Sum deorc wyrd gathers: *Dark Ecology, Brexit Ecocriticism, and the Far Right*

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Referring to a poem by Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt wrote that the dark times of early-twentieth century Europe were characterised not by an occlusion of the brightly lit world of public affairs but by the capacity of this world to hide its atrocities out in the open. Dark times, whenever they occur, happen in this way through the medium of some supposedly transparent rationalisation, Arendt writes.[1] In Brecht's 'To Those Born Later', written in exile in the late 1930s, the speaker appeals to future generations not to blame him too harshly for having failed to avert the catastrophe:

> You who will emerge from the flood
> In which we have gone under
> Remember
> When you speak of our failings
> The dark time too
> Which you have escaped.[2]

Thinking about the impasses of environmental politics today often feels like being in the position of Brecht's speaker, striving to explain to some future society that the darkness did not look so dark, that it all seemed to happen in the plain light of day. It is a matter of learning to see the darkness for what it is. James Bridle has argued that this is a 'new dark age' precisely because our current, massively distributed, networked technologies cannot give the fully illuminated picture of the world that we believe technoscientific reason should do. Bridle argues that the task, then, must be to learn to live in the absence of enlightenment's certainty, to inhabit the darkness as a space of

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possibility in which unknowing is not only unavoidable but necessary.[3] This is a profoundly ecological position, and so it is no surprise that he refers to ecocritical theorist Timothy Morton's concept of the 'hyperobject' to characterise technological networks.[4] Environmentalists have long understood that we live in a lighted clearing surrounded by a much greater, denser, darker mass of planetary life. The sunny optimism of 'bright green' environmentalism, with its faith in technological solutions, is frequently criticised.[5] This is an ecological critique of light, in which the public world of politics (what Arendt describes as a 'space of appearances') is decentred by an appeal to something fundamentally withdrawn from the *lumen naturale* of human reason.[6] The chromatics or shades of ecopolitics, ranging from dark to bright, suggest degrees of commitment to this position.

But how should the ecological critique of light be understood at a time when all sorts of dark politics, disturbingly reminiscent of Brecht's 1930s, are looming? Neo-fascist tendencies towards white ethnonationalism and anti-immigrant racism have appeared in the early twenty-first century in the context of a warming Earth in which the political itself is adapting to volatile new environmental conditions.[7] The climate denial that has long been the position of the right and far right is mutating into a violent, exclusionary, and nihilistic environmental politics.[8] Fascism is returning as ecofascism, fossil fascism, or what Christian Parenti calls the 'armed lifeboat' scenario, in which 'green authoritarianism [emerges] in rich countries, while the climate crisis pushes the Third World into chaos'.[9] The ecopolitical question is not simply how to make our world more sustainable but how to avert 'climate

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[3]   James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London, 2018), p. 15.

[4]   *Ibid.*, p. 73. Timothy Morton defines hyperobjects as 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans', *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis, 2013), p. 1.

[5]   Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, and Max Wilbert, *Bright Green Lies: How the Environmental Movement Lost Its Way and What We Can Do About It* (New York, 2021).

[6]   Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. viii.

[7]   See Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London, 2018). See also Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London, 2021).

[8]   For an international overview of these trends, see Bernard Forchtner, ed., *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication* (Oxford, 2021).

[9]   Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York, 2011), p. 11. On ecofascism, see Sam Moore and Alex Roberts, *The Rise of Ecofascism: Climate Change and the Far Right* (Cambridge, 2022). On fossil fascism, see Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel*.

barbarism'.[10] If scientific enlightenment is held to be insufficient to bring about salvation, then we necessarily enter into a dark political terrain in which a desire for environmental justice must confront the most repressive forces.

I will draw out some consequences of this for the politics of ecocriticism by analysing the concept of 'dark ecology', which has been espoused independently by Morton and environmentalist-turned-novelist Paul Kingsnorth.[11] These are vastly different figures – the former a cutting-edge cultural theorist and philosopher with communist leanings, the latter a disillusioned ex-activist seeking new narratives of ecological belonging through English nationalism – so it is important not to conflate their positions. Nevertheless, their convergence on the theme of darkness tells us a lot about the situation of environmental politics today. In what follows, I analyse Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake* (2014) in the context of his non-fiction writings, before moving on to look at Morton's ecocritical theory in some detail. For both authors, dark ecology is a political and aesthetic framework that moves us from the Gaian holism of deep ecology towards somewhere gloomier, but it also aims to avoid simple despair by turning the dark affects of melancholy, loss and separation into modes of ecological inhabitation in their own right.[12] It is only in a melancholy mood that the sheer scale and extent of the impasses we face can be properly lived. Morton writes that

> Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature. It preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe. Instead of whistling in the dark, insisting that we're part of Gaia, why not stay with the darkness?[13]

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[10]   Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (New York, 2019), pp. 49–50.

[11]   Timothy Morton asserts ownership of the concept, dating its invention to 2004, in *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York, 2016), p. 163; his first publication on it was *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge MA, 2007). Paul Kingsnorth, 'Dark Ecology', *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (London, 2017), pp. 119–49, originally appeared in 2013. Kingsnorth had already established the Dark Mountain Collective with Dougald Hine in 2009.

