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Ecophilosophy and the Ambivalence of Nature: Kierkegaard and Knausgård on Lilies, Birds and Being

Abstract: In *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849), Kierkegaard presents a succinct critique of Romantic aesthetics, in line with contemporary critiques of ecocriticism and ecophilosophy, e.g. by Timothy Morton. Whereas Romantic poets see nature as a mirror of their inner thoughts and pathos, thereby divinising themselves and their creativity, Kierkegaard emphasises the authority of the Creator and the exteriority of nature. He identifies the consequences of such Romantic self-infatuation on all levels of discourse: aesthetics, ethics, epistemology and ontology, and seeks to formulate an alternative. I argue that the discourses thus represent an alternative philosophy of nature, revealing an immediate joy for the gift of being-there. Being human thus means being dependent on and embedded in nature. This makes Kierkegaard a highly relevant interlocutor for contemporary ecophilosophy and ecocriticism, as revealed by Knausgård's novel *Morgenstjernen* (2020).

> In a strange way, what I read fell together with my being. I read about the noise of the sea in the noise of the sea; I read about the whispering woods in the whispering woods; and when I read that praying is not to speak but to remain silent, because it was only in silence that the Kingdom of God could come, then the Kingdom of God came. The Kingdom of God was the moment. (Karl Ove Knausgård)[1]

I Introduction

Throughout his authorship, Søren Kierkegaard reflected repeatedly on the single individual, her anxiety, choice and conditions of existence.[2] Some authors have argued that Kierkegaard also contributed to a critical understanding of commu-

1 Karl Ove Knausgård, *Morgenstjernen*, Oslo: Oktober 2020, p. 411. All quotations from Knausgård are translated by MTM.

2 Cf. the preface to *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843) to which Kierkegaard later refers, e.g. in the preface to *The Lily on the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849): *SKS* 11, 9 / *WA*, 3.

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nity.[3] However, what about Kierkegaard and the human being as embedded in nature: Is his philosophy also relevant for ecology?[4] In his ethical thinking, we find an emphasis on the question of responsibility and the limits of the ethical. On a more profound level, his texts on ethical issues focus on the *works* of love: erotic, passionate, despairing, graceful, suffering and caring.[5] His thinking on this topic is relational, focusing on the duty to love one's neighbour and thereby fulfilling and participating in divine love. However, what if we presume that this love and the duty to love ought to pertain not only to one's neighbour—that is, to human beings—but also to creation as a whole, to created beings such as flowers and birds?[6] Would this be a valid interpretation of Kierkegaard's thinking in our age of ecological crisis, often referred to as the Anthropocene?[7]

Kierkegaard's treatises and discourses are rarely seen as texts contributing to a specific understanding of nature.[8] Philosophy of nature and cosmology were significant topics among many of his predecessors and contemporaries, including the German philosophers Schelling and Hegel, the Danish poet

3 See *Kierkegaard's Influence on Social-Political Thought*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 14). Cf. also Hermann Deuser, *Søren Kierkegaard: Die paradoxale Dialektik des politischen Christen*, Munich: Kaiser 1974; Burkhard Conrad, *Der Augenblick der Entscheidung. Zur Geschichte eines politischen Begriffs*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2008; Bartholomew Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno*, New York and Amsterdam: Brill and Rodopi Press 2014.

4 A preliminary argument in favour of such a view is found in Bartholomew Ryan, "'Out into the Middle of Life': The Age of Disintegration and Ecological Perspectives in Kierkegaard's Thought," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2019, pp. 437-462.

5 See the first and second speech in *Works of Love*: *SKS* 9, 13-50 / *WL*, 5-43.

6 Cf. the discussion in Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, London and Brooklyn: Verso 2017.

7 "The term Anthropocene has been adopted to refer to the era of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth." *Oxford English Dictionary*: https://public.oed.com/blog/june-2014-update-new-words-notes [Accessed 30 November 2020].

8 In his article on Kierkegaard's discourses about the lilies and the birds from 1847, published two years prior to the discourse I discuss here, David Kangas argues that it raises a fundamental critique of the structures of human reality in questions of Being and Care. Towards the end, he touches upon the key question of what "lily-being" and "bird-being" means for being human, but he does not raise the even more fundamental question of human dependence on and relation to its natural environment. See David Kangas, "Being Human: Kierkegaard's 1847 Discourses on the Lilies of the Fields and the Birds of the Air," *Konturen*, vol. 7, 2015, pp. 64-83. In Kangas' latest book from 2018, we find a beautiful reading of the discourse from 1849, focusing on silence, joy and the authority of reading: David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meaning of Kierkegaard's Religious Discourses*, London: Bloomsbury 2018, pp. 135-167.

Adam Oehlenschläger and the Norwegian philosopher Henrik Steffens. These thinkers, however, represent a Romantic idea of nature, of which Kierkegaard was critical. Yet it is precisely as a *critic* of Romantic ideas of nature that Kierkegaard may be a relevant interlocutor for contemporary ecology and philosophy of nature, in particular in the emerging field of ecophilosophy. Ecophilosophy and ecocriticism already contain a vast literature on contemporary ideas of nature (and the denial thereof), but also the history of ideas leading to the ecological crisis we observe locally and globally today.[9] The question of aesthetics and the perception of nature thereby plays a key role.

When I describe Kierkegaard's view of nature as *ambivalent*, I first of all refer to Kierkegaard's critique of the Romantic poet as ambivalent (Danish: *tvetydig*) in his relation to nature.[10] However, *ambivalence* also applies to Kierkegaard's Romantic perception of nature on the one hand, and his explicit critique of Romanticism on the other. The first tendency points towards an affective and interiorised description of the lily and the bird, presented as ideals for human resilience, spirituality and relationship to God. The opposite tendency, however, is expressed in Kierkegaard's subtle critique of "the poet" for interiorising nature, pointing towards human embeddedness in nature as criterion for perceiving nature as gift. The ambivalence opens up for various interpretations of Kierkegaard's view of nature. The argument presented here takes the indicated ambivalence of human understanding of nature as a point of departure and delves into the complexity and inherent tensions of the human-nature relationship, where the interiority of human self-consciousness is *broken* by the exteriority of nature, in the discourse represented by the lily in the field and the bird of the air.

I will analyse Kierkegaard's discourse *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* against the backdrop of contemporary critiques of the Romantic notion of nature as presented by ecophilosopher and literary scholar Timothy Morton. Morton has become one of the key figures in contemporary ecophilosophy, due to his subtle and critical analyses of the ecological movement, its ideologies

9 A good collection of the early period of deep ecology is found in *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Næss and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*, ed. by Andrew Brennan and Nina Witoszek, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 1999. Further essays on Nordic contributions to ecophilosophy can be found in *Ecophilosophy in a World of Crisis: Critical Realism and the Nordic Contribution*, ed. by Roy Bashkar et al., London: Routledge 2012. The two recent volumes by Arne Johan Vetlesen offer radical and valuable perspectives on the issue: Arne Johan Vetlesen, *The Denial of Nature*, London: Routledge, 2016; Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism*, London: Routledge 2019.

