

Patrick Westfall

Instructor: Sarah Pike

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From Great Mother to Mere Matter:

The Exile of the Nature Goddess and the Desacralization of the Western Landscape

Abstract: The conceptualization of Nature in Western thought has undergone a series of radical transformations that have fundamentally redefined the human experience. From 20,000 B.C. until the late Paleolithic era, Western humanity embraced an organismic worldview that equated the physical earth with an immanent, all-inclusive Nature goddess (Baring & Cashford 1991, xi). However, the transition into the Bronze and Iron Ages initiated a restructuring of the sacred that shifted the focus toward a transcendent, patriarchal monotheism that exiled Nature and the Divine Feminine from the material world.

This paper argues that as Western philosophy moved from viewing Nature as an ensouled divine *entity* to a desacralized mechanical *object*, humanity suffered a profound existential detachment from the biological systems that sustain and give meaning to life. This "crisis of meaning" is exemplified by the modern alienation from our food sources and local ecosystems, which is a theme made explicit in Gary Snyder's chapter entitled "Plain Talk" (Snyder 1974, 91-102). Ultimately, I contend that this loss of intimacy with the natural world has resulted in a pervasive, non-clinical malaise; an existential depression born of a society that has forgotten its place as stewards and students within the earth's kingdoms.

I. The Invisible Ache of the Modern Soul

As members of the contemporary Western era, our societies are characterized by a strange and pervasive paradox; we live in an age of total connectivity yet an alarming number of us are haunted by a sense of profound isolation (Louv 2008, 34). This is not merely the loneliness of the individual in a crowd, but an existential alienation that seems to emanate from our societal institutions, our families, and from within our own hearts. Emile Durkheim called this sense of existential alienation *anomie*, and it may be a form of "non-clinical malaise;" a type of existential "alienation" that traditional psychology struggles to name because it does not originate within the brain's chemistry alone but from an acute lack of meaning in our lives (Taylor 2010, 9). Instead, it more closely resembles a soul-sickness born of a society that has forgotten its place as stewards and students within the earth's kingdoms.

This paper argues that the modern crisis of meaning is the direct result of a radical transformation in how Western thought conceptualizes the natural world and our place within it. We have moved from an organismic worldview where the Earth was perceived as an divinely-ensouled entity, the Great Mother (Baring & Cashford 1991, 47-48), toward viewing matter as a desacralized mechanical object; a resource to be mined, measured, and manipulated (Collingwood 1945, 7). In this transition, humanity has suffered a profound existential detachment from the biological systems that sustain life, but by tracing the historical exile of the Nature Goddess and the subsequent rise of a mechanistic universe, we can begin to understand the roots of our ecological and psychological crises and find the path back to a re-enchanted landscape.

II. Paleolithic Immanence

To understand how much has changed, we must look back to the beginning of Western civilization. From 20,000 B.C. through the late Paleolithic era, archaeology and the historical record indicate that the primary image of the sacred was the figure of the Mother Goddess. As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford argue in their comprehensive work, *The Myth of the Goddess*, this was not merely a primitive deity to be worshipped, but a "perception of the universe as an organic, alive, and sacred whole" (Baring and Cashford 1991, xi). In this organismic worldview, the Earth was not a "thing" separate from humanity, but rather all life participated as her children in a "Cosmic Web," a structure where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related because they share in the sanctity of the original source (Baring and Cashford 1991, xi). In this panentheistic context, the divine was immanent; present *within* the material world. Thus the soil, the rain, the migration of animals, and the cycles of the sun and moon were all epiphanies of the planetary nature Goddess.

This ancient sense of an ensouled world is vividly captured in Greg Sarris's *How a Mountain Was Made*. Drawing from Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo traditions, Sarris presents a world where the landscape is not merely passive matter but a rich narrative landscape. For the people of Sonoma Mountain, the mountain itself is a *being* with agency. Sarris notes that "all things on Sonoma Mountain connect with one another," creating a lived reality where even the "Water Bug" and the "Rain" have stories and songs (Sarris 2017, 1). In Sarris's tales, the twin crows Question Woman and Answer Woman act as guides through a world where knowledge is specific to geographical locations. This echoes the Paleolithic experience of communion with physical

land as also being communion with its divine component as well; there was no distinction between the biological system and the spiritual system. Thus when Sarris writes about the "Chief's Song," he is describing an enchantment that keeps people and the world in balance; the antithesis of modern detachment (Sarris 2017, 107).

