

Alejandro de Acosta

**Green Nihilism or
Cosmic Pessimism**

November 20th, 2013

Contents

* * *	5
* * *	8
* * *	13
* * *	17
* * *	20
* * *	24

Men have been so mad as to believe that God is pleased by harmony

Spinoza

Some of us have read *Desert*, and opted to reprint it, to promote its discussion, maybe to promulgate (at least repeat) some of what is said in it. Despite our efforts, I still feel it has not had the uptake it deserves. I am beginning to think that the issue is less about our limited ability to distribute texts and discuss ideas, and more about the limits of the milieu itself. As to the reception *Desert* did get, the most one can say is that a few literate anarchists quickly *processed* it, either absorbing it into their position or rejecting it. This scanning-followed-by-yes-or-no operation pretty much sums up what many anarchists consider reading to be. One sort of rejection was documented in the egoist newspapers *The Sovereign Self* and *My Own* (and **responded to** in *The Anvil*): it concerned the idea that the anonymous author of *Desert* was engaging in a pessimistic rhetoric for dramatic effect while concealing their ultimate clinging to hope, perhaps like those who endlessly criticize love, only to be revealed as the most perfectionist of romantics in the last instance. *That* exchange on *Desert* tells much more about the readers—what they expected, what they are looking for—than the booklet itself. As does the other, sloppier, sort of rejection of the writing, which has for obvious reasons not appeared in print. More than one person has been overheard to say something to the tune of: “Oh, *Desert*? I hated it! It was so *depressing*!” And that is it. No discussion, no engagement, just stating in a fairly direct manner that, if the writing did not further the agenda of hope or reinforce the belief that mass movements can improve the global climate situation, then it is not relevant to a discussion of green issues (which are therefore redefined as setting out from that agenda and belief). In the background of both exchanges is a kind of obtuseness characteristic of the anarchist milieu: our propensity to be as ready to pick up the new thing as to dismiss it either immediately after consumption or soon after another consumes it. This customary speed, which we share with many with whom we share little else, is what necessitates the yes-or-no operation. Whatever the response is, it has to happen quickly. (We are the best of Young-Girls when it comes to the commodities we ourselves produce.) To do something else than mechanically phagocyte *Desert* (or anything else worth reading) and absorb it or excrete it back out onto the bookshelf/literature table/shitpile, some of us will need to take up a far less practical, far less pragmatic attitude towards the best of what circulates in our little space of reading. In short, it is to intervene in the smooth functioning of the anarchist-identity machine, our own homegrown apparatus, which reproduces the milieu, ingesting unmarked ideas, expelling anarchist ideas. Of course all those online rants, our many little zines, our few books—the ones we write and make, and the ones that we adopt now and then—are only part of this set-up, which also

includes living arrangements, political practices, anti-political projects, and so on. All together, from a few crowded metropolises to the archipelago of outward- or inward-looking towns, that array could be called the machine that makes anarchist identity, one of those awful hybrids of anachronism and ultramodernity that clutter our times. But, trivial though the role of *Desert* may be in the reproduction of the milieu, its small role in that reproduction is especially remarkable given that it directly addresses the limits of that reproduction, and, indirectly, of the milieu itself. Its reception is a kind of diagnostic test, a demonstration of our special obtuseness. If I am right about even some of the preceding, then the increasingly speculative nature of what follows ought to prove interesting to a few, and repulsive to the rest.

* * *

I intend the *or* in the title to be destabilizing. It does not indicate a choice to be made between two already somewhat fictitious positions. (Quotation marks for each would not have been strong enough. To say this or that position is fictitious may seem to be belied by the advance, here or there, of those who present themselves as the representatives of positions. This is where we need to make our case most forcefully, arguing back that to take on a position *as an identity* simply eludes the *what* of position altogether, making it rest on a different, more familiar kind of fiction.) By placing the *or* between them I mean to mark a slippage, which I consider to be a movement of involuntary thought. Not being properly yoked to action, to what is considered voluntary, it is the kind of thought most have little time for. It has to do with passing imperceptibly from one state to another, and what may be learned in that shift. It is a terrible kind of thought at first, and, for some, will perhaps always be so, all the more so inasmuch as we are not its brave protagonists . . . Compare these passages:

The tide of Western authority will recede from much, though by no means all, of the planet. A writhing mess of social flotsam and jetsam will be left in its wake. Some will be patches of lived anarchy, some of horrible conflicts, some empires, some freedoms, and, of course, unimaginable weirdness.

And:

The world is increasingly unthinkable—a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. In spite of our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all.