10 See *SKS* 11, 37 / *WA*, 33.

and blind spots, but also because of his unorthodox, eclectic and somewhat popular style. In his texts, Morton combines Derridean deconstruction and post-Marxist theory with contemporary metaphysics, classical literary texts and elements from popular culture. His critique of the notion of nature in *Ecology without Nature* is perhaps the most thought-provoking argument in his philosophy.[11] Since he first presented the full argument in 2007, Morton has further elaborated on questions of ecophilosophy, focusing on related topics such as dark ecology, hyperobjects, and object-oriented ontology.[12] The argument concerning ecology without nature is basically a critique of the Romantic notion of nature, which according to Morton was developed in the period of industrialization at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, but still dominates discussions on ecology today, in particular within the movement of deep ecology.

Hegel's notion of the beautiful soul (*schöne Seele*) plays a key role in Morton's argument, and thus both Kierkegaard's philosophical critique of Hegel and his aesthetic critique of Romanticism are highly relevant for developing a more nuanced understanding of the notion of nature in the 19th century.[13] In *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849) we find a subtle critique of the Romantic aestheticisation of nature that provokes a more complex and challenging understanding of flowers and birds as examples of natural, material beings—to which even human beings belong. Flowers, birds and humans all belong to nature in the same way, and thus Kierkegaard insists that humans need to *learn* from the bird and the lily what it means to be organic and thus material, and why it matters. Finally, I will show how the Norwegian fictional author Karl Ove Knausgård in a recent novel introduces Kierkegaard's *Lily and Bird* in order to reveal the joy of nature and its immediate spiritual dimension. I will thus conclude by reconsidering the implications of Kierkegaard's aesthetics of lilies and birds, silence and passivity for ecological thinking and existence in the 21st century.

11 See Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007.

12 See Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2012; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2013; Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York: Colombia University Press 2016. A recent discussion of Kierkegaard and object-oriented ontology is found in Niels Wilde, "Weird Allies? Kierkegaard and Object-Oriented Ontology," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2019, pp. 393-413.

13 See Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 118-122; pp. 178-180.

II Ecocriticism and the Romantic Notion of Nature

Timothy Morton has become a leading voice in ecophilosophy of the early 21st century, although he is hardly a philosopher in the traditional sense. He is professor of English literature, and he has written extensively on Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley and the period of Romanticism. Inspired by Jacques Derrida, he has addressed the notion of ecology and argued that ecological critique has become activist, ideological, consumerist, and eco-logocentric.[14] His meta-critique jeopardises the notion of 'nature,' which he sees as a heritage from the period of Romanticism. In the Romantic period, Nature (with capital N) became an object of admiration and eulogies. However, according to Morton, this admiration "does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration."[15] He argues that the binary between civilisation and nature has become a metaphysical dichotomy rendering 'nature' the flipside of civilisation. Hence, on the one hand, nature becomes the object of dreams or fantasies of the "state of nature," and yet on the other, a *neglected* object that inflicts shame, destruction and denial. For Morton, it does not qualify as an object at all, but it is simply "the environment," and as such, it is impossible to grasp without exploiting or otherwise misusing the term. Hence, he argues that we ought to drop the term 'nature'—simply drop it, and not try to redefine or reinterpret it.[16] According to Morton, ecology would be better off *without* it. The discourse on ecology and ecocriticism in the 21st century is, according to Morton, still dominated by the legacy of the Romantic era and its enthusiasm for nature in art, writing and philosophy. He argues for taking a step backwards from the philosophical, but inherently ideological, distinction between civilization and nature that he finds among the proponents of deep ecology, such as Arne Næss and George Sessions, in order to reconsider its meaning and destabilize the metaphysics of Romantic Nature.[17] With reference to Jacques Derrida, he claims that this metaphysical distinction between civilization and nature is still *haunting* us.[18]

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14 See Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 6.

15 Ibid., p. 5.

16 Ibid., p. 21.

17 See Arne Næss and George Sessions, "The Deep Ecology Platform," in *Philosophical Dialogues*, pp. 6-7 and Arne Næss, "A Defense of the Deep Ecology Movement," in *Philosophical Dialogues*, pp. 109-120.

18 Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 21.

In certain respects, Morton's argument concerning the two ages mirroring each other is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's *Two Ages*.[19] Morton not only compares the two periods, but he also claims that the *pathos* of Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th century has returned two centuries later, towards the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Within eco-philosophy in general, and deep ecology in particular, the rationalistic worldview embedded in analytic philosophy and modern natural science is seen as a major reason for the unsustainable exploitation of resources that has accelerated since the industrial revolution.[20] In the era of globalisation, the economic forces of liberal capitalism continue to drive the development in the wrong direction. In order to find new solutions, deep ecology has looked for alternative ways of thinking in Spinoza's theory of universal interconnectedness (favoured by Næss), in nature writing or Indigenous spirituality.[21] However, Morton argues that this turn to alternative ontologies, spiritualities and epistemologies carries the traits of Romantic aesthetics. The problem Morton wants to address is not Spinoza or Indigenous thinking as such, but the gesture of reproducing or reconstructing such images of nature that in the very act of repetition are haunted by patterns of orientalism, exotification and Romanticism. Such aesthetics of nature is what Morton jeopardises and seeks to eradicate. It functions as ideology rather than realism, he argues, and he suspects that it obfuscates the fact that environmental activism in the form of wildlife fascination has become inextricable from consumerism.[22]

Morton's analysis of the Romantic era includes numerous authors such as Thoreau, Byron, Wordsworth and Mary Shelley that represent the oscillation of Romantic aesthetics between distant observation and experienced proximity to nature. However, when it comes to a more precise understanding of the subject that produces nature aesthetically, Morton turns to Hegel, who describes the character of the beautiful soul in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).[23] This is a turning point in Morton's argument: "The beautiful soul is ecological subjectivity. Ambience is really an externalized form of the beautiful soul.... The

19 See *SKS* 8, 102 / *TA*, 108. Cf. also Ryan, "'Out into the Middle of Life,'" p. 460.

20 Cf. Arne Næss, "Environmental Ethics and Spinoza's Ethics," in *Philosophical Dialogues*, pp. 91-101.

21 Cf. ibid., p. 97; Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 180.

22 Cf. Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 82 and the critique of Næss on p. 103 and pp. 116ff.

23 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, vols. 1-20, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1978-1979, vol. 3, pp. 464-495.

beautiful soul holds choices within itself in a state like quantum superposition."[24]

This vision of nature is an expression of the alienated soul's longing for something beautiful—or, in the same vein, modern civilized man's longing for wilderness and "original" (Indigenous) spirituality. Hegel sees the beautiful soul as a version of the unhappy consciousness, estranged from itself and from the world, and unable to perceive the world in a realistic sense. That is the reason why Morton recognises ecological consumerism in this concept and adopts it as critical concept in order to uncover the illusions and ideologies of eco-philosophy, eco-spirituality and eco-activism. He is not convinced by Hegel's solution in the *Phenomenology*, achieved by the Absolute Spirit that dialectically overcomes the split between subject and object; but the notion of the beautiful soul still remains a negative, diagnostic concept used in order to unveil the illusions of contemporary ecological ethics and aesthetics. Although his argument is rather eclectic and far from consistent, I think Morton has identified a weak point in contemporary ecocriticism, whether articulated in philosophy, activism or poetry. Ecocriticism easily drifts into Romantic projections of nature in order to identify a better epistemology, a more biocentric spirituality, a Gaia-centred ontology or the right morality for ecological existence. The tendency towards Romantic aesthetics is still present in the world experiencing an ecological crisis in the 21st century.

