Jan Zwicky. *Once upon a Time in the West: Essays on the Politics of Thought and Imagination*. McGill-Queen's University Press 2023. 200 pp. $120.00 USD (Hardcover 9780228017080); $29.95 USD (Paperback 9780228017097).

Once Upon a Time in the West, a collection of semi-scholarly, semi-personal essays by the Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky is above all an attempt – semi-scholarly, semi-personal – to grapple with the particulars of our moment in time, the end of Western civilization, and by implication, human civilization. Zwicky (b. 1955), who has previously written on a wide range of topics including the philosophy of language, Greek philosophy, the philosophic import of poetry, and the relationship between scientific thought and environmental disaster, continues in this collection to explore many of the themes she already touched upon in her previous work; above all, she returns here to the concept of "lyric" philosophy or thinking, which she conceives as an alternative epistemology to some of the more analytic, sequential, scientific-technical modes of thought that have increasingly come to dominate Western mind and practice over the course of modernity. In her book *Lyric Philosophy* (1992 & 2011), for example, she presented lyric thought as a different *form* of thought, even challenging the traditional layout of the printed philosophic tract by pursuing an unconventional arrangement of lines and illustrations on the page. In *Once Upon a Time in The West*, she seems to take one further step in her exploration of lyric awareness, opting to write in the essay genre, privileging the personal and sensible over the definitive; the *attempt*, as it were (the very meaning of the term 'essay') over the conclusion, and the result is a pleasure to read.

The narrative or philosophy of history that underlies *Once Upon a Time in the West* is one that is relatively ubiquitous among philosophers, intellectual historians, and other social scientists, according to which there exists a direct line of causation between the moral and scientific revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (otherwise known as the Enlightenment) and the horrors of the twentieth. According to Zwicky, most of the acute crises currently faced by humanity – including 'teetering economies, democratic institutions under threat, belligerent populism on the rise, [and] ecological cataclysm on the horizon' – stem from a single source, 'a *way of thinking* that is also responsible for some of [the West's] most signal achievements' (vii). In the Preface, she calls this way of thinking 'resourcist' (viii), although elsewhere, in what may be the most scholarly essay in this collection, 'Auden as Philosopher: How Poets Think,' she calls this way of thinking 'Baconian' (16-20).

It is worth dwelling momentarily on the significance of Zwicky's invocation of Francis Bacon, as it helps elucidate a central argument of the book, insofar as it could be said to have one. The nature of the Enlightenment revolution, according to Bacon and other proponents of the new morality, could be seen as primarily concerned with the roles of science and nature. In the premodern era, during classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, the purpose of science was generally seen as the observation and study of the world so that humankind may learn to live *in accordance with nature*. According to Bacon and others, however, the purpose of science should be utilitarian – as Bacon himself said, science should be used 'for the relief of man's estate.' Nature, then, *became a resource*. For Zwicky, as for many of the other critics of modernity, it is this moral revolution that ultimately led the West down the path of destruction (27, ff).

Now, I admit, I was unfamiliar with Zwicky's writings before taking on this review. What drew me to this book was its intriguing mixture of the philosophy of history and literary theory. While reading these essays, however, I could not help reflecting that Zwicky brings a particularly Canadian sensibility to bear on some of the issues affecting those of us living in the post-industrial West. Another famous Canadian scholar, the literary theorist Northrop Frye, famously suggested once that Canadian literature emerged from an early 'garrison mentality' that characterized the early Canadian settlers: 'Small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological "frontier," separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting […]' (Conclusion to *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck, [University of Toronto Press, 1965], 224). Several of these themes are also present in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, even if her circumstances – and in many cases, her conclusions – differ from those of her Canadian forbears.

Above all, Zwicky sees very differently from the early Canadians the *type* of threat that we currently face. It is no longer nature or the wilderness that she fears, but rather, the industrial-capitalist-technological-scientific manifestations of Western civilization. Nature, as she shows most explicitly in the essay 'Wilderness and Agriculture,' has by this point in the early twenty-first century, been so utterly mastered and tamed that it could no longer possibly serve as a threat. In fact, occasionally there lurks among the essays the sense that nature may perhaps be the only refuge we have from industrial civilization, as for example in the essay 'Lyric Realism,' which

discusses the philosophical significance of nature poetry: 'The fundamental gestures that underlie nature poetry […] insist not that nature is nice but that it's *out there*: other than us, and every bit as ontologically robust' (39). But ultimately, the explicit message of this collection is that there is no saving grace. Resistance is futile, and all that remains for us to do is to better comprehend the character and magnitude of our contemporary predicament. As she writes in her powerful and evocative Preface: 'Because I do not think solutions are available, my aim is simply to understand how we got here. […]. The point is to go down with our eyes open' (ix).

Zwicky is equally despondent about the possibility of making any meaningful political change. In what may be the most forthrightly political essay in the collection, 'A Note on Jane Jacob's *Systems of Survival*,' she suggests there may still be some value – and even hope for change – in the actions of individuals as well as of small communities, as long as these remain at the local or at least sub-state level: 'It is too late […] to urge the virtues of self-restraint and wisdom on the state. We are left to attempt meaningful moral gestures as individuals and small communities rather than as voting members of large national politics.' But in her view, these actions, too, depend on first understanding, and coming to terms with where and who we are: 'The virtue now most required by those of us who enjoy the supermarkets, the drinkable tap water, and the air-conditioning offered by Western so-called liberal democracies is courage: courage to admit our individual complicity in ecological catastrophe and courage to admit that we belong to a remarkably violent, intemperate, and short-sighted species. These acts of self-recognition may, in turn, give us the integrity to die well' (95). In another essay, 'Frost and Snow,' where she explains the reasons why she decided to leave academia, she seems just as pessimistic: 'Why awaken the soul to justice if the only result can be to increase awareness of the futility of aspiring to justice in the world?' (135). And although the essay ends on a somewhat more uplifting note, the underlying message is that education, too, has been corrupted, and can no longer serve as refuge from the enclosure of evil. Nonetheless, perhaps somewhat like the early Canadian settlers, she does seem to value law and order as a sublime expression of humanity. 'We need rules,' she writes, 'and our upholding of them can be a source of moral beauty' (107).

Since Zwicky is above all concerned with the conditions and future (or lack thereof) of Western civilization, I could not help noticing that she pays very little attention to Christianity. While Christianity – and religion in general – makes occasional appearances in the text (for example, in the discussion of 'sacredness' in the essay on Auden), these remain rather tangential. It seems to

me that Zwicky, at least in this collection, has not considered either at all or deeply enough the direct relationship between the demise of Christianity and the growth of materialism over the course of Western history. The Christian perspective – with Christianity seen as *true* rather than as mere cultural construct – could have also provided Zwicky with another alternative epistemology to the reigning materialism (and may have been easier to define than the lyric sensibility). Moreover, a renewal of Christianity could possible have also given her hope – and a vision – for the renewal of Western civilization. Zwicky herself does not seem to entertain, or even wish to entertain this option. She attests that she is 'a person of no orthodox religious affiliation, raised by atheists in a secular culture' (10). But would a lyric sensibility not at least suggest certain *openness* toward the possibility of the truth of religion? Or are we, indeed, too far down the path of destruction? I hope that in her future writings, she will address these questions, too.

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