

Article

The Saving Grace of America's Green Jeremiad

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Abstract: By the late seventeenth century, Puritan leaders in colonial America were bemoaning what they perceived to be the betrayal of New England's godly "errand into the wilderness." In election sermons they mourned the community's backsliding from its global mission as a "city upon a hill." Such doomsday rhetoric echoed the lamentations of decline intoned by ancient Hebrew prophets such as Jeremiah. Yet this "Jeremiad" discourse characteristically reached beyond effusions of doom and gloom toward prospects of renewal through a conversion of heart. It blended warnings of impending catastrophe with hope for recovery if the erring souls it addressed chose to repent. This twofold identity of the Puritan Jeremiad, gradually refashioned into the American Jeremiad, has long resonated within and beyond this nation's literary culture. Featured in creative nonfiction, jeremiad expression surfaces in various forms. And with rise of the modern environmental movement, a prophetic subspecies identifiable as "Green Jeremiad" has lately emerged. The essay reflects on how, especially in an Anthropocene era, Green Jeremiads dramatize the crisis of spirit and faith that undergird challenges to earth's geophysical health and survival. What saving graces might temper the chilling reminders of imminent peril composed by authors such as Rachel Carson, Bill McKibben, Barbara Kingsolver, and Elizabeth Kolbert?

Keywords: jeremiad; anthropocene; saving grace; rhetoric; doomsday; spiritual crisis; climate change

At the moment, it's fair to say, we find ourselves painfully aware of our vulnerability in the face of multiple perils—threats not only to the geophysical environment we inhabit but also, on the national scene, to our trust in democratic processes and the rule of law. Yet ours is scarcely the only such crisis juncture in American history. From the nineteenth century, for example, we recall the nearly catastrophic fracturing this nation endured amid the horrors of civil conflict. And earlier still in our history, beyond the sturdy resolve projected by first waves of Anglo-European settlers, New England's second- and third-generation Puritan leaders bemoaned the way their land of divine promise had already by 1650 begun to fall sinfully, disastrously short of fulfilling what minister John Danforth described in 1670 as its singular "errand into the wilderness."¹

Moreover, in election sermons and diverse polemical writings reflecting a literary subgenre known today as the "jeremiad," New England's would-be prophets felt bound to pour out their dismay at the land's declension toward apostasy *and* to warn her citizens, in lurid terms, of the supreme woes toward which they were now headed in defiance of God's wrath. Here was vulnerability with a vengeance—even, so it seemed to them, divine vengeance. For America's new city of the saints, once set upon a hill, had lapsed now into a faithless abyss unworthy of its biblical promise. All sorts of

¹ Leading scholars of the Puritan Jeremiad commonly invoke Danforth's election sermon, preached in 1670, as a landmark illustration of the genre. Such commentators have included Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Emory Elliott (Elliott 1994), and David Mintner (Mintner 1974). Study of colonial New England's version of this genre therefore rests on a firm foundation and has also, in the case of Bercovitch's book, addressed subsequent adaptations and modifications of the Jeremiad tradition in America—aside from relevant, latter-day environmental writings, which have yet to be seriously evaluated in the light of that tradition.

worldly woes—disease, drought, warfare, communal dissension and dissolution—had followed from her apostasy. Yet the essence of this crisis, as her leaders perceived it, was neither physical, nor social or political, but spiritual.

Expanding on the earlier work of some eminent twentieth-century scholars such as Perry Miller (Miller 1953) and Sacvan Bercovitch (Bercovitch 1978), I argue here that the Puritan jeremiad, as circumstances refashioned it over time into a form definable in broader terms as the *American* jeremiad, has had an enduring and decisive influence on our culture to the present day. I would claim, in fact, that a latter-day subset of the American Jeremiad that I'll call in oxymoronic zeal "the Green Jeremiad" has been flourishing in our own age of environmental peril and carries timely significance for the planet at large. Permutations of the Green Jeremiad have appeared thus far in multiple literary genres, in works by American authors as varied as Rachel Carson, Jonathan Schell, Ed Abbey, Gary Snyder, Bill McKibben, Barbara Kingsolver, Elizabeth Kolbert, and David Wallace-Wells. Artistry of the Green Jeremiad is likewise evident in a number of contemporary film documentaries associated with figures such as Al Gore (*An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006) and Leonardo di Caprio (*Before the Flood*, 2016). But I first want to consider how the strategic logic of all these works follows at least consistently—if not always causally or self-consciously—from the precedent set by New England's Puritan rhetoricians.

