UNCIVILISATION

THE DARK MOUNTAIN MANIFESTO

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THE EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF UNCIVILISATION

'We must unhumanise our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.'

1. We live in a time of social, economic and ecological unravelling. All around us are signs that our whole way of living is already passing into history. We will face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it.
2. We reject the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of 'problems' in need of technological or political 'solutions'.
3. We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.
4. We will reassert the role of storytelling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality.
5. Humans are not the point and purpose of the planet. Our art will begin with the attempt to step outside the human bubble. By careful attention, we will reengage with the non-human world.
6. We will celebrate writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time. Our literature has been dominated for too long by those who inhabit the cosmopolitan citadels.
7. We will not lose ourselves in the elaboration of theories or ideologies. Our words will be elemental. We write with dirt under our fingernails.
8. The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us.

REARMAMENT

These grand and fatal movements toward death: the grandeur of the mass
Makes pity a fool, the tearing pity
For the atoms of the mass, the persons, the victims, makes it seem monstrous
To admire the tragic beauty they build.
It is beautiful as a river flowing or a slowly gathering
Glacier on a high mountain rock-face,
Bound to plow down a forest, or as frost in November,
The gold and flaming death-dance for leaves,
Or a girl in the night of her spent maidenhood, bleeding and kissing.
I would burn my right hand in a slow fire
To change the future … I should do foolishly. The beauty of modern
Man is not in the persons but in the
Disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the
Dream-led masses down the dark mountain.

Robinson Jeffers, 1935

I

WALKING ON LAVA

The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilisation.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Those who witness extreme social collapse at first hand seldom describe any deep revelation about the truths of human existence. What they do mention, if asked, is their surprise at how easy it is to die.

The pattern of ordinary life, in which so much stays the same from one day to the next, disguises the fragility of its fabric. How many of our activities are made possible by the impression of stability that pattern gives? So long as it repeats, or varies steadily enough, we are able to plan for tomorrow as if all the things we rely on and don't think about too carefully will still be there. When the pattern is broken, by civil war or natu- ral disaster or the smaller-scale tragedies that tear at its fabric, many of those activities become impossible or meaningless, while simply meeting needs we once took for granted may occupy much of our lives.

What war correspondents and relief workers report is not only the fragility of the fabric, but the speed with which it can unravel. As we write this, no one can say with certainty where the unravelling of the financial and commercial fabric of our economies will end. Meanwhile, beyond the cities, unchecked industrial exploitation frays the material basis of life in many parts of the world, and pulls at the ecological systems which sustain it.

Precarious as this moment may be, however, an awareness of the fragility of what we call civilisation is nothing new.

'Few men realise,' wrote Joseph Conrad in 1896, 'that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings.' Conrad's writings exposed the civilisation exported by European imperialists to be little more than a comforting illusion, not only in the dark, unconquerable heart of Africa, but in the whited sepulchres of their capital

This is the Dark Mountain project. It starts here.

Where will it end? Nobody knows. Where will it lead? We are not sure. Its first incarnation, launched alongside this manifesto, is a website, which points the way to the ranges. It will contain thoughts, scribblings, jottings, ideas; it will work up the project of Uncivilisation, and invite all comers to join the discussion.

Then it will become a physical object, because virtual reality is, ultimately, no reality at all. It will become a journal, of paper, card, paint and print; of ideas, thoughts, observations, mumblings; new stories which will help to define the project — the school, the movement — of Uncivilised writing. It will collect the words and the images of those who consider themselves Uncivilised and have something to say about it; who want to help us attack the citadels. It will be a thing of beauty for the eye and for the heart and for the mind, for we are unfashionable enough to believe that beauty — like truth — not only exists, but still matters.

Beyond that… all is currently hidden from view. It is a long way across the plains, and things become obscured by distance. There are great white spaces on this map still. The civilised would fill them in; we are not so sure we want to. But we cannot resist exploring them, navigating by rumours and by the stars. We don't know quite what we will find. We are slightly nervous. But we will not turn back, for we believe that something enormous may be out there, waiting to meet us.

