

Chapter 12

The God of the Whirlwind

Taking our current situation seriously requires us to reexamine our political and ethical understanding of our ordinary practices, our life decisions, our relationship to others and to all earthly life. It asks us to reimagine what we do and who we are across the entire range of our experience. As I have suggested, it even requires us to own disaster—to put the enormous environmental crisis to our own account, take responsibility for what is unfolding, and to begin the endless task of making reparation.

But as I have suggested, in taking this last, most difficult step, we must also affirm our place within the planetary and biological history that produced us. To assume responsibility for the disaster we are causing, we must also affirm much else: the debt we owe to the forces that created us, to the web of life of which we are a part.

As a result, the ethical stance I outlined above speaks also of an unreserved affirmation of those forces that ultimately reach far beyond ourselves—those aspects of the natural world that are so vast, wild, and violent that we can only submit to them in genuine humility. That affirmation, however, stretches well beyond a discussion of ethics per se; it raises questions that deserve their own treatment, challenging us with dilemmas we can understand only if we pause to consider them in their own right. If we are to absorb the full impact of climate change on our humanity, then, we need to move beyond the framework of political and ethical action and contemplate another set of questions, traditionally addressed through mythology, theology, and philosophy: What forces ultimately constitute our world, and how should we respond to them? Now that we live in a world without guarantees, possibly without a future that is livable to us, what stories should we tell about our condition? What is our place in the cosmos?

In this domain, as in all others, the near inevitability of severe climate change alters everything. The religious reassurances that once shaped many of the world's cultures no longer hold true—or at least not in the same way as before. In fact, the discoveries of climatology over the past two or three decades only sharpen what had already become a strong sense of the vulnerability of the world.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, geologists learned that Earth's history was immensely vaster than they previously suspected, that ordinary physical processes, extended over many millions of years, had given the planet's surface its present shape. Confronted with this “dark abyss of time,” they could hardly encourage their audience to sustain a familiar sense of humanity's place within the history of life.¹⁴⁰ Cataclysms and mass extinctions, it turned out, were ordinary events; as I will discuss below, the guarantees of the rainbow covenant, in which God promises Noah never again to unleash a flood to destroy his creation, were put into question. Furthermore, since so much of the geological record bore no trace of humanity, it was no longer clear that the creation centered around human beings. This sense of human vulnerability strengthened further over the course of the nineteenth century, especially as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace found a core mechanism—natural selection—that could drive the evolution of species and extended that mechanism to human beings. The twentieth century added many new elements to this emerging picture, notably when scientists proposed a theory of plate tectonics according to which the continents had broken away from a single primordial landmass and drifted to their present positions. The ground beneath our feet, it turned out, also moved, floating on the molten heat within the Earth.

But that is not all: in more recent decades, scientists have learned how regularly the Earth's climate has flipped back and forth between relative cold and heat, creating the conditions for ice ages and for temperate eras. At times, the Earth has been almost entirely covered in ice and snow and at others has sustained warm temperatures from pole to pole. The changes in the Earth's distance from the sun or in the tilt of its axis have routinely generated alterations in the planet's dynamic systems, producing positive feedback loops that over time cause a general warming or cooling of the atmosphere.¹⁴¹ As a result of all these waves of scientific

inquiry, we now have a broad sense of how Earth's dynamic systems are in constant transformation. The planet itself wobbles; the continents move; cataclysms come and go; the species appear and disappear; and the ice visits and departs. Everything ceaselessly changes.

The fact that some version of our species has lived on this planet through so many changes may give us hope. After all, if we've survived several previous big swings in the climate, it seems likely we will endure the challenges to come in the next several centuries. An enormous resilience is our ancient inheritance; it may have arisen precisely so that we could cope with very rapid, climate-driven shifts to our ecosystems.¹⁴² We may have evolved to handle challenges something like those we'll face in the coming era. Because of our intelligence and extreme adaptability, we're a tough species to eradicate. That thought, of course, can hardly comfort us as individuals; the species will endure even if virtually all of us are wiped out, even if most people—and most societies—disappear.

