Towards an Ecological Catholicism: Marian Pilgrimage in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In his novel "Die Wallfahrer," or "The Pilgrims" (1986), Carl Amery draws together the topics of Catholicism and ecological criticism through pilgrimage. The novel depicts the journeys of four pilgrims to the Marian shrine at Tuntenhausen, in Bavaria. Their journeys take place during critical times over four centuries: the Thirty Years' War, the Enlightenment, the "Gründerzeit," or the economic and industrial boom in nineteenth century Germany, and the Second World War. While these journeys are deeply rooted in Catholic practices, they do not neatly fit into the story of Christian soteriology. Instead of pointing towards heaven and God's mercy, they point to a future characterized by a different kind of mercy revealed through the pilgrims' interactions with Marian figures they encounter along the way. These interactions guide them to engage with a counter narrative to anthropocentrism and disregard of those considered weak. The pilgrim's journeys anticipate their ultimate journey towards Gaia, the earth goddess in Greek mythology, and the inspiration for the Gaia Hypothesis, which proposes that the Earth evolves as a system in which organisms are an active, fundamental component. I argue that the novel recasts the pilgrim journey as a journey towards an ecological consciousness of humans' creatureliness and increasingly detrimental impact on the web of life.

Keywords: Marian figures, ecological Catholicism, ecological crisis, Virgin Mary, Gaia, Anthropocene era, pilgrimage

Introduction

In his magnum opus, the novel *Die Wallfahrer*, or *The Pilgrims* (1986), the author, environmental activist, and co-founder of the Green Party in Germany, Carl Amery, draws together the topics of Catholicism and ecological criticism through pilgrimage. With chapters written in baroque German and Bavarian dialect, the novel is linguistically challenging and has never been translated into English. In this paper I hope to make *The Pilgrims* accessible to a broader audience because it uniquely re-frames ecological crises through pilgrimage.

The novel depicts four pilgrimages to the church at Tuntenhausen, in Bavaria, Germany, where pilgrims honor the Virgin Mary and ask for and

commemorate miracles. The pilgrim journeys in the novel take place during critical times over four centuries: the Thirty Years' War, the Enlightenment, the "Gründerzeit," or the economic and industrial boom in nineteenth-century Germany, and the Second World War. Although separated by hundreds of years, the pilgrimages are connected by their common goal, Tuntenhausen, and by encounters with Marian figures.

The novel opens with an epigraph from the 18th century German poet Novalis: "Ich sehe dich in tausend Bildern, / Maria, lieblich ausgedrückt" ("I see you in a thousand pictures,/ Mary, sweetly expressed") (Amery 1986, p. 6).[1] Amery's novel offers the reader a thousand pictures of the Virgin Mary, but in an unexpected, ecological framework, painted against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. As they come into contact with these different pictures of the Virgin Mary, the pilgrims do not become more aware of their spiritual state, as might be expected in a pilgrimage, but of their status as living creatures and the impact of humanity on the biosphere. In this paper I will contextualize this journey within the broader Anthropocene debate, and argue that the novel recasts the pilgrim journey as a journey towards an ecological consciousness of humans' creatureliness and increasingly detrimental impact on the web of life.

The pilgrims begin their journey with different motivations: fulfillment of a vow, healing, fear of the End Times, and confession. None of these motives have anything to do with the environment. However, as they journey, the pilgrims come into contact with Marian figures—women sharing and refashioning features of the Virgin Mary—that little by little place each pilgrim's motivation and journey into a larger ecological context. Before they shift the focus of the pilgrims outwards towards the biosphere, they first turn the pilgrims' attention to themselves. They make the pilgrims aware of their own physicality and creatureliness, which Eric Santner describes as "the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference" (Santer, 2006, p. 12). This "radical difference" in Amery's novel appears in the depiction of the human as a religious animal, a difference that melts away during pilgrimage and encounters with Marian figures.

The Marian figures often appear to the pilgrims during the most physically challenging moments of the pilgrimage, such as harrowing mountain climbs or violent rainstorms. As they respond to the extreme physicality of the pilgrim journey and the Marian figures' messages, the pilgrims come to recognize their frailty, their status as creatures, and their interconnectedness with other life forms, both human and non-human. Although the pilgrims are confronted with

1 Citations from Die Wallfahrer are hereafter cited in text as DW. All English translations are my own.

their frailty on the one hand, they are confronted with the strength and power of humanity on the other. With each encounter the Marian figures increasingly expand the scope of the pilgrims' focus, ultimately extending it to the biosphere.