[12]   The term deep ecology originated with Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s, and was developed by Bill Devall and George Sessions in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, 1985). The left-anarchist social ecologist Murray Bookchin famously used the term ecofascism to denigrate the kind of ecocentric holism which deep ecology emphasised. On this history, see Keith Makoto Woodhouse, *The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism* (New York, 2018).

[13]   Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 187.

There are divergent ways of doing this, of course, and darkness is irreducibly ambiguous. Though Morton and Kingsnorth's politics tend in opposing directions, they both seek political positions based on an *aesthetics* of darkness, and thus, I argue, have more in common than either would probably care to admit. While Kingsnorth seems happy to court accusations of right-wing and even far right tendencies in his appeals to econationalism, Morton insists that dark ecology is sufficient to avert the calamitous intersection of environmentalism and far right extremism gaining ground today. The specific role of ecocriticism in this respect needs to be interrogated, since it too often assumes a left-liberal orientation as the default setting of ecological consciousness. This article will explore some of the questions raised by Greg Garrard's article 'Brexit Ecocriticism' in this respect to suggest that ecocritics must engage with the aestheticisation of environmental politics, and with the dangers attendant on this.[14] Given that Walter Benjamin, in the 1930s, famously defined fascism as an aestheticisation of politics, and communism as a countervailing politicisation of art, dark ecology, whatever else it may mean, emerges from the kind of penumbral historicity evoked in Brecht's poem.[15] Within this shadowy space, framings of political identity and historical time become warped, or, to use a term invoked similarly by both Morton and Kingsnorth, *weird*.

An English Twilight

The Irish writer Fintan O'Toole has argued that the form of nationalism which drove Brexit involved 'the fever-dream of an English Resistance, and its weird corollary: a desire to have actually been invaded so that one could – gloriously – resist. And not just resist but, in the ultimate apotheosis of masochism, die'.[16] O'Toole's main literary example of such dark English dreaming is Robert Harris's alternative history novel *Fatherland*, which depicts a contemporary Britain in which Nazi Germany won the War. But, as Christian Schmitt-Kilb notes, O'Toole could just as easily have referred to Kingsnorth's Booker-longlisted novel, *The Wake* (2014).[17] This is the first in a trilogy of novels,

[14]   Greg Garrard, 'Brexit Ecocriticism', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 24.2 (2020), pp. 110–24.

[15]   Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 242.

[16]   Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London, 2018), p. 44. See also Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (London, 1992).

[17]   Christian Schmitt-Kilb, 'A Case for a Green Brexit? Paul Kingsnorth, John Berger and the Pros and Cons of a Sense of Place', Ina Habermann, ed., *The Road to Brexit: A Cultural Perspective on British Attitudes to Europe*, pp. 162–78 (p. 164).

including *Beast* (2016) and *Alexandria* (2020), which presents a long speculative history of England, from the Norman Conquest of 1066 to the present day, and then to the year 3000. I focus on *The Wake* since it most directly captures how Kingsnorth imagines the converging destinies of national identity and ecological crisis.

Two key features lend the book its undeniable appeal and dramatic power: the way it sets an ecoapocalyptic narrative in the eleventh century and the ingenious, made-up version of Old English in which the entire text is written. Buccmaster of Holland, the first-person narrator who leads a futile effort to resist the 'frenc' invaders who have come to 'angland', speaks to us in a language both rooted in place and broken into scattered fragments which reach us across a gulf of time:

> songs yes here is songs from a land forheawan folded under by a great slege a folc harried beatan a world brocen apart. all is open lic a wound unhealan and grene the world open and grene all men apart from the heorte. deofuls in the heofon all men with sweord when they sceolde be with plough the ground full not of seed but of my folc [...] so it is when a world ends.[18]

With some help from a glossary provided by the author, the reader understands that 'forheawan' means 'cut down' and 'slege' means 'slaughter' but is left to decipher 'folc' as 'folk', 'sceolde' as 'should', 'deofuls' as 'devils', and so on. The effect is reminiscent of Russell Hoban's science fiction dystopia *Riddley Walker*, which forces the reader to engage with a shattered English vernacular that has slowly emerged in the centuries following nuclear Armageddon.[19] In both cases, linguistic and historical estrangement effects function side-by-side in an apocalyptic narrative. For Kingsnorth, the dismemberment of English organic community by the invading Normans is an ecological catastrophe as much as a genocide, the wounds inflicted on the 'folc' an inversion of the generative act of ploughing and sowing. Green wounds are mirrored in the green land. Through the myth of the Norman Yoke, the history of environmental crisis is woven into the *longue durée* of what Kingsnorth sees as the destruction of native English society, which was small-scale and rooted in place rather than global and imperialistic.[20] But

[18]   Paul Kingsnorth, *The Wake* (London, 2014), p. 2.
[19]   Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (London, 1980).
[20]   The Norman Conquest has, for centuries, been a contested part of English cultural memory. The myth of the Norman Yoke, particularly strong in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, denotes the idea that the conquest amounted to a brutal dispossession of a more democratic Anglo-Saxon society. For a discussion of the myth, its various deployments and historical contexts, see Siobhan Brownlie,

this is not, despite appearances, just an historical novel. Kingsnorth's fiction is directly inspired by a crisis of environmental politics, and what he sees as a deleterious global and technocratic turn in the green movement's orientation. In a 2017 article in the *Guardian*, he explained that his support for Brexit was motivated by the pursuit of a 'benevolent green nationalism' (which he describes elsewhere as 'ecological Englishness'), opposed both to the 'rootless ideology' of neoliberal capitalism and the left-liberal mainstream of contemporary environmentalism.[21]