But even these reflections scarcely do justice to the full import of what we face. Our evolutionary history is hardly the proper context for interpreting the present moment, for this time, rather than merely adapting to the climate change we face, we will have *caused* it. As I suggested earlier, that fact shows how little we respect the web of life from which we arose. Neither God nor Darwin, neither creation nor evolution, put us where we are today; we got here because we violated the limits imposed on us by the divine command or by our place within living systems. Thus it is entirely fitting that those who wish to honor the divine command, including Jewish, Catholic, and evangelical Christian leaders, call on us to do all we can not to contribute to climate change and to act with compassion for those who will be most harmed by it.¹⁴³

Our actions to this point, however, have placed us in an unprecedented position. Over two decades ago, Bill McKibben rightly commented that because of climate change, we were no longer living in what we could call nature, in a world in which some ecosystems could thrive without a human imprint. Climate change shapes the conditions of life for all creatures, which cease as a result to be fully wild. In effect, he suggested, we are witnessing the end of nature.¹⁴⁴ Geologists designate this fact in their own way: in their view, we are moving from the Holocene

into the Anthropocene, the era in which human activities determine the context of existence for all living things.

But if nature ends in one sense, it endures in another. Although we may erase a nature free of human influence, nature nevertheless persists in altered form. Our activities may ultimately force massive changes to the planet's dynamic systems, but those systems, accepting the new conditions of the biosphere, will go on doing their work. In its new mode, nature may no longer be "wild" in the sense that it is free of human interference. But because it is far outside our control, threatens the built environment in which we live, and indeed promises to shatter the cultural continuity we take for granted, it may be even *more* "wild" in the rather different sense that it is now excessively powerful and seemingly hostile to human concerns. We may ultimately have given nature a new guise as something even less hospitable to us than before, something far more capable of reminding us of our weakness and vulnerability.

Most of the time our discussions of climate change ask how we might endure in this new world by focusing on practical, technological, and ethical questions. But as I suggested a moment ago, we do not live only on those levels. We cannot grasp our situation through a bare rendition of the facts; we need stories, figures, parables—in short, myths—to make our reality come fully alive to us, to make it possible for us to do justice to our moment. The point, of course, would not be to replicate the stories by which we once lived; the myths we need today might well contest, undercut, or even destroy those familiar tales, revealing why they are no longer credible, no longer in some sense true. What stories might we tell to interpret our place in this wild domain?

One story could be the history of a mind-boggling error whereby we ruined the Earth's living systems for all creatures. This would be a fairly implausible new story of a fall, in which we once again commit a great crime and are cast out of Eden—this time, the garden of the planet's living systems over the last ten millennia.

Or we might prefer to tell the story as a tragedy. In one version, we could narrate how the technologies that enabled us to liberate ourselves from an ancient scarcity also proved to be our undoing. In a more sweeping rendition, we would see our actions as another episode in a much longer history of human ineptitude, achieving a tragic knowledge of

the self-defeating, obtuse, and pathological dimensions of humanity. In either form, that story would allow us to affirm our history in the midst of defeat, for rather than merely denouncing our actions, it would find moral complexity in them, discerning a certain dignity even in our capacity to recognize that hubris.¹⁴⁵

We could also move to a more visceral mode of affirmation; by telling this story as dark comedy, we could put to test the power to laugh at our radical folly. In doing so, we might learn how to endure the world we created through our great crime, to accept the unacceptable, to explode its pain through a burst of laughter. Through these and other tales we could carry out the gesture I mentioned near the end of chapter nine, daring to affirm the nullity that we are.

Writing at an earlier but comparable moment in the wake of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Samuel Beckett explored a version of this emotional terrain. In *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, he gave us masterworks of bleak farce, of hopeless slapstick, where nearly every sign of life has departed, divine promises are never to be fulfilled, and the routines of everyday life expand to fill an utterly pointless passage of time.¹⁴⁶ In these plays, comedy verges on making the human condition tolerable not by enabling us to affirm it outright, but far more subtly to make our peace with it by affirming it *as laughable*. Our situation may be hopelessly ridiculous, but it is one we can recognize, reenact, and through comedy, accept as our own. In these plays, we can glimpse laughter's ability to reconcile us with nearly every sort of folly and degradation.

But these plays also go a step further, showing us characters who can no longer laugh, who are no longer moved by their stories, who have lost their pleasure in rehearsing their condition; they give us moments when even comedy fails. If laughter in some sense affirms life and helps us go on, the radical absence of a future (especially visible in *Endgame*) threatens laughter itself, inspiring characters—and members of the audience—to ponder, in the midst of laughing, whether they should laugh at all. These plays put us on the edge of a condition *after* comedy, one that even its subtle stratagems cannot redeem.