The first passage is from *Desert*, an anonymous pamphlet on the meaning of the irreversibility of climate change for anarchist practice. The second is from Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet*, a collection of essays that leads from philosophy to horror, or rather leads philosophy to horror. I bring them together here because they seem to me to coincide in a relatively unthought theoretical zone. As *Desert* invokes the present and coming anarchy and chaos, it admits the *weirdness* of the future (for our inherited thought patterns and political maps, at least); when *Dust of this Planet* gestures to the weirdness and unthinkability of the world, it invokes the current and coming biological, geological, and climatological chaos of the planet. They should be read together; the thought that is possible in that stereoscopic reading is what my *or* intends. (I mean to gesture towards the passage from one perspective to the other, and perhaps back.) If *Desert* sets out

from the knowability of the world—as the object of science, principally—it has the rare merit of spelling out its increasing unknowability as an object for our political projects, our predictions and plans. *Dust of this Planet* allows us to push this thought father in an eminently troubling direction, revealing a wilderness more wild than the wild nature invoked by the critics of capitalism and civilization: the unthinkable Planet behind the inhabitable Earth. As we slip in this direction (which is also past the point of distinguishing the voluntary from the involuntary), all our positions, those little compressed bundles of opinion and analysis, practice and experience, crumble—*as positions*. No doubt many will find this disconcerting. But something of what we tried to do by thinking up, debating, adopting and abandoning, positions, is left—something lives on, survives—maybe just the primal thrust that begins with a question or profound need and collapses in a profession of faith or identity. That would be the path back to the perspective of *Desert* (now irreparably transformed). What is left, the afterlife of our first outward movements, might be something for each to witness alone, in a solitude far from the gregarious comfort of recognizable positions, of politics. To say nothing of community.

* * *

All our maneuvering, all our petty excuses for not studying it aside, there is still much to be said about this wonderful, challenging booklet, *Desert*. To wit, that it is the first written elaboration of sentiments some of us admit to and others feel without confessing to them. And, moreover, that it hints repeatedly at an even broader and more troubling set of perspectives about the limits to what we can do, and maybe of what we are altogether. If the milieu's demand were accepted and these feelings and ideas were narrowed down to a position, it could indeed be called *green nihilism*. In this naming of a position the second word indicates one familiar political, or rather anti-political, sense of *nihilism*—the position that views action, or inaction, from the perspective that nothing can be done to save the world. That no single event, or series of events clumsily apprehended as a single Event, can be posited as the object of political or moral optimism, except by the faithful and the deluded. Moreover, that the injunction to think of the future, to *hope* in a certain naive way, is itself pernicious, and often a tool of our enemies. As to *green*—well, those who have read *Desert* will be familiar with the story it tells. Irreversible global climate change, meshing in an increasingly confusing way with a global geopolitical system that intensifies control in resource-rich areas while loosening or perhaps losing its grips in the hinterlands, the growing desert . . . It is the story, then, of literal deserts, and also of zones deserted by authority or that those who desert the terrain of authority inhabit. But let's be clear about this: *Desert* does not name its own position. It is less a book that proposes a certain strategy or set of practices and more a book about material conditions that are likely to affect any strategy, any practices whatsoever. What is best about *Desert* is not just the unflinching sobriety with which its author piles up evidence and insights for such a near future, without drifting too far into speculation; it is the way they do not abandon the idea of surviving in such a decomposing world. It is neither optimism nor pessimism in the usual sense; it is another way to grasp anarchy. That is why I write that much remains to be said about it. One way to begin thinking through *Desert* is to concentrate less on what position it supposedly takes (is there a green nihilism? for or against hope?) and to consider how to push its perspective farther. This means both asking more questions about how it allows us to redefine survival and taking up the possibilities for thought that it mostly hints at. For example, to say the future is unknowable is a pleasant banality, which can just as well be invoked by optimists as pessimists; but to concentrate on what is unknowable in a way that projects it into past and present as well is to think beyond the dull conversation about hope, or utopia and dystopia, for that matter. Here is one example of how such thinking might unfold: *Desert* seems to offer a novel perspective on *chaos*. There have probably been two anarchist takes on chaos so far: the traditional one, summed up in the motto, *anarchy is not chaos, but order*; and Hakim Bey's discussions