III. The Rise of Transcendence and the Exile of the Goddess

The transition from the Paleolithic to the Bronze and Iron Ages initiated what can be called a great divorce, as it saw the "exile" of the Nature Goddess and the restructuring of the sacred into a patriarchal, transcendent monotheism (Baring & Cashford 1991, 40; 428). Mark Smith's scholarship in *The Birth of Monotheism* traces this shift in ancient Israel. In the early Bronze Age, the Eastern Mediterranean was a tapestry of localized, nature-oriented deities associated with fertility, storms, the moon, and the sun. These gods and goddesses were part of a pantheon known as the *Sons of El* which closely resembled the gods of Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia. Over centuries, Smith traces how these deities were either suppressed or absorbed into the single, transcendent figure of Yahweh and how El's consort, Asherah, was all but forgotten. This shift can be viewed as a psychic revolution which still greatly affects our Western worldview to the present day as we try to avert our reasoning minds from the quandary of Creation issuing from an exclusively all-male deity.

As the God of Abraham rose to prominence in the ancient Near East, the divine was moved from *within* nature to *outside* of it. If Yahweh (now God with a capital G) is the single transcendent creator who exists outside of space and time, then the material world is no longer his body but merely one of his objects. Baring and Cashford argue that this process "emptied animate life

from nature" and transferred that life into a humanity now cast in a relation of opposition to or dominance over the natural world (Baring and Cashford 1991, 661). Noted historian Lynn White Jr. critiques Christianity's doctrine of dominance over nature: "Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (White 1967, 4).

This move from immanent Mother (identity/inclusion) to transcendent Father (dissociation/separation) symbolized an increasing detachment from the Earth. Nature, once seen as the nurturing mother of all life, began to be viewed as something to be overcome or transcended, and this may be the historical root of our present existential detachment. When the source of meaning is confined to a celestial realm, the Earth becomes merely a type of waiting room rather than our permanent home. It is in the shift to transcendence that the "non-clinical depression" begins to take root; by removing the "soul" from the landscape we created a psychological vacuum. Humans were no longer part of a sacred web but subjects of a distant king. This created a fundamental restlessness or dissatisfaction with life that may be linked with Buddhism's idea of *dukkha* as the suffering that arises from *thirst*; in this case, a thirst for intimacy with the natural world. This sense is well summarized as being *in* the world, but not truly belonging *to* it (John 15:19 KJV). This spiritual displacement is the precursor to the modern feeling that our daily lives in the physical world are ultimately hollow.

IV. The Christian Axiom and the Defeat of Animism

The desacralization process reached its zenith through the spread of Christianity. In his seminal 1967 article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Lynn White Jr. argues that Christianity is the world's most anthropocentric religion, explaining that by defeating animism as the belief that every tree, spring, and mountain has its own spirit or "genius loci," Christianity made it possible to exploit nature with total indifference (White 1967, 4). According to White, one did not cut down a tree or dam a stream in the earlier animistic world without first performing a ritual to appease the spirit residing there (White 1967, 4). He argues that Christianity replaced this reverence with the cold axiom that "nature has no reason for existence save to serve man" (White 1967, 6).

Further, White's critique emphasizes that this theological shift provided the moral justification for the technological exploitation of the planet. If the Earth is a desacralized object, then there is no sin in its destruction. However, Western civilization has paid a dear price for this dominion over the world in the ecological distress and the crises of identity, purpose, and meaning that result. As we conquered the Earth, we became increasingly alienated from the very biological systems that sustain us (Louv 2008, 34). In our hopes for something eternally transcendent, we have gained the world but lost our intimacy with it, and have forgotten our place within its interconnected systems.

V. The Renaissance and the Birth of the Machine

As Christianity provided the theological framework for desacralization, the Scientific Revolution provided the philosophical architecture. Noted philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood, in *The Idea of Nature*, identifies this as the move from the "organismic" view of the Greeks in the Classical era to the "mechanistic" view of the Renaissance (Collingwood 1945, 5).