Contrary to Morton, however, I will argue that the notion of nature is a key to *understanding* these two ages: the crisis of the present age and the roots of an ecological crisis in the 19th century philosophy of nature, sensitive to the epistemological split between technological instrumentalism and human perception of the natural environment to which humans belong. Denying or simply rejecting the term, I contend, will not solve the problem. While the environment and thus 'nature' is under pressure by the forces of civilization, it still *resists* and *escapes* the control of humankind. Indeed, some argue that natural disasters and pandemics are examples of how nature "strikes back," although the definition of such agency is controversial.[25] Rather than rejecting the notion of nature, then, in what follows I will delve into the concept's literary, religious and philosophical layers in the 19th and the 21st century by studying texts written by Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Ove Knausgård.

24 Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 121.

25 Cf. Shehzad Ali, "Coronavirus Pandemic: Nature Strikes Back?" *Review of Human Rights*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. xxv-xxxi.

III Kierkegaard on Silence

Kierkegaard's short text, *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849), sets out from an aesthetic reflection on nature, or more precisely: how to look at nature and how to write about nature. Kierkegaard introduces a figure, "the poet," who speaks in the following manner: "'Oh, I wish I were like a bird, like the free bird that, delighting in travel, flies far, far away over land and sea, high in the sky, to lands far, far off ….'"[26] The description of this poet is a caricature of wishful thinking, but the author spends several pages deliberating on what the poet *thinks* of, how he *speaks* about and how he *looks* at nature; at the bird in the air and the lily on the field. That is hardly a coincidence. Kierkegaard is concerned with the aesthetics of nature, and he is critical of the Romantic ideal that comes to the fore in the voice of the poet.

The three devotional discourses in this book are formulated as reflections on the famous passage from the Sermon of the Mount (Mt 6:24-34), beginning with Jesus talking about the impossibility of serving two lords, God and Mammon (Mt 6:24). The passage continues with a call to the listeners: Do not worry! Neither about your life, nor about food or clothes, nor about concerns for daily sorrows. Instead of worrying over material goods, Jesus invites the listeners to learn from the birds of the heaven and the lilies of the field, and always seek justice and the Kingdom of God—and the listeners are then promised to receive everything they need, as a gift, at the appropriate time. Finally, Jesus repeats the invitation to avoid worrying about the morrow, since "each day has enough trouble of its own" (Mt 6:34).

This passage from the gospel is the basis for Kierkegaard's reflection, and the voice of the gospel is a contrast to the poet's voice. They speak about the same things—they speak of flowers and birds—and yet they speak differently. Hence, Kierkegaard (in the voice of the poet) identifies a "language difference," or rather a difference *in* language between the two.[27] Whereas the poet thinks that he ought to become *like* a bird, that is, wishes to fly like the bird and escape from the boundaries of earthly existence, the gospel says: Look at the bird, and *be* like the bird. It is a question of being, of existence, and thus also a question of becoming—and therein consists the linguistic difference that concerns Kierkegaard in this text. Let us look at the passage:

26 *SKS* 11, 13 / *WA*, 7.
27 *SKS* 11, 14 / *WA*, 8.

> But it is of course an impossibility that I would be able to be like them …. How cruel then, of the Gospel to talk this way to me—indeed, it seems as if it wanted to make me lose my mind [*tabe Forstanden*]—that I *shall* be what I all too deeply feel, just as the wish for it is deep within me, that I am not and cannot be. I cannot understand the Gospel; there is a language difference [*Sprogforskel*] between us that, if I were to understand it, would kill [*dræbe*] me.[28]

Since I am focusing on aesthetics and philosophy rather than theology, I shall not discuss his interpretation of the gospel referred to here, but rather emphasise this difference *in* language that makes the reader aware of a difference in being, too. The difference thus articulated is between the wishful flight that makes the bird an object of dreams and future escapes from responsibility and the ad-dress [Danish: *til-tale*, German: *An-rede*] that requires listening [Danish: *lytte*], possibly even obedience [Danish: *lyde*]. What is this difference? Or *wherein* lies the difference?

Kierkegaard's response, in the first of the three discourses, is: silence. Silence is the difference of language, or, the difference hiding within language, the difference inscribed in every speech, between word and word, sentence and sentence.[29] The poet and the gospel speak of the same 'thing,' namely the bird and the lily. Still, says the poet, if I were to *understand* the difference, it would "kill me." In the mouth of the poet, this is an exaggeration, but in Kierkegaard's view, this is exactly the *work* of this difference: It puts your life at risk, and it shatters the world as you understand it, as you have *conceived* and imagined it. It opens up a fissure in your understanding and moves beyond the capacity of your reason, your fantasy and your imagination. It undermines your privilege of speech. Hence, the first step in this exercise, in discovering the difference of speech, is the following: "From the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn *Silence*, or learn to be *silent*."[30]

Since Kierkegaard wants to make the reader aware of this silence that is inscribed into language as a difference separating wishful imagination from being, dreams and moods from the task and responsibility of becoming, what are the consequences of this reasoning for his aesthetics of nature?

Evidently, the aesthetic representation of nature in this text is deeply ambivalent—it mirrors the perceived ambivalence of nature: It shifts between *imagination* and thus nature as an external representation of the interior, and another, more earnest and realistic perception of nature that is less easy to

28 *SKS* 11, 14 / *WA*, 8.

29 See Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, pp. 137-138.

30 *SKS* 11, 16 / *WA*, 10. Emphasis and line break in the original.

articulate, more difficult to describe. The difference of language Kierkegaard makes the reader aware of through his emphasis on silence corresponds to an aesthetic difference between, on the one hand, nature as artistic representation of images in the mind, of wishes and fantasies, and, on the other, nature as something given, or even as gift. This nature, which is already *there*, and thus given before the human mind starts imagining itself as bird, as lily, is an irreducible exteriority in relation to the human self. It is already given *prior* to the human mind, and thus given *priority* in the definition of what nature *is*. It represents a different point of departure for the ontology of nature, so to speak, and thus also for the aesthetics of nature.

That would not render the work of imagination superfluous, though. The aesthetics Kierkegaard displays in these discourses betrays a deep ambivalence between the one and the other—the one would not be achievable, or imaginable, without the other. The rejected position of the poet is in accordance with Hegel's description of the "beautiful soul," the observer who projects his vision on the world but remains in a detached and imaginative superposition. Reality gives no resistance to the beautiful soul. Hence, nature is there for the beautiful soul to project itself, to experience its alienation, as happy or unhappy consciousness. When Hegel proceeds further in the *Phenomenology*, of course, he is able to overcome the abstract position of the beautiful soul. In the final analysis, when he arrives at the Absolute Spirit, he achieves a synthesis between subject and object by way of sublation, an *Aufhebung* of the difference.