What would a similar take on our present dilemma look like? Perhaps the best attempt so far is T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, which features a group of ecological activists whose attempts to save the world have

gone astray and whose excessive love or anger wreaks havoc on their own lives.¹⁴⁷ Placed partly in the past, in the era of 1980's eco-terrorism, and partly in the future, when severe climate change has set in for good, the book acknowledges the attempt to bring about political transformation more openly than Beckett does but renders it comically, as if even activism is ludicrous. We could object that treating activism in this way comes close to authorizing passivity and indifference, but instead, as the novel looks back on those efforts from a defeated future, it makes comedy the antidote to a potentially overriding sense of political despair, treating even failure as part of a ridiculous and ultimately comic condition. The novel does not shrink from depicting that utter defeat, imagining a world when most large nonhuman animals are extinct or greatly endangered, fiercely intense storms are commonplace, and the forests of the American West have fallen to the earth. Yet because the book is set in a world without ecological hope, it sharpens the perspective of comedy, daring us to laugh precisely at what is irredeemable, to affirm our truly grotesque folly.

The novel focuses on the misadventures of a familiar comic type—an aging, easily enraged, sexually manipulable, often drunk white man who is well-meaning and truly loving but whose decisions almost always go wrong. By centering on this character, Boyle invites us to view the world of the novel through a position of radical error and ineptitude, using the ancient comic strategy of regarding the world from below, from that irrepressibly impulsive, desiring, persistent dimension of us that, no matter how much it might whine and complain, still endures. Here, as so often, comedy might evade a full confrontation with disaster, indulging in a literary stylization of loss, but in doing so it makes loss livable. It demonstrates how human beings might adapt to an impossible world through an entertaining performance that conquers defeat itself through the minor powers of self-mockery and absurdist play. If activism cannot ward off the ruins, laughter can convert them into the material of an art.

But even comedy has its limits. Boyle is less honest than Beckett, for he does not directly stage the possibility that the shtick will get old, that the laughter may ring a bit hollow, that the absurd life it celebrates may not go on. If we are to live in the ruins, we need something more, something beyond all the genres I have mentioned so far—a kind of wild mythology, and perhaps even a mad theology, for the ruins. Tragedy

and comedy, in particular, are preoccupied with the task of affirming in retrospect the nullity of human being. But the challenge today is also to acknowledge and in some sense affirm the more intimidating, threatening, even disastrous face of nature. Comprehending the latter theme will no doubt require understanding its significance for us, to keep its impact on human beings in focus as well. Nevertheless, doing so forces us to venture beyond ourselves, to take up once again the ancient myths regarding the stability of the creation itself.

The best strategy to pursue in this regard might be to return to the theme I explored above, the transformation of nature into a force even more wild and implacable than before. What are the mythological overtones to such a shift? At first, the very attempt to interpret nature in these terms might seem impossible; the realities of Earth's systems no longer address us in an unequivocal voice. Thanks to climate change, nature no longer seems mythic to us, anchored in primordial, archaic truths; it is now historical, and like our built environment is a product of human activity. Virtually nothing in our experience now falls outside the realm of human history, thriving in a domain we cannot harm. Accordingly, we might imagine that nature's voice has fallen silent, that the old gods are dead. But as I suggested earlier, nature is not merely submissive to our will; our intervention, in fact, has caused its dynamic forces to become more powerful, less predictable, and thus more openly capable of defying human expectation.

As a result, we find ourselves in unprecedented spiritual terrain. The sacred is no longer what it used to be, but it has not simply disappeared. We might say that, like the climate itself, it has transformed. But how should we interpret that transformation? Should we imagine that divine forces have taken on a new shape and will henceforth reveal themselves to us with particularly terrifying features? No doubt those features will indeed terrify us. But if they do so, these gods are not all that unfamiliar after all. Encountering them, we may discern the return of the dark gods once defeated by the relatively humane divinities that have ruled over us for millennia. In forcing our way into a strange future, we may have revived a forgotten stage of our past.