Uncivilisation, like civilisation, is not something that can be created alone. Climbing the Dark Mountain cannot be a solitary exercise. We need bearers, sherpas, guides, fellow adventurers. We need to rope ourselves together for safety. At present, our form is loose and nebulous. It will firm itself up as we climb. Like the best writing, we need to be shaped by the ground beneath our feet, and what we become will be shaped, at least in part, by what we find on our journey.

If you would like to climb at least some of the way with us, we would like to hear from you. We feel sure there are others out there who would relish joining us on this expedition.

Come. Join us. We leave at dawn.

IV

TO THE FOOTHILLS!

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned'

A movement needs a beginning. An expedition needs a base camp. A project needs a headquarters. Uncivilisation is our project, and the promotion of Uncivilised writing — and art — needs a base. We present this manifesto not simply because we have something to say—who doesn't?—but because we have something to do. We hope this pamphlet has created a spark. If so, we have a responsibility to fan the flames. This is what we intend to do. But we can't do it alone.

This is a moment to ask deep questions and to ask them urgently. All around us, shifts are under way which suggest that our whole way of living is already passing into history. It is time to look for new paths and new stories, ones that can lead us through the end of the world as we know it and out the other side. We suspect that by questioning the foundations of civilisation, the myth of human centrality, our imagined isolation, we may find the beginning of such paths.

If we are right, it will be necessary to go literally beyond the Pale. Out- side the stockades we have built — the city walls, the original marker in stone or wood that first separated 'man' from 'nature'. Beyond the gates, out into the wilderness, is where we are headed. And there we shall make for the higher ground for, as Jeffers wrote, 'when the cities lie at the monster's feet / There are left the mountains.' We shall make the pilgrimage to the poet's Dark Mountain, to the great, immovable, inhuman heights which were here before us and will be here after, and from their slopes we shall look back upon the pinprick lights of the distant cities and gain perspective on who we are and what we have become.

cities. The inhabitants of that civilisation believed 'blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion,' but their confidence could be maintained only by the seeming solidity of the crowd of like-minded believers surrounding them. Outside the walls, the wild remained as close to the surface as blood under skin, though the city-dweller was no longer equipped to face it directly.

Bertrand Russell caught this vein in Conrad's worldview, suggesting that the novelist 'thought of civilised and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths.' What both Russell and Conrad were getting at was a simple fact which any historian could confirm: human civilisation is an intensely fragile con- struction. It is built on little more than belief: belief in the rightness of its values; belief in the strength of its system of law and order; belief in its currency; above all, perhaps, belief in its future.

Once that belief begins to crumble, the collapse of a civilisation may become unstoppable. That civilisations fall, sooner or later, is as much a law of history as gravity is a law of physics. What remains after the fall is a wild mixture of cultural debris, confused and angry people whose certainties have betrayed them, and those forces which were always there, deeper than the foundations of the city walls: the desire to survive and the desire for meaning.

It is, it seems, our civilisation's turn to experience the inrush of the savage and the unseen; our turn to be brought up short by contact with untamed reality. There is a fall coming. We live in an age in which familiar restraints are being kicked away, and foundations snatched from under us. After a quarter century of complacency, in which we were invited to believe in bubbles that would never burst, prices that would never fall, the end of history, the crude repackaging of the triumphalism of Conrad's Victorian twilight — Hubris has been introduced to Nemesis. Now a familiar human story is being played out. It is the story of an empire corroding from within. It is the story of a people who believed, for a long time, that their actions did not have consequences. It is the story of how that people will cope with the crumbling of their own myth. It is our story.