Kierkegaard proceeds differently, though. When the voice of the gospel is emphasised, it is because it expresses an alternative interpretation and an alternative vision of aesthetic perception. For Kierkegaard, this is an authorial voice; it speaks with authority (whereas he speaks without authority), but its significance for the aesthetics of nature is due to the point that it represents *exteriority*. The gospel points towards a religious reality out there, called God's kingdom.[31] However, aesthetics addresses the question of form rather than content, and, as such, Kierkegaard argues that it signifies nature as given, prior to my construction of it, prior to my interiority. As such, this voice makes

31 This point is emphasized by Krishek and Furtak in their reading of *The Lily in the Field*: Sharon Krishek and Rick Anthony Furtak, "A Cure for Worry? Kierkegaardian Faith and the Insecurity of Human Existence," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 72, 2012, pp. 157-175. Although they give a careful philosophical interpretation of Kierkegaard's book in the vein of Christian existentialism, they have not taken his emphasis on exteriority into account, nor have they considered the ecophilosophical potential of his aesthetics of nature. For a different and more subtle understanding of authority, see Frances Maughan-Brown, *The Lily's Tongue: Figure and Authority in Kierkegaard's Lily Discourses*, New York: SUNY Press 2019.

me aware of matters that represent the concrete, the material and physical nature out there on the field. When Kierkegaard therefore repeats the imperative: Look at the birds! Look at the lilies!—the imperative is expressed because the interiority of the reader ought to be formatted according to this organic living being, not the other way around. Towards the end of the first discourse, Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasises the "out there" as the place where the readers find their self:

> There is silence out there. The forest is silent; even when it whispers it nevertheless is silent. The trees, even when they stand in the thickest growth, keep their word, something human beings rarely do despite a promise given: This will remain between us. The sea is silent; even when it rages uproariously, it is silent. At first you perhaps listen in the wrong way and hear it roar. If you hurry off and report this, you do the sea an injustice. If, however, you take the time and listen more carefully, you hear—how amazing!—you hear silence, because uniformity is nevertheless also silence.[32]

The passage betrays another level of ambivalence in Kierkegaard's aesthetics: He is working poetically, imagining the forest, the sea, the silence. Even so, he rejects the reality of the image thus produced, its identification with *real* nature. Nature in the more realistic and original sense requires silence, requires listening, and only by listening and observing this exterior plant or animal is it possible to learn from the lily, learn from the bird: "The bird is *silent and waits* [Danish: *tier og bier*]."[33] The bird thus referred to in the text, is the imagined (or written) bird, but as signifier it points towards the bird out there, to which you ought to listen—and learn. The *difference* remains in nature and in the representation of nature. The being of natural things remains given, but non-captured (out of grasp) out there.

IV Simplicity of Nature and Passivity of Perception

While Kierkegaard's aesthetics of nature in *The Lily in the Field* is decidedly critical towards Romanticism, his style is not always easy to distinguish from that of Romantic poetry. For this very reason, however, the similarity of style makes it all the more significant to distinguish Kierkegaard's approach from Romanticism, not only in aesthetic terms, but also when it comes to ethics

32 *SKS* 11, 19 / *WA*, 13.
33 *SKS* 11, 19 / *WA*, 13.

and religion. Romantic religiosity represents for Kierkegaard a divinisation of nature, yet that is exactly the kind of religiosity he seeks to avoid. When the Romantic poet reflects on nature as divine, this reflection simply reflects the poet's own subjectivity, that is, the human subject in God's place. The poets see nature as a mirror of their own thoughts, their own *pathos*, and thence, they divinise themselves, their own genius and creativity, rather than accepting the authority of the Creator.

Kierkegaard recognises the consequences of such Romantic self-infatuation on all levels of discourse: aesthetics, ethics, epistemology and ontology. His critique of Romanticism and the Romantic perception of nature therefore addresses all these levels of understanding, even within the short text of *The Lily in the Field*. It is not a theoretical treatise, and therefore it requires some attention to elaborate all the levels throughout the discourses; but these do appear. As already mentioned, Kierkegaard sets out from a discussion of aesthetics and continues the first of the three discourses by elaborating on the passivity of perception. In the second discourse, he addresses the ethical issue of how to respect and obey God by paying respect to nature rather than forcing nature to obey. In the third discourse, he proceeds more explicitly towards the ontological status of nature, with a deliberation pointing towards other writings such as *Works of Love* and *The Sickness unto Death*.

As historical movements, both Romanticism and German Idealism represent reactions to the mechanistic view of nature in physics and the rationalistic secularisation of nature during the Enlightenment.[34] For Kierkegaard, however, neither Romanticism nor German Idealism can offer a genuine alternative to Enlightenment rationalism. In German Idealism, as well as in Romanticism, the divine is merely interiorised by the genius or the beautiful soul in order to be projected onto the exterior world.[35] Consequently, the mechanistic understanding of natural science in the 18th and 19th century and the Romantic aestheticisation of nature are not contradictory views but rather two sides of the same coin. If Kierkegaard would accept this strategy of the Romantic authors, the most reasonable consequence would be to follow Feuerbach in the latter's critique of religion as mere projections of human subjectivity, i.e. as an apotheosis of subjectivity itself.[36]

Kierkegaard, however, follows a different path. In some respects, it is a more traditional path, since Kierkegaard seeks to avoid the inherent constructivism of

34 See Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, p. 32.

35 Cf. Carmen Götz, *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi im Kontext der Aufklärung*, Hamburg: Meiner 2008, p. 403.

36 See Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, Leipzig: Otto Wigand 1841.

Kant's transcendental Idealism and Hegel's dialectical Idealism. In other respects, though, Kierkegaard's position points *beyond* the constructivism of the 19th and 20th centuries towards an anthropology and epistemology that is embedded in a simpler, more intuitive aesthetics of nature as that which is given prior to human intentionality and projections. The aesthetic ambivalence described above thus culminates in an emphasis on the *simplicity of nature*: nature itself as simple, and the simplicity of nature as a model for human self-understanding.[37]

There are three steps on Kierkegaard's path towards this concept of simplicity: First, becoming silent; second, waiting, and third, suffering. When simplicity is achieved, there follows a fourth step, to which I will return below. As opposed to the speculative character of Hegel's phenomenology, Kierkegaard elaborates an epistemology of nature emphasising its factuality and simplicity. This epistemology corresponds to the passivity of perception when nature is "out there": nature as given in the exterior precedes my effort at understanding it. Hence, nature as given also resists my effort at conceiving it meaningfully—and, incidentally, the same applies to God. The author emphasises the wonder and awe that should seize us when we become aware of this fact. In accordance with the mentioned ambivalence, however, the author feels free to poeticise nature for the sake of human self-reflection. This double strategy runs through all the three discourses. Even in these poetic passages, though, the author emphasises the passivity of perception.

Nowhere is Kierkegaard's emphasis on the passivity of perception, prior to any construction of meaning, more evident than in his analysis of how we experience mere suffering. Humans seek to *understand* suffering, Kierkegaard contends. Thus, they try to explain its reasons and look for meaning behind it, whereas the bird and the lily simply suffer, neither more nor less: "The bird is silent and suffers." Even in this respect, the bird and the lily can teach us something about earnestness and simplicity: When we seek to explain suffering and rationalise it, Kierkegaard asserts that the suffering "increases immensely," but the same happens when we try to overlook it or explain it away. When Kierkegaard reduces suffering to its minimum, however, he also points towards the ethical task of becoming yourself, in a simplicity that equals the bird and the lily.[38]

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37 Kierkegaard uses the term 'simplicity' (Danish, *Eenfoldighed*) in order to describe the attitude of obedience.