Let me here take up the language of the central tradition of the west, the tradition that has informed all the Abrahamic religions—Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam. While the mythologies of Greece and Rome told how a given generation of the gods (the Titans, for example) were displaced by another (the Olympians), we seldom imagine that the God of the Abrahamic religions arose within any such sequence. But the early chapters of Genesis describe a sequence of another kind, a transformation in God's attitudes toward his creation. We may be used to the story that God created the world in seven days and blessed his creation outright. But we might forget that before long, in later chapters of that story, he became horrified at human sin and repented of creating humankind at all—and accordingly chose to drown the Earth and nearly all living beings beneath the waters of the flood (see Genesis, chapter 6). The God of creation, it turns out, is also the God of the deluge—one who at times utterly *hates* what he has created. Perhaps this deep ambivalence is intrinsic to omnipotent power: any power that can create can also destroy. But in that case, we are not secure in our status as creatures, for at any time God can blot us out as well. No theology can come to rest on the presence of the creation itself, for the God that brought it into being can annihilate it in a moment.

Thus the key moment in the Genesis story takes place neither at the creation nor the flood but immediately after the floodwaters recede.¹⁴⁸ After leaving the ark, Noah offers a burnt sacrifice to God; in response, God promises never again to destroy the world, vowing that “[w]hile the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (8:22) and places a rainbow in the cloud as a “sign of the covenant” between himself and “all flesh that is upon the earth” (9:17).¹⁴⁹ Here, the God who has the continual option to destroy the world renounces doing so forever. Only because of *this* act can his creatures finally have confidence that the creation they know will endure. The most reassuring act is not the creation itself but the divine vow never again to undo it. The core founding moment, in effect, is the rainbow covenant.

What, then, are we to make of the fact that disasters and cataclysms of many kinds have taken place again and again over the history of the Earth? As I mentioned above, modern geological knowledge casts doubt on the rainbow covenant. It suggests that we have always been abandoned to history, living in a world without guarantees. In mythological terms,

the world is under the sway of the God of creation *and* the God of the deluge—that ambivalent, dark figure who makes no promises. Nevertheless, we could argue that our sense of this dark God has retreated into a distant past, for it was once superseded by our trust in the kinder, gentler God of the covenant, whose promises seem to have been realized in the relatively stable biosphere of the Holocene. We could, in effect, match up the history of the covenant and of the Earth, construing God's promise as an appropriate sign of the very livable world we have enjoyed over the past ten millennia.

But in that case, our exit from the Holocene into the Anthropocene raises new questions. Now that our own actions will almost inevitably cause far more difficult living conditions, leading to drought, famine, and natural disasters of many kinds, we threaten to carry out the material equivalent of cancelling the covenant all by ourselves and of unleashing again the God of the deluge. Such a possibility is quite relevant in our moment because a countervailing belief in this covenant can inspire us to deny that human beings have any such power and thus to negate the reality of climate change itself. If we believe that God created the world and made the rainbow covenant with all living beings, we have a strong basis for repudiating climate change. Take as an example the statement of John Shimkus, Republican member of Congress from the state of Illinois. Speaking before the House Energy Subcommittee on Energy and Environment in March 2009, Shimkus quoted Genesis 8:22, the verse I cited a moment ago, and continued, “I believe that is the infallible word of God, and that's the way it is going to be for his creation. The earth will end only when God declares its time to be over. Man will not destroy this earth. This earth will not be destroyed by a flood.”¹⁵⁰

Although referring to the rainbow covenant in the midst of discussions of climate change may be unusual, we should take this gesture seriously. The passage on the covenant is a central statement on the viability of creation within the religious and cultural traditions of the West. If we are to understand the mythic resonances of climate change, we simply must grapple with that covenant's implications. Doing so may make us uncomfortable; after all, the rainbow covenant was not conditional on human behavior, for it constituted an outright promise to all creation. The possibility we could undermine the security of the creation, then,

challenges divine power, as if we are in the midst of wrenching the ability to destroy the Earth out of God's hands. In his own way, Mr. Shimkus has accurately identified the aspect of climate change that threatens to undercut one version of traditional belief.

We could object that climate change does not undo that covenant; we are merely changing the climate, not destroying it. But if we take the further details of the covenant seriously, we cannot sustain this position. In fact, climate change will destroy “seedtime and harvest” in many places; what we now recognize as winter is likely to retreat ever further toward the poles, leaving more and more of us in a seasonal cycle quite unlike what we knew before—in an oscillation not between “cold and heat,” but between warmth and blistering heat. Furthermore, climate change will increase the intensity of atmospheric systems, unleashing much more powerful storms and making destructive floods far more likely. This is not the world guaranteed by the covenant. However impossible it may be to conceive, then, we have dispensed with the relatively kinder God of the covenant and revived that earlier, dark God, opting for a less friendly, more demented divinity—as if, in pagan terms, we have moved from the Olympians back to the Titans. We have embraced a far more difficult fate.