of chaos, which may be summed up in his poetic phrase *Chaos never died*. The former is clear enough: like many leftist analyses, it identifies social chaos with a badly managed society and opposes to it a harmonious anarchic order (which, it was later specified, could exist in harmony with a nature itself conceived as harmonious). This conception of chaos, which is still quite prevalent today, does not even merit its name. It is a way of morally condemning capitalism, the State, society, or what you will; it is basically name-calling. Any worthwhile conception of chaos should begin from a non-moral position, admitting that the formlessness of chaos is not for us to judge. That much Hakim Bey *did* admit. What, in retrospect especially, is curious about his little missive “**Chaos**” are the various references to “agents of chaos,” “avatars of chaos”, even a “prophethood of chaos.” It is a lovely letter from its time and perhaps some other times as well; I have no intention to criticize it. It is a marked improvement on any version of *anarchy is order*, and yet . . . and yet. It comes too close, or reading it some came too close, to simply opting for chaos, as though order and chaos were sides and it were a matter of choosing sides. The inversion of a moral statement is still a moral statement, after all. What is left to say about chaos, then? The explicit references to chaos in *Desert* are all references to social disorder. But a thoughtful reader might, upon reading through for the third or fourth time, start to sense that another, more ancient sense of chaos is being invoked: less of an extreme of disorder and more of a primordial nothingness, a “yawning gap”, as the preferred gloss of some philologists has it. The repeated reference to a probable global archipelago of “large islands of chaos” is directly connected to the destabilization of the global climate. And this is the terrible thought that *Desert* constructs for us and will not save us from: that from now on we survive in a world where the global climate is irreversibly destabilized, and that such a survival is something other than life or politics as we have so far dreamt them. The meager discussion we’ve seen so far on *Desert* revolves around questions such as: is this true? and, since most who bother thinking it through will take it to be true, does the “no hope”/“no future” perspective (the supposed nihilism) which *Desert* to some extent adopts, and others to some extent impute to it, help or hinder an overall anarchist position? A less obvious discussion revolves around two very different sorts of questions: *what myths does exposing this reality shatter?* and, if we are brave enough to think ourselves into this demythologized space that has eclipsed the mythical future, *is an anarchist position still a coherent or relevant response to survival there?* The myth that is shattered here is first and foremost that wonderful old story about the Earth:

Earth, our bright home . . .

Shelley

There are two main versions of this story. In the religious version, a god intends for us to live here and creates the Earth for us, or, to a lesser extent, creates us for the Earth. In either case our apparent fit into the Earth, our presumed kinship with it, usually expressed in the thought of Nature or the natural, has a transcendent guarantee. In the second version, which is usually of a rational or scientific sort, we have evolved to live on the Earth and can expect it to be responsive to our needs. Here the guarantee is immanent and rational. It is true that this second story, in the version of evolutionary theory, also taught us that we could have easily not come to be here, and that we may not always be here. That is why Freud classed Darwin's theory as the second of three wounds to human narcissism (the first being the Copernican theory, which displaced the Earth from the center of the cosmos, and the third being Freud's own theory, which displaced conscious thought from prominence in mental life). But a certain common sense, or what could be called the most obtuse rationalism, seems to have reintroduced the religious content of the first version into the second, and concluded that it is good or right or proper for us to be here. Natural, in short. In any case, the lesson here is that the psychic wound can be open and humanity, whoever that is, may limp on, wounded, thinking whatever it prefers to think about itself. What *Desert* draws attention to is a congeries of events that could increasingly trouble our collective ability to go on with this story of a natural place for (some) humans. *Irreversible climate change is both something that can be understood (in scientific and derivative, common-sense ways) and something that, properly considered, suggests a vast panorama of unknowns. It is true that* *Desert* makes much of its case by citing scientists and scientific statistics. But the real question here is about the status of these invocations of science. This is where a subtler reading shows its superiority. If the entire argumentative thrust of *Desert* relied on science, the pamphlet would be fairly disposable. *Desert* invokes science to put before the hopeful and the apathetic images of a terrible and sublime sort. We could say that its explicit argument is based on science, plus a certain kind of anti-political reasoning. But its overall effect is to dislodge us from our background assumption of a knowable and predictable world into a less predictable, less knowable awareness. After all, it would be just as easy to develop a similar narrative in the discourse of a pessimistic political science, emphasizing massive population growth and social chaos: an irruptive and ungovernable human biology beyond sociality. Let's try it. From a red anarchist perspective, this could mean more opportunities for mutual aid, for setting the example of anarchy as order; chaos would be a kind of forced clean slate, a time to show that we are better and more efficient than the forces of the state. From an insurrectionary perspective, the chaos would be an inhuman element making possible the generalization of conflict. General social chaos would be the macrocosm corresponding

