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McMurry, "Entertaining Futility: Despair and Hope in the Time of Climate Change"

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Book Review

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From the trenches of World War One, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that "only death gives life its meaning" (Monk 1991, 139). The nightly artillery barrages focused on his position at an observation post overlooking no man's land – a post Wittgenstein volunteered for – brought the philosopher closer to enlightenment: "Perhaps the nearness of death will bring me the light of life" (Ibid, 138). Only when he could look death in the eye without fear could Wittgenstein be sure that he was living a decent and moral existence.

For Wittgenstein, immersion in mortality – a pessimistic endeavour, one might argue – elicited edifying potential. So, what of this mindset? What edification, enlightenment even, can be gleaned from events that throw light on human transience today? Working within the context of anthropogenic global warming – "our Great War" (Lovins and Cohen 2011, 87) – Andrew McMurry's 2018 book, *Entertaining Futility: Despair and Hope in the Time of Climate Change*, brings these questions into sharp relief.

Entertaining Futility considers global warming as a "sort of slow apocalypse" (1), a "slide toward extinction" (2). Though ours is a time when the threat of human extinction is less definable than in previous eras (the sword of mutually assured destruction ever-present during the Cold War, for example, no longer dangles over our heads) it is yet, McMurry argues, more substantive (40). Indeed, unlike the artillery barrage of the First World War, or the H-bomb, which destroys in seconds large swathes of human life, the threat posed by global warming functions to "reverse the horror" (Ibid). This threat, explains McMurry, is imperceptible at first, instead gathering and multiplying its killing power over time. "The horror," in other words, "is already on us long before we … wake up to it" (Ibid).

Through a collection of original essays, *Entertaining Futility* considers why climate change and its horrific consequences – both witnessed and potential – have for decades failed to awaken an urgent response in the West. It is not McMurry's intention to provide solutions to this dilemma, at least not in any standard way. Calls for Green New Deal proposals, for example, are not the focus of McMurry's attention. On the contrary, *Entertaining Futility* treats such tactics as having been co-opted by the party of hope that has led us astray from meaningful climate action time and time again.

Entertaining Futility frames hope as a longing for a future condition over which one is powerless. By contrast, "when hope is gone, there is potential to actually *do* something" (68). "When we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse," McMurry quotes the ecophilospher

Derrick Jensen, "then we are finally free – truly free – to honestly start working to thoroughly resolve it. I would say when hope dies, action begins" (68). For McMurry, progressive efforts to ameliorate climate change – the real-life policies of the Cameron, Merkel, and Obama administrations ("selective … subsidies promoting windmills, electric cars, improved energy infrastructure, clean coal research and the like" (89)) – are imbued by hopeful thinking. Indeed, many of the leading progressive voices concerning climate change – the Krugmans, the Gores, the McKibbens – claim "we can save the climate-as-we-know-it by adjusting the current economic model to promote and reward so-called green production and consumption" (Ibid). What such thought fails to account for, claims McMurry, is that "decoupling," the idea that renewable energy and increased efficiencies can be separated from economic growth and its environmental impact, is a red herring. Indeed, only absolute decreases in production and consumption have any chance of decelerating the rate of global warming, let alone halting it: "The climate system is already loaded with so much inertia that we could reduce the human carbon footprint to zero tomorrow and we would still undergo catastrophic warming over the next century" (Ibid). In Western society, where humans' rewarded efforts are in the areas of production and consumption, and where the "creation and curation of desire" (12) between producers and consumers is so entrenched, attempts to decouple are futile: "Sustainable development describes the impossible dream, whereby combined impacts are imagined to lessen even as the sum of our activity increases without end" (27).

 In McMurry's view, this reality "is impossible to confront, both politically and psychologically" (89): "We cannot live in a destroyed biosphere; economic expansion is destroying the biosphere; therefore, to save the biosphere we must expand the economy" (89-90). Of course, this formula is absurd. However, instead of following the logic through to its full implications – "implications that go to the heart of our failing tenure on this planet" (90) – Western society, where "the capitalist program of turning any misadventure or even unmitigated disaster into an opportunity for growth and profit" (92) runs rampant, has ignored the premises and reverts to hope and wishful thinking. Policies that aim simply to "hope for the best" (78), progressive policies, like those mentioned above, that promote wishful thinking above any serious consideration of the cultural and economic conditions underpinning Western culture's remarkable penchant for self-destructive expansionism are, argues McMurry, doomed to ineffectiveness.

Entertaining Futility's mission is to probe into the "wounded psyche" (106) that at once inspires and flees our planetary dysfunction. McMurry's investigation is aided by a deep and exciting consideration of philosophical pessimism, a worldview that attempts to confront the perceived distasteful realities of the world and eradicate irrational hopes and anticipations – the idea of progress, for example – that may bring about disagreeable consequences. By way of reference to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Oswald Spenglar, to name but a few, McMurry promotes "sober reflection" and the rejection of hope as preconditions for the

realisation of "a kind of *second enlightenment*" (4). Unlike the first Enlightenment of the 17th to 19th centuries, which advocated mastery of nature and "turn[ed] a green and blue world into a brown one" (27), McMurry's second enlightenment serves to confront humanity's exploitative relationship with the biosphere. "Denial," as evidenced through climate action that fails to engage with the economic and cultural roots of climate change, is framed by McMurry as a "reaction to our fear of death" (69). Accordingly – echoing Wittgenstein's meditations on life and death – McMurry wishes for human beings to look their mortal condition in the eye without fear. It is via this reflection that Western civilisation might become newly aware of just how serious our situation is. With our eyes focused this way, a novel strand of moral fibre might awaken in us.