This time, the crumbling empire is the unassailable global economy, and the brave new world of consumer democracy being forged

worldwide in its name. Upon the indestructibility of this edifice we have pinned the hopes of this latest phase of our civilisation. Now, its failure and fallibility exposed, the world's elites are scrabbling frantically to buoy up an economic machine which, for decades, they told us needed little restraint, for restraint would be its undoing. Uncountable sums of money are being funnelled upwards in order to prevent an uncontrolled explosion. The machine is stuttering and the engineers are in panic. They are wondering if perhaps they do not understand it as well as they imagined. They are wondering whether they are controlling it at all or whether, perhaps, it is controlling them.

Increasingly, people are restless. The engineers group themselves into competing teams, but neither side seems to know what to do, and neither seems much different from the other. Around the world, discontent can be heard. The extremists are grinding their knives and moving in as the machine's coughing and stuttering exposes the inadequacies of the political oligarchies who claimed to have everything in hand. Old gods are rearing their heads, and old answers: revolution, war, ethnic strife. Politics as we have known it totters, like the machine it was built to sustain. In its place could easily arise something more elemental, with a dark heart.

As the financial wizards lose their powers of levitation, as the politicians and economists struggle to conjure new explanations, it starts to dawn on us that behind the curtain, at the heart of the Emerald City, sits not the benign and omnipotent invisible hand we had been promised, but something else entirely. Something responsible for what Marx, writing not so long before Conrad, cast as the 'everlasting uncertainty and anguish' of the 'bourgeois epoch'; a time in which 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.' Draw back the curtain, follow the tireless motion of cogs and wheels back to its source, and you will find the engine driving our civilisation: the myth of progress.

The myth of progress is to us what the myth of god-given warrior prowess was to the Romans, or the myth of eternal salvation was to the conquistadors: without it, our efforts cannot be sustained. Onto the root stock of Western Christianity, the Enlightenment at its most optimistic grafted a vision of an Earthly paradise, towards which human effort guided by calculative reason could take us. Following this guidance, each generation will live a better life than the life of those that went before it. History becomes an escalator, and the only way is up. On the top floor is human perfection. It is important that this should remain just out of reach in order to sustain the sensation of motion.

Apart but engaged, its practitioners always willing to get their hands dirty; aware, in fact, that dirt is essential; that keyboards should be tapped by those with soil under their fingernails and wilderness in their heads.

We tried ruling the world; we tried acting as God's steward, then we tried ushering in the human revolution, the age of reason and isolation. We failed in all of it, and our failure destroyed more than we were even aware of. The time for civilisation is past. Uncivilisation, which knows its flaws because it has participated in them; which sees unflinchingly and bites down hard as it records — this is the project we must embark on now. This is the challenge for writing — for art — to meet. This is what we are here for.

of our humanity — it is an affirmation of the wonder of what it means to be truly human. It is to accept the world for what it is and to make our home here, rather than dreaming of relocating to the stars, or existing in a Man-forged bubble and pretending to ourselves that there is nothing outside it to which we have any connection at all.

This, then, is the literary challenge of our age. So far, few have taken it up. The signs of the times flash out in urgent neon, but our literary lions have better things to read. Their art remains stuck in its own civilised bubble. The idea of civilisation is entangled, right down to its semantic roots, with city-dwelling, and this provokes a thought: if our writers seem unable to find new stories which might lead us through the times ahead, is this not a function of their metropolitan mentality? The big names of contemporary literature are equally at home in the fashionable quarters of London or New York, and their writing reflects the prejudices of the placeless, transnational elite to which they belong.

The converse also applies. Those voices which tell other stories tend to be rooted in a sense of place. Think of John Berger's novels and essays from the Haute Savoie, or the depths explored by Alan Garner within a day's walk of his birthplace in Cheshire. Think of Wendell Berry or WS Merwin, Mary Oliver or Cormac McCarthy. Those whose writings [15] approach the shores of the Uncivilised are those who know their place, in the physical sense, and who remain wary of the siren cries of metrovincial fashion and civilised excitement.