Some might protest that climate change is merely a consequence of human action, another example of how sin corrupts the creation, and that it cannot alter God's power over us. But in the covenant, God takes charge over the future health of the creation; he does not concede to us any power to alter it through the sheer abundance of our sins. Others may object that God is allowing global warming to happen as a judgment on our actions; he promised to sustain the seasons “[w]hile the earth remains,” so the warping of the seasons might mean that the earth will not remain, that we are witnessing a slow-motion end of the world, a strange but legitimate version of God's judgment on humankind. But the Bible always attributes the timing and substance of the final judgment to God himself, never suggesting that human beings through their own actions might force that judgment to take place. If God is allowing the end of the world to unfold, he is a mere figurehead, for that judgment is coming down upon us without his needing to do a thing.

These interpretations of the covenant, however, ultimately distract us from how it is being used in the current debate. Mr. Shimkus quotes

the key verse and insists on its infallible truth in order to argue against any effort to ward off climate change. It won't happen, so we need do nothing about it. Case closed. The irony is thus quite stark: the more we believe that God guarantees the continuity of Earth's living systems, the less responsibility we take for them and the more we destroy them. Here, a reliance on biblical mythology is actually pernicious, justifying a great transgression against the divine command that we exercise stewardship over the creation.

But Representative Shimkus is not the only person caught in a contradiction. What about a position that *does* insist on stewardship—but also admits that the covenant no longer holds? In that case, what divine injunction are we carrying out if we hold firmly to the notion we must be responsible to all life? We may end up in a dilemma opposite to that of Mr. Shimkus, carrying out our role as stewards of the Earth in the absence of a covenant. We would find ourselves complying with an ethics that has no divine foundation and on an Earth that may not be subject to our control.

How might we resolve this contradiction? We could argue that the absence of that divine foundation actually makes our stewardship necessary; if God is totally in charge of the creation, what could we possibly do to assist him? Our activity *matters* precisely because there is no transcendental guarantee that all will be well. Our ethical orientation would thus arise not from a divine command but from our responsibility to the web of life from which we arose. We could do without God—and without a story of the creation—and still have a strong basis for doing justice to our fellow creatures.

This is the kind of ethical position that arises from a secular and scientific interpretation of our moment. But it does not fully take the measure of the mythic, theological challenge; because it tells no story, it leaves us without a language in which to depict our most fundamental situation. Would it be possible to resolve the contradiction in another way—one that takes seriously the presence of more-than-human forces, whatever they may be?

As it turns out, in looking at this split between the creation and a workable ethics, we are thinking about questions already asked elsewhere in the Bible, particularly in the book of Job. The book of Genesis need

not be our only mythic reference in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, for the latter includes many texts and places them all within a complex, creative tension—within a spacious spiritual legacy no single statement, however sophisticated, could ever capture. That diversity of statement, which arises from within a long and varied history, makes available a range of spiritual resources for people who live within varying historical moments of their own, so that the book of Job, for example, might become more relevant to us today than Genesis as we face our own unique challenges. We who are the heirs of this tradition, whether religious or secular, may thus draw on this often neglected rendition of God to understand the face the world may take in the coming decades and in this way to sustain something more than a pragmatic relation to the infinite.

The story of Job is very simple: he is a just man, yet disaster strikes his family and property and he is stricken with boils. Why did God do these things to him? If there is some link between God's rule over the creation and his respect for just action, then Job should not suffer. Yet clearly he does. His friends sit with him and talk to him endlessly, coming up with one explanation or another for his condition, exposing the vanity of all human chatter. In the end, God himself appears to Job in a whirlwind and addresses him, asking who he is to challenge what God does. Was Job present when God laid the foundations of the earth or set bounds for the sea? Can he tame Behemoth or lead Leviathan with a fishhook? Job responds, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Struck with awe at divine might, he gives up any claim to being rewarded for his right action, humbles himself, and repents.