Buccmaster's Old English vernacular is arrived at through a careful excision of words and letters which would not have existed before Norman society imported its Latinate French. The method is inconsistently deployed, as Kingsnorth admits in *The Wake*'s explanatory note, but his goal is much less historical accuracy or linguistic authenticity than to 'project a ghost image of the speech patterns of a long-dead land', to evoke a 'shadow tongue' still haunting modern English.[22] The narrator's stentorian, repetitive voice springs from this spectral persistence of something dead within living speech. Language is rooted in place, Kingsnorth is suggesting, but this also means that it can be uprooted, lost, and destroyed along with the living landscape itself.

Buccmaster, a free tenant farmer in the Lincolnshire fens or wetlands, represents a folk already doomed at the point the narrative begins. This is reflected in his eschatological obsession with omens of the impending 'blaecness' which many of his fellow 'anglisc' in their folly fail to heed: 'none wants to see all wants to haro and plough and drink and fucc lic the blaec will nefer cum'.[23] Buccmaster knows himself to be 'last of the anglisc' standing in 'anglands dyan light'.[24] 'Sum deorc wyrd gathers' on the horizon and within his people, even if they refuse to see it.[25] The Old English 'wyrd' is glossed by Kingsnorth as 'fate' or 'destiny', but it can also mean 'event' or 'phenomenon', and is derived from the verb *weorðan*, to 'become' or 'turn'.[26] Morton,

Memory and Myths of the Norman Conquest (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 111–30.

[21]   Paul Kingsnorth, 'The Lie of the Land: Does Environmentalism have a Future in the Age of Trump?', *Guardian* (18 March 2017), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/18/the-new-lie-of-the-land-what-future-for-environmentalism-in-the-age-of-trump; Paul Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* (London, 2017), p. 212.

[22]   Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, pp. 356, 353.

[23]   *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[24]   *Ibid.*, pp. 333–4.

[25]   *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[26]   *Ibid.*, p. 351; J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, fourth edn (Toronto, 1960), p. 427.

in *Dark Ecology*, also develops this idea: ecological knowledge or 'ecognosis' is 'knowing in a loop – a *weird* knowing. *Weird* from the Old Norse *urth*, meaning twisted, *in a loop* [...] The term *weird* can mean *causal:* the winding of the spool of fate'.[27] Here lies the key to understanding the novel's aims.

Buccmaster is, in fact, never really convinced of the English resistance, organised first by King Harold II and then by guerrillas such as the actual historical figure Hereward, whose nickname 'the Wake' (the watchful) lends the book its title. Buccmaster, for all his talk of killing 'ingengas' (foreigners) and his own attempts to raise a 'werod' or band of resistance fighters, is frequently sceptical of such efforts, and initially tries to talk his sons out of joining Harold's army. Even after his sons' deaths, he never seeks to join with Hereward, who, in some genuinely comic passages, Buccmaster furiously disparages, out of jealousy for Hereward's greater fame. A large part of what motivates Buccmaster's anger (and, towards the end of the book, his bloodlust) is what he feels to be the mistaken belief that fate, which is essentially dark, can be known and resisted. This is much less a historical novel, then, than one about the *weirdness* of history, its tendency to exceed disenchanted linear temporality as it turns back on itself through the hauntings and echoes of destiny. Instead of taking 1066 as the starting point of English history, as Kingsnorth notes is generally done, *The Wake* takes it as the end.[28] By looping history back on itself in this way, he conjures up what could be called an English Twilight.

For O'Toole, the entire Brexit project is about an image of Englishness modelled on the romantic notion of heroic failure, an approach he adapts from Stephanie Barczewski's book *Heroic Failure and the British*. Barczewski notes that some 'Britons felt that their nation's best qualities emerged in its moments of greatest duress, and that the celebration of heroic failure reflected an admirable embrace of perseverance, resilience and stoicism'.[29] This is embodied in famous episodes of noble defeat, such as the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava and Captain Scott's doomed expedition to the Antarctic. Adapting Barczewski's idea, O'Toole reinterprets Brexit as a collective masochistic fantasy generated by a specifically English experience of the end of the British Empire, in the post-War period, and the devolution of power in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the late 1990s. While these nations found their postcolonial identity validated by their devolved parliaments and the degree of self-governance they were granted, English nationalism was experienced by many as degraded and taboo. In

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27   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 5.
28   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 207.
29   Stephanie Barczewski, *Heroic Failure and the British* (New Haven, 2016), p. vi.

his 2015 article 'Rescuing the English', which reads like a pro-Brexit mani-
festo, Kingsnorth writes that, following devolution, 'England remained
the only UK nation to which power was not devolved, and whose people
were not consulted about their governance'.[30] This, of course, is nonsense:
devolution was implemented precisely in order to address the imbalance of
a Westminster government which was overwhelmingly concerned with the
affairs of England, and in which those of the other nations of the Union
have always been seen as peripheral. Nevertheless, Kingsnorth, a year before
to the Brexit referendum, hit on something crucial about the public mood:
at the turn of the twenty-first century, the story of Englishness found itself
without dramatic power because it featured no struggle for independence,
no imperial yoke from which freedom could be heroically wrested. This is
why a novel such as *Fatherland* can be seen to resonate with the fervour of
Brexit nationalism, in which the European Union was depicted as a totalitar-
ian monolith. Kingsnorth follows this logic but takes it even further: if we
accept the established narrative that Britain as such begins with the invading
Normans, were not the English 'the first victims of the British Empire' and
its global ambitions?[31] And if Britain invented industrial capitalism, were not
the English the first victims of that too?