If we name particular writers whose work embodies what we are arguing for, the aim is not to place them more prominently on the existing map of literary reputations. Rather, as Geoff Dyer has said of Berger, to take their work seriously is to redraw the maps altogether — not only the map of literary reputations, but those by which we navigate all areas of life.

Even here, we go carefully, for cartography itself is not a neutral activity. The drawing of maps is full of colonial echoes. The civilised eye seeks to view the world from above, as something we can stand over and survey. The Uncivilised writer knows the world is, rather, something we are enmeshed in — a patchwork and a framework of places, experiences, sights, smells, sounds. Maps can lead, but can also mislead. Our maps must be the kind sketched in the dust with a stick, washed away by the next rain. They can be read only by those who ask to see them, and they cannot be bought.

This, then, is Uncivilised writing. Human, inhuman, stoic and entirely natural. Humble, questioning, suspicious of the big idea and the easy answer. Walking the boundaries and reopening old conversations.

Recent history, however, has given this mechanism something of a battering. The past century too often threatened a descent into hell, rather than the promised heaven on Earth. Even within the prosperous and liberal societies of the West progress has, in many ways, failed to deliver the goods. Today's generation are demonstrably less content, and consequently less optimistic, than those that went before. They work longer hours, with less security, and less chance of leaving behind the social back- ground into which they were born. They fear crime, social breakdown, overdevelopment, environmental collapse. They do not believe that the future will be better than the past. Individually, they are less constrained by class and convention than their parents or grandparents, but more constrained by law, surveillance, state proscription and personal debt. Their physical health is better, their mental health more fragile. Nobody knows what is coming. Nobody wants to look.

Most significantly of all, there is an underlying darkness at the root of everything we have built. Outside the cities, beyond the blurring edges of our civilisation, at the mercy of the machine but not under its control, lies something that neither Marx nor Conrad, Caesar nor Hume, Thatcher nor Lenin ever really understood. Something that Western civilisation — which has set the terms for global civilisation—was never capable of understanding, because to understand it would be to undermine, fatally, the myth of that civilisation. Something upon which that thin crust of lava is balanced; which feeds the machine and all the people who run it, and which they have all trained themselves not to see.

II

THE SEVERED HAND

Then what is the answer? Not to be deluded by dreams.
To know that great civilisations have broken down into violence,
and their tyrants come, many times before.
When open violence appears, to avoid it with honor or choose
the least ugly faction; these evils are essential.
To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted
and not wish for evil; and not be duped
By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These dreams will
not be fulfilled.
To know this, and know that however ugly the parts appear
the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand
Is an ugly thing and man dissevered from the earth and stars
and his history … for contemplation or in fact …
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,
the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty
of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,
or drown in despair when his days darken.

Robinson Jeffers, 'The Answer'

The myth of progress is founded on the myth of nature. The first tells us that we are destined for greatness; the second tells us that greatness is cost-free. Each is intimately bound up with the other. Both tell us that we are apart from the world; that we began grunting in the primeval swamps, as a humble part of something called 'nature', which we have now triumphantly subdued. The very fact that we have a word for 'nature' is [5] evidence that we do not regard ourselves as part of it. Indeed, our separation

outsiders. If you want to be loved, it might be best not to get involved, for the world, at least for a time, will resolutely refuse to listen.

A salutary example of this last point can be found in the fate of one of the twentieth century's most significant yet most neglected poets. Robinson Jeffers was writing Uncivilised verse seventy years before this manifesto was thought of, though he did not call it that. In his early poetic career, Jeffers was a star: he appeared on the cover of Time magazine, read his poems in the US Library of Congress and was respected for the alternative he offered to the Modernist juggernaut. Today his work is left out of anthologies, his name is barely known and his politics are regarded with suspicion. Read Jeffers' later work and you will see why. His crime was to deliberately puncture humanity's sense of self-importance. His punishment was to be sent into a lonely literary exile from which, forty years after his death, he has still not been allowed to return.