As they appear and re-appear throughout the pilgrimages, the Marian figures function as typological figures; namely, they point to an archetype, and draw events together. Typology, in the biblical exegetical tradition, refers to persons or events that serve as a pattern for others (Woollcombe, 1957). Amery's novelistic typology functions similarly to what K.J. Woollcombe considers a typological "method of writing," which he defines as "the description of an event, person or thing in the New Testament in terms borrowed from the description of its prototypal counterpart in the Old Testament" (Woollcombe, 1957, pp. 39-40). Throughout the novel, persons, events, and things are described in terms borrowed from the description of their prototypical counterparts in earlier pilgrimages. In the novel, Amery creates his own novelistic typology centered on the figure of the Virgin Mary. However, while the figure of Mary in classical typology points to Christ and his incarnation, the Marian figures in Amery's novel point to Gaia, the earth goddess. While centered on different figures, the two typologies are part of larger stories of the redemption of humankind. With his new typology, Amery depicts a shift from a Christocentric to a biocentric worldview without abandoning Christian spiritual or Catholic cultural allegiances.

An Ecological Pilgrimage

These figures set the pilgrims on a path consisting of three stations: recognition of their own creatureliness, their entwinement with other life forms, and the entwinement of humanity as a whole with the life composing the biosphere. This path can be seen in the journey of one of the pilgrims, Count Innozenz Maria, a Bavarian nobleman living near Tuntenhausen in the 19th century. Innozenz Maria plays an active role in Bavarian political life, heading a party to support Bavarian farmers and traditional Catholic values. Above all things, the count values purity, both physical and moral. His esteem of purity is reflected in his hobby, the study of contemporary Marian art, in particular, art of the Nazarene school (Amery, 1986).[2] He appreciates the simplicity of the depictions of Mary, depictions that he finds fitting for the age in which he lives:

> In einer Epoche der zunehmenden Verwüstung der Sitten schien es ihm von der Vorsehung gewollt zu sein, daß sich dieser Verwüstung die gleichfalls ständig wachsende Verehrung der Virgo Intemerata, der Unbefleckten

2 For more on the Nazarene aesthetic and movement, see Cordula Grewe's Painting the Sacred in the Age of Romanticism, and Mitchell Benjamin Frank's German Romantic Painting Redefined.

> Jungfrau, entgegenstemmte; eine Verehrung, die in der zunehmenden Engelhaftigkeit des Marienbildes ihren Ausdruck findet. (Amery, 1986, pp. 155-156)

> In an age of increasing devastation of morals it appeared to him to be the will of providence that the ever-growing cult of the Virgo Intemerata, the Immaculate Virgin, a cult that finds its expression in increasingly angelic pictures of Mary, should make a stand against this devastation. (Amery, 1986, pp. 155-156)

The extreme purity of the Nazarene Marian depictions acts as a counterweight to the perceived modern immorality that so deeply disturbs the count. More than anything else, he appreciates how the Nazarene School of painting depicts triumph over the sensual (Amery, 1986). Innozenz Maria himself reflects the trend of growing veneration of the Virgo Intemerata; the count's name, Innozenz Maria, recalls the innocence and purity of Mary. His lifestyle, one of piety, abstinence, and discipline, reflects his devotion to the immaculate Mother of God.

The count's extreme ascetic lifestyle, however has psychological and physical consequences which manifest themselves as psychosomatic conditions; he suffers from extreme constipation, a physical ailment that reflects a deeper psychological ailment—a tendency to block out all physical and moral impurities in life. Having found prayer and modern medicine ineffectual against his ailment, Innozenz Maria turns to the unorthodox healer, Apollonia. While at her home, he gives up his life of abstinence and physical discomfort, taking up the use of tobacco, swearing, and committing adultery. To relieve his subsequent guilt, he then becomes part of the papal army in Rome, an international army raised to uphold papal power in the wake of Italian unification and democracy.

While in Rome, the count contracts amebic dysentery, an infection of the intestines caused by a protozoan (Amery, 1986). After having spent most of his life in pursuit of purity and in abhorrence of the sensual and physical, the count dies completely out of control of his bodily functions and surrounded by excrement. However, he no longer feels exiled from the physical and organic side of life. He has learned to give up his vision of an Immaculate Virgin and a completely sanitary world. Perhaps most importantly, he learns to see himself as an organic, physical creature and takes a step towards a new ecological consciousness.