38 *SKS* 11, 21 / *WA*, 17: "Silent before God, like the lily and the bird, you *shall* become."

V Obedience and Humility

The question of ethics raised in the second discourse of *The Lily in the Field* is more problematic. Kierkegaard displays a firm belief in *obedience* as the solution to any ethical dilemma. Is this merely a reflection of the society he lived in, where the king could demand obedience from anyone? Is it alternatively an example of how Kierkegaard emphasised the Christian scandal of radical obedience towards the end of his authorship? Both options are possible, but I will follow a path of interpretation running from the aesthetics of nature towards the ethics of nature. Here too, the voice of the poet is opposed to the voice of the gospel.

The gospel defines the ethical choice in Mt 6:24 as an either-or: "No one can serve two masters, for he must either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon." In Kierkegaard's reading, Mammon represents the attitude of the poets, the Romantic poets who divinise themselves and look at nature as a mirror of their own imagination and pathos. This is what Kierkegaard sees as the temptation, viz. the temptation of ambivalence (Danish: *Tvetydighed*).[39] This ambivalence follows from reducing nature to an instrument for the needs of the Romantic poet, a mirror of their own suffering, a utopia of their longings, a dystopia of their despair. What Morton calls 'ambience' is deeply ambiguous since it shifts according to the moods and constructions of nature projected by the poet. It equals the famous critique of Lynn White against Christianity as the most damaging religion for the environment. White accuses Christianity of claiming that it "is God's will that man exploits nature for his own ends," and he further argues that "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."[40]

This is a rather one-sided representation of Christianity, however, neither with roots in history nor a sober analysis of modernity in the West. It reflects the logic of the Enlightenment and the ideology of consumerism rather than traditional understandings of Christian faith. Writing in the United States two decades after World War II, Lynn White belongs to a generation and a culture where the alliance between Christendom, individual freedom, consumerism, and the exploitation of nature was driven to its most extreme. Admittedly, the same tendency is visible today across the Western world and beyond, as global-

39 See *SKS* 11, 37 / *WA*, 33.

40 Lynn T. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Nature*, vol. 155, 1967, pp. 1203-1207.

isation has spread these ideas and attitudes to every corner of the world, but it is difficult to see why there should be a necessary historical or ideological link between this unbounded consumerism and the Christian tradition before the Enlightenment.

Kierkegaard, in his own way, warns against the megalomania of Idealism and Romanticism, which applies to their aesthetics and theory of perception, but also is inherent in Idealist and Romantic ideas of nature. He addresses a crucial dilemma in the two ages, the age of Romanticism and the age of the Anthropocene: The idea of human superiority over nature, expressed in exploitation of nature on the one hand and Romantic self-projection on the other. If that is the *ambivalence* (*Tvetydighed*) of nature in the present age, then silence (within language) and passive perception (in terms of epistemology) are in demand in order to achieve simplicity (*Eenfoldighed*). Learning to respect and venerate nature in its exteriority is therefore no longer an *adiaphoron*; it rests at the heart of a modern Christian philosophy of life, an obedience that resists the ruling idolatry of Mammon. Hence, it is also a path towards being saved from yourself, of losing yourself in order to receive it from outside, and from beyond, as a gift of grace.

In this sense, *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* represents the counterpart to *The Sickness unto Death*, published one month later. In order to further develop Kierkegaard's contribution to ecophilosophy, I suggest reading the two books together. Kierkegaard identifies despair as the *sickness unto death*, and writes a pathology of modern culture, philosophy, aesthetics and religion based on this diagnosis. Despair is divided into weakness and strength, and thus the despairing self is caught up in the *ambivalence* of willing and not willing to be oneself. The sickness is analysed dialectically as despairingly *losing* oneself (or fleeing from the self that one is given) and despairingly clinging to oneself, according to your own superiority and will.[41] The ambivalence of despair thus pointed out is not only characteristic of the human relationship to oneself, but also the human relationship to God, to life, and—as this reading of *The Sickness* in light of *The Lily in the Field* demonstrates—to nature. However, the silence and simplicity of the lily and the bird represents an *alternative* to the self-concerned dialectic of despair. The silence of the lily invites the reader to accept a phenomenological reduction of suffering *through* silence. Moreover, the appeal to obedience is anything but a question of submission to a set of rules or commandments. In the sense invoked here, as unconditioned obedience, it means the abandonment of control, of superiority, indeed, the

41 See e.g. *SKS* 11, 129-130 / *SUD*, 13-14.

abandonment of *oneself*, in order to discover a new sense of simplicity and perceptivity.[42]

Kierkegaard thus points to a different understanding of nature by emphasizing the either-or of the gospel: *either* you produce nature in your own image, *or* you accept the *simplicity* of nature, as indicated by Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount, and learn from it. The simplicity indicates that you need to learn *humility* from the lily and the bird. Nature is never there simply for your sake, it is there *for its own sake*, as God once created it, a God who remains continuously creative in nature. Hence, in order to understand what it means to be human, truly human, you need to learn from nature, not in the sense of control and construction, but in the sense of humility. By watching the lily and the bird, you should learn to appreciate nature, not the other way around. Such humility is a practice in Christianity: overcoming the self-interest of exploiting nature and learning to live according to the simplicity of natural existence. As it is described here, it is not without sorrow, nor without suffering, but it is simple and real.

Kierkegaard does not reflect ethically on the ecological crisis of our time—he had no idea of such a crisis nor any knowledge about its consequences. Still, he reflects upon two different attitudes that may have far-reaching consequences for the environment today and in the future: If we manage to learn from nature, and thereby acknowledge the need for humility, there might still be opportunities to avoid the most disastrous consequences. If we otherwise seek to consume and dominate it, the ecological consequences might be even more dramatic than we are able to imagine today. In the present age too, there is a choice between God the Creator and Mammon the consumer. There is an either-or.

VI Being-There

The third and last discourse in *The Lily in the Field* is about joy. That is, of course, a more gracious topic for the author as well as for the reader, but it also involves the danger that author and reader are once more caught up in the temptations of Romantic rhetoric. Indeed, the third discourse is most elaborate stylistically, and

42 Cf. the understanding of unconditioned obedience described by David Kangas: "Only unconditioned obedience is capable of investing the living being with 'the faith and courage to become in all its glory,' to realize its entire possibility, if only for an instant. Unconditioned obedience, presupposing the essential jointure of becoming and death, grants the wherewithal to bloom, to become one's entire possibility, fully to inhabit and to bloom in that finite, anarchic space-time." Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, p. 157.