Job is the great biblical text that splits apart the wildness and terror of the creation from any notion of divine justice. God is so powerful, so stunning in what he achieves, that he need not pay any attention to human concerns. We could regard this God as a kind of divine bully, a character very fond of throwing his weight around. Or we could adopt a humbler version of this interpretation, deciding out of an excess of piety not to contradict God in any respect whatsoever, even if we have no idea how to understand him. This latter stance seems to be orthodox, of course, but its hasty submission hides an unstated resentment against the bully and

thus surreptitiously agrees with the first, defiant response. But there is a third option: perhaps the creation is so stunning, the beast Leviathan so spectacularly terrifying, that we are genuinely moved, truly transported with awe, and no longer care about our petty concerns. *The creation is so splendid that we renounce our longing to live in an ethical universe in the first place.* At that point, our previous complaints look foolish, and we repent of even raising them in dust and ashes.¹⁵¹

This, I think, is the reading of Job that makes most spiritual sense. If we take it seriously, though, it leads us far beyond the story of the creation, flood, and rainbow covenant. For one thing, *this* God doesn't affirm the beauty of a creation that might submit meekly to human control; on the contrary, he celebrates the fire-breathing, iron-hearted, invulnerable monster Leviathan. In the old myths and rituals from which the creation story comes, the heroic divine being produces our world by defeating chaos—or in the Genesis version, that state in which “[t]he earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (1:2). The creator God is a tamer of chaos, a dragon slayer, a victor over monsters; what's more, the God of the covenant promises never to release the waters of the deep again, as if to reaffirm the original achievement of his creation. But in Job, God *celebrates* the monstrous. Not only does this God show utter contempt for any covenant with human beings, he points to his creation's terrifying power as the utmost sign of his sovereignty, indicating that the very thing that would violate the covenant is the most divine thing about him. It's not as if this God would unleash the flood because he despises human sin; on the contrary, he is indifferent to human assertion, for in the presence of his transcendental power, any human act has virtually no significance. It would not do, then, to regard him as the God of the deluge; he is even more threatening than that dark being.¹⁵²

It's worth remembering that this God declaims from amidst the whirlwind, as if to make absolutely clear that he is embodied in whatever is most formless, threatening, and terrifying. But this God is *even more terrifying than chaos*, for his ability to defeat chaos and give it organic form in the monster Leviathan shows he is stronger than monstrosity itself. Rather than being a slayer of the formless, this God takes the formless as

his form, takes delight in its destructive qualities, and thrusts them in the face of complaining human beings.

Anyone who has encountered *this* God might have a few choice words for Representative Shimkus. This God makes no kind promises; if anything, he authorizes his creation to humble humanity at any time. Under his sway, disasters might indeed be ordinary events, and mass extinctions—and the emergence of all kinds of Leviathan-like creatures—might become a regular part of Earth's history. I would thus suggest that we should take this God as the exact mythological counterpart of the forces that in the view of science have operated over the history of the biosphere; there is in fact little difference between the attitude the God of the whirlwind displays and the implicit tone of those dynamic systems. In our time, the gap between a mythic and a materialist sense of those superhuman forces has virtually disappeared. Both do their work on time scales and with a power far beyond human imagining; both manifest a chaotic inventiveness and casual destructiveness that dwarf our own; and both, having produced humankind, are indifferent to our well-being. This God would worry no more than biodynamic systems about the devastating consequences of climate change; if anything, to speak in mythological terms, he would point them out as further demonstrations of his wild power.

It might be tempting to repudiate this God as a being who takes delight in humiliating us. But if we responded in that way, we would not be true to an important and revelatory dimension of ourselves, a dimension realized in Job's response. We *love* wild creatures; the great predators—lions, cheetahs, tigers, sharks—move us beyond words. We take an astonished delight in the furious power unleashed in tornadoes and hurricanes—in the very forms that the God of Job chooses to clothe himself. When we see such things, we know we are in the presence of something infinitely greater than us, something that does not mind our concerns whatsoever. In such moments, we might even feel an immense relief, knowing that we will never experience the severe boredom and alienation of living within an entirely controlled environment. Our awe tells us that we *seek* transcendence, that we *rebel* against the prospect of absolute human control. We are *grateful* in knowing that Earth's living systems and nonhuman creatures do not follow any moral norms, certainly not our own.¹⁵³

To some degree, then, we share the awe that moved Job to give up his moral claim. Furthermore, as we look forward to the coming decades, we must also recognize that the extraordinary forces that climate change will release around the biosphere will inspire awe in us as well. However devastating such forces will be, however greatly they will harm our societies and our individual lives, we can still recognize in them the signs of a supreme power.