The fantasy of liberation portended by this anti-imperialist story of English
identity is masochistic, as O'Toole observes, because Brexit is fundamentally
lacking, is real only insofar as it spurs the fantasy on, and any attempt to actu-
alise it can only entail suffering. This is not to deny the historical significance
of the Norman Conquest (or the EU) but Kingsnorth – despite the list of
historical sources he references in his appendix to *The Wake* – only wants
it as a mythic grand narrative of dispossession and acculturation. Ecological
Englishness demands the pathos of loss.

It is not that he is romanticising Anglo-Saxon society in order to construct
an Arcadia. The idea of a lost rural idyll, as Raymond Williams famously
argued, goes back down the escalator of history as far as one is willing to
follow it.[32] Kingsnorth somewhat gleefully observes that his mode of local-
ist, vernacular environmentalism and his veneration of small-scale organic
community will inevitably be critiqued as nostalgic and conservative by the
middle-class liberals who dominate today's green movement.[33] But there is
something much more going on in *The Wake* than simple nostalgia. The col-
lapsing Anglo-Saxon world of the novel is not really idyllic at all, and in any

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[30]   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 201.
[31]   *Ibid.*, p. 207.
[32]   Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), p. 11.
[33]   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 125.

case, Kingsnorth is much too good a novelist to trot out clichéd visions of a golden age. In fact, Buccmaster's devotion to his place in the fens, and the violence he wreaks against all who threaten it, is nihilistic and misanthropic in its intensity:

> i wolde haf folcs cnaw of the yfel what has been done to our land and of the yfel what cums on them who worcs to right it. all my lif i has worced to right yfel i has worced to waecen men to mac them see and all my lif i has been beat in the guttas for it. trust none but the treows the meres the ground trust none but the dead.[34]

Buccmaster attempts to gather a band of 'grene men' to live in the woods and fight a guerrilla campaign against the invaders, but he ultimately only trusts the land, its gods and its ancestors, discerning that the essence of rootedness is a deathly communion with the dark earth and its 'mares' or waters. This is an unhappy book, then, despite the moments of humour that tend occasionally to deflate Buccmaster's nativistic bombast and delusions of grandeur. Garrard argues that Kingsnorth's narrator should be understood with a degree of irony, as his claims about the 'triewe anglisc' are surely undercut by the fact that his own Anglo-Saxon ancestors were once colonists, or his admission that the Danish King Cnut had come to England and reigned benevolently.[35] Is Kingsnorth complicating the simplistic nativism of his own conceptions of ecological Englishness here, or criticising the undeniable dangers inherent in such political mythmaking? Perhaps. But then again, Kingsnorth may also be saying that ecological attachment is important precisely because it *is* politically dangerous, because it does *not* necessarily translate into the normative terms of acceptable political discourse. Ecocritics have long understood that literature, and art more generally, can offer a mode of provocation inaccessible to other kinds of discourse. Kingsnorth is deliberately provoking his readers by making them wonder just how ironic or serious he is being in his portrayal of a character whose devotion to the ecology of his homeplace becomes a murderous, delirious and ultimately self-destructive project.

Dark Politics

As Garrard points out, *The Wake* can be regarded as part of a broader contemporary moment in Britain and across Europe, when 'myths of national origins and sovereignty are no doubt coalescing and diverging from domi-

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[34]   Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, p. 269.
[35]   Garrard, 'Brexit Ecocriticism', pp. 118–19.

nant stories of ecological dwelling in distinctive, yet parallel, ways'. He adds that 'there is work to be done here that further engages, but also elevates, the times we inhabit'.[36] The character of this work is suggested in his co-written volume *Climate Change Scepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis* (2019), which uses ecocritical methods to analyse right-wing anti-environmentalist, anti-climate science rhetoric.[37] By scrutinising discourses beyond the liberal and leftist positions often assumed as the default of environmental awareness, ecocritics may be able to help depolarise climate politics and foster consensus on urgent questions of mitigation. In this way, Garrard maintains, ecocriticism should become both more and less political: less focused on translating the goals of green activism into critical practice but more engaged with a wider spectrum of positions and modes of political analysis. Brexit ecocriticism, then, 'would set out to consider the relationship of conservative, and Conservative, cultural politics to the politics of the environment, both before 2016 and in the aftermath'.[38]

Kingsnorth is a fascinating case study in this respect precisely because he does not fit the conservative (or Conservative) mould. He is a former radical green activist, whose politics were shaped by the anti-globalisation protests of the 1990s, and, around the same time, the anti-roads actions which occurred in places such as Twyford Down and Newbury, in the south of England. Recalling his time in the direct action camps in these rural areas, he writes that 'there was a Wordsworthian feel to the whole thing: the defence of the trees simply because they were trees'.[39] But he argues that this period also marked the conclusion of the kind of ecocentric activism he cared about. From the end of the millennium to the present, the environmental movement has become less and less nature-centred, and more and more concerned with things like carbon, sustainability, and renewable energy. This is not environmentalism but 'neo-environmentalism', he complains, little more than an adjunct to global capitalism in its race to obliterate wild nature with technologies intended to sustain human appetites.[40] Worst of all was the invasion of the environmental movement by socialists, especially since environmentalism was always supposed to be an alternative to 'the seized up politics of left and right'.[41] In Kingsnorth's view, the end of the Soviet Union prompted