to the microcosm of the riot. For them chaos would also be an opportunity, in this case to hasten and amplify anomic irruptions. In sum, one could make the same argument about the biological mass of humanity as about the Earth—that its coming chaos is an opportunity for anarchists because it is a materially forced anarchy. This does not mean that we are inherently aggressive or whatever you want to associate with social chaos, but rather ungovernable in the long run (or at least governed by forces and aims other than the ones accounted for in political reasoning). It does mean, however, that the idea *we are ungovernable in the long run*, the affirmation of which is more or less synonymous with the confidence with which the anarchists take their position, is now closely linked with another idea, that *in the last instance the Earth is not our natural home*. It may have been our home for some time, for a time that we call prehistory. Indeed, Fredy Perlman marks the transition from prehistory to **His-Story**, or Civilization, as the prolongation of an event of ecological imbalance, a prolongation whose overall effect is destructive, even as the short-term or narrowly focused results along the way are to make the Earth more and more of a welcoming and natural place for humans to be. And now our parting of ways with Hakim Bey may be clarified, for, even if he did not simply take the side of chaos, he did write:

remember, only in Classical Physics does Chaos have anything to do with entropy, heat-death, or decay. In our physics (Chaos Theory), Chaos identifies with tao, beyond both yin-as-entropy & yang-as-energy, more a principle of continual creation than of any nihil, void in the sense of potentia, not exhaustion. (Chaos as the “sum of all orders.”)

He was making an argument about what is **stupid** about death-glorifying art which, parenthetically, still seems relevant. But I simply don't see why chaos (or tao, for that matter) is somehow better understood as creation than as destruction, or why it is preferable to invoke *potentia* and not exhaustion. In the name of what? “Ontological” anarchism? Life? And the sum of all orders . . . is this a figure of something at all knowable? And if not, why the preceding taking of sides? The chaos that *Desert* summons is not ontological. No new theory of being is claimed here. The effect is first of all psychological: stating what more or less everyone knows, but will not admit. If *Desert* deserves the label nihilist, it is really in this sense, that it knowingly points to the unknowable, to the background of all three narcissistic wounds. (This is my way of admitting that talking or writing about nihilism does not clarify much of anything. If it was worth doing, it is not because I wanted to share a way of believing-in-nothing. I see now that I was going somewhere else. *The analysis of nihilism is the object of psychology. . . it being understood that this psychology is also that of the cosmos*, wrote Deleuze.)

* * *

In the Dust of This Planet introduces a tripartite distinction between World, Earth, and Planet. Thacker states that the human world, our sociocultural horizon of understanding, is what is usually meant by world. This is the world as it is invoked in politics, in statements that begin: *what the world needs*. . . , and of course any and all appeals to *save* or *change the world*. It is the single world of globalism (and of global revolution) but also the many little worlds of multiculturalism, nationalism, and regionalism. But one could argue that our experience (and the gaps in our experience) also unfold in another world, the enveloping site of natural processes, from climate to chemical and physical processes, of course including our own biology. This is the Earth that we are often invited to save in ecological politics or activism. A third version of what is meant by world is what Thacker calls the Planet. If the world as human World is the world-for-us, and the Earth as natural world is a world-for-itself, the Planet is the world-without-us. Visions of the World and the Earth correspond roughly to subjective and objective perspectives; but what these are visions of, the Planet, is not reducible to either, however optimistic our philosophy, theory, or science may be. In terms perhaps more familiar to some green anarchists, the World corresponds to the material and mental processes of civilization, and the Earth to Nature as constructed by civilization. Civilization, so it would seem, produces nature as its knowable byproduct as it encloses the wild, leaving fields, parks, and gardens, along with domesticated and corralled wild animals, including, of course, our species. Does the wildness or wilderness of the green anarchists then correspond to the Planet, as world-without-us? Only if we can grasp that the wild, like, or *as*, chaos, is ultimately unknowable—not because of some defect in our faculties but because it includes their limits and undoing. When green anarchists and others invoke the wild, we must always be sure to ask if they mean an especially unruly bit of nature, nature that is not yet fully processed by the civilized, or something that civilization will never domesticate or conquer. Planet is an odd category, in that it seems to correspond both to the putative and impossible object of science (a science without an observer) and an inexplicable and strange image emergent from out of the recesses of the unconscious (which itself raises a troubling question as to what an unconscious is at all if it can be said to issue images that exclude us). I think about this third category in terms of *Desert* as I read this passage from Thacker:

When the world as such cataclysmically manifests itself in the form of a disaster, how do we interpret or give meaning to the world? There are precedents in Western culture for this kind of thinking. In classical Greece the interpretation is primarily mythological—Greek tragedy, for instance, not only deals with the questions of fate and destiny, but in so doing it also evokes a world at once

familiar and unfamiliar, a world within our control or a world as a plaything of the gods. By contrast, the response of Medieval and early modern Christianity is primarily theological—the long tradition of apocalyptic literature, as well as the Scholastic commentaries on the nature of evil, cast the non-human world within a moral framework of salvation. In modernity, in the intersection of scientific hegemony, industrial capitalism, and what Nietzsche famously prophesied as the death of God, the non-human world gains a different value. In modernity, the response is primarily existential—a questioning of the role of human individuals and human groups in light of modern science, high technology, industrial and post-industrial capitalism, and world wars.