Kierkegaard here poeticises nature without reservations in his description of the bird and the lily: "What joy when the dew falls and refreshes the lily, which, now cooled, composes itself for rest! What joy when after the bath the lily voluptuously dries itself in the first rays of the sun! What joy the long summer day! What joy when the bird hides by the lily… ."[43]

Read in relation to Kierkegaard's warning to the poet in the first discourse, this passage indicates that he is also in dialogue with himself: Even his own rhetoric is Romantic; he is writing like a poet, and thus there is an open tension within the book. The representation of nature in the third discourse is, more evidently than in the first two, an example of what Morton calls ambience. The author flies away with the bird and dreams sweetly of the lilies of the field, the two teachers of joy with whom the poet identifies joy itself. The lily and the bird are defined as joyful teachers of joy, "who just because they are *unconditionally joyful* are joy itself."[44] The author deliberates about the distinction between conditional joy, that is, being joyful 'because…'; and being unconditionally joyful, that is, being joyful despite all worries, sorrows, sufferings and pains.

The third discourse represents the rhetorical climax of the book, and here Kierkegaard's praise of joy puts the two previous discourses in a new perspective. The conditional joy belongs to the poets who are concerned with themselves and therefore bound to their own limitations. When they fear losing their mind ("*tabe Forstanden*"), it is because their world is limited to predictability and calculable risks. The gospel to which Kierkegaard refers, however, speaks a different language. It speaks of the simple gift of being-there as wonder, indeed as a wonder of wonders, and in Kierkegaard's reading, this gospel sings, rejoices and speaks through nature: "their teaching of joy, which their lives in turn express, is quite briefly as follows: There is a today: it *is*—indeed, an infinite emphasis falls on this *is*."[45]

This acquired insight concerns a particular understanding of *Being*, as being-there. Even though it is the fruit of lessons in silence and obedience, it is not the calculable reward of such lessons. That does not mean, however, that it is easily achievable.[46] Simple joy can be difficult to achieve if we are preoccupied with the arduousness of life, if we suffer from anxiety or despair, if we are so busy changing the world that we do not have the time to enjoy it—what Kierkegaard

43 *SKS* 11, 41 / *WA*, 37.

44 *SKS* 11, 41 / *WA*, 37. Emphasis in the original.

45 *SKS* 11, 42 / *WA*, 38.

46 *SKS* 11, 43 / *WA*, 39: "'But,' you say, 'the lily and the bird, they have it easy.'" See also Kangas, "Being Human," pp. 80-81 and Ryan, "'Out into the Middle of Things,'" pp. 460-461.

refers to as "sorrows" or concerns.[47] If, in this way, we are unaware of nature's simplicity, we might not even be able to recognise it in the first place.

So long as we act as if we have to produce our self, produce our life, and even produce its meaning, we are circling around ourselves and encircling our self in itself (*incurvatus in se ipse*).[48] This is a sign of despair, as indicated by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*, published only a month later than *The Lily in the Field*. Compared to that structure of despairingly willing or not willing to be oneself, the mere exteriority of nature is a relief, possibly even a liberation from despair.[49] It corresponds to an understanding of nature as given, as being there. This givenness, the gift of being there, is emphasised as the secret of joy:

> What is joy, or what is it to be joyful? It is truly to be present to oneself; but truly to be present to oneself is this *today*, this *to be* today, truly *to be today*. The more true it is that you are today, the more completely present you are to yourself today, the less the day of trouble, tomorrow, exists for you. Joy is the present time, with the whole emphasis on: *the present time*.[50]

The idea of being present to oneself presented here is, on the one hand Romantic, ecstatic, and presents Being in a form that is literally unachievable, and yet, on the other hand, it is realistic in insisting on being *there*, as the most simple and basic human experience. Even for those who have lost faith in such basic experiences, it is presupposed, as the opposite of despair, the counterpoint to absence. An unconditional suspension of the ethical and an unconditional suspension of the self-concerned circle of despair. *The Lily in the Field* circles around this secret of being, that there are countless ways of losing oneself, or forfeiting the joy of existence, by living in the memory of paradise lost or worrying about the future collapse of your life—or, I would add, our ecosystem. Still, all these worries are of small significance unless we are able to rejoice in the existence of nature, today. The simple and basic experience of being-there, which is available in every moment. As long as we can say "today."

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47 Cf. *SKS* 11, 43-45 / *WA*, 39-41.

48 Cf. the analysis of '*Indesluttethed*' (inclosing reserve) in *The Sickness unto Death*: *SKS* 11, 177-178 / *SUD*, 63-64. See also Marius Timmann Mjaaland, "Die Schrift im Selbst: Das Äußere im Inneren—oder umgekehrt," in *Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard*, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al., Berlin: De Gruyter 2006 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 11), pp. 457-464.

49 Cf. Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2009 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 17), pp. 192-199.

50 *SKS* 11, 43 / *WA*, 39. Emphasis in the original.

VII Knausgård on Lilies, Birds and Being in the Anthropocene

Fictional author Karl-Ove Knausgård has discovered this simple but basic insight through a recent reading of Kierkegaard.[51] His novel *Morgenstjernen* [*The Morning Star*] (2020) is an apocalyptic drama reflecting on the life of ordinary people who are suffering and fighting for dignity, each in their own way, while the dark powers are released in nature. The dramatic consequences of the ecological crisis thus intervene with the ordinary life of nine different characters living on the coast of Southern and Western Norway. In one of the narratives, hundreds of crabs are suddenly crossing the road.[52] In another, rats emerge from the underground in the middle of the day.[53] These are signs of how nature is out of balance. On an exceptionally hot summer night, the characters are surprised and disturbed by the appearance of a shining star.[54] The title refers to an apocalyptic expectation in the New Testament of Christ coming as a morning star at the end of times, indicating judgment and eschatological expectation of cosmic reconciliation (2 Pet 1:19; Rev 2:28; 22:16). The passage from the Book of Revelation is ambiguous, though, and may refer to the appearance of Lucifer, too. Either way, the star is a sign of the end of days, a sign of the times.

Knausgård's reflections on the climate crisis are mediated through the lives of common people: men and women, old and young. His narratives move between the microscale dramas of the everyday and the macroscale drama of the cosmos, whereby the latter conveys the dark hunch of a threatening tragedy to the former. When the ecosystem is out of balance, strange things start happening in nature and in everyday life. Kierkegaard's work has inspired numerous fiction authors, not only in Scandinavia but across the world from the 19th century until today, yet for the first time it seems to become the fixed star, so to speak, of ecocritical fiction.[55]

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51 The first Norwegian translation of *The Lily in the Field* appeared in 2015 with an extensive introduction by MTM: Søren Kierkegaard, *Liljen på marken og fuglen under himmelen*, trans. by Knut Johansen, Oslo: Verbum 2015.

52 Knausgård, *Morgenstjernen*, p. 50.

53 See ibid., pp. 145-146.

54 See ibid., p. 51, p. 112, p. 152, p. 350, p. 664 et passim.

55 The Norwegian author Carl Frode Tiller has already 2017 taken Kierkegaard as point of departure for an ecocritical novel: Carl Frode Tiller, *Begynnelser*, Oslo: Aschehoug 2017. For an overview of Kierkegaard's influence on Norwegian literature, from Ibsen to Solstad, cf. Marius Timmann Mjaaland and Thor Arvid Dyrerud, *Forfatterne møter Kierkegaard*, Oslo: Press 2013.