36   *Ibid.*, p. 123.
37   Greg Garrard, Axel Goodbody, George Handley, and Stephanie Posthumus, *Climate Change Scepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis* (London, 2019).
38   Garrard, 'Brexit Ecocriticism', p. 111.
39   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 74.
40   *Ibid.*, p. 131.
41   *Ibid.*, p. 75.

leftists to migrate opportunistically to the ecopolitical arena, bringing with them their anthropocentric commitments to social justice:

> Now it seemed that environmentalism was not about wildness or ecocentrism or the other-than-human world and our relationship to it. Instead it was about (human) social justice and (human) equality and (human) progress and ensuring that all these things could be realised without degrading the (human) resource base that we used to call nature.[42]

As a result of this baleful coalescence of capitalists and socialists, 'today's environmentalism is about people', he exclaims, as if there could be no greater betrayal of green principles.[43]

How do we get from the bitterness of disillusionment to the politics of ecological Englishness and the apocalypticism of *The Wake*? The connecting thread lies in Kingsnorth's account of dark ecology. Dark ecology is, in part, a process of grieving for the hope and enthusiasm green activism once inspired, but it also stems from a hard-won realisation that ecology's proper affective register is melancholy, not the optimism that neo-environmentalists draw from the prospect of technological salvation. Kingsnorth provocatively refers to Ted Kaczynski (more commonly known as the Unabomber), not in order to advocate ecoterrorism but to suggest that our environmental situation is so dire that a collapse of 'technological society' may be our only viable path.[44] Drawing on Ronald Wright's concept of the progress trap (the idea that technological solutions to short-term problems generate longer-term problems, requiring more technological solutions), Kingsnorth argues that technology has an inbuilt tendency towards crises. When humans perfected hunting in the Palaeolithic era, this caused extinctions of megafauna and the loss of the food sources provided by big game. This in turn led to the end of large-scale hunter-gatherer societies, and the emergence of agricultural society in the Neolithic period. The emergence of fossil capitalism and the Anthropocene follows the same logic: solutions are found which only intensify the problems they were supposed to solve. Each improvement of knowledge or technology leads recursively to more problems, requiring new improvements, in a runaway process.[45]

Kingsnorth's is not a simplistic anti-technology or primitivist position, then, but a recognition that contemporary ecological crisis is bound to a

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42   *Ibid.*, p. 76.
43   *Ibid.*, p. 78.
44   *Ibid.*, p. 121.
45   *Ibid.*, p. 138. See also Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto, 2004).

long history of human social evolution, in which nature is externalised in response to demands for greater security for ever greater numbers of people. Society becomes trapped and then imperilled within the form of ecological accumulation on which it depends. This is comparable to what Gregory Bateson called a 'double bind', a communication paradox in which a message is refuted by its own context.[46] Rather than dissipating itself, the paradox maintains the subject of communication within a divided state. Morton argues that 'agrilogistics', or the 'technical, planned and perfectly logical approach to built space' which emerged with agricultural society at the end of the last Ice Age, is a similarly paradoxical process.[47] The more agrilogistic consciousness renders nature an externalised resource, the more we are drawn into an ecological web that binds us to it inextricably. For Morton, this weirdly looping form of ecological awareness is manifest in the very agrilogistic consciousness which tries to straighten the loop out through the linear, anthropocentric temporalities of technological reason.[48] The 'machine' of human domination of the Earth becomes unstoppable.[49] But it is also weirdly wired to destroy itself, as if possessed by a nihilistic death drive. And yet dark ecology, for both Kingsnorth and Morton, is also an acknowledgement that if technological society becomes ecologically devastating at planetary scales, that devastation nevertheless emerges from a fundamentally ecological relationship which can provide some kind of path through the ruins. A politics of affect emerges here for both authors: 'you find the sweetness inside the depression', writes Morton.[50] Moving beyond simple despair while confronting the darkness of inevitable collapse, Kingsnorth suggests, in a similar vein that 'there is something beyond despair too; or rather, something that accompanies it, like a companion on the road. This is my approach [...] a dark time; a dark ecology. None of this is going to save the world – but then, there is no saving the world'.[51]

Read in terms of *The Wake*, though, dark ecology's sombre apocalypticism can be said to underpin a political narrative of rebirth or palingenesis. Ecological Englishness is constituted through the annihilation that obliterates the 'anglisc folc', but also brings them back as a spectral presence. Ecocentric hyperlocalism, for all its hostility to anthropocentrism, thus becomes part of

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[46]   Discussed in Anthony Chaney, *Runaway: Gregory Bateson, the Double Bind, and the Rise of Ecological Consciousness* (Chapel Hill, 2017).
[47]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 42.
[48]   *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[49]   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 141.
[50]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 117.
[51]   Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*, p. 147.

