to Warhols; we live in a Post-Natural world.” (p.51)

⁵ Speaking from the perspective of what McKibben would call a “post-natural” adult, drawing a thick line between a can of Coke and a Warhol painting is not only possible, but healthy and necessary.