

Book Review: Nancy Ryley *The Forsaken Garden: Four Conversations on the Deep Meaning of Environmental Illness*

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- *The Forsaken Garden: Four Conversations on the Deep Meaning of Environmental Illness.*
- Nancy Ryley
- Quest Books, 1998, 297 pages, \$23.00

I have a confession to make. When the editor asked me if I wanted to review *The Forsaken Garden* he described it as a book on environmental illness, which, up to a point, is quite accurate. Although I wasn't terribly keen on dealing with that subject, I agreed, mainly because it's my experience that if your first response to a group you want to work with is a refusal, you often don't hear from them again. Nonetheless, when the parcel arrived I didn't open it for a while, mainly because I was up to my neck in research on the arts and had more pressing deadlines to meet.

Well, reader, I have opened the book and read it, and its impact on me may be judged by the fact that, although I was hoping to take a break from teaching university courses next year, I am now thinking of revamping one of my courses and offering it this fall, if only to be able to talk with students about *The Forsaken Garden*.

The Forsaken Garden has as its subtitle "four conversations on the deep meaning of environmental illness." The editor, Nancy Ryley, is a documentary filmmaker who had to get out of the Toronto rat race and move west because she suffered from fatigue, depression and hypersensitivity to foods and chemicals, a malaise that some ascribe to our increasing additive-ridden diets and chemically-poisoned environments. This book, however, doesn't really go into that; it simply assumes it as a given. And whatever it is that afflicted (or afflicts) Nancy Ryley, it has driven her in a most creative direction. *The Forsaken Garden* doesn't spend much time lamenting illness; it presents Ms. Ryley in creative dialogue with four important thinkers who have unique but related visions of what a healthy society should be and how we may attain it. This is a book that stirs one to action, not because it is rhetorically overblown, but because of the sharpness of the insights of the contributors and their ability to

pinpoint the historical false turnings that are driving us toward what may be an almost inevitable confrontation with major ecological catastrophe.

Ms. Ryley's first interview, with the late Sir Laurens van der Post, whose *The Lost World of The Kalahari* is one of the important books in my life, struck me as the least striking of the four, perhaps because I am quite familiar with van der Post's point of view, or possibly because his linking of the inner and outer aspects of the current crisis is stated in such general terms. Sir Laurens insists that we suffer from "loss of soul" and need to undertake our own personal journeys to achieve wholeness. Our own narrowness, our inability to deal with our shadow side, causes us to project our destructive selves outward. Our post-Renaissance obsession with controlling the outer world, which has made us unconscious of our inner processes, has also meant losing touch with anything transcendent. We spend most of our energy, in every sense, in attempts at domination but we destroy what we seek to dominate and remain hollow at the centre. The task in front of us is to find a way to turn things around; failing that, we will be faced with a judgment "that will be something which even the Book of Revelation may not have properly foretold."

While this may not be a very specific analysis, it manages to link the inner and outer sides of the world ecological crisis in a way that discourages superficial solutions. Sir Laurens doesn't say that we shouldn't try to stop exploiting the third world, or that some of the dehumanizing and socially destructive sides of the new international economy shouldn't be dealt with, but he does suggest that, if we think in terms of outer structures alone, we are falling into a trap and will accomplish very little.

Nancy Ryley's interview with Thomas Berry, which is placed last in the book, picks up from the van der Post theme, sharpens the historical context, brings hard science into the picture in a much more creative way and, above all, shows us how the actual experience of the natural environment can itself be transformative, apart from any supposed Jungian paradigm. Readers of Thomas Berry's books, *The Dream of the Earth* and *The Universe Story*, will find familiar material in this interview, but those coming to this impressive thinker for the first time will be amazed at the breadth and profundity of the man's insights and at the synthesizing power of his vision.

