

Nihilist Animism

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Ultimately everything I do, every project, everything I build, every relationship I start is going to fail. The world, to the extent that I am part of it, is also dissolving. This building/destroying is my expression of a feeling that lives somewhere between the Protestant work ethic, the will to inflict anarchy on the world, and an attitude against the projects of Man. I am satisfied living here, in this unstable place, continuing to do things that will blow away as soon as the center stops holding. I'm satisfied to call this nihilism, not because that is what it is, but because our culture is into naming things and I am into sending lemmings off of the cliffs of their own creation.

There is a current that breezily uses animism as a solution to the “problem of spirituality.” I have concerns. An older article on the topic, Sarah Anne Lawless’ “The Song of the Land: Bioregional Animism,”¹ both demonstrates and refers to the problems of immediatist spirituality rather well. On the one hand we benefit from the knowledge (mostly from anthropological data) of the seeming parallelism between many peoples (i.e. that everyone, in the past, was an animist) and on the other hand any attempt to practice animism either suffers from being a sort of cultural appropriation or a hokey stab in the dark that does not immediately satisfy a cultural need and feels embarrassingly small compared to the greatness of the whole earth.

There is a painful gap between being (or naming yourself) an animist and feeling the glory of the profane (and holy) things around you. This gap is enormous. It is filled with the monoculture religions, civilization, and technocracy. This trinity makes the compelling claim that the holy holy is in fact achievable by ritual, law, and blinking lights. It claims this with the promise of personal salvation and potential of private revelation by way of priest, urban living, and new cell phones.

It an enormous provocation to say that kneeling alone by the bank of a river and being cleansed by the sacred is a pure, unadulterated animism. It may be a true moment (especially to someone enveloped in spectacle and lies) but it is not a complete one. At some point one packs up the REI equipment in the Subaru and drives back home. Sometime later one posts about it on Tumblr. One is not complete in the moment, but instead is an observer of one’s own life. That life can feel like a series of real moments punctuated by gaps of disconnection that look like daily life. Living can be like a problem that can be solved after retirement or whatever.

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140305154119/http://sarahannelawless.com/2014/02/21/the-song-of-the-land-bioregional-animism/>

Animism (grand, capital A) began to die as the City was being born. This does not mean the urge died, but that urge primarily moves us against ourselves and towards camping trips, Eschatology, and faith-based approaches to the sickness of this world. Our question is whether mediated experiences are the only ones we are capable of. If that is the case, as is likely, then our capacity for revelatory joy is similarly curtailed, all arguments to the contrary. If we are indeed broken are we capable of NOT being broken? As anarchists who have an interest in how the world operates, and perhaps how we could perform as wooden shoes to it, we are naive about what grinding gears mean today. We think it is enough to change the world without realizing that troubleshooting gears is a quarter of what the world does. We have urges but little wisdom about the unforeseen consequences of our small strategies. This is the reason why we are so hungry for the possibility of animism, a spiritual practice where desire and capacity are mapped perfectly.

The reason we will not solve this problem like the little special snowflakes that we are is because of exactly that. Just as monotheism has succeeded in the deception that it represents a personal relationship between you and the almighty (parsed and mediated by priests, ministers, and the dining room table) animism needs a social fabric, outside of the civilized order, to keep warm. This social fabric isn't as simple as playing outdoors with other children, starving for life lessons from the kitchen table where the elders sit and talk, or rituals that help you understand that you are a part of something large. But one can imagine such simplicity. One can imagine life without screens as that life just passed us by, but that is only a fraction of what it would take to live a whole life. While the cell phone may itself be sacred and alive, the things we see on it are mundane and ordinary and make us the same.

It is on infertile land that future spiritual practitioners attempt to live. These are hardscrabble lives, devoid of community or anything but scraps of information of how others did what you are trying to do. In this context it makes perfect sense that racial, silly, or fantastic elements (often the same thing) often infiltrate what is an impossible effort. It's not that we can't "go back," it is that doing so is just as difficult as marching to somewhere completely new (whether Narnia or into the Star Wars universe). The new just seems easier.

What I would propose, what a nihilist animism would entail, would be an acknowledgment that a spiritual endeavor must come from a sociable practice. This might be a conversation between seven of us in the woods, or different sets in different places but it has to pass the test of the I/we. If you can find a group of people who are willing to ride the tension of being individuated, having undergone the great pain of core alienation in the modern world, while not privileging one's own experiences in a group then you could begin. This would look like a long waiting, while the traffic passes overhead, while your devices beep, bop, beep in your car, when you could be doing other things, for the world around you to expose its language to you. This would not happen quickly. It would probably take years and then it could shape a set of principles, a path to walk, that would make sense to your set of people. This is why it is impossible to imagine in this world, the context has shifted too radically to imagine building a set of tools over years before even thinking about using them. The context has shifted too radically to imagine doing anything so long term with sociability.

This long listening project does not make sense in a world of traffic, screens, and bullshit dichotomies like I and we. But this is the start. One, find a set of people, two, find a language. That language should probably not be a public one because the task that comes next is all too vulnerable. We are talking about creating something that the history of the current order has

done a bang-up job of genociding, mocking, and parading in front of the slaving consumers of modern spectacle for their amusement. Keeping this language secret will be nearly impossible in a world of social media but the task isn't nearly complete then. Finally this language has to become meaningful. With it a set of people, who will have to become multi-generational, have to disassemble and recreate a world that does not suffer from monotheism, civilization, and modern technology.

That impossible task set I share with you is the closest thing I would put forward as a recommended practice. A world-weary rebuilding of the very reasons we should do things together at all. A practice I am myself incapable of participating in because I have been broken by the same things as you. My mind is no longer limber enough to learn a new language. My heart is too scarred to do something so honest with a group of new people and too experienced to do it with the monsters I surround myself with (for other reasons). To go deep enough to subvert the conditioning and violence of this world is just impossible enough that I can imagine the kind of person who would attempt it but I have no idea what will result, even in a best case scenario.

I dream of free actors who live without fear. I imagine words that speak beyond comprehension. I imagine the same goals that I have expressed lived by people who care for one another, who laugh at the empty sociability of our era, who are the anarchy unleashed unto the world. I imagine connections to the world that I am not capable of. This impossible set of conditions and potentials is why a nihilist animism appeals to me at all. It names capabilities I don't have in a world I can't imagine living in. That's all one can ask of oneself.

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