To be sure, the Puritan jeremiad conveyed God's own plenty of doom and gloom. A note of alarm, of terror and disillusionment, suffuses even the titles attached to many New England compositions from this era, an age of anxiety leading toward the infamous Salem Witchcraft trials of 1692. I have in mind titles like the one that accompanied the Reverend Michael Wigglesworth's versified account of "God's Controversy with New-England, written in the time of the Great Drought, 1662," or his widely read poem dramatizing "The Day of Doom." The tenor of such writing sounds fairly chilling, even today; and as someone whose scholarly investigation once focused on the religious culture of colonial New England, I ended up reading more Puritan sermons, histories, and poetic lamentations than most persons would ever volunteer to absorb.

Striving to interpret the adversities New England faced during a period of severe drought and waning piety, Michael Wigglesworth, in one of his verse expositions struggled to understand, for example,

How is it, that Security, and Sloth,
Amongst the best are Common to be found?
That grosser sinns, in stead of Graces growth,
Amongst the many more and more abound.
.....
This O New-England hast thou got
By riot, & excess:
.....
Beware, O Sinful Land, beware;
And do not think it strange
That sorer judgments are at hand,
Unless thou quickly change. (Wigglesworth 1968, pp. 48–49, 53)

Yet as some scholars pointed out decades ago, the essence of the Puritan "jeremiad"—and, by extension, the American jeremiad—was *not* purely denunciatory. The form should not, in other words, be seen as simply an ireful tirade, an outpouring of near-despair over the state of society and the world. For true Jeremiads looked to do more than expound their authors' litany of woes because they reached beyond effusions of doom and gloom toward a prospect of renewal. Above all, they blended warnings of impending catastrophe with a faith-grounded hope for recovery *if* the erring souls they addressed

chose to repent. If, that is, they accepted the imperative set before them to alter their current course. As Wigglesworth declared, “sorer judgments are at hand/Unless thou quickly change.” Thus the aspect of choice is crucial. In this regard the Jeremiad differs markedly from another literary subgenre—likewise drawn from Old and New Testament sources—we have come to know as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic, which prefigures an ultimate disclosure expected to be inevitable, rarely highlights the decisive, still-latent potential of human choice. Neither does the *visionary* future envisioned in most religious forms of apocalyptic resemble the earthy immediacy of the jeremiad, which situates its moral critique of some particular place and time within a discrete setting of sociopolitical conditions.

It is worth recalling that even an ancient Hebrew prophet so forbidding as the original Jeremiah, back in the seventh century before Christ, seems to have understood his vocation of oracular speech as inspiring visions not only of divine destruction but also of potential restoration and redemption. For “if you turn back” from your evil ways, insists the prophet on behalf of his Lord, “I will take you back,” Oh Israel, and “you shall stand before me” (Jeremiah 15:19, NRSV version).

In fact some of New England’s jeremiad prophets, including the Reverend Samuel Willard in his 1682 election sermon on “The Only Sure Way to Prevent Threatened Calamity,” took their homiletic text directly from Jeremiah. But what virtually all these jeremiads shared rhetorically was a ritual invocation of three elements: a *Recollection* of better times, a *Recognition* of the current state of declension, and an exhortation to *Return* to better faith and conduct.

The first element called for a *Recollection* and affirmation of how promising things had once seemed for the Puritans’ original community of faith in the New World. “What affectionate care was there one of another,” recalled Samuel Danforth, during that idealized era of “our first and best times” which preceded “the loss of our first love.” Why, after all, had the fathers of New England pursued their holy “errand” overseas in the first place, daring to pass “over the vast ocean into this waste and howling wilderness?” (Danforth, in Plumstead 1968, pp. 65, 73). Then, in sounding the second theme, the jeremiad prophet typically pressed his hearers to *acknowledge* their apostasy with “full and free consent,” recognizing “that the hand of God is out against this people awful in tokens of wrath” (Willard, in Plumstead 1968, p. 97). Yet in the sermon’s final, or “Uses” phase, the preacher moved toward assuring “this people” of God’s willingness to save them from future calamities if they swiftly repented to seek an amendment of life, a reformation of their faith and practices. Preachers like Samuel Willard painted a threatening picture of woes looming ahead but offered as well “a way to escape” (Willard, in Plumstead 1968, p. 98)—albeit a narrow way, requiring collective resolve.

Thus the future in jeremiad perspective—though doubtful, frightening, mostly grim—remains open rather than predetermined. This hortatory, marginally hopeful characteristic of the American jeremiad may owe something to this nation’s original faith—a faith grounded not only in divine providence, but also—through the early federal-Jeffersonian period—in the resilience and creative resolve of its own citizenry. The saving grace of the jeremiad lies especially in its residue of hope, its insistence that with enough common resolve we may yet avoid perdition because it is now almost but not quite too late to change course.