But Jeffers knew what he was in for. He knew that nobody, in an age of 'consumer choice', wanted to be told by this stone-faced prophet of the California cliffs that 'it is good for man … To know that his needs and nature are no more changed in fact in ten thousand years than the beaks of eagles.' He knew that no comfortable liberal wanted to hear his angry warning, issued at the height of the Second World War: 'Keep clear of the dupes that talk democracy / And the dogs that talk revolution / Drunk with talk, liars and believers … / Long live freedom, and damn the ideologies.' His vision of a world in which humanity was doomed to destroy its surroundings and eventually itself ('I would burn my right hand in a [14] slow fire / To change the future … I should do foolishly') was furiously rejected in the rising age of consumer democracy which he also predicted ('Be happy, adjust your economics to the new abundance…')

Jeffers, as his poetry developed, developed a philosophy too. He called it 'inhumanism.' It was, he wrote:

> *a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to notman; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence… This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist … It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy… it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.*

The shifting of emphasis from man to notman: this is the aim of Uncivilised writing. To 'unhumanise our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from.' This is not a rejection

attempts to stand outside the human bubble and see us as we are: highly evolved apes with an array of talents and abilities which we are unleashing without sufficient thought, control, compassion or intelligence. Apes who have constructed a sophisticated myth of their own importance with which to sustain their civilising project. Apes whose project has been to tame, to control, to subdue or to destroy — to civilise the forests, the deserts, the wild lands and the seas, to impose bonds on the minds of their own in order that they might feel nothing when they exploit or destroy their fellow creatures.

Against the civilising project, which has become the progenitor of ecocide, Uncivilised writing offers not a non-human perspective—we remain human and, even now, are not quite ashamed — but a perspective which sees us as one strand of a web rather than as the first palanquin in a glorious procession. It offers an unblinking look at the forces among which we find ourselves.

It sets out to paint a picture of homo sapiens which a being from another world or, better, a being from our own — a blue whale, an albatross, a mountain hare — might recognise as something approaching a truth. It sets out to tug our attention away from ourselves and turn it outwards; to uncentre our minds. It is writing, in short, which puts civilisation — and us — into perspective. Writing that comes not, as most writing still does, from the self-absorbed and self-congratulatory metropolitan centres of civilisation but from somewhere on its wilder fringes. Somewhere woody and weedy and largely avoided, from where insistent, uncomfortable truths about ourselves drift in; truths which we're not keen on hearing. Writing which unflinchingly stares us down, however uncomfortable this may prove.

It might perhaps be just as useful to explain what Uncivilised writing is not. It is not environmental writing, for there is much of that about already, and most of it fails to jump the barrier which marks the limit of our collective human ego; much of it, indeed, ends up shoring-up that ego, and helping us to persist in our civilisational delusions. It is not nature writing, for there is no such thing as nature as distinct from people, and to suggest otherwise is to perpetuate the attitude which has brought us here. And it is not political writing, with which the world is already flooded, for politics is a human confection, complicit in ecocide and decaying from within.

Uncivilised writing is more rooted than any of these. Above all, it is determined to shift our worldview, not to feed into it. It is writing for

from it is a myth integral to the triumph of our civilisation. We are, we tell ourselves, the only species ever to have attacked nature and won. In this, our unique glory is contained.

Outside the citadels of self-congratulation, lone voices have cried out against this infantile version of the human story for centuries, but it is only in the last few decades that its inaccuracy has become laughably apparent. We are the first generations to grow up surrounded by evidence that our attempt to separate ourselves from 'nature' has been a grim failure, proof not of our genius but our hubris. The attempt to sever the hand from the body has endangered the 'progress' we hold so dear, and it has endangered much of 'nature' too. The resulting upheaval underlies the crisis we now face.