In the light of the ongoing and growing disaster called irreversible climate change, *Desert* clearly exposes the theological-existential roots (the modern roots, that is to say) of anarchist politics, not particularly different, as far as this issue goes, from the panorama of Left or radical positions. What matters to me is the opportunity to strike out beyond these positions, elaborating an anti-politics thought through in reference to a point of view Thacker calls *cosmological*. *Could such a cosmological view, he writes, be understood not simply as the view from interstellar space, but as the view of the world-without-us, the Planetary view? Desert* might be one of the first signs of the paradoxical draw of this view, which, it should be clear by now, is something other than a position to be adopted. But for those who like the convenience names lend to things, consider the version Thacker elaborates (in a discussion of the meaning of *black* in *black metal*, of all things). He calls it cosmic pessimism:

The view of Cosmic Pessimism is a strange mysticism of the world-without-us, a hermeticism of the abyss, a noumenal occultism. It is the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups. Its limit-thought is the idea of absolute nothingness, unconsciously represented in the many popular media images of nuclear war, natural disasters, global pandemics, and the cataclysmic effects of climate change. Certainly these are the images, or the specters, of Cosmic Pessimism, and different from the scientific, economic, and political realities and underlie them; but they are images deeply embedded in our psyche nonetheless. Beyond these specters there is the impossible thought of extinction, with not even a single human being to think the absence of all human beings, with no thought to think the negation of all thought.

Now the intention of my or will be clear for some (from the psyche to the cosmos . . .). In *Dust* Thacker does not draw many connections between his ideas and politics, so it is worthwhile to examine one of the places where he illustrates

the paradox his view of the Planet opens up in that space. He cites Carl Schmitt's suggestion, in *Political Theology*:

the very possibility of imagining or re-imagining the political is dependent on a view of the world as revealed, as knowable, and as accessible to us as human beings living in a human world. . . . But the way in which that analogy [from theology to politics] is manifest may change over time . . .

Thacker notes:

the 17th and 18th centuries were dominated by the theological analogy of the transcendence of God in relation to the world, which correlates to the political idea of the transcendence of the sovereign ruler in relation to the state. By contrast, in the 19th century a shift occurs towards the theological notion of immanence. . . which likewise correlates to "the democratic thesis of the identity of the ruler and the ruled." In these and other instances, we see theological concepts being mobilized in political concepts, forming a kind of direct, tabular comparison between cosmology and politics (God and sovereign ruler; the cosmos and the state; transcendence and absolutism; immanence and democracy).

The closed loop of politics:

The republic is the only cure for the ills of the monarchy, and the monarchy is the only cure for the ills of the republic.

Joubert

Thacker's question follows: what happens to this analogy, which structures both political theory and ordinary thinking about politics to some extent, if one posits a world that is not, and will never be, entirely revealed and knowable? The closed loop is opened, and the analogy breaks down. *What happens when we as human beings confront a world that is radically unhuman, impersonal, and even indifferent to the human? What happens to the concept of politics. . .* It seems to me that a question of this sort is lurking in the background of *Desert* as well.

* * *

The desert may be, or sometimes seem to be, what is left after a catastrophic event, but it has also always been with us, as image and reality.

*In what passes for a moon
On the galactic periphery,
Here is an austere beauty,
Barren, uncompromising,
Like that which must have been
Experienced by men
On the ice-caps and deserts
As they once existed on earth
Before their urbanization
Harsh and unambiguous. . .*

John Cotton

World-desert: the desert grows. . .

Earth-deserts: they are growing, too.

Cosmic deserts: *on the galactic periphery*. . . In a response to François Laruelle's ***Du noir univers***, Thacker elaborates on the various senses of the desert motif, suggesting both that it is the inevitable image and experience of the Planet, as a slice of the Cosmos, or what Laruelle calls the black Universe, and that it is a mirage, that there is no real desert to escape to. Hermits keep escaping to the desert, but their solitude is temporary; others gather nearby. The escape from forced community develops spontaneous forms of community. But for being spontaneous, such community does not cease to develop, sooner or later, the traits of the first, escaped, community. The issue for me is double: first, that to the two senses invoked in *Desert* (the literal ecological sense, and the sense of desertion) we may now add the third corresponding to the Planetary or Cosmic view, the desert as the impossible, as nothingness. Second, the ethical, psychological, or at least practical insight that some keep deserting society, civilization, or what have you in the direction of the desert and, as stated, sooner or later populating it, inhabiting it, somehow living or at least surviving in it. Even if these deserters headed towards the desert in the first sense, they were motivated or animated by the impossible target of the desert in the third sense. Now, this apparently closed-loop operation could be the inevitable repetition of some ancient anthropogenic trauma. Or it could be (we just can't know here and now) the sane, wild reaction to Civilization: desperate attempt to return to the Earth (our bright home) via the