The blended warning of a peril to come with a call for immediate reformation, as reflected in the Puritan Jeremiad, has long continued to resonate through the course of American literary culture—as reflected, for example, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s masterwork, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. And despite Stowe’s agonistic relation to her own Puritan-Calvinist heritage, she animated her narrative in that novel with evangelical passion so as to inspire in her readers a zeal for conversion. For Stowe, this call to conversion of heart resounded in two dimensions at once—spiritually and inwardly, toward a new birth of Christian faith and repentance, as well as morally and socio-politically, toward solidarity with the abolitionist cause of immediate emancipation. The Jeremiad subtext of this imperative was unmistakable. For by 1852, when the novel first appeared, Stowe deemed the nation headed swiftly toward cataclysm, a horrific consequence of the original sin of slaveholding that rendered America vulnerable to divine judgment. A destructive upheaval lay ahead—unless the citizenry Stowe addressed moved with alacrity to welcome God’s new birth. So in her concluding, overtly homiletic

chapter Stowe voiced a hope that such turn and rescue might still take place. Ever the evangelist, Stowe ends up intoning, before her congregation of all America, God's promise of salvation *if* those she addresses awaken to their peril and respond now in faith:

A day of grace is yet held out to us. Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the *Christian church* has a heavy account to answer. Not by combining together, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin, is this Union to be saved—but by repentance, justice and mercy; for, not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law, by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God! (Stowe 2018, p. 418)

What circumstances, then, gave rise eventually to the *green* jeremiad? What purpose and special character did this subspecies come to assume?

Celebrated writerly naturalists such as Henry Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold all played a role in that story. But for the purpose at hand I propose leaping ahead now to 1962, recalling the seminal text of latter-day environmentalism that Rachel Carson published in that year: *Silent Spring*.

The bad news Carson feels charged to convey in this prophetic work is signaled from the first, in its ominous yet provocative title. “*Silent Spring*” becomes an all-encompassing augury—at first tied to a single chapter—that the author’s agent, Marie Rodell, helped her settle on. And just past the title page, on the dedication page where Carson honors Alsatian polymath Albert Schweitzer, known among other things for championing the principle of “reverence for life,” readers presently encounter this withering prediction: “To Albert Schweitzer who said ‘Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.’” Destroying the earth—scarcely by this time, a fancifully remote prospect, seventeen years after first use of thermonuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a decade after first detonation of the hydrogen bomb. Neither would readers scanning the Contents page find much encouragement there. Among its headings are these foreboding tags: “Elixirs of Death,” “Needless Havoc,” and “The Rumbblings of an Avalanche.”

The book’s subsequent elaboration of these themes is replete with technical explanations, documentation, and manifold examples of the havoc wrought by the massive, indiscriminate application of chemical pesticides such as DDT. Left unchecked, such practices meant to target insect pests threatened not only to silence songbirds, but also to pollute plants, fish, domestic animals, soil, and water. So as commentator Lisa H. Sideris has observed, they threatened, in effect, to silence the “nonhuman world” itself (Sideris 2008, p. 137). Moreover, as these toxic insecticides are carried up the food chain, poisoning human diets and bodies, they also become toxic to human life and health. Chapter 12, “The Human Price” enlarges upon the unpredictable yet frightful “effects of lifetime exposure to chemical and physical agents that are not part of the biological experience of man” (Carson 1962, p. 188). And in two subsequent chapters, Carson describes the terrifying danger that toxic pesticides pose, by way of genetic influence on future generations—to say nothing of their potential, still undetermined today, as carcinogens. This last reminder carries a poignant irony, too, insofar as the author was struggling at the time to finish writing her book while herself battling breast cancer.

A more encompassing cultural indictment emerges from the densely expository middle chapters of *Silent Spring*. Carson certainly acknowledged that humans had just cause, with the benefit of science, to intervene selectively in natural processes—especially, where feasible, through biological rather than chemical means. But for her the supposition that humans can and should fully *control* nature was another matter—an arrogant, self-destructive fantasy. It led ultimately, she claimed, to the folly of waging war against the very natural order—with its “fabric of life”—that sustains us. A misguided conception of science, having “armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons,” has thus ended up turning them, unwittingly, not only toward the annihilation of insects but “against the earth” (Carson 1962, p. 297).

None of this, needless to say, comes as welcome news. So why read such a book? What saving grace, amid the dire warnings, could possibly render this volume not only palatable to Carson’s readers but a best-seller in its day?