Thus our foray in the domain of myth, which can seem to take us far afield from our core concerns, can in fact sharply transform and perhaps even reverse an initial assessment of our condition. Our awe in the presence of this demented God—or of the implacable, anonymous forces that this figure of God personifies—can enable us to make peace with our cosmic inconsequence, affirm the absence of any moral concern in the universe, and thus embrace the very features of our condition that might otherwise fill us with despair. In a few years, we may, like the characters in Beckett's *Endgame*, be numbed by the apparent futility of our actions and the blank hostility of the natural world. The book of Job teaches us to respond with awe instead—to see Earth's living systems and creatures as inhuman, even monstrous, *and for that reason all the more splendid*. If we move deeper into despair, as it were, and come out the other side, as Job does, we will at last be released into a space much vaster than our petty concerns and be stunned by a great splendor.

This release inevitably alters our sense of nearly all the themes I have discussed so far in this book. The reversal from anguish to awe, bafflement into astonished humility, can take place only if we give up our fierce arrogance, cosmic or otherwise. That renunciation, of course, would inevitably motivate us to give up our habit of subordinating the biosphere to ourselves—to carry out, on a collective and individual level, a truly ecological revolution. A transformative politics is the immediate consequence of that spiritual breakthrough, for it would put into practice the equivalent of Job's repentance.

That awe would also change our response to the consequences of severe climate change. If that change should come, we would know our actions helped trigger it—but we would also recognize that we did not create the forces that it would unleash, forces that would perpetually humble us with their power. Its onset would remind us that the very

attempt to slay the dragon, to use the immense resources of the Earth for our convenience, eventually unleashes it, making the Earth less habitable. Our story would thus be much like Job's: by demanding that an indifferent universe comply with our expectations, we would have provoked it to respond with a stunning violence that revealed our true place.

Such a transformation would not put our ethical orientation into doubt but would actually give it new strength and sophistication. We who inevitably lead intentional lives, filled with a sense of responsibility, would learn not to expect that our intentions will also be those of the universe. Giving up our cosmic arrogance, we would also renounce the idea that our moral purposes for the cosmos will come true. If we choose to assume responsibility for the environmental crisis now taking place around the Earth, to own disaster, we would realize that this ethical act does not make us masters of the situation, but the reverse, for it asks us to do justice even when we are powerless to bend natural forces to our will. We would thus act with justice not because the universe will reward us or because everything will work out well for us if we do, but simply because such action is the right thing to do. This renunciation would have a double benefit: it would allow us to give the wildness of the world its due, to pursue a truly ecological ethics of humility in the face of nature, as I argued above, and would also relieve us of the notion that this wildness will necessarily operate in a manner we might expect.¹⁵⁴ We would thus finally live with genuine humility, affirming through our actions our due place in the creation.

Once we learned to live in this way, we might also finally place the great emphasis on the future in its proper sphere—in the world of ordinary prudence, beyond which lies an entirely different level of concern. We can and should still remain attentive to the practical matters of life, including how we emit greenhouse gases and the consequences of doing so for all forms of life. But beyond prudence lie the ultimate questions of who we are and why we are here. Our pragmatic concern for the future cannot eclipse the presence of forces that have always superseded us, that have perpetually revealed our cosmic vulnerability.

Accepting this gap between ethics and the universe, between pragmatic concerns and a sense of the sacred, between prudence and awe, we would also relinquish any myth, any religious teaching, that would

attempt to unite the two. The rainbow covenant, however beautiful, can hardly serve as a resource of consolation in our time. But stepping beyond it is no small matter. If we do so, our entire sense of what religion might offer us also changes; in fact, as I have suggested above, the awe that arises out of the book of Job accords almost exactly with a humility in the presence of what a materialist science teaches us to see. It does so not because it finally reconciles faith and reason but because it pushes beyond them, cracking open both religious and secular interpretations of our condition. The God of the whirlwind demands that we give up any confidence that the universe will comply with our expectations. Awe in his presence obliterates those religious institutions that would translate his power into human terms, that would capture his voice in specific doctrines, and that would assure us of our place in an eventual cosmic triumph. By the same token, an encounter with such dark forces reveals there can be no ultimate basis for secular hope, no guarantee that utopia will come to pass, no prospect of historical closure, and no certainty that any political promise will come true. The same awe that destroys our religious arrogance would also demolish our confidence that through reason we will conquer those forces that challenge us. Through the experience of that awe, we would thus give up our confidence that God is a larger version of ourselves or that by speaking in his name we can subdue our fellow creatures—or that with greater effort we might gain a rational and systematic control over every aspect of our fate. We would be in the presence of what defeats us and for that reason takes us beyond ourselves.