dark indifference of the Planet or Cosmos. Of this return pessimism says: you will need to do it again and again. Is the pessimism about a condition we can escape, or one we can't? Is it the anti-civilization pessimism of the most radical ecology, or is it despair, no less trivial for being a psychological insight, before the morbid obtuseness of humans? We just can't know here and now. Masciandaro, Thacker's fellow commentator on Laruelle, aptly terms this "the positivity and priority of opacity"—the opacity of the Planet and the Cosmos, Laruelle's black universe.

*O the dark, the deep hard dark
Of these galactic nights!
Even the planets have set
Leaving it slab and impenetrable,
As dark and directionless
As those long nights of the soul
The ancient mystics spoke of.
Beyond there is nothing,
Nothing we have known or experienced.*
John Cotton

* * *

In *Desert* we read:

Nature's incredible power to re-grow and flourish following disasters is evident both from previous mass extinctions and from its ability to heal many lands scarred by civilisation. Its true power is rarely considered within the sealed, anthropocentric thinking of those who would profit from the present or attempt to plan the future. Yet the functioning of the Earth System is destructive as well as bountiful and it is not a conscious god with an interest in preserving us or its present arrangement—something we may find out if the Earth is now moving to a new much hotter state.

For his part, Thacker concludes his book by discussing a mysticism of the unhuman, what he calls a *climatological mysticism*. It is a way of thinking, and paradoxical knowing, modeled on religious mysticism rather than scientific knowledge. But it is not reducible to the former. He writes,

there is no being-on-the-side-of the world, much less nature or the weather. [. . .] the world is indifferent to us as human beings. Indeed, the core problematic of the climate change issue is the extent to which human beings are at issue at all. On the one hand we as human beings are the problem; on the other hand at the planetary level of the Earth's deep time, nothing could be more insignificant than the human. This is where mysticism again becomes relevant.

This attitude of nonknowledge, as Bataille would have put it, informs life even as it decenters it. That the Earth is our place, but the planet does not care about us and the cosmos is not our home, is a thought of the ways in which we might survive here. Some will remember Vaneigem's repeated contrast between *vie* and *survie*, life and survival. For him it was a matter of inverting the accepted, and to a large extent enforced, view in which one must survive first and live second. Some of this view seems to have been taken into the perspective that identifies life and nature, where the latter is understood as what we are or should be—that is, that there is something normative about life or nature that we can refer to. The perspective I am developing here suggests that we have no way of knowing what we are or should be, and that the wild is better conceived as that no-way, as the conditions that push back against our best effort to define ourselves, identify ourselves, or know our world. Similarly, what is wild in us can only be conceived (though it is not really conceivable in the long run) as what resists, what pushes back, against any established order. But this might be closer to survival than to life. Survival has a positive value in that it is itself an activity, a set of nontrivial practices that refer back to life insofar as we know it. We survive as we can, not confident that we are living. It is this aspect of *Desert* that some insurrectionaries

seem to have disagreed with, in that it often talks of plans for survival where they would have preferred to see plans for action, or at least calls to action. We can read there of

An Anarchism with plenty of adjectives, but one that also sets and achieves objectives, can have a wonderful present and still have a future; even when fundamentally out of the step with the world around it. There is so much we can do, achieve, defend and be; even here, where unfortunately civilisation probably still has a future.

It is passages like this one, towards the end of the pamphlet, that probably left some with the impression that its author is still attached to hope, and left others with the sense of a form of survival that still somehow resembled activism more than attack. As for the former impression, that would be to confuse the climate pessimism of *Desert* with a kind of overarching and mandatory mood, as though those who had this view were of necessity personally depressed or despondent. There is no evidence for such a conclusion. As for the latter, it is a little more complicated. Yes, the author of *Desert* often sounds like someone addressing activists; and, yes, *Desert* explicitly rejects *the cause of Revolution* in several places. One could say this adds up to a kind of political retreat. One could also say, however, that some are too used to reading political texts that always end on a loud and vindictive note! No, this is where the question of rethinking survival from an anti-political perspective inflected by something like Thacker's cosmic pessimism or reinvented mysticism is critical. We make survival primary, not so much inverting Vaneigem's inversion of the norm in societies like ours, but rather by noticing what in our conception of life has always been a kind of religion or morality of life, easy adjustment to a familiar nature. Whatever its faults, *Desert* was written to say that such a conception is no longer useful, and that one useful meaning of anarchist is someone who admits as much. Can that meaning fit with the subcultures that most of today's anarchists compose? Probably not. The subcultures exist as pockets of resistance, of course; but survival in them is indelibly tied to reproducing the anarchist as persona, as identity, as an answer to the question of what life is or is for. To make sense or have meaning this answer presupposes the workings of our homegrown identity-machine, our collective, repeated minimal task of discerning about actions whether they are anarchist or not, and, by extension, whether the person carrying them out is anarchist. It is our way of bringing the community into the desert. Announcement of one's intentions to overcome the limits of subculture and reach out to others, or inspire them with our actions, is not different than, but rather a crucial part of, this operation. Survival, in the sense *Desert* suggests it to me, is something completely