Wishful thinking, for McMurry, requires abandonment in contexts beyond progressive climate-related policies. Indeed, *Entertaining Futility* represents a broad and ambitious project aimed at understanding misguided narratives concerning human progress that mystify humans' relationship with ongoing planetary disaster; "[the] thought-ways", in other words, "that license us to believe we are apocalypse-proof" (5). McMurry approaches this task as an "antihumanist" scholar working within the humanities. By contrast with humanist scholars, antihumanists take particular issue with that scholarship disinclined to attend to what's going on with humans' relationship to nature, but instead interested only in nature and humanity as a theme of literature or a problem of thought, or worse yet, as a sentence in a theory of such themes and problems.

An antihumanist scholar is one who turns away from the modes of study and culture that in their enthusiasm for human progress (the "Triumph of Man") (41) – science, enlightenment, and modernity – ignore the human (and non-human) sacrifices necessary for this so-called progress to occur (the "Crash of Man") (Ibid). The Triumph of Man is viewed by McMurry as the "controlling motif, as though by institutional fiat, of every humanist analysis of human production" (Ibid). The Crash of Man, by contrast, represents "the long march of civilization [and culture having] always been contained within a longer frogmarch toward oblivion" (4). In order to maintain prescience over the Crash of Man, the Triumph of Man must function as a convenient "blind spot that occludes the signs of extinction" (41). Man's triumph, articulates McMurry, must be civilized to maintain the talking points on the "Human Pageant" forever fresh and spritely (Ibid): "That world war was surely awful, but it did give us tanks and flamethrowers" (14). Similarly, the seriousness of the threat posed by global warming is surely inconvenient, but the industrialization of our planet has given us cars, mobile phones, and internet-connected fridges.

To those inclined to treat such analysis with scepticism, McMurry presents a particularly powerful case study in the form of a call for papers from an environmental humanities conference in Germany. The conference, McMurry explains, should be a dream for an antihumanist: "We are

looking for contributors to a transdisciplinary symposium on the didactical implementations of ecocriticism." So far so good for McMurry. Yet, the call for papers continues, "…without succumbing to warnings and claims to catastrophic urgency which are hard to reconcile with an ethos of critical and democratic pedagogy" (45). A decidedly bleak qualification. That the same thing that has inspired many humanists to consider the merits of humanism – the catastrophic urgency of our environmental moment – is dismissed out of hand, as if self-respecting scholars shall have no concern with environmental and planetary disaster in its total horror, is particularly troublesome for McMurry: "To succumb to any such urgencies would be to let slip… the reasoning mask so carefully secured over many centuries, to allow the raucous street fight to disturb the high-discussion going on in the parlor" (Ibid).

McMurry's response – his pedagogic vision – is laid out in a proposal for a new liberal arts satellite campus at the University of Waterloo (McMurry's employer). The new campus, writes McMurry, "[should] shape minds, perceptions, and values in ways that take account of the true price we are exacting from this planet…. Our world needs economists who understand no cost is ever externalized; it needs entrepreneurs who create wealth without endangering the planet's health; it needs politicians who measure policies in terms of their effects on people as yet unborn" (54-55). McMurry's proposal wasn't taken up. The campus went in the direction of moneyed and, one might argue, realistic interests. Its mandate, explains McMurry, read a lot like the chancellor's idea of the model university: a place where "students, leading researchers, businesses and entrepreneurs [come] together to create, examine and commercialize opportunities" (56). A place, in other words, that treats objects of study not as problems, gaps, lines of inquiry, or enigmas, but rather as prospects.

The university's preference for a more conventional vision than McMurry's will, dare I say, represent a significant number of readers' reactions to *Entertaining Futility*. Yet, it is to McMurry's credit that he recognises the enormity of the task he lays out. Discussing the purpose of higher education, McMurry acknowledges what he perceives as the corporate interest to deliver "on time those job-ready graduates that our commercial friends had already put in orders for, and to serve as tax-subsidized research incubators for product development" (56). Undeterred, McMurry resists openly. Moreover, McMurry knows that the society he envisions – the self-destructive psyches that drive Western indifference to climate change challenged and eradicated – is fantastical, so engrained are capitalist modes of production.

Entertaining Futility is a complex and rewarding work that deserves our attention. If there is complaint to be made, it is in regard to tone rather than content specifically. In the book's closing chapters, McMurry offers a polemic against mobile phones and social media, for example, which comes across as haughty. I will spare you the gory details, but McMurry's desire to smash mobile phones used in his presence wears thin. Moreover, in spite of an enviable command of prose,

McMurry is at times guilty of employing lofty language detrimental to the coherence and fluency of his idea sharing.

The three strands of McMurry's thought here discussed – socio-economic, socio-political, and educational – are featured because they represent the book's thematic overtures. It should yet be impressed that *Entertaining Futility* offers far more than one person's campaign against optimism and wishful thinking in these areas. From Judeo-Christian eschatology to ethics-based discussion of the *Terminator* series, McMurry's is a book driven by broad reading and an impressive number of sources. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it is an honest publication; McMurry admits that there are many questions relevant to his discussion that he "can't begin to answer" and that "hurt [him] to think about" (167). An admirable admission.

In *Melancholia,* Von Trier suggests that there exist two postures toward the end of the world: "that of denial, which coexists with a kind of self-deluding hope, and that of acceptance, which coexists with a certain resoluteness and energy" (67). If the planet is doomed, what good this latter posture – the backbone of McMurry's publication – might do is anyone's guess. If it succeeds in adding even a thread of moral fibre, however (which it is difficult to deny it does), then *Entertaining Futility* deserves praise and wide readership.

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