Part of the answer, I'd suggest, lies in the grace of Carson's rhetorical artistry and logic. Consider, for example, that celebrated opening chapter, "A Fable for Tomorrow." From the outset, it invites readers to contemplate the pastoral loveliness of a fictive town in America's heartland where "all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings." Such an all-American settlement with its "prosperous farms," "countless birds" (Carson 1962, pp. 1–2), and colorful botanical life would strike readers as altogether familiar. Undoubtedly, too, it presents an appealing image, one that lingers in imagination throughout the book as an ideal against which to measure the immense loss facing us were *that* town's mysterious blight to engulf the whole of actual America.

An even clearer opening toward grace then confronts us from the start of the final chapter, titled "The Other Road." Here Carson as jeremiad prophet calls for a collective conversion of heart that's still possible but requires a decisive shift in attitude, practice, and public policy:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one "less traveled by"—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth.

The choice, after all, is ours to make. (Carson 1962, p. 277)

That Carson here images the nation's current path toward perdition as a superhighway strikes me as oddly, provocatively apt for its time. For in the early 1960s, America's interstate highway system of limited-access roadways was still fairly new. Superhighways, which swiftly changed the character of communities they encompassed or bifurcated, including those near Carson's home in Silver Spring, Maryland, seemed to be sprouting up everywhere. Promising unsurpassed speed, efficiency, and convenience of motorized transport, they represented for many a visible fulfillment of America's postwar ambition to lead the world into a new golden era of industrial-technological progress. Few then considered what might be lost along the way—with respect to the fracturing of settled communities that superhighways often brought about, or the diminishment of felt connection with the land that motorists would henceforth be experiencing en route to their destination.

But Carson wanted readers to recognize that the easier path of a quick-fix to pest control through saturation with pesticides posed more than a *physical* threat to the health of America's citizenry. If no birds sang, that would likewise set at risk everyone's spiritual welfare and aesthetic satisfaction with the world they inhabit.² Preserving these trans-material values, and the earth's larger integrity, would require a novel, thoughtfully variable approach. Hence Carson's concedes, amid the prevailing gloom of her final chapter, that change is still possible but insists that a humbler, less direct way toward future development than technocracy's superhighway represents our "last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth."

The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 was arguably a crucial event in the flourishing of what I have been calling the American green jeremiad. From that time to the present moment, a multitude of other writings have appeared to address grave environmental perils of one sort or another. Several of these works, particularly those expressed in essayistic form, consciously reflect and absorb the example set by Rachel Carson. Several, too, reach beyond warnings of our bodily peril to underscore the spiritual, psychological liabilities of environmental degradation. All of them, though, participate in the precedent set by *Silent Spring* and, more distantly, by those colonial-era New Englanders.

² Despite the significant progress made since 1962 in limiting the destructive use of pesticides, Carson's specter of muted birdsong has proved to be prophetic. In addition to the mass extinction of species, a major, ominous decline in the overall population of North American birds has also taken place over the last forty years—leading to quieter if not silent springtime music in our own day. (Zimmer 2019) Carl Zimmer's recent *New York Times* article, drawing on scientific reports published elsewhere, on how "Birds are Vanishing from North America," discloses that some three billion fewer North American birds—a 29% decline—remain alive in 2019 as compared with 1970.

What array of authorial personalities, literary genres, and subject choices might come to light, then, in an overview of green jeremiads that postdate *Silent Spring*? A few subspecies of that genre deserve mention before I attend more expansively to the recent emergence of climate change literature.

One inescapable topic of jeremiad treatment was—and, I hasten to add, plainly still is—the threat of nuclear war. Although this shadow has darkened prospects for sustenance of all earthly life since 1945, particularly during the Cold War era, Jonathan Schell’s book *The Fate of the Earth*, which appeared in 1982, attempted to dramatize in memorable, grisly detail the likely consequences of an all-out nuclear holocaust. For Schell, unfolding that horrid scenario at the outset represents a first step toward enabling readers to apprehend, fully and emotionally, the threat’s imminent actuality, since “it may be only by descending into this hell in imagination now that we can hope to escape descending into it in reality at some later time” (Schell 1982, p. 5).