a highly human political project, based in geographical rootedness, a kind of *volkish* environmental populism done up in funereal colours. Kingsnorth's condemnation of 'citizens of nowhere', a phrase subsequently taken up by Theresa May's anti-immigrant Brexit rhetoric, is redolent of antisemitic discourse about rootless cosmopolitanism.[52] This takes us into a very dark political terrain indeed. In Roger Griffin's influential analysis, mythic narratives of collapse and rebirth were characteristic of the fascist ideologies of the early-twentieth century. But the political myths of fascism were themselves symptomatic of a wider context in which modernity was reacting against itself, in a manner that might be called 'autoimmune'.[53] This is reflected extensively in the aesthetic cultures of modernism, as Griffin shows, but the development of ecological politics is deeply implicated, too. The Nazi Party deployed the language and aesthetics of nature protection in various ways to insist upon ethnic purity, organic integrity, and geographical rootedness.[54] What Hitler's minister of food and agriculture Richard Walther Darré called 'blood and soil' was an attempt to align ethnonationalism with a romanticised appeal to the stability and durability of pre-modern agrarian life.[55] The unstable term 'ecofascism' has been used to characterise both Nazi appropriations of environmentalism in this vein and those forms of ecocentrism which appear misanthropic in their exclusion of questions of social justice.

Recently, ecofascism has become an identifier for some within the violent extremes of the contemporary far right.[56] In Europe and elsewhere, political groups are deploying forms of neo-Malthusian environmentalism to demonise immigrants and insist on territorial integrity in the face of climate collapse. Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly the National Front) is one of the most prominent examples of contemporary far-right ecopolitics. In 2019, Le Pen targeted immigrants as causing environmental harm: 'environmentalism

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[52]   Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland* (London, 2008), p. 7. For a history of the antisemitic discourse of the rootless cosmopolitan, see Cathy S. Gelbin and Sander L. Gilman, *Cosmopolitanisms and the Jews* (Ann Arbor, 2017).

[53]   Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 8. On the concept of autoimmunity, see Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, 2005).

[54]   Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Edinburgh, 1995).

[55]   See Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 47–8. See also Greg Garrard, 'Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.2 (2010), pp. 251–71 (p. 256).

[56]   Moore and Roberts, *The Rise of Ecofascism*.

[is] the natural child of patriotism, because it's the natural child of rootedness [...] if you're a nomad, you're not an environmentalist'.[57] The links made here between national identity, nature protection, and the ecological essentialism of place are not very different from Kingsnorth's, though his tone is loftier. Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective argue, scathingly, that Kingsnorth's belletrist rhetoric of national nature is the mere flipside of a brutal climate apartheid in which the global North prioritises its own survival above all else.[58] Love of nature and climate barbarism merge.

Given these troubling similarities between Kingsnorth's supposedly 'benevolent' green nationalism and the more extreme variants of far-right ecopolitics at work today, Garrard's conciliatory approach might appear misplaced. But it is crucial that ecocritics be able to offer some response, other than simple dismissal or blissful ignorance, of far-right environmental discourse, past and present. We should acknowledge how fascism has, in a sense, been part of the history of ecology, even ecocriticism itself, since arguably one of the key founders of ecocritical practice was Martin Heidegger, who joined the Nazi Party in 1932 and never officially renounced his membership. Heidegger's post-war studies of the poetry of Hölderlin and Rilke have been hugely influential for work on the relationships between literature and place. Essential dwelling, for Heidegger, meant the inhabitation of a place of revelation that poetry, in opposition to technological consciousness, makes possible.[59] These kinds of ideas have become embedded in ecocriticism. Foundational texts in the field, such as Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2001) and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), engage with the problem of Heidegger's fascism obliquely and evasively by regarding the German philosopher's love of rustic place (famously, the Black Forest) as ultimately separable from his unfortunate political views.[60] Garrard, on the other hand, has suggested that ecocritics have little to lose by dispensing with Heidegger altogether.[61] But Morton's dark ecology suggests a different and more interesting, though fraught, path. It is insufficient to segregate Heidegger from politics or to disregard him

[57]   Cited in Joe Turner and Dan Bailey, '"Ecobordering": Casting Immigration Control as Environmental Protection', *Environmental Politics* 31.1 (2022), pp. 110–31 (p. 120).
[58]   Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel*, p. 149.
[59]   Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 213.
[60]   Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London, 2000); Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford, 2005).
[61]   Garrard, 'Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism'.

altogether, rather 'ecognosis must traverse Heideggerian-Nazi space, descend below it: through nihilism, not despite it'.[62] In the final section of this article, I give an account of this remarkable claim, showing how Morton's version of dark ecology relates to Kingsnorth's, and what all of this means for the politics of ecocriticism.