For the ancient Greeks, the world was an intelligent organism that was not devoid of psyche, defined as soul or mind. There was no "problem of the relation between matter and mind" because no difference was recognized (Collingwood 1945, 111). However, Renaissance thinkers, like Descartes in his 1644 *Principles of Philosophy*, reimagined nature as a machine in which he did "not recognize any difference between the machines made by craftsmen and the various bodies that nature alone composes" (Descartes 1985, IV.203). In this view, matter is formless and indeterminate, and the universe is a collection of dead parts acting according to cold mathematical laws.

This mechanical worldview created a "Gulf of Misunderstanding" between science and philosophy (Collingwood 1945, 3). Natural science became the study of natural facts (mere matter), while philosophy and religion were relegated to the realm of the mind. Under this paradigm, nature became a desacralized mechanical object. The mountain was no longer a *being* as in Sarris's stories, but merely a pile of minerals. The forest was no longer a sacred grove, it was simply standing timber. This reductionism was a dangerous step toward the existential

detachment of humanity because when humanity views the world as a dead machine, we may eventually begin to view our own bodies and spirits, and those of others, in the same way.

VI. The Crisis of Meaning: Alienation from the Biological

The consequence of this 2,500-year trajectory is a modern Western world where we are profoundly detached from our biological reality. We live in a society that has "forgotten wild plants,[and] their virtues," as Gary Snyder notes in *Turtle Island* (Snyder 1974, 106). This detachment is perhaps most evident in our relationship with food. For the majority of human history, eating was a ritual of participation in the cosmic web, but today, food is simply a resource that is provided by a global mechanistic system. We are alienated from our food sources and local ecosystems as a result, and this alienation has led to our present crisis of meaning because we no longer understand or participate in the very systems that keep us alive.

Snyder argues that Western culture has forgotten its stories or traded them for statistics. In his essays and poems, he critiques trends that are focused on economic growth that view the land only through the lens of utility. When we lose Sarris's idea of the "Chief's Song" and replace it with a spreadsheet, we suffer a loss of inner peace. This is the essence of our non-clinical malaise or existential depression: it is the psychological weight of living in a world that has been rashly decoded and desacralized until nothing is considered to be "real" except statistics and particles viewed under microscopes.

Moreover, this non-clinical malaise should not be perceived as a dysfunction on the part of affected individuals, but as a normal response to an unhealthy environment. Our biology is

still Paleolithic and our bodies remember the cosmic web, but our modern culture tries to force us to live as mechanical objects in a mechanical world. This friction creates a chronic, low-level but all-pervasive grief that can be equated to a form of mourning for the lost intimacy we once had with ourselves, with the Great Mother, and with life itself as part of the divine Mystery.

VII. The Path to Re-Enchantment

Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* serves as a modern example of an optimistic path to re-enchantment. For Snyder, sustainability is not just an ultimate goal but a spiritual practice. It involves seeing ourselves as part of a "continent of watersheds and life-communities" (Snyder 1974, 101). By acknowledging that "the living flowing land...sings through us," people can begin to heal from our detachment and move from being exploiters to becoming stewards (Snyder 1974, 106).

Bron Taylor, a professor of Religion and Environmental Ethics, identifies this shift as a global phenomenon. His "Dark Green Religion" considers nature itself to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value and worthy of reverent care. This refers to a form of "Gaian earth religion" that often emerges from evolutionary biology and environmentalism rather than from traditional scripture (Taylor 2010, 14). Taylor notes that nature spirituality is far more prevalent than is commonly recognized and represents a "decisive change in ideas and practices," where the protection of the Earth is viewed as a sacred trust (Taylor 2010, 202). This is the modern return to the Great Mother; re-enchanting our world through a spiritualized ecology, in forms that are compatible with contemporary science and the core of most religions.