For decades now, too, Wendell Berry, has inveighed against the unsustainable character of America’s mainstream farming practices, with their reliance on chemical modes of soil support and pest control. Berry’s agrarian critique of the so-called Green Revolution, of the decline of family farming along with the close-knit ethos of rural communities, of the depersonalizing effects of over-industrialized food production and the growth of agribusiness—all of these themes have long figured across multiple genres of Berry’s writing. One can sense the jeremiad force of this testimony from early on in Berry’s vocation, as in the title of his 1977 volume on *The Unsettling of America*. (Berry 1977)

The anthropogenic extinction of certain favored animal species has presented another cause for alarm in latter-day green jeremiads. Thus the threatened demise of large crustaceans, especially sperm whales, became a prominent issue by the 1970s. A poetic amalgam of the jeremiad complaint with psalm-like praise of this signature animal gained prominence, for example, with the publication of Gary Snyder’s verse oration, “Mother Earth, Her Whales,” included in his Pulitzer-prize winning volume of 1974, which bore the eco-implicated title of *Turtle Island* (Snyder 1974). Peter Matthiessen enlarged upon the theme of diminished biodiversity in the second version (1987) of his *Wildlife in America*. “No one can doubt,” he concluded there, “that the world confronts an unprecedented impoverishment of the diversity of life,” a crisis in the making that “will be the exclusive work of man.” Indifference to the loss of species is effectually, he claimed, an “indifference to the future” that threatens to leave us “fatally diminished as a species” (Matthiessen 1987, pp. 279–80).

By 2014, Elizabeth Kolbert in her volume titled *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnnatural History*, was calling attention to the unprecedented scale and acceleration of humanity’s latter-day erasure of species. Although for Kolbert this mass extinction of manifold plant and animal species bears some resemblance to catastrophic upheavals from earth’s geophysical past, its anthropogenic agency marks something new under the sun. And with coral reefs, the integrity of earth’s oceans, and the survival of many amphibian and other species all thrown into peril, it contributes toward a fundamental and degrading alteration of earth’s environment, dubbed now the era of the anthropocene. “No creature has ever altered life on this planet in this way before,” Kolbert writes (Kolbert 2014, pp. 2–3). Thus enmeshed in what she calls a pivotal “extinction event of our own making,” we can scarcely refrain from wondering “what happens to us?” One ironic possibility, as Kolbert observes in her concluding chapter, is that “we, too, will eventually be undone” (p. 267), rendered extinct as a species by the very transformations we have brought about. *Homo sapiens* could thus end up as both agent and victim of the anthropocene. That prospect, wherein “everything people have written and painted and built” will have “been ground into dust” (p. 269), leads us to contemplate an abyss of existential vulnerability even more unsettling than that borne by cognizance of our personal mortality.

Some of these latter-day writings blend the fearful, admonishing tone of the jeremiad with other modes of expression. In that light we should at least note in passing Ed Abbey’s prophetic discourse in his *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (Abbey 1968). Cactus Ed held strong views, after all, about the welfare of wildlands—above all, desert spaces surrounding Arches National Park near Moab, Utah—that he regarded as vulnerable to desecration despite, or perhaps because of, their federally designated status. Thus assuming the voice of a brashly oracular Jeremiah, he labels a key chapter of

his book “Polemic”—followed in subtitle by “Industrial Tourism and the National Parks.” And in the book’s “Down the River” chapter, set nearby in Arizona, Abbey blends his primary mode of personal narrative with social satire, an adventure tale, and a kind of jeremiad-elegy over the flooding of idyllic Glen Canyon. Here Abbey excoriates what he takes to be the profanation of nature’s sacred sanctuary and waterway, the ruin of an irreplaceable beauty, through this imposition of a damned dam onto the Colorado River.

What choice or saving grace could Abbey possibly offer, though, in recounting such a never-to-be repeated journey through canyonlands whose fate had already sealed by the time the book appeared? True, Glen Canyon *was* gone for good. Too late for hope of conversion there. Yet Abbey’s testimony, like John Muir’s failed campaign to save Hetch Hetchy Valley, effectively galvanized public support for future preservationist bids at other sites in the region near Grand Canyon, including dam projects that had been proposed at Marble Canyon and Bridge Canyon. To that extent Abbey’s writing helped to transform the demise of Glen Canyon, beautifully elegized as well by photographer Eliot Porter, into something of a generative calamity.

Of course no perilous circumstance of the anthropocene era now draws more attention than our environment’s momentous, accelerated alteration in the face of climate change. Much attention has even been directed lately toward a new literary subgenre called “climate fiction” or Clifi. It is represented, at its best, by a work such as Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Flight Behavior* (Kingsolver 2012), which finds an objective correlative for the disruptions effected by climate change in the anomalous patterns of monarch butterfly migration as witnessed by characters residing in my own region of rural Tennessee.

Yet nonfictional prose represents the largest share of what qualifies as classic American environmental literature, including those latter-day versions of the green jeremiad meant to dramatize the imminent, all-encompassing danger posed by climate change. Anxiety over the progress and consequences of climate change doubtless figures now as the chief environmental issue of our time.