The key to this development is Knausgård's reading of Kierkegaard's 1849 discourses, *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Sky*. In 2019, Knausgård published a short story where the entire plot based on this text.[56] The book was harshly criticised as "kitsch" by literary critic and Kierkegaard scholar Eivind Tjønneland, polemically asking: "Is Knausgård now more dangerous than Kierkegaard as producer of ideology?"[57] The publication of *Morgenstjernen* in 2020 has presumably disappointed Tjønneland even more. This is a clear indication that Knausgård has identified a burning issue in Kierkegaard, running counter to Tjønneland's anti-religious reading of Kierkegaard (following Georg Brandes) and his insistence on Kierkegaard's work as an example of Romantic irony.[58] According to Knausgård, it is planned as a major work of three or four volumes. Hence, the short story from 2019 was only the prelude to a huge epos on human beings and their relation to the apocalypse of ecological crisis. Understanding Knausgård in the light of Kierkegaard's relation to nature in terms of ecophilosophy and ecocriticism therefore becomes more topical than ever.

The major events in *Morgenstjernen* are interpreted through the eyes of Egil Stray, an ambivalent character who is fascinated by death and occultism, but also classical works of film and literature. His reading of *The Lily in the Field* has changed his life, and he gives a careful description of how it happened.[59] Whereas nature is raging around him, and the ambitions, plans and explanations are raging within him, he suddenly discovers the possibility of silence in a book about birds and lilies:

> The silence in which you were supposed to hide, was like the silence of the lily and the bird, they were supposed to be our teachers, but so was also the silence in the woods and the silence on the sea. Even when the sea rages and blusters, there is silence, [Kierkegaard] wrote, while the sea was raging and blustering outside the place where I sat reading. Even when the woods are swishing, they are silent, he wrote, and I heard the woods swishing and the silence in the swish, and I recognised that silence: it was in contrast to it that my own inner noise became so distinct.[60]

56 Karl Ove Knausgård, *Fuglene under himmelen*, Oslo: Oktober 2019.

57 Eivind Tjønneland, "Kitsch from Knausgård," at https://en.nytid.no/kitsch-fra-knausgard [Accessed 01.12.2020].

58 Cf. Eivind Tjønneland, *Ironie als Symptom*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2004. See also Eivind Tjønneland, *Knausgård-koden*, Oslo: Spartacus 2010.

59 Knausgård, *Morgenstjernen*, pp. 397-413.

60 Knausgård, *Morgenstjernen*, p. 411. My translation. All translations from Knausgård are mine.

As we can see from the quotation, nature in its exteriority takes Egil by surprise. It becomes a liberating force, in the sense that he becomes free from himself, abandoning the noise of wills, plans and ambitions. At the same time, however, he comes to himself in terms of a more basic freedom: the immediate presence of the moment.[61] In his reflections, Egil discusses the biological philosophy of Hans Jonas, where life originates from matter, but continuously needs energy and nourishment in order to keep its freedom: "Life itself is matter, and thus the miracle is that matter liberates itself from matter and can do as it wants, more or less independent of the systems....Still, freedom is not unconditional, since what happens when matter is liberated, is that a new dependence emerges, and even that is new and unheard-of."[62] Egil wonders about how life has existed for millions and millions of years before it achieved the freedom it now has, and yet still, the dynamic of freedom and dependence is the same for the bacteria or the single-celled creature as for us.

When he later reads Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, he does so as an extension and continuation of Jonas—although the historical influences run the other way around, via Heidegger. Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are personal philosophers, and at times ecstatic, he comments, but whereas Nietzsche's ecstasy ends in madness, Kierkegaard's points towards the moment, the silence, the absolute trust and devotion (Norwegian: *hengivenhet*) to God.[63] The first turn in his insight follows from a reflection on the woods, the sea, the lilies, the birds, who are "simply present in the moment"—without future or past, without fear or anxiety. Then follows another insight: "*What befalls the bird is none of its concern*. That was the most revolutionary thought I had ever thought. It would free me from all pain, all suffering. *What happens to me is none of my concern*."[64]

A little later, Egil is the character who interprets the title of the book, the morning star.[65] When strange things are happening outside the summerhouse by the sea, he finds an old Bible and looks up the passage from the prophet Isiah, where Isiah predicts that the morning star will fall from heaven (Is 12:12-14). Egil reflects upon the name of Lucifer, referring to the morning star, in Hebrew הילל and in Greek Φωσφόρος. The ambivalence of this name catches Egil's attention, since it addresses the personal and cosmic ambivalence of

61 The whole passage from p. 400 onwards is a discussion of freedom and its paradoxes.
62 Ibid., p. 401.
63 Ibid., p. 411.
64 Ibid., p. 411.
65 See ibid., pp. 426-427.

good and evil. He concludes that the star is a sign, but he has no clear idea of what it signifies.[66]

As the final chapter of *Morgenstjernen*, Knausgård has included an essay by Egil Stray, where he reflects upon death and the dead ones.[67] He writes about Hölderlin and Orfeus, Homer and Nietzsche, but he ends up with John at Patmos, who has written about his visions of the apocalypse, the revelation at the end of times: "In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them" (Rev 9:6). That is the key to his interpretation of the ongoing events. Suspending this imminent catastrophe is only possible when Egil returns to Kierkegaard, to the human dependence on nature and matter as the condition for life. Kierkegaard does in this case represent a different understanding of eschatology, an eschatology of the present. In the moment, he can also achieve the momentary liberation from nature, and from death, by learning to listen, learning to discover silence, from the lily and the bird.[68]

After writing autobiographic fiction over six volumes in *My Struggle* (2009-11), circling around defining moments of shame, guilt and despair, Knausgård has now turned to a narrative universe of nine protagonists who experience their personal drama of life and death under the appearing apocalyptic sign of the morning star. As in *My Struggle*, all the characters experience a deep sense of despair. Egil is a key figure in Knausgård's plot—to a certain extent he represents the position of the author (or an intermediary figure between author and reader), interpreting the events and philosophizing about their meaning. Via Egil, Knausgård establishes a meta-discourse including questions of ecophilosophy, existentialism, aesthetics and ecocriticism.[69] Egil is an ambivalent figure, however, and thus he demonstrates the *ambivalence of nature* in Knausgård's novel. His reflections and reactions show us a character who is dysfunctional in many respects and unable to cope with the daily challenges of society. Not only *The Lily in the Field*, but also *The Sickness unto Death* is therefore instrumental in order to understand Egil's ambivalent relation to nature. Egil Stray is despairingly willing and despairingly not willing to be himself. He is always on the run: fleeing from every challenge in life, fleeing from the responsibility of raising a son, and fleeing from the hard realities of

66 Ibid., p. 427.
67 Ibid., pp. 613-664.
68 Cf. ibid., p. 411.
69 Cf. ibid., pp. 397-412.

life into Romantic religiosity. This is what Kierkegaard analyses as despair in weakness.[70]

Egil Stray is caught up in a Romantic view of nature and a Romantic view of himself. He represents the strand of Romanticism which according to Morton is typical of our time, and its relation to nature. However, reading Knausgård's latest novel against the backdrop of Kierkegaard also makes visible some fundamental differences between the Age of Romanticism and the Age of the Anthropocene. Whereas the era of Romanticism produces a poet and a subjectivity which is naively concerned with itself, yet with a fantastic fascination for nature, the era of the Anthropocene has produced subjectivities that destroy the very nature they are fascinated by. Hence, they are haunted by the original sin of the culture and civilization to which they belong, with its ambivalence of exploitation and destruction of nature on the one hand, and fascination for the beauty and simplicity of nature on the other.