We imagined ourselves isolated from the source of our existence. The fallout from this imaginative error is all around us: a quarter of the world's mammals are threatened with imminent extinction; an acre and a half of rainforest is felled every second; 75% of the world's fish stocks are on the verge of collapse; humanity consumes 25% more of the world's natural 'products' than the Earth can replace — a figure predicted to rise to 80% by mid-century. Even through the deadening lens of statistics, we can glimpse the violence to which our myths have driven us.

And over it all looms runaway climate change. Climate change, which threatens to render all human projects irrelevant; which presents us with detailed evidence of our lack of understanding of the world we inhabit while, at the same time, demonstrating that we are still entirely reliant upon it. Climate change, which highlights in painful colour the head-on crash between civilisation and 'nature'; which makes plain, more effectively than any carefully constructed argument or optimistically defiant protest, how the machine's need for permanent growth will require us to destroy ourselves in its name. Climate change, which brings home at last our ultimate powerlessness.

These are the facts, or some of them. Yet facts never tell the whole story. ('Facts', Conrad wrote, in Lord Jim, 'as if facts could prove anything.') The facts of environmental crisis we hear so much about often conceal as much as they expose. We hear daily about the impacts of our activities on 'the environment' (like 'nature', this is an expression which distances us from the reality of our situation). Daily we hear, too, of the many 'solutions' to these problems: solutions which usually involve the necessity of urgent political agreement and a judicious application of human technological genius. Things may be changing, runs the narrative, but there is nothing we cannot deal with here, folks. We perhaps need to move faster, more

urgently. Certainly we need to accelerate the pace of research and development. We accept that we must become more 'sustainable'. But everything will be fine. There will still be growth, there will still be progress: these things will continue, because they have to continue, so they cannot do anything but continue. There is nothing to see here. Everything will be fine.

We do not believe that everything will be fine. We are not even sure, based on current definitions of progress and improvement, that we want it to be. Of all humanity's delusions of difference, of its separation from and superiority to the living world which surrounds it, one distinction holds up better than most: we may well be the first species capable of effectively eliminating life on Earth. This is a hypothesis we seem intent on putting to the test. We are already responsible for denuding the world of much of its richness, magnificence, beauty, colour and magic, and we show no sign of slowing down. For a very long time, we imagined that 'nature' was something that happened elsewhere. The damage we did to it might be regrettable, but needed to be weighed against the benefits here and now. And in the worst case scenario, there would always be some kind of Plan B. Perhaps we would make for the moon, where we could survive in lunar colonies under giant bubbles as we planned our expansion across the galaxy.

But there is no Plan B and the bubble, it turns out, is where we have been living all the while. The bubble is that delusion of isolation under which we have laboured for so long. The bubble has cut us off from life on the only planet we have, or are ever likely to have. The bubble is civilisation.

Consider the structures on which that bubble has been built. Its foundations are geological: coal, oil, gas — millions upon millions of years of ancient sunlight, dragged from the depths of the planet and burned with abandon. On this base, the structure stands. Move upwards, and you pass through a jumble of supporting horrors: battery chicken sheds; industrial abattoirs; burning forests; beam-trawled ocean floors; dynamited reefs; hollowed-out mountains; wasted soil. Finally, on top of all these unseen layers, you reach the well-tended surface where you and I stand: unaware, or uninterested, in what goes on beneath us; demanding that the authorities keep us in the manner to which we have been accustomed; occasion- ally feeling twinges of guilt that lead us to buy organic chickens or

Mainstream art in the West has long been about shock; about busting taboos, about Getting Noticed. This has gone on for so long that it has become common to assert that in these ironic, exhausted, post-everything times, there are no taboos left to bust. But there is one.

The last taboo is the myth of civilisation. It is built upon the stories we have constructed about our genius, our indestructibility, our manifest destiny as a chosen species. It is where our vision and our self-belief intertwine with our reckless refusal to face the reality of our position on this Earth. It has led the human race to achieve what it has achieved; and has led the planet into the age of ecocide. The two are intimately linked. We believe they must decouple if anything is to remain.