Accordingly, the last green jeremiad I want to consider here is Bill McKibben’s landmark exercise of environmental journalism, titled *The End of Nature*, published back in 1989. Since 1989 McKibben has gone on to publish many other writings. He has also served in any number of public roles as social critic, prophetic voice, and environmental activist in leading movements such as 350.org. Since 1989, to be sure, much of the statistical and other data presented in *The End of Nature* needs revision, given all we have learned about the relevant earth science and measurable changes over the last thirty years. Relevant writings, whatever their literary standing, by commentators such as Elizabeth Kolbert and David Wallace-Wells (*The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, Wallace-Wells 2019) do incorporate such updated findings. Why, then, might *The End of Nature* still be regarded as a seminal and indispensable work, even arguably as *the* essential green jeremiad of our time?

For one thing, this book played a pioneering role in drawing climate change—otherwise known then as global warming—to the serious attention of America’s public at large at a time when the issue had as yet received little recognition beyond the small circle of scientific specialists. In this volume McKibben, much as Carson had done, takes pains along the way to explain for nonspecialist readers the science behind the peril he perceives, to offer plentiful evidence of global warming’s reality and major impact on our world. While questions remain about the particular, long-term consequences of climate change, and while much of the quantitative data McKibben supplied in 1989 needs updating, one should also note that the book’s dire predictions sound, if anything, understated in light of the ever-accelerating climactic changes we have been witnessing lately. Or as David Wallace-Wells declares, in the opening salvo of his recent, withering assessment, “It is worse, much worse, than you think” (Wallace-Wells 2019, p. 3).

The End of Nature still deserves to be read for other reasons, too. To begin with, it reflects a grace and force in its mode of presentation that qualifies as authentically literary. And like other enduring specimens of American environmental literature, its larger argument is enlivened and humanized by personal testimony. The book’s voice and storytelling interludes—from the opening chapter all

the way to final paragraphs—help to situate us sympathetically on this author’s home ground, amid the forested lake country of New York State’s Adirondack Mountains. And the ecology of literary fellowship that McKibben invokes within the larger course of his presentation amounts to a who’s who of American nature writers across time: from the eighteenth-century botanist-explorer William Bartram to landmark authors such as Henry Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, John Burroughs, Rachel Carson, Ed Abbey, Loren Eiseley, Barry Lopez, and Wendell Berry. They all participate in the choir of witnesses that McKibben orchestrates.

The work’s figurative and rhetorical artistry likewise contributes to its impact. Part of McKibben’s rhetorical strategy here is to foreground his description of climate change—an almost unimaginably invisible and unlocalized form of environmental deformation—by challenging readers to reconceive the way they apprehend space and time. He points out how the headlong pace of present-day climate shifts challenges their most fundamental expectations about earth-space and geological earth-time. So just as we are inclined to “think of time as imponderably long, we consider the earth to be inconceivably large” (McKibben 1999, pp. 5–6). But the earth we now inhabit conforms to neither of these expectations.

Consider, too, some of the figurative re-visioning developed in this book. McKibben notes, for example, how the greenhouse effect might aptly describe not only the way trapped atmospheric gasses have elevated temperature levels, but also the many ways in which we human beings have unwittingly, across the entire earth, “built a greenhouse—a *human creation*—where once there bloomed a sweet and wild garden” (p. 91). This greenhouse earth comes to resemble yet another human artifice writ large. What then might it mean, we’re pressed to wonder, to find now that “we are at the end of nature”? Surely, too, McKibben intends that telling phrase, “the end of nature” to have a broadly figurative rather than literal import. By the “end of nature,” he writes,

I do not mean the end of the world. The rain will still fall, and the sun will still shine. When I say “nature,” I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of these ideas begins with concrete changes in the reality around us, changes that scientists can measure and enumerate. More and more frequently, these changes will clash with our perceptions, until our sense of nature as eternal and separate is finally washed away and we see all too clearly what we have done. (McKibben 1999, p. 8).