When Knausgård describes Egil's reading of Kierkegaard, it is as if the philosopher reveals all the deficiencies of contemporary culture. He describes it as a shattering experience, a conversion. Egil identifies the crisis of the civilization to which he belongs and perceives it as an existential crisis, but his discovery of a deep interconnectedness with nature and with God, i.e. with the principle of life, is hardly sufficient to make a difference when it comes to human destruction of the environment. *The Lily in the Field* remains a revealing contrast to the despairing subjectivities of our times. It is a reminder that such simplicity, and such unconditioned obedience is *possible*, and yet it seems almost unachievable, like a reminder of paradise lost.

Knausgård's narrative betrays an additional dilemma in the contemporary situation: When a figure like Egil Stray discovers his alienation from nature as an existential issue, his religious response seems somewhat unworldly, almost quixotic. He recognises the split in his own attitude towards nature: scientific doubt based on Enlightenment rationality on the one hand, and Romantic enthusiasm on the other. Egil Stray takes refuge to the latter option, in an ecstatic moment of truth and insight, but also as an escape from this world, threatening to collapse. However, since he is hardly able to overcome or properly react to the crisis of nature in our age, he ends up *repeating* the split been exteriority and interiority when seeking consolation in religious interiority. The inner conflict is more explicit, as a despair "declaring" itself. Still, the existential response is apparently insufficient. It might mitigate his personal crisis, but it seems more or less inadequate for contemporary ecological concerns.

70 Cf. *SKS* 11, 165ff. / *SUD*, 49ff.

In the present age, a repetition of Kierkegaard's three key points—silence, obedience and joy—seems unachievable under the morning star, the dystopic sign of the times. The lily and the bird are signs of a different world, indeed indications that a different perception of nature is *possible*, but Egil falls back into ambivalence and the repetition of such silence, obedience and joy fails. This is symptomatic not only for Egil Stray, but for Karl Ove Knausgård and the crisis, the atmosphere, the world he portrays. It is homeless, apocalyptic, despairing; divided between the sign of Christ and the sign of Lucifer—the ambiguity of the threatening morning star. The quotes from Kierkegaard's discourse are flashing up like signs of silence, of obedience, of ecstatic joy, as if the author wants to point towards a different possibility, a glimpse of hope and utopia behind the dystopic future. However, Egil Stray is still a poet in Kierkegaard's sense of the term. His relation to the world is poetical, and thus he poeticises nature and his relation to nature. And so does Karl Ove Knausgård, the author behind *Morgenstjernen*.

If I should indicate a path from there, it would be to follow the lead of the text towards a difference in language and a passivity of perception. Read from this point, as a point zero of the text, it opens up a difference *within* the ambivalence of nature, *within* the ambivalence of despair. Therein lies the option of a different and unconditional obedience, and a different ontology of nature, where the lily and the bird are encountered in their exteriority, as examples of silence and attentive prayer, as sources of joy: An unconditional gift of being-there, of being human. The latter option belongs to a different time, a different temporality, but I think it might be accessible in any age, even the age of the Anthropocene, if we take the risk of questioning the basic premises of the era of the Anthropocene.

VIII Conclusion

Today, the need for an eco-philosophical reading of *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Sky* (1849) seems obvious, and yet it has not been conducted previously.[71] What I have presented here, is only the starting point for a more comprehensive re-reading of later works in Kierkegaard's authorship, in particular the works from the period 1847-49. Despair, guilt and anxiety of an ecological collapse is today widespread among the younger generation, as

71 Brief references to ecophilosophy and object-oriented ontology are found in Ryan, "'Out into the Middle of Things,'" pp. 460-461 and Wilde, "Weird Allies?," p. 403.

demonstrated by Greta Thunberg and *#fridaysforfuture*, but also described in the mythical narrative *Morgenstjernen*, written by Karl Ove Knausgård.[72] Reading *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) in dialogue with *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849) or rather, reading the latter as response to the former, opens up radically new perspectives on human despair. When the human being, the human as *Spirit*, is cut off from its natural surroundings, from the conditions of life and death embedded in our natural conditions, it can hardly avoid the vicious circle of despair. This loss of nature causes guilt and sorrow, since all human relations are embedded in Creation. The silence and unconditioned obedience of the lily, and also the singing joy of the bird, point towards a different way of being, as letting-be and being-there, rather than as controlling and exploiting nature.

Timothy Morton has criticised contemporary ecophilosophy and literary ecocriticism for reproducing Romantic aesthetics in their description of nature. He claims that the *pathos* of Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th century has returned two centuries later as a response to the mechanistic view of nature within the natural sciences and the consumerism of globalised capitalism. However, such aesthetics functions as ideology rather than realism, Morton argues. He suspects that it obfuscates the fact that environmental activism in the form of wildlife fascination has become inextricable from consumerism. For Morton, this blind spot of ecocriticism is reminiscent of Hegel's critique of the beautiful soul in the *Phenomenology*.

Today, theories of ecophilosophy discuss nature and the loss of nature in various forms, including scenarios of doomsday and climate catastrophe. There is a need to discuss climate change from various perspectives, including biological changes, loss of biodiversity, political regulations to protect nature and philosophical analyses of the consequences of environmental disaster. There is also a need for eco-literature interpreting the impact of climate change on human existence, and ecocriticism discussing such literature from an aesthetical and structural point of view. Surprisingly often, however, I find that ecocriticism and ecophilosophy miss this simple but decisive point emphasised by Kierkegaard: that the spiritual presence in nature remains closed to the objectively observing eye, but is accessible to us in its simplicity, any moment, with the mere gift of being-there. We do not even need Romantic

72 See Greta Thunberg, *No-one is Too Small to Make a Difference*, London: Penguin 2019; Ole Jacob Madsen, "The Thunberg Effect: Reassessing Emotion in the Climate Change Debate," in *Between Closeness and Evil*, ed. by Odin Lysaker, Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press 2020, pp. 215-230.

aesthetics in order to discover that, although becoming silent when watching the lily and the bird is helpful in order to become aware of it.

The three discourses in *The Lily in the Field* display the ambivalence of nature in his texts, but they also betray Kierkegaard's ambivalent relationship to Romanticism and Romantic poetry: He consciously applies Romantic figures of writing, and yet, he sharply criticizes Romantic aesthetics and epistemology. He is critical of Romantic ethics and religiosity, and thus he introduces the voice of the gospel as counterexample to the Romantic imagination of nature. The result is a different literary and philosophical genre, which I would label *broken* Romanticism or *ecstatic* Realism. It is both romantic in it existential intensity and realistic in its insistence on becoming what you are, in the simple sense, rather than fleeing from the basic conditions of life. The most typical mark of this genre is its brokenness: It displays human failure, sorrow and absence in contrast to the lily and the bird, two figures who are situated "out there," in nature. Nature represents dependence, but also simplicity and freedom; suffering, but also presence and joy. These are the natural conditions lying as foundation for being human. Hence, it would simply be impossible to flee from these shared conditions of life, and every effort at doing so would end in despair.