Similarly, Greg Sarris's work reminds us that humanity can change our relationship to the natural world by listening to the stories of the land. In *How a Mountain Was Made*, the "Answer Woman" tells us that the way to fix the world is to return to the specific knowledge of our place in it. This involves recognizing the sacred power in every being from the crows to the stones. By recognizing that "the mountain" possesses its own independent power and presence, humanity can escape the isolation of a cold, clockwork cosmos and rejoin the interconnected community of all living things.

VIII. Reintegrating as Stewards and Students of Nature

The transformation of Nature from an ensouled divine entity to a desacralized mechanical object has been the defining journey of Western civilization. It has brought us immense technological power, but at the cost of our existential sanity. Thus the crisis of meaning and the resulting pervasive non-clinical malaise of our time are the symptoms of this 2,500-year exile from the Great Mother. To heal this existential depression, Western societies must reject the errant Christian axiom of *dominion* and the desacralizing Renaissance axiom of the *machine*, and move toward a re-enchanted worldview that reintegrates the sacred into the material world; a "Dark Green" awareness that sees the Earth not as a resource, but as the living body of a planetary Creator. We must learn to become stewards and students of the Earth once more and re-enchant our local ecosystems. Only by remembering the "Chief's Song" and recognizing our place within the cosmic web can we hope to end our self-imposed exile and truly return to the storied landscape of "Turtle Island." The mountain is still there, still singing; the question is whether we are willing to listen.

Annotated Bibliography

Baring, Anne, and Jules Cashford. *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*. London: Viking Arcana, 1991.

This comprehensive work traces the historical and psychological shift from Paleolithic mother-goddess worship to the rise of patriarchal religions. The authors argue that the loss of the "Goddess" image led to a desacralization of nature. This source is foundational for my essay as it provides the long-arc narrative of how the divine feminine, and the earth by extension, lost its sacred status in Western consciousness.

Collingwood, R. G. *The Idea of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945.

Collingwood provides a philosophical history of how nature has been defined by philosophers from the ancient Greeks to the modern era. He distinguishes between the ancient view of nature as a living organism and the Renaissance view of nature as a machine. This text helps bridge the gap between the religious and intellectual shifts that allowed for the industrial exploitation of the environment.

Descartes, Rene. *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans.

John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), IV.203.

In Part IV, Article 203 of this foundational text, Descartes articulates the definitive mechanistic view of nature that would come to dominate Western scientific thought. By reducing the physical world to "extended matter," Descartes provides the philosophical framework for the "disenchantment" of the world.

Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.

Updated ed. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008.

Louv introduces the concept of "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the psychological, physical, and cognitive costs of Western society's alienation from the natural world.

Sarris, Greg. *How a Mountain Was Made: Stories*. Berkeley: Heyday, 2017.

Through a series of interconnected stories rooted in Coast Miwok tradition, Sarris demonstrates a living relationship between people, place, and the sacred. Unlike the historical sources, this text provides a primary-style narrative of how nature religion is practiced and maintained.

Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.

Smith explores how early Israelite religion emerged from a Canaanite polytheistic background where deities like the goddess Asherah were prominent. This is a crucial source for showing the transition point when a goddess-inclusive nature religion began to consolidate into a monotheistic framework centered on a male deity.

Smith, Mark S. *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Complementing his previous work, Smith uses the Ugaritic texts to show how the "divine family" of polytheism was gradually restructured. For my essay, this provides the technical evidence of how nature-oriented deities (associated with storms, fertility, and the sun) were absorbed into the single figure of Yahweh.

Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974.

This collection of poems and essays marks a 20th-century return to nature-based spirituality. Snyder blends Zen Buddhism with Native American concepts of "Turtle Island" (North America). It serves as a modern example of "re-enchantment," showing how contemporary writers attempt to reintegrate the sacred back into the physical landscape.

Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

Taylor identifies a modern global phenomenon where nature itself is considered sacred without necessarily requiring a traditional god or goddess. This source is vital for my essay as it discusses how evolutionary biology and environmentalism are creating new forms of goddess-like reverence for Gaia or the biosphere.

White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7.

In this seminal and controversial article, White argues that Christian anthropocentrism (the idea that humans are separate from and have dominion over nature) is responsible for the ecological crisis. This source provides the critical link between the decline of nature religions and the physical degradation of the planet.