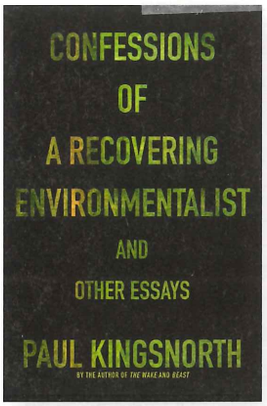

Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist

PAUL KINGSNORTH

Graywolf Press, 2017. $16, 208 pages.

IN AN ERA so bent on rewarding gleeful, self-serving spite passing itself off as contrarianism, it is easy to misinterpret the title of Paul Kingsnorth's new essay collection. Yet *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist* is a call not to apostasy but, rather, to honesty, to confession about what we've done to ourselves and the planet:

> *The results of half a century of debt-fueled "growth" are becoming impossible to deny convincingly, but even as economies and certainties crumble, our appointed leaders bravely hold the line. No one wants to be the first to say the dam is cracked beyond repair.*

But if it is indeed cracked, we must first be honest about it, then devise ways of living and thinking that will provide realistic—even, at times, joyful—engagement with our new world. *Confessions* sits alongside books like Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological,* Melanie Challenger's *On Extinction,* and Kathleen Dean Moore's *Great Tide Rising,* asking us to confront the scale of the crisis and renovate the perceptions that have enabled it. "[I]n the decline of one age, and one way of seeing," Kingsnorth writes, "there is always contained the seed of another."

In writing and in life, the author turns familiar-looking forms inside out to see what purpose they serve. Hearkening to fellow dissenting Englishmen, from William Blake to Edward Thomas to the Luddites, he lives with his wife and children off the grid on a farm in Ireland, where he cuts grass with a scythe (beautifully described in an essay first published in *Orion*) and composts the family's waste. "What happens to a society that won't deal with its own shit?" he asks. "It ends up deep in it."

Kingsnorth, cofounder of the Dark Mountain Project and author of *Real England, The Wake,* and *Beast,* has been battling waste for some time, asking readers to confront the truth of what we may well have wrecked beyond repair: "But this is a starting point. . . . Accepting the loss and moving through it, dropping old assumptions and thinking afresh, allows you to think again about the big question: how can I still be useful?"

While Kingsnorth ranges to the outer edges of the possible and the sayable, he never just stays there. He is forthright about follies like space colonization:

> *Bind this bundle of blind greed and desire with a length of imperial bombast—insist that exploring space is the equivalent of exploring the oceans in an earlier age, that it is our right and our destiny—and you have a whole new fantastical mythology on your hands.*

His work is anchored by attention to the local and the small as part of an overall posture of humility. "Grow your own carrots," he urges, "learn to use an axe and a scythe, know where the sun falls and what the trees do and what is growing in the laneways." Farm becomes philosophy, as in the work of Wendell Berry. "Once you start thinking you are responsible for, or can influence, everything," Kingsnorth writes, "you are lost. When you take responsibility for a specific something, on the other hand, it's possible you might get somewhere."

Part of clearing our vision is not just seeing what is in front of our noses, to paraphrase George Orwell, one of Kingsnorth's inspirations. It is recognizing the stories we tell and their power for good or for ill, especially against the false security of numbers and greenwashing business plans. "If there is, in the words of Thor Heyerdahl, 'nothing for modern man to return to,'" Kingsnorth writes, "the question is what we can move on to, and how we can do it in a way that brings us back in tune with what the philosopher Thomas Berry called 'the great conversation' between humans and the natural world." Contrary to what the title might suggest, this collection speaks not of defeatism or of mere retreat, but of the particular kind of hope to be found in realism and in responsibility to the place where you are right now.

—Amy Weldon

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