different, for in it any social group or kin network, as it attempts to live on, cannot draw significant lines of difference (of identification, therefore) between itself and others. It melts into a humanity collectively resisting death. Needless to say this is something entirely different than the revolutionary process as it has been imagined and attempted. There is no future to plan for, only a present to survive in, and that is the implosion of politics as we have known it.

To survive, not to live, or, not living, to maintain oneself, without life, in a state of pure supplement, movement of substitution for life, but rather to arrest dying. . .

Blanchot

. . . deserting life.

* * *

A desert and not a garden: one remarkable aspect of the contemporary anarchist space is an open contradiction between two perspectives on what struggle is, or is for, that might be summed up in the phrases *we have enemies* and *we did this to ourselves*. There are countless versions of this contradiction, which at a deeper level is really not about political struggle at all, but about the essence of resistance. One version is the condemnation of the notion of enemy as a moral notion, and another is its silent return in the emphasis on friendship and affinity; there is also what a book called *Enemies of Society* may be taken to suggest from its title on. The contradiction surfaces most clearly in discussions influenced by primitivist positions or ones hostile to civilization, likely because of the tremendous temporal compression they require to make their case. In such talk, we zoom out from lifetimes and generations to a scale of tens of thousands of years. The enemy appears within the course of history, but the *fact* of the appearance of the enemy, the split in humanity, summons the second *we*, because of the need to presuppose a whole species in some natural state (balance, etc.) that, in the event or events that open up the panorama of civilization and history, cleaves itself into groups or at least roles. The positions we know better tend to revolve around trivialized versions of these perspectives, never really experiencing the tension between them. It is only in the play of the anarchist space as a whole (and precisely because it is not a single place, in which all involved would have to put up with each other for a few hours, let alone live together) that the contradiction unfolds. Some form of *we have enemies* is the great rallying for a wide array of active agents, from the remains of the Left to advocates of social war. And some form of *we did this to ourselves* is in the background of all sorts of moralizing approaches to oppression and interpersonal damage, but also the more misanthropic strains of primitivism. I would also argue that a modified form of it informs the deep background of egoism and some forms of individualism (splitting the forced *we* from the atomic *ourselves*). My question is, what happens if we zoom out farther? Here the virtue of invoking science as *Desert* does may be visible. For what is beyond history (the time of the World) and prehistory is geologic time, the time of the Planet, which leads us to cosmic time. There is a difference between invoking science and practicing or praising it. The latter simply produce more science. The former may be a way to encounter what our still humanist politics ignore. From the perspective of cosmic time, the contradiction does not dissolve (at least not for me); but its moral or political character seems to unravel. Something less centered on *us* emerges. Perhaps both stories—the story about enemies and the story about ourselves—ignore something much more disturbing than mere accidental guilt or immorality, something that disturbs us precisely because it is the disturbing of humanity. (“It is not man who colonizes the planet, but the planet and the cosmos who transgress the lonely threshold of man”—does this