We believe that artists — which is to us the most welcoming of words, taking under its wing writers of all kinds, painters, musicians, sculptors, poets, designers, creators, makers of things, dreamers of dreams — have a responsibility to begin the process of decoupling. We believe that, in the age of ecocide, the last taboo must be broken — and that only artists can do it.

Ecocide demands a response. That response is too important to be left to politicians, economists, conceptual thinkers, number crunchers; too all-pervasive to be left to activists or campaigners. Artists are needed. So far, though, the artistic response has been muted. In between traditional nature poetry and agitprop, what is there? Where are the poems that have adjusted their scope to the scale of this challenge? Where are the novels that probe beyond the country house or the city centre? What new form of writing has emerged to challenge civilisation itself? What gallery mounts an exhibition equal to this challenge? Which musician has discovered the secret chord?

If the answers to these questions have been scarce up to now, it is perhaps both because the depth of collective denial is so great, and because the challenge is so very daunting. We are daunted by it, ourselves. But we believe it needs to be risen to. We believe that art must look over the edge, face the world that is coming with a steady eye, and rise to the challenge of ecocide with a challenge of its own: an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind.

This response we call Uncivilised art, and we are interested in one branch of it in particular: Uncivilised writing. Uncivilised writing is writing which

Yet as the myth of civilisation deepened its grip on our thinking, borrowing the guise of science and reason, we began to deny the role of stories, to dismiss their power as something primitive, childish, outgrown. The old tales by which generations had made sense of life's subtleties and strangenesses were bowdlerised and packed off to the nursery. Religion, that bag of myths and mysteries, birthplace of the theatre, was straightened out into a framework of universal laws and moral account-keeping. The dream visions of the Middle Ages became the nonsense stories of Victorian childhood. In the age of the novel, stories were no longer the way to approach the deep truths of the world, so much as a way to pass time on a train journey. It is hard, today, to imagine that the word of a poet was once feared by a king.

Yet for all this, our world is still shaped by stories. Through television, film, novels and video games, we may be more thoroughly bombarded with narrative material than any people that ever lived. What is peculiar, however, is the carelessness with which these stories are channelled at us — as entertainment, a distraction from daily life, something to hold our attention to the other side of the ad break. There is little sense that these things make up the equipment by which we navigate reality. On the other hand, there are the serious stories told by economists, politicians, geneticists and corporate leaders. These are not presented as stories at all, but as direct accounts of how the world is. Choose between competing versions, then fight with those who chose differently. The ensuing conflicts play out on early morning radio, in afternoon debates and late night television pundit wars. And yet, for all the noise, what is striking is how much the opposing sides agree on: all their stories are only variants of the larger story of human centrality, of our ever-expanding control over 'nature', our right to perpetual economic growth, our ability to transcend all limits.

So we find ourselves, our ways of telling unbalanced, trapped inside a runaway narrative, headed for the worst kind of encounter with reality. In such a moment, writers, artists, poets and storytellers of all kinds have a critical role to play. Creativity remains the most uncontrollable of human forces: without it, the project of civilisation is inconceivable, yet no part of life remains so untamed and undomesticated. Words and images can change minds, hearts, even the course of history. Their makers shape the stories people carry through their lives, unearth old ones and breathe them back to life, add new twists, point to unexpected endings. It is time to pick up the threads and make the stories new, as they must always be made new, starting from where we are.

locally-produced lettuces; yet for the most part glutted, but not sated, on the fruits of the horrors on which our lifestyles depend.