By accepting our defeat, we would at last become capable of witnessing the unutterable wildness at the heart of things, the biological exuberance (as Bruce Bagemihl calls it) that proliferates in sheer crazy inventiveness and raucous excess without rhyme or reason, without hope of explanation.¹⁵⁵ That wildness is the sense of the sacred of our time—a version of the sacred that supersedes and devastates nearly every prior experience that went by its name. In this version of the sacred there is no solace for human beings except for our astonishment at its limitless beauty and fragility, the splendor of what arises without origin or end, what flourishes in the dark abyss of time.

Dazzled by that splendor, we can endure nearly anything that may transpire. If we act in time, as we must, we will have withdrawn what

would otherwise have been a great crime—and will be blessed with the opportunity to dwell with a beautiful chaos henceforth. If we do not, as we almost inevitably will not, we can greet the coming horrors not only with regret and grief, indignation and sorrow, but also with the sense that what sweeps over us is an even more stunning revelation of the ultimate strangeness of things. In that world, which is almost upon us now, we would do well to endure the floods, embrace the ruins, and let the dragons roam—accepting our due place at last.

Notes

140. On the study of the history of the earth and the notion of the dark abyss of time see Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth & the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
141. For readable overviews of Earth's highly dynamic climate systems, see Richard B. Alley, *The Two-Mile Time Machine: Ice Cores, Abrupt Climate Change, and Our Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), and Wallace S. Broecker and Robert Kunzig, *Fixing Climate: What Past Climate Changes Reveal About the Current Threat—and How to Counter It* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).
142. See William H. Calvin, *A Brain for All Seasons: Human Evolution & Abrupt Climate Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
143. For three examples among many, see “Climate Change,” a resolution adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 2005, <http://www.jewcology.com/resource/Central-Conference-of-American-Rabbis-Resolution-Climate-Change-2005>; *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/global-climate-change-a-plea-for-dialogue-prudence-and-the-common-good.cfm>; and The Evangelical Climate Initiative, “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action,” available as a pdf document online.
144. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).
145. This tragic knowledge would be akin to that which speaks in Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone*, whose Chorus celebrates our capacity to move forward into no future that will actually happen and to rely on resources that leave us bereft. Here I draw upon a discussion and loose translation of key lines of the play in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, edited by Jacques-Alain

Miller, *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 274–75.

146. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove Press, 1954); *Endgame, A Play in One Act, Followed by Act Without Words, A Mime for One Player* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).
147. T. C. Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000).
148. For my analyses of this subject in another context, see “After the Covenant: Romanticism, Secularization, and Disastrous Transcendence,” *European Romantic Review* 21 (2010): 345–61.
149. All biblical quotations in this chapter are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Edition* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Old Testament portions copyright 1952).
150. “‘The planet won't be destroyed by global warming because God promised Noah,' says politician bidding to chair U.S. energy committee,” *[Daily] Mail Online*, November 10, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1328366/John-Shimkus-Global-warming-wont-destroy-planet-God-promised-Noah.html>.
151. For an exemplary reading of Job along these lines, see Stephen Mitchell, Introduction, *The Book of Job*, translated by Mitchell (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), vii–xxxii.
152. As a result, even though Job eventually recovers his property and family, we should not assume that this happy ending arises as a *consequence* of his moment of humility. In fact, the divine repudiation of justice renders that happy ending trivial by comparison.
153. Some readers might ponder whether awe is a version of the aesthetics of the sublime. In his influential account, Immanuel Kant argues that in the sublime we respond to the infinite capacity of the mind, not of nature. The book of Job instead depicts a response to what truly exceeds us. For Kant's discussion, see *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128–159.
154. For a reading of Job that brings out the environmentalist overtones of its attack on anthropocentrism, see Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
155. Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); see especially 252–262.