Aesthetic Agencies

For Morton, whose most well-known book is still probably *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), the aesthetic problem of 'Nature' is also a political problem, one that relates specifically to fascism. The kinds of aestheticised natural environments beloved of Heidegger (and others besides) are too indebted to Nature as an aesthetic-political framing device to be able to properly engage with ecological realities, which are often dark, depressing and abject.[63] 'Nature' – externalised and romanticised, projected onto wilderness areas and places like the Black Forest – is yet another piece of agrilogistic engineering designed to straighten out the weird loop of ecological awareness, to separate humans from their nonhuman contexts by a neat dividing line, to seek some purified version of humanity by purging it of its ecological others. Nature is over there, we are over here.[64] The Nature of romantic environmentalisms and the Nature of technoscientific Enlightenment reason are really the same thing. Furthermore, if fascism's appeals to a racially homogenous pre-modern society are just part of modernity's own autoimmune reaction, then this itself is part of a longer history, beginning in the Neolithic, in which agrilogistics attempts to escape its own progress traps.[65] There is nothing particularly special about fascism in this sense. Morton writes that

> Nazis are trying to maintain the normative subject–object dualism in which I can recognize myself as decisively different from a nonhuman or, to be more blunt, a non-German, a recognition in which everything else appears as equipment for my Lebensraum project. So there is little point in denigrating ecological politics as fascist. But there is every point in naming some Nature-based politics as fascist. Here is a strong sense in which ecology is without Nature.[66]

[62]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 52.
[63]   Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 58.
[64]   *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[65]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 38.
[66]   *Ibid.*, p. 138.

The Heideggerian Nature of essential dwelling is projected outside of the turmoil of modern technological society to become a reservation for Being, just as agrilogistic reason projects a concept of matter as an inert resource available for unlimited human consumption. Heidegger's fascism, accordingly, can be regarded as part of the same error that leads us to annul ecological entanglements through a rigid nature/society dualism that segregates humans from nonhumans in arbitrary and often racist ways.

But – and this is key – Morton holds on to a certain version of Heideggerianism, one filtered through Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, which maintains that reality is itself fundamentally withdrawn into its own dense obscurity and that we glimpse only momentary clearings, partial unconcealments within the thicket.[67] This does not simply mean that reality is withdrawn from consciousness and that we only perceive a representation of it, as asserted by traditional Kantian philosophy, but that all objects – from material things to human minds – withdraw from each *other*, interrelating only partially and in a way that never constitutes the holism of totality. 'Withdrawal – the fact that no access mode can exhaust a thing – bestows upon things their flickering, spectral quality'.[68] The *lumen naturale* of what Heidegger called Dasein (human existence) is only one mode of access in a vast constellation of interconnected objects. A 'hyperobject', for example, is a massively distributed thing that only manifests a partial side of itself at any given moment, as climate does through local weather events, or factory farming through the meat on the plate.[69] Ecological interconnectedness is never exhausted by any particular mode of appearing, but is a flickering half-light of object encounters. Holism is always incomplete (that is, non-Gaian), because there is always a shadowy gap between what an object is and how it appears to another object. This gap is the space of appearance (the aesthetic dimension) and the space of action or agency (the political dimension) combined. The weird is not just related to causality, the web of becoming and fate, then, but also to the 'strange of appearances' – things never appear as they are and are ontologically incapable of doing so.

This 'weird weirdness' is what makes ecology dark.[70] Objects are *aesthetic* as well as political (causal or agentic), and in this respect Morton's work is of a piece with the new materialism that has been crucial for developments in ecocritical theory

[67]   On Graham Harman's influence, see Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbour, 2013), pp. 1–39.
[68]   Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London, 2019), p. 98.
[69]   Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 12.
[70]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 7.

over the last few years.[71] But we need to interrogate carefully what this ecological aestheticising of agencies means for questions relating to the critique of power, theories of the state, and populist social movements, including new nationalist movements and the politics of territories. It is important to insist that there is no guarantee that a dissolution of the nature/society dualism will necessarily give rise to liberatory forces. One way of understanding ecological politics today is to observe that the Arendtian space of appearance, which she quite deliberately defined in anthropocentric terms, is dissipated into the vast aggregation of objects constituting human and nonhuman reality.[72] What historical forces does this leave us open to? Kingsnorth's econationalism, which indigenises a historically privileged group through a compelling narrative of ecological crisis, is only one example. More extreme forms of blood and soil politics is another, taking shape across the world in ways conjugated with climate change.[73] These syntheses of nature, nation and ethnic identity are often only possible through a cultural imaginary, that is to say, an ecoaesthetic politics.[74] Ecocritics generally believe in the symbolic power of cultural representations to change the world for the better.[75] However, they are less likely to take notice of such far-right adoptions of ecoaesthetic agencies.

Morton's ecocommunism could be thought of as a counterexample, a politicisation of the aesthetic as opposed to an aestheticisation of politics, in the Benjaminian sense. But the correspondences noted between the two versions of dark ecology discussed here should cause us to ask questions about Morton's project. In the latter's view, fascism is nothing more than an attempt to annihilate the weird penumbral space between an object and its partial manifestation in an attempt to make the whole a complete presence. The antisemitic figure of the Jew comes to embody everything abject and strange which prevents the closure of the totality, and is targeted with exterminatory violence for this reason.[76] Indeed, all racism might be said to stem from a hatred of ecological otherness. The Nazi nation state and the organic whole of nature fetishised by Nazi nature worship are just reflections of one another.[77] In this sense, Morton insists that dark ecology, stripped

[71]   See, for example, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington, 2014).

[72]   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 198–9.

[73]   Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecology Contested: Environmental Politics between Left and Right* (Porsgrunn, 2021), p. 149.

[74]   Christoffer Kølvraa and Bernard Forchtner, 'Cultural Imaginaries of the Extreme Right: An Introduction', *Patterns of Prejudice* 53.3 (2019), pp. 227–35.

[75]   Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 2.

[76]   Morton, *Humankind*, pp. 134–5.