We are the first generations born into a new and unprecedented age — the age of ecocide. To name it thus is not to presume the outcome, but simply to describe a process which is underway. The ground, the sea, the air, the elemental backdrops to our existence — all these our economics has taken for granted, to be used as a bottomless tip, endlessly able to dilute and disperse the tailings of our extraction, production, consumption. The sheer scale of the sky or the weight of a swollen river makes it hard to imagine that creatures as flimsy as you and I could do that much damage. Philip Larkin gave voice to this attitude, and the creeping, worrying end of it in his poem *Going, Going*:

Things are tougher than we are, just
As earth will always respond
However we mess it about;
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:
The tides will be clean beyond.
– But what do I feel now? Doubt?

Nearly forty years on from Larkin's words, doubt is what all of us seem to feel, all of the time. Too much filth has been chucked in the sea and into the soil and into the atmosphere to make any other feeling sensible. The doubt, and the facts, have paved the way for a worldwide movement of environmental politics, which aimed, at least in its early, raw form, to challenge the myths of development and progress head-on. But time has not been kind to the greens. Today's environmentalists are more likely to be found at corporate conferences hymning the virtues of 'sustainability' and 'ethical consumption' than doing anything as naive as questioning the intrinsic values of civilisation. Capitalism has absorbed the greens, as it absorbs so many challenges to its ascendancy. A radical challenge to the human machine has been transformed into yet another opportunity for shopping.

'Denial' is a hot word, heavy with connotations. When it is used to brand the remaining rump of climate change sceptics, they object noisily to the association with those who would rewrite the history of the Holocaust. Yet the focus on this dwindling group may serve as a distraction from a far larger form of denial, in its psychoanalytic sense. Freud wrote of the inability of people to hear things which did not fit with the way they saw themselves and the world. We put ourselves through all kinds of inner

contortions, rather than look plainly at those things which challenge our fundamental understanding of the world.

Today, humanity is up to its neck in denial about what it has built, what it has become — and what it is in for. Ecological and economic collapse unfold before us and, if we acknowledge them at all, we act as if this were a temporary problem, a technical glitch. Centuries of hubris block our ears like wax plugs; we cannot hear the message which reality is screaming at us. For all our doubts and discontents, we are still wired to an idea of his- tory in which the future will be an upgraded version of the present. The assumption remains that things must continue in their current direction: the sense of crisis only smudges the meaning of that 'must'. No longer a natural inevitability, it becomes an urgent necessity: we must find a way to go on having supermarkets and superhighways. We cannot contemplate the alternative.

And so we find ourselves, all of us together, poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us knows where to look, but all of us know not to look down. Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.

Our question is: what would happen if we looked down? Would it be as bad as we imagine? What might we see? Could it even be good for us?

We believe it is time to look down.

III

UNCIVILISATION

Without mystery, without curiosity and without the form imposed by a partial answer, there can be no stories—only confessions, com- muniqués, memories and fragments of autobiographical fantasy which for the moment pass as novels.

John Berger, 'A Story for Aesop', from Keeping a Rendezvous

If we are indeed teetering on the edge of a massive change in how we live, in how human society itself is constructed, and in how we relate to the rest of the world, then we were led to this point by the stories we have told ourselves — above all, by the story of civilisation.

This story has many variants, religious and secular, scientific, economic and mystic. But all tell of humanity's original transcendence of its animal beginnings, our growing mastery over a 'nature' to which we no longer belong, and the glorious future of plenty and prosperity which will follow when this mastery is complete. It is the story of human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures.

What makes this story so dangerous is that, for the most part, we have forgotten that it is a story. It has been told so many times by those who see themselves as rationalists, even scientists; heirs to the Enlightenment's legacy — a legacy which includes the denial of the role of stories in making the world.

Humans have always lived by stories, and those with skill in telling them have been treated with respect and, often, a certain wariness. Beyond the limits of reason, reality remains mysterious, as incapable of being approached directly as a hunter's quarry. With stories, with art, with symbols and layers of meaning, we stalk those elusive aspects of reality that go undreamed of in our philosophy. The storyteller weaves the mysterious into the fabric of life, lacing it with the comic, the tragic, the obscene, making safe paths through dangerous territory.