Gaia and a New Soteriology

Paradoxically, Innozenz Maria's journey towards impurity situates him in a larger story of salvation as it prepares him to accept Gaia's future offering of evolutionary purification. In the Christian theological tradition, salvation history is essentially the story of God's enactment of his plan of salvation for sinful

humanity. Through typological Marian figures that point to Gaia, Amery re-imagines Christian salvation history. He rewrites the story with a new sin, a new savior, and a new eternity. In this story, humanity's damnation results not from their disobedience to God, but from their disregard for their own creatureliness and violence against the biosphere and the life forms composing it. This sin necessitates a savior, but not the biblical Christ. Instead, Gaia steps forward to extend mercy to the devastated biosphere. At the very end of his pilgrimage, Innozenz Maria finds "…the Great Shepherdess herself, the Lady of the animals and the eternally inviolable Virgin-Mother – yes, yet more precisely and more powerfully named […] GAIA" (Amery, 1986, p. 391). Although embedded in the framework of Christian salvation history, the novel's depiction of Gaia and her grace imbues this framework with an ecological twist and offers the pilgrims a new way to conceive of the biosphere and their relation to it.

Amery's Gaia not only shares characteristics of the Virgin Mary, but also of the mythological goddess and Gaia theory, a central point of reference in early earth system science. In Greek mythology, Gaia is the earth goddess. She creates the earth, mountains, sea, and sky, Ouranos, to whom Gaia bears many children. Ouranos hates his children and hides them in the depths of the earth so that Gaia cannot give birth to them. In her distress, Gaia concocts a plan against her husband. She invents iron to make a sickle and convinces the youngest of her many unborn children, Kronos, to carry out her scheme to punish Ouranos. When Ouranos comes in the evening to Gaia for sexual relations, Kronos uses the sickle to cut off his father's genitals. Gaia's twelve children, the Titans, are then born (Kerényi, 1979).

James Lovelock, a physiologist and inventor, references this primordial Greek goddess in his Gaia hypothesis, in which he makes an argument for understanding the earth as animated. He looks as the peculiarity of the earth as a living planet, asking why water is still on the earth and why carbon dioxide falls into the earth instead of staying in the air. He argues that this is because the Earth evolves as "a system in which the organisms are an integral part," a system he names Gaia (Lovelock, 2000, p. 128).

In his lectures on the new climatic regime, Bruno Latour revisits Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and situates it in the midst of current debates regarding the Anthropocene. Latour writes that Lovelock's hypothesis could be seen as a reversal of the Copernican revolution. While Galileo made earth part of a galaxy, one planet among others, Lovelock takes earth out again, putting it into a privileged position (Latour, 2017). According to Latour, Lovelock uses the figure of Gaia to articulate that the earth is animated without painting it as a system: "His problem is indeed to understand in what respect the Earth is active, but *without endowing it with a soul*; and to understand, too, what is the immediate consequence of the Earth's activity – in what respect can one say that it *retroacts to the*

collective action of humans?" (Latour, 2017, p. 86). Latour goes on to argue that while Lovelock explains the earth's behavior by the work of living organisms, by seeing the earth as active and animated, Lovelock does not suggest that Gaia is a superorganism or goddess (Latour, 2017).

A difficulty with the Gaia system, Latour notes, is the tendency to see Gaia as a single agent: "Now the problem Lovelock saw very well is that, in the literal sense, in the objects he studied, *there are neither parts nor a whole*" (Latour, 2017, p. 95). In technological systems, which Latour contrasts with Gaia, if there are parts fulfilling a function within a whole, there is a need for an engineer, or Providence, to give the parts a function to fulfill a greater whole. Latour argues that Lovelock's Gaia theory does not paint the earth as a technological system, but rather explores how agencies connect without conceptualizing them as part of a whole. In order to do this, Latour writes, Lovelock encompasses living entities within the "fragile envelope that he called Gaia" without unifying them (Latour, 2017, p. 98). The organisms within and composing Gaia do not adapt themselves to an inanimate environment, but rather bend the living environment around themselves in order to promote their own development (Latour, 2017).