[77]   Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 97.

of the concept of Nature, ensures that we can avoid the political disaster of fascist environmentalism, since dark ecology focuses on the abject, spectral weirdness of human-nonhuman kinships and solidarities.[78] 'Humankind' is Morton's name for the space of human solidarity with nonhumans: 'humankind is flickering, displaced from itself, ecstatic, rippling and dappled with shadows'.[79] Marxism is still too anthropocentric to grasp this shadowy realm properly, which is why an anarchistic mode is necessary.[80]

The problem, however, is that there is no guarantee that the aesthetic agencies of ecology alone are sufficient to guard against the kinds of dark econationalism we have seen in Kingsnorth's work, or indeed other forms of far-right ecopolitics emerging today. 'Nature' is the key problem for Morton because it remains an illuminating framework, a means of clarifying differences and dispelling spectral ambiguities. But this may be to grant too much saving power to darkness. Morton has argued that Kingsnorth's version of dark ecology 'delete[s] the strangeness' and gives in to 'bleak certainty'.[81] But this is not true. The weird, uncanny, or spectral are equally part of Kingsnorth's project. In *The Wake*, the English landscape is full of supernatural entities and uncanny places, in particular the dark waters of the fens, Buccmaster's *Mare Tenebrarum*, where the 'eald gods' call upon him to fight for England.[82] What is perhaps most fascinating about Buccmaster is that he speaks to us as a ghost, a spectral presence who refuses to be moved from our modern vernacular.

The 'Spectral Plain' is Morton's name for the space of egalitarian, anarchistic, non-totalisable co-existence in which politics is to be conducted.[83] It can be reached only by descending through the nihilism of racist biopolitics and their strict demarcations of living and dead, clean and unclean, human and nonhuman, to a place where all of these oppositions collapse. Ecological reality is 'undead' in this precise sense.[84] Kingsnorth's notion of ecological Englishness complicates this, however, since it is exclusionary by default, and *The Wake* demonstrates how a palingenetic nationalism can make use of spectral ecology. Indeed, Morton severely underplays the degree to which fascism was fascinated by, and deployed, ideas of the undead and the uncan-

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[78]   Morton, *Humankind*, p. 83.
[79]   *Ibid*., p. 84.
[80]   *Ibid*., p. 28.
[81]   Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge MA, 2018), p. 15.
[82]   Kingsnorth, *The Wake*, p. 108.
[83]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 137.
[84]   *Ibid*., p. 97.

ny.[85] It is also well known that some fascist authors, both before and after the First World War, were in thrall to the occult in ways that amount to a kind of spiritual ecofascism pitted against scientific rationalism. The Italian writer Julius Evola (who influenced Benito Mussolini and Steve Bannon, among others) is probably the most famous of these figures. In *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934), Evola espouses a dark ecology in order to ground notions of hierarchy and tradition:

> Traditionally speaking, the notion of 'nature' did not correspond merely to the world of bodies and of visible forms – the object of research of contemporary, secularized science – but on the contrary, it corresponded essentially to part of an invisible reality. The ancients had the sense of a dark netherworld, populated by obscure and ambiguous forces of every kind (the demonic soul of nature, which is the essential substratum of all nature's forms and energies) that was opposed to the superrational and sidereal brightness of a higher region. [...] Only the nonhuman dimension constituted the essence and the goal of any truly traditional civilization.[86]

Subverting the bright, illuminating framework of Nature with a darker one capable of admitting uncanny nonhuman agencies is not necessarily sufficient to ward off fascism.

While the esotericism of Evolan fascism is unlikely to become widespread enough to warrant a political threat, more populist varieties of such thinking are making themselves felt in the ethnonationalisms now forming in the context of climate collapse. Bruno Latour – a key influence on Harman and Morton – argued that a new kind of politics of the local must emerge, as the cosmopolitanism of global capitalism falls apart.[87] Returning to Earth, to the terrestrial (as opposed to Nature), involves reconceptualising territorial attachments entirely. Ecocriticism should see itself as deeply entangled in these epochal political questions, since place has been for it such a crucial and contested category.[88] A critique of place, rather than an unrelenting aestheticisation of it, is needed now more than ever, but it is also crucial to understand to what extent places are aesthetic constructions with specific histories, aesthetic agents in their own right. Indigenous peoples have long known how

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[85]   Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism* (Cardiff, 2005), p. 77.
[86]   Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, 1995), p. 4.
[87]   Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, 2018), p. 92.
[88]   See Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*.

entire worlds have been destroyed in the ruthless establishment of a single capitalist world-system.[89] Dark ecology, for both Morton and Kingsnorth, amounts to a recovery of the local in the ruins of the global, but neither seem interested in trying to comprehend, for example, the world loss suffered by victims of the transatlantic slave trade.[90] Morton argues that dark ecology's commitment to the weird agencies of ecological entanglement can provide a 're-enchantment' of place and the local.[91] Yet, in the absence of a properly contextualised historical and political understanding, the re-enchantment of place can lead down some very dangerous political paths. Rather than fleeing the shattered remnants of the world in search of smaller worlds – little Englands, for example – ecocriticism should insist, all the more strongly, on the irreducibility of a common Earth.

[89]   See Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Vivero de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Cambridge, 2017).
[90]   Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Cambridge, 2022), p. 35.
[91]   Morton, *Dark Ecology*, p. 17.