odd sentence of Laruelle's express the thought here, I wonder?) It makes sense for Thacker to invoke mysticism when he considers the cosmos or the Planet, because its otherness has most often been referred to as divine, and related to as a god. Now, that need have nothing to do with religion, especially if we identify religion with revelation; but mysticism is a good enough approximation to the attitude one takes towards a now decentered life. I call that attitude a thoughtful kind of *survival*. This is closely connected to a conversation one often overhears in the company of anarchists. Someone is discussing something they prefer or are inclined to do, and doing so in increasingly positive terms. Another person points out (functioning of the anarchist identity machine) that there is nothing specifically anti-capitalist or radical about the stated activity or preferred object, reducing it verbally to another form of consumption. Anxious hours are passed this way. About such inclinations I prefer to say that we do not know if they come from above or below; we know our own resistance, and not much more. That resistance manifests in unknowable ways, obeying no conscious plan. It could well be a particularly fancy kind of neurosis; but *survival* means just this, that we do not know the way out of the situation and we must live here with the idea of anarchy. Another way to put this is that if our rejection of society and state is as complete as we like to say it is, our project is not to create alternative micro-societies (scenes, milieus) that people can belong to, but something along the lines of becoming monsters. It is probable that anarchy has always had something to do with becoming monstrous. The monster, writes Thacker in **another of his books**, is *unlawful life*, or *what cannot be controlled*. It seems to me the only way to do this, as opposed to saying one is doing it and being satisfied with that, would be to unflinchingly contemplate the thing we are without trying to be, the thing we can never try to be or claim we are: *the nameless thing*, or *unthinkable life*. Which is also the *solitary* thing, or the *lonely* one. The egoist or individualist positions are like dull echoes of the inexpressible sentiment that I might be that nameless thing, translated into a common parlance for the benefit of a (resistant, yes) relation to the social mass. That the cosmos is not our natural home is a thought outside the ways in which we might survive here. To say we survive instead of living is in part to say that we have no idea what living is or ought to be (that there is probably no ought-to about living). But also that we resist any ideal of life, including our own. Becoming monstrous is therefore the goal of dismantling the milieu as anarchist identity machine. Being witness to the nameless thing, to the unthinkable life or Planet or Cosmos, is not a goal. It is not a criterion of anything, either. It is more like a state, a mystical, poetic state (though in this state I am the poem). It is the climatological mysticism Thacker describes and *Desert* hints at for an anarchist audience, both deriving in their own way from the weird insight that *the Planet is indifferent to us*. So read *Desert* again

as an allegory of the self-destruction of the milieu, of any community that, as it runs from its norms, places new, unstated norms ahead of itself. Such is the slippage from green nihilism to cosmic pessimism, which gives us occasion to continue speaking of chaos. Well, one might say that I have merely imported some alien theory into an otherwise familiar (if not easy) discussion. Of course I have. My aim, however, was not to apply it, but to show in what sense one play that is often acted out in our spaces may be anti-politically theorized, which is to say cosmically psychoanalyzed. Our place is not to apply the theory of cosmic pessimism (or any other theory; that is not what theory is, or is for); our place is to think, to continue speaking of chaos, not being stupid enough to think we can take its side. There are no sides. We might come to realize that we, too, in our attempts to gather, organize, act, change life, and so on, were playing in the world, ignorant of the Planet, its *unimaginable weirdness*.

If the earth must perish, then astronomy is our only consolation

Joubert

Post scriptum. I mentioned community in passing. Most anarchists I converse with regularly treat the word delicately or dismissively, either ignoring it altogether, putting it in quotation marks, or virtually crossing it out. I suppose that crossed-out sense of community is another name for the milieu. As crappy as it is most of the time, I will admit that the milieu is a space-time (really a series of places-moments, some of them taking place ever so briefly) where one can register, to some extent, what ideas have traction in our lives. *Desert's* explicit statements are certainly more pedestrian than Thacker's theory; but the downside to Thacker's exciting flights of intellectual fancy, at least from where I am writing, is that it is hard to know who he is speaking to, or about, much of the time. One imagines that people do gather to hear what he has to say, or read his books in concert. I do wonder to what extent they consider themselves to be a community, a potential community, a crossed-out community.

Post scriptum bis. I mentioned solitude. It would also be worthwhile to think about friendship along these lines.

References

Desert. LBC Books. 2011.

- Laruelle, François. “**Theorems on the Good News.**”
- “On the Black Universe.” In *Dark Nights of the Universe*, [NAME], 2013.
- Masciandaro, Nicola. “**Comments on Eugene Thacker’s ‘Cosmic Pessimism’.**” *continent*. 2.2, 2012.
- “Secret” In *Dark Nights of the Universe*, [NAME], 2013.
- Snyder, Gary. “The Etiquette of Freedom.” In *The Practice of the Wild*, North Point Press, 1990.
- Thacker, Eugene. *After Life*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- *In the Dust of this Planet*. Zero Books. 2010.
 - “**Cosmic Pessimism.**” *continent*. 2.2 (2012).
 - “Remote: The Forgetting of the World.” In *Dark Nights of the Universe*, [NAME], 2013.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright
November 21, 2013



Alejandro de Acosta
Green Nihilism or Cosmic Pessimism
November 20th, 2013

The Anvil Review
Retrieved on November 21st, 2013 from [http://theanvilreview.org/
print/green-nihilism-or-cosmic-pessimism/](http://theanvilreview.org/print/green-nihilism-or-cosmic-pessimism/)