In his fourth lecture, Latour writes about the conclusion of the 34th International Geological Conference in 2012. At the end of the conference, it was decided to consider declaring a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Given a tentative start date of 1800, approximately at the beginning of the industrial revolution, it would mark the end of the Holocene, or what is considered the current geological age (Latour, 2017). In the Anthropocene, humans would be designated the most significant force affecting the development of the earth (Latour, 2017, p. 112). Living in the Anthropocene means viewing the biosphere as sensitive, viewing it as Gaia, "the name proposed for all the intermingled and unpredictable consequences of the agents, each of which is pursuing its own interest by manipulating its own environment" (Latour, 2017, p. 142). In Amery's novel, Gaia takes on a form that incorporates elements of mythology, Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, and Catholicism. Introduced slowly through Marian figures, Gaia only takes center stage at the end of the novel.

She comes forward in what is entitled the "heretical conclusion" of the novel. This conclusion takes place 50 million years in the future. One of the pilgrims, Innozenz Maria, awakens to sunshine and beautiful vegetation, and finds he has evolved into bodiless being. He is met by a leporibock, or the *ungulagus silvicultrix*. Described by Dougal Dixon in his book, *After Man: A Zoology of the Future*, in which Dixon speculates how life on earth will evolve after a pe-

3 Amery uses the term "Leporibock" to denote the silvicultrix, while Dixon uses the term "rabbuck" in his book. I will use Amery's term in discussing excerpts from the novel.

riod of mass extinction, the leporibock is a hoofed mammal related to the hare or rabbit (Dixon, 1981).[3] Able to sense Innozenz Maria's bodiless presence, the leporibock approaches the pilgrim to announce the grand entrance of Gaia, the prototype that the Marian figures foreshadowed throughout the centuries of pilgrimages to Tuntenhausen.

Although Amery's Gaia, like the Gaia of mythology and the Gaia hypothesis, is powerful, she is also benevolent. While Latour writes that "[t]here is nothing inert, nothing benevolent, nothing external in Gaia," the pilgrims in *Die Wallfahrer* experience repeated benevolence from both Gaia and her forerunners (Latour, 2017, p. 106). Along with an unorthodox message of penitence, the Marian figures also offer the pilgrims a glimpse into an unexpected future and mercy. The re-imagined salvation history they reveal also gives rise to a re-imagined eschatology; the Marian figures prompt the pilgrims not to look to the end times as punishment for sins against God, but rather to ask what kind of future comes from ignorance of their creatureliness, in other words, to consider the trajectory of the Anthropocene.

One of the first glimpses into the future in the novel comes from Innozenz Maria's observation regarding the rise of industrialization in his own century. In a conversation with a friend, Innozenz Maria remarks on the increased mechanization he sees around him:

> Das Lebenswasser ist jetzt in Bleirohre gefaßt, in metallene Adern, kann durch Auf- und Zudrehen administrativer Hähne in die eine oder andere Richtung geschickt werden—rechts, links, hinauf und hinab. Den Himmel sieht es nicht mehr. Das mag seine materiellen Vorteile haben, aber es ist kein Gleichgewicht mehr von Natur und Kunst. Hier hat kalte Mechanik gesiegt, und in mehr als einer Weise sind wir hier alle ihre Opfer. (Amery, 1986, p. 39)
>
> The lifewater is now contained in lead pipes, in metal veins; through the turning off and on of administrative spigots it can be sent in one or the other direction—right, left, up, down. It doesn't see the heavens anymore. That must have its material advantages, but there is no longer balance between nature and art. Here cold mechanics have prevailed, and in more than one way we are all their victims. (Amery, 1986, p. 39)

The metaphor used to describe the water pipes, "metal veins," likens the pipes to organic material, but at the same time suggests that the enclosure and instrumentalization of water is highly unnatural. Described as "life water," water is not only portrayed as giving life, but as having a life of its own, a life that the

pipes restrict. Enclosed in these metal veins, the water is no longer able to see the sky, nor to direct its own movement. These limitations, the count reflects, while bringing "material advantages" to humans, also disturb a delicate balance between nature and art, and eventually become detrimental to humans. Innozenz Maria's vision highlights the uncomfortable relationship between humans and the biosphere, their dual status as both offender and victim.

Innozenz Maria's vision of humanity's and earth's trajectories share similarities with Lovelock's predictions of Gaia's future. Lovelock argues that Gaia, the earth conceived of as a physiological system, suffers from a "people plague" (Lovelock, 2000).

He writes that "[h]umans on the Earth behave in some ways like a pathogenic microorganism. We have grown in numbers and in disturbance to Gaia, to the point where our presence us perceptibly disabling, like a disease" (Lovelock, 2000, p. 155). Lovelock maintains that current human actions and their consequences, namely, agriculture, deforestation, and pollution, render the earth less inhabitable for the living organisms that have been keeping the conditions of the earth favorable for life. These actions rendering the environment less favorable to life, he argues, could eventually lead to the elimination of the species causing the planetary illness (Lovelock, 2000, p. 25). Similarly, Innozenz Maria's vision suggests that the desire for mastery over nature will lead humanity to destruction and to the destruction of humanity.