Philosophically, another connotation of the “End” of nature leads us to muse upon its *telos*—that is, its putative meaning, purpose, and essential character. In such a light Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his landmark 1836 volume entitled *Nature* poses this question from the outset: “Let us inquire, to what end is nature?” (Emerson 1983, p. 7)

Above all, McKibben’s book dramatizes the point that the vulnerability we’re forced to confront with the anthropogenic end of nature involves still more than a momentous threat to our physical health and survival as a species. More even, than a threat to the health and survival of manifold species and ecosystems. For the end of nature, McKibben argues, also occasions for our species a profound crisis of spirit. It poses an existential challenge to our personal and collective identity, our capacity for faith even in the possibility of godliness—that is, of any form of self-transcendence, our capacity henceforth to apprehend any essential reality beyond ourselves. Humanity’s pride in its seemingly supreme power to create a kind of shopping mall earth issues in deep sorrow and loneliness, McKibben writes, because in the final analysis “there’s nothing there except us” (p. 89). So we are henceforth left to answer to no one but ourselves—both individually and collectively—for whatever we do. And in place of God, we suppose ourselves to be the only deities over earth worthy of our knowledge and belief. This new idolatry leaves us unable to reverence anything or anyone outside ourselves,³ to apprehend our contingent yet potentially satisfying place within the larger, wondrous expanse of Creation. In sum, the end of nature carries a “faith-shattering” potential (McKibben 1999, p. 79).

³ (Woodruff 2001) Philosopher Paul Woodruff, in his discourse on *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, offers a revealing perspective on the legacy and broadly non-parochial, trans-cultural implications of “reverence.”

But this crushing jeremiad does hold out to readers, at least as of 1989, some prospect of saving grace. Recalling Rachel Carson's exhortation from 1962 to choose the road "less traveled," McKibben (whose writing, like Carson's and Kolbert's, had appeared first in pages of *The New Yorker* magazine) observes that we "could exercise our reason to do what no other animal can do: we could limit ourselves voluntarily, *choose* to remain God's creatures instead of making ourselves gods" (McKibben 1999, p. 214). For remarkably enough, he points out, state political leaders *had once* chosen, for example, to adopt policies that reversed the previous course of deforestation in the Adirondack woodlands surrounding his home in New York State, thus enabling a "second-chance wilderness" to emerge there. Fortunately, too, the world had "shifted course" in other ways following Carson's jeremiad warning about the deleterious effects of DDT.

Yet McKibben was in 1989—and certainly still is—far from underestimating the obstacles to our civilization's changing its response to climate change. To advance that case with as much force and urgency as possible, he relied not only on an array of scientific evidence and explanations, but also on personal narrative and anecdote, on an array of literary invocations from American naturalist writers and from Milton's *Paradise Lost*—even, from the faith perspective of his own Methodist Christianity, on an appeal to biblical texts. Perhaps surprisingly, the chief biblical text that informs his essay is the Hebrew Book of Job, about which he ended up writing another full though brief volume of commentary (*The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation*) (McKibben 1994). In the Job-author's dramatization of earth's blessedly wild creatures—mighty Behemoth, Leviathan, and the rest—McKibben locates the expansive, enspirited vision of a Creation vastly larger than ourselves. So he finds the testimony of God's voice from the whirlwind, though chastening indeed, to be revelatory. Here is how, within *The End of Nature*, he sums up the earthy force of that revelation:

The Old Testament contains in many places, but especially in the book of Job, one of the most far-reaching defenses ever written of wilderness, of nature free from the hand of man. The argument gets at the heart of what the loss of nature will mean to us.... Finally, God arrives, a voice from the whirlwind. But instead of engaging in deep metaphysical discussion, he talks at some length about nature, about concrete creation... "Behold now Behemoth," booms God. "He eateth grass as an ox, his strength is in his loins... Shall any take him when he is on watch, or pierce through his nose with a snare?" The answer, clearly, is no; the message, though not precisely an answer to Job's plaint, is that we may not judge everything from our point of view—that all nature is not ours to subdue. (McKibben 1999, pp. 75–76)

In this cultural moment, when we face a more accelerated threat to climate stability and environmental sustainability across the globe than formerly suspected, sustaining the jeremiad's traditional reserve of hopeful exhortation has itself become problematic. Hopelessness, in fact, seems more than slightly warranted. Scientists confirm that even if international initiatives to reduce carbon dioxide and methane emissions were shifted promptly into high gear—as now seems unlikely—it would already be too late to reverse or even to halt the overall slide toward atmospheric degradation, too late to restore the wondrous old earth of preindustrial memory. Evidently, too, the least privileged members of the human family must continue to bear the worst consequences of humanity's dereliction in this regard. As activist Peterson Toscano points out, the ecojustice consequences of climate disruption are such that "we may all be in the same boat, but we are not all on the same deck" (Toscano 85, in Schade and Bullitt-Jonas 2019). And without some currently unimaginable breakthrough in technology, apparently the best outcome we might expect now—if we even dare to call such a desideratum "hope"—is some mitigation of those otherwise grave debasements of planetary life and health that now seem inevitable.