Berry's view of the universe rests on a profound acceptance of the deepest western traditions of natural sacrality. He makes clear that, as modern quantum science insists, we are actually enfolded into this universe of ours; it is literally our inescapable environment. Recognizing the millennial roots (and their dangers) in his own conception of the Ecozoic Age — the here and now in which we must bring human activity into balance with the spontaneous functioning of nature — he argues convincingly for a future that is both rationally limned and mythically resonant. This part of Nancy Ryley's book alone would make it well worth buying.

The other two contributors, Marion and Ross Woodman, are a well-known Toronto wife and husband couple, she a Jungian analyst, he a professor of literature. Marion Woodman has written much on addiction and the creative reader can put together her cultural analysis of this phenomenon with what Thomas Berry sees as our obsession with “Wonderworld.” We choose the wrong kind of food to fill us up, and deny ourselves spiritual sustenance, just as we choose consumer goods to “make us happy” with the result that we are deeply miserable. Is this just rhetoric? I don’t think so.

Only last week I made a public presentation opposing a new Loblaws big box in my neighborhood of Ottawa. To the consternation of our mayor, I condemned the bad city planning that is dumping a suburban monster into a unique and village-like section of this city. I was not surprised that no one seemed to understand the fundamental principles of city planning, least of all the planners, but what really shocked me was the parade of citizens (they seemed like zombies to me) who stood up to speak for Loblaws in awestruck tones, rhapsodizing over the company’s merchandise and even apologizing to the almighty corporation for blasphemers like myself who value a sanely developed neighborhood over one more monster stuffed with overmarketed and mostly unnecessary consumer goods.

Everything that Marion Woodman says about addiction spoke to me then and I realized more clearly than ever that I am surrounded by devotees of the fatuous dream of Wonderworld exposed by Thomas Berry.

The Marion Woodman conversations touch on issues of the feeling-relation to the environment, on the limitations of patriarchal thinking and of the need to return to those vital forces within us that we project culturally as gods and goddesses but too often ignore. Here, more than anywhere else in the book, there is specific discussion of environmental illness, but also a marvelous working through of some key imagery to suggest solutions to the loss of soul described by van der Post. We must return to the garden, Marion Woodman suggests, not to a presumed innocence but to a being-in-the-body that is fully aware of that “quantum non-separability” described by Thomas Berry.

Ross Woodman for his part zeroes in on the Romantic writers and shows how fundamentally their insights underlie modern deep ecological thinking, as well as how a book like *Frankenstein* presents us with a terrifying vision of the destructive potential of our own creative powers. I’ve never met Woodman, nor heard his ideas before, but I was delighted to find great areas of overlap between his approach to these writers and mine (I’ve taught Romantic literature for some three decades). Woodman understands very well the dynamic link the Romantics perceived between psyche and nature, a link that has been overshadowed in much recent criticism by obsessive attention to gender and politics. Woodman argues that what some decry as “mysticism” in Romantic writing is really the grounding of value in experiential process, something Alfred North Whitehead identified in Romantic poetry in his classic book on *Science and the*

Modern World. Romantic poetry, as Woodman pithily outlines it, links with the ecological movement, with the revival of myth as a way of knowing, and with the turn to inwardness through meditation that characterizes the twentieth century interest in eastern thought. The Romantics form the true, original counter-culture, one that seeks to make contact with — and in a deeper sense knows itself to be a part of — a polytheistic world of natural energy.

Nancy Ryley has created a wonderful book, literally so, since it gives us a path back to wonder, in the sense that Carlyle and others have defined it. The thoughts and imagery of the various contributors make a coherent counterpoint that is full of energy and the spirit of play, yet not one of them underrates the dangers of the current situation, or stands in the way of specific social and political action. Ms. Ryley herself with her many valuable questions and probings, has managed to keep the subject in focus and to bring out the considerable best in most of her contributors. As an introduction to the creative ways in which the broadest and deepest ecological thinking is challenging the complacencies of consumerism, “development,” and scientism, *The Forsaken Garden* is truly outstanding.

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