

Ny Jord: Tidsskrift for naturkritik

Forlaget Virkelig, 323 pages, illustrated. Danish

What is nature criticism?

The small independent Copenhagen publisher Forlaget Virkelig has during its hitherto brief existence focused on beautifully designed and finished translations of primarily younger authors from the other Nordic countries, as well as, in the Bestiarium series, translations of shorter works by major figures of 20th century literature. In the autumn of 2015 they added *Ny Jord. Tidsskrift for naturkritik* (New Earth: Journal of Nature Criticism) to their portfolio. The idea of nature criticism, the editors tell us in their foreword, has ‘arisen from the desire to establish a new critical concept. ... The preconditions for nature criticism, we believe, are once and for all to move beyond the idea that human beings and nature are separated or can in any way be kept apart. Ecocriticism’s fantasy about a *cordon sanitaire* between humans and nature is therefore not to be found here, neither are traditions which insist on man as something special created outside of nature.’

In the face of the visible effects of climate change, there has been a growing awareness and concern amongst a young generation of artists and academics that we need to take better care of the planet if the human race is to survive — indeed to the extent that concept of ‘the Anthropocene’ has been in danger of becoming something of a buzzword in Danish cultural life over the past year or two. As lecturer in Bioethics, Mickey Gjerris says in the roundtable discussion at the centre of the publication: ‘It [the Anthropocene] is an enormously interesting concept, because something utterly obvious is suddenly being conceptualised. Now it has become a discovery.’ To their credit, the editors of *Ny Jord* have taken up the topic with seriousness and rigour, seeking to shed light on it from a number of relevant viewpoints. For example from that of the geologist, the biochemist, the literary author, the visual artist, and more.

‘The Anthropocene’, for the uninitiated, is the idea that human beings have had such a decisive effect on the planet and its ecosystems that a new geological era can arguably be defined, so that we no longer may be said to live in the Holocene, but the Anthropocene era. Where exactly this new era should begin is, however, a point of debate, as geologist Minik Rosing argues in the roundtable discussion: ‘all other geological periods have been defined retrospectively. Normally one observes a period’s common features and names the period after those features. But now we are beginning to define a period which reaches into the future. And the question is, can one actually do that? And then the next question is, when did this period start? ... one could say that the decisive difference is that we found out how to use fire for our own ends. ... That’s millions of years ago. Another could be agriculture, which is about 10,000 years ago. One could also say that the industrial revolution is a marker. And because of the desire to find and define that energy which has changed the entire geological layer, the nuclear tests of the 1940s and 1950s have been suggested, because they have laid an isotope signal everywhere on Earth at once.’

The Anthropocene, then, though it offers a useful handle with which to grasp the obvious fact that we are causing drastic changes to our environment, is in its details not necessarily an easy concept

to work with. Neither does *Ny Jord* concentrate solely on it, but is rather, in attempting to establish the foundations of its new critical concept, prepared to gather partially conflicting positions from across historical periods and let them play off one another. Francis of Assisi, for example, is granted a sort of mini-suite, encompassing the original text of his *Laudes Creaturarum* (plus Danish translation), a text about St Francis by Danish author Johannes Jørgensen from 1907, and a new text about the saint's approach to life and the development of the Franciscan order by co-editor Andreas Vermehren Holm. Similarly, we are presented with an excerpt from the compendious oeuvre of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, natural historian and director of the Jardin des Plantes from 1739, followed by a contextualising essay on the man and his life's work. In contrast to the rational taxonomic system of his great rival and exact contemporary the Swede Carl von Linné, who focussed on individual parts such as the reproductive organs in order to categorise nature, Buffon insisted that objects cannot be described in isolation from their surroundings, and investigates the relationship of plants and animals to their environment. For example, for Buffon an important quality of a horse is its use by humans. It is therefore ridiculous to Buffon that a horse be classified with a zebra. Nature is never of itself, it is always in contact with other phenomena.

'Are we supposing there is purpose in nature? Aren't we then back with religion?'

So Jesper Hoffmeyer asks rhetorically in his essay 'Biosemiosis as a causal category', which takes us rapid fire through a number of concepts, from CS Peirce's concept of final causality, a critique of Newtonian causality and the second law of thermodynamics, through a description of a biological autocatalytic system (the Florida yellow bladderwort, its periphyton, and grazing zooplankton), and a critique of Shannon and Weaver's model of communication, before returning to Peirce and his concept of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. To accept Peirce's assertion that it is 'a widespread error to think that a final cause is necessarily a purpose. ... purpose is the conscious modification of final causation', Hoffmeyer has earlier pointed out, is difficult because we are 'socialised into a Newtonian way of thinking', that is, the linearity of A causing B. Biological autocatalytic systems are for Hoffmeyer essential real world examples in proving that 'the fact that occurrence A even occurs is already a step in a pattern of occurrences which also includes occurrences of B's type.' Nevertheless Hoffmeyer acknowledges that it 'may seem repellent to some' that 'humans are as spiritual beings entangled in a natural semiosphere, a global network of relations of meaning'.