In the face of all this, the green jeremiad's traditional appeal to hoped-for change becomes indeed problematic, ambiguous if not downright futile. Yet ambiguity and paradox are of course the lifeblood of literary expression, arguably the stuff of life itself. What Mary Evelyn Tucker has termed a "tsunami of sadness" (Tucker xiii, in Schade and Bullitt-Jonas 2019) that engulfs all who care deeply about the climate crisis might thus serve at least to remind us that the virtue of Christian hope cannot

be simplistically equated with temperamental optimism or wishful thinking. Best understood as a cultivated outgrowth of faith and love, it arises instead from a radical trust in, and abandonment to, a divine presence beyond ourselves, trust in the eschatological mystery of redemption. So within this mortal life it remains, like that which it aspires to achieve, a work-in-progress rather than a stable presumption.

From the standpoint of this elusive, self-contradictory version of gospel “hope,” all human initiatives to combat and overcome the climate crisis must be regarded as impossible indeed—and yet, paradoxically, an imperative. As the arresting headline of one op-ed contribution to the *New York Times* puts it, “Stopping Climate Change is Hopeless: Let’s Do it.”⁴ Hope of this sort looks to live fully within, rather than in denial of, the encircling bounds of grief, discouragement, disillusionment, and near-despair. Thus critic Roger Gottlieb, in a discerning recent essay titled “Living with Environmental Despair,” concludes that “what is called for” at this juncture “is perhaps neither hope nor hopelessness—but courage to live with the fear,” given that “despair, I suspect, will for the indefinite future be a permanent part of an awakened consciousness” (Gottlieb 168, 167, in [Schade and Bullitt-Jonas 2019](#)).

In the final analysis, then, what might we name as chief saving graces of America’s Green Jeremiad tradition, as we look beyond its graphic depiction of some ruinous future lying ahead of us? For one thing, green jeremiads confront us with a bracing declaration of the truth of things. They press us to see where we really are, where we and our fellow creatures must now be headed as a consequence of what we have done with and to the earth we have inherited, especially within the last thirty years. There is arguably a grace latent in just that much clear factual honesty, particularly in this post-truth era of public discourse, even when the truth in question happens to be inconvenient, unwelcome, or something we already know as abstract fact but have yet to absorb existentially. Or as Jonathan Schell prophesied, back in 1982 concerning the world’s nuclear sword of Damocles, “At present, most of us do nothing. We look away ... We deny the truth that is all around us” (p. 230).

“We deny the truth that is all around us”—still largely true, it seems, of this nation’s practical response to climate change. But green jeremiad authors insist upon holding open for the moment some prospect for seeing or doing otherwise, despite their hopeless prognosis for recovering an earth of fond remembrance. A distant echo thus remains audible from those decades ago when Rachel Carson ended her best-known book with a chapter titled “The Other Road,” or Jonathan Schell with a chapter titled “The Choice.” And though Bill McKibben in 1989 saw through *Nature’s End* with such penetration that he could only “hope against hope” to see anything else, he, too, grants that we’re still invited to choose between “humble” and more dismissively “defiant” approaches to the specter of climate change ([McKibben 1999](#), p. 193). And choosing the humbler path of relative austerity, whatever its practical result, helps at least to shatter the illusion of our radical self-sufficiency as masters of the world we inhabit, both as individuals and collectively.

I would sound one last note about the green jeremiad’s potential for transformative grace. For the chastening, hortatory passion of the Jeremiad author likewise conveys its own testimony of faith—faith, at least, in the readership’s resilience, moral seriousness, and capacity for change, if not in a divine wellspring of transformation. It is, after all, by virtue of such faith, that the better angels of our nature might be awakened by argument, that prophetic writers find cause to launch their jeremiads in the first place. To alter if not reverse earth’s current course of anthropogenic degradation doubtless requires a godly abundance of faith, imagination, and resolve. Conversely, though, the green jeremiad might also contribute toward our recalling, and summoning up, the requisite faith.

Perhaps it is no wonder, then, Bill McKibben concludes his classic jeremiad of 1989 by directing our gaze not down to all the environmental degradations, present and future, from which we shrink

⁴ From an op-ed piece by Auden Schendler and Andrew P. Jones published on 6 October 2018, cited by Jim Antal, at the start of his essay on “Fighting Climate Change: Our Responsibility, Our Vocation, Our Salvation,” 123 in [Schade and Bullitt-Jonas](#).

but upward, toward the starlit heavens. In such a light, he writes of the deep satisfaction he and his wife once felt, late at night atop a rocky northern summit, under a clear August sky, as they beheld with fresh confidence how “This vast nature above our atmosphere still holds mystery and wonder” (McKibben 1999, p. 217).

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