Millions of years after his pilgrimage to Tuntenhausen, Innozenz Maria still clings to the idea of a Day of Judgment. To his astonishment, he encounters no hellfire, but rather "very fearsome and great" mercy (Amery, 1986, p. 393). He asks Gaia where the judgment is. In answer to his query, Gaia responds that there is no final judgment, no book in which all misdeeds and good works are recorded and then weighed. She goes on to ask if he would have really wanted this judgment, explaining that all of humankind, even the pious Innozenz Maria, would have been found guilty (Amery, 1986). Gaia's mercy consists not of her careful weighing of every deed and misdeed, but rather in her abstention from judgment.

Because humanity has already destroyed itself in its ambition to subjugate other life forms, Gaia does not pursue further punishment. She responds to the human-made ecological disaster not with righteous anger, but rather with the gentle, tired "ts ts ts" of a mother rebuking a misbehaved child. In her dealings with the pilgrims, Amery's Gaia differentiates herself from Lovelock's Gaia, whom Latour argues has no teleological purpose (Latour, 2017). Amery's Gaia takes on human form in order to warn the pilgrims of impending disaster and remakes the planet so that conditions will again be friendly to life, both human and non-human. She enacts a plan of salvation, becoming a central figure in his radical, ecological Catholicism that, although stripped of much Christian dogma,

retains grace as a central tenet.

Gaia declares that she is remaking the world and that humans will not rule it. Innozenz Maria understands that if he desires a place in this new creation, he must accept that his status and form in the biosphere will not be the same as before. He has to say "yes" or "no" to a new world (Amery, 1986). Although Innozenz Maria's first reaction is to say "no" to this new world, a memory of a conversation with a Jesuit about the fall of Lucifer changes his mind. The Jesuit taught him that Lucifer, one of the most powerful angels in heaven, was offended when God revealed his plan to save humanity by sending his Son to earth as a baby. The debasement of God becoming man, a descendent of apes, so deeply disturbed Lucifer's love of "above and below, order and hierarchy and purity" that he left heaven, and became God's arch enemy, the devil (Amery, 1986, p. 397). As he remembers this story, Innozenz Maria suddenly sees his own similarities with Lucifer. He realizes that Gaia's offering to him is merciful, and that he must relinquish his own love of hierarchy and purity and accept her evolutionary grace.

50 million years after Innozenz Maria sets off on his pilgrimage that takes him through Tuntenhausen, Apollonia's farm Hechsenwraith, and Rome, he finally comes full circle, arriving in Posthomic Tuntenhausen. At each of these stops, he is confronted with his creatureliness. Begun in search of freedom from his physical ailment, Innozenz Maria's pilgrimage leads him to accept his own status as a biological organism interconnected with other organisms. This acceptance of his own creatureliness ultimately prepares him to continue his pilgrimage towards ecological consciousness, and to say "yes" to Gaia's offering of new life.

Conclusion

The pilgrimage to Tuntenhausen paints the uneasy relationship between humans and the biosphere in a re-imagined soteriological framework. In his overview of Carl Amery's writings on environmental crisis, Axel Goodbody writes that the novel *Die Wallfahrer* "present[s] apocalyptic scenarios of the end of the world, seeking to shock and warn [its] readers, leaving open the question of mankind's ability to make the shift of consciousness needed to avert catastrophe" (Goodbody, 2002, p. 135). The novel indeed presents a grim picture of human impact on the environment. However, the analysis of one of the four pilgrim stories portrayed, each one of which depicts this journey towards an ecological consciousness in similar but different ways, suggests that humanity has the potential to make this shift of consciousness. As they travel the path to Tuntenhausen and encounter typological Marian figures, the pilgrims in Amery's novel ultimately make a journey towards consciousness of their creatureliness, their entwinement with other life forms, and their relation to the biosphere. Through its portrayal of four re-imagined Marian pilgrimages, Amery's novel offers an ecological Catholicism as a space where this kind of consciousness can form. This Catholicism, centered on Gaia and her salvation history and revealed through ty-

pological Marian figures, challenge the pilgrims, and perhaps the reader, to gain a new perspective on the web of life.

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