The point appears then to be not that nature should be supposed (quasi-religiously) to have a purpose, but that, to paraphrase Hoffmeyer, the insistence of the medical and natural sciences on reducing final causality to pure indexicality or subjecting effective causality to deterministic brute force has, while bringing these sciences many victories, caused them to treat all living things as asemiotic devices. As can be seen, this is a fascinating and ambitious text that dares to make intellectual demands of the reader and demonstrates the fearlessness of the editors. I have to quibble, however, that despite its fairly academic tone, it is marked by the sense of an academic article having been re-edited for more general consumption, with the process not quite having been brought to completion. One might rephrase the point by stating that the sciences, in focusing on the specific functions of separate constitutive parts, lose sight of the interaction of organisms as

complex systems. It is this rehabilitation of the idea of humans, animals, plants, and minerals as codependent which lies at the heart of the 'nature criticism' proposed by the volume.

Running through the well considered structure of the articles are several different pictorial elements. Co-editor Jeppe Carstensen's essay on the history of land reclamation in Denmark is accompanied by a selection of photographs of drainage canals, machines, and workers taken from a book entitled *Det tabte land* (The Lost Land). Interspersed among the articles are a number of doctored photographic works by the Austrian artist Lois Weinberger. Illustrator Carl Christian Tofte's meditation on how observing birds in their natural habitat and drawing them offers an alternative 'realism' to the photographs, a different connection between viewer and subject, is accompanied by a generous selection of his drawings of plants and birds. An image of St Francis feeding the birds appears not alongside the mini-suite in his honour, but at the beginning of an extract from CS Peirce's discussion of the concept of God much later in the volume.

Many more of the individual articles deserve to be highlighted if only space allowed. Ernst Jünger's (author of the World War I memoir *Storm of Steel*) reminiscences of sunbathing, beetle hunting and local cuisine on the beaches of Sardinia and San Pietro serve to conjure a fascinatingly bodily experience of nature. Danish natural historian Morten D D Hansen and British essayist Brian Dillon tell two related tales of nature's resilience and ability to make human misuse and destruction fertile again. Philosopher and historian Justin E H Smith analyses, in *Kafka's Burrow, or, The Extended-Body Hypothesis*, the congruence of body and home, suggesting that there is no clear border between them, noting in conclusion that 'some termite mounds are constructed so that they absorb oxygen and give off carbon dioxide in a way that is reminiscent of certain qualities of the respiratory system of animals.' Along the way, he notes that 'St Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that the body is a temple, while the Pythagoreans complained that it was a prison.' This essay is followed by an extract from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which has been given the title 'The Migration of Souls and Vegetarianism', and which, the perspicacious reader will note, is nothing other than the conclusion of The Doctrines of Pythagoras passage, which teaches not only that to kill a beast might be to harm the soul of a man, but also that all is flux, enumerating the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of natural phenomena, and could in its entirety almost have functioned as a poetics of 'nature criticism', given the editorial insistence on the multidisciplinary and poetic essence of this new concept.

If I were to be so churlish as to offer a criticism of this admirable and generous enterprise (apart from the fact that another round or two of proofreading wouldn't have gone amiss), it would be that the selection of younger Danish authors does not display the same breadth of curiosity as the other aspects of the collection, appearing to be rather more confined to the comfort zone of Forlaget Virkelig's existing network than is the case with the theoretical and artistic elements, which range more widely and boldly. Of the younger Danish authors, the excerpts from Liv Sejrbo Lidegaard's *Ved vejen, det grønne inden tørken* (By the road, the greenery before the drought) stand out most strongly. She reveals an intense and tactile relation to natural phenomena and a rare sensitivity to the people around her, which occasionally flares up as a socially and even politically aware wish for 'a well thought through and durable system.'

Critical voices might point out that by the end of 323 pages of ranging across disciplines and epochs we still don't know what nature criticism is; but those pages perhaps also tell us that it is not so much a question of 'is' as of a method of approach. It will be very interesting indeed to see how the editors will seek to contribute to that approach in the future.

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