

 **Christian Arnsperger**
 **Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet**

University of Lausanne

“Looking to the Past to Reinvent the Future”: Writing About the Long Descent, Practicing Green Wizardry *A Conversation with John Michael Greer*

CA & ASM: You are not officially an academic, but in our eyes your work on the critique of progress as a religion and on the opportunities and pitfalls of a “de-industrial” descent ranks among the most creative and exciting on the market—by a long shot. One remarkable aspect is that while dismantling the modern idea of progress, you doggedly refuse to slide down the other, twin slope of the modern imaginary—that of catastrophic collapse and apocalypse. You were an early witness to how the neoliberal backlash successfully halted the advent of appropriate technologies in the late 1970s and 1980s, and how the Overton window for a still relatively serene transition to sustainable lifestyles was abruptly shut (Greer, *Green Wizardry*). This seems to have convinced you that “catabolic” decline is the actual path our industrial civilization is going to follow into a de-industrial future as it chronically overshoots the biosphere’s limits (to paraphrase William Catton, one of your intellectual mentors). You have called this the “Long Descent” and published one of your most acclaimed books under that title (Greer, *The Long Descent*). What signs do you identify at present that this descent is clearly underway, and how do you fend off the twin objections that you’re (a) being pessimistic and (b) feeding hopelessness?

JMG: I’d like to start my response by questioning the idea that the myth of apocalypse is in any way separate from the myth of progress. The connection between these two isn’t just a matter of shared heredity, though of course that’s a dimension worth examining; as Philip Lamy pointed out quite some time ago in his book *Millennium Rage*, these and most other visions of the future are “fractured apocalypses,” fragments

of narrative from the Book of Revelations pulled out of context and rearranged to suit the needs of contemporary prophecy. Yet the connection is not limited to this.

The myth of progress only fulfils its social function when it's paired with the myth of apocalypse. Taken together, they carry out a good cop/bad cop routine on our collective imagination of the future, allowing the galaxy of possible futures to be flattened out into a binary choice, in which utopia and oblivion are the only alternatives and the only way to reject one is to embrace the other. More, whatever isn't one must be the other: we haven't plunged into the abyss yet, so we must be progressing, and we have to keep progressing along current lines (and thus funnelling wealth into the same set of pockets) because the only alternative is a plunge into the abyss. It's a convenient weapon in the contemporary politics of technology, where new products vie to be anointed by the corporate media as the next inevitable step in the march of progress, and those who aren't enthusiastic enough about the techno-gimmick du jour are accused of wanting to go back to the caves (the inevitable endpoint of the apocalypse narrative), of standing in the way of progress, or of wanting the apocalypse to happen.

All this is necessary background for my answer to your question. Here in the United States and in some other industrial nations as well, standards of living for most of the population have been tracing out a ragged decline since the 1970s. One measure of this is that in 1972, a family of four living on one working class income in the US could afford a home, a car, three meals a day and all the other necessities of life, and still have some left over for the occasional luxury. In 2022, a family of four living on one working class income in the US is probably living on the street. Outside the bubble-environments of the well-to-do, life in the world's notionally richest country is a squalid mess, marked by deteriorating infrastructure, widespread poverty, intractable social conflicts and pervasive hopelessness that can best be measured by our sky-high rates of drug addiction and suicide. If that doesn't count as decline, I'm not sure what would. Only the pretence that apocalyptic collapse is the only alternative to progress keeps the ongoing scale of our decline from being noticed and discussed by more than a few.

Such perspectives are very often countered by a line of argument that can be summed up as "But we have cell phones!" It's true that a handful of technological innovations have been parlayed over the last few decades into a suite of information technologies that weren't available in 1972. That fact doesn't outweigh the many other things that have declined precipitously since that time. Having a cell phone does not make up for a lack of good jobs at decent pay, affordable housing, public utilities in good condition, adequate nutrition at reasonable prices, or the other

things industrial nations once provided for their citizens and now do not always offer except to the well-to-do. It bears remembering that you can starve to death in a burnt-out basement with a working cell phone clutched in one hand.

As for labels such as “pessimism” and “hopelessness,” those are subject to the same distortions as the terms I’ve just discussed. I’ve been called a pessimist and a purveyor of hopelessness for pointing out that our species is unlikely to get what we may as well call the *Star Trek* future—the stereotyped future vision that fixates on interstellar travel and human colonization of other star systems. It should be obvious that there are many rich, complex, interesting human futures that don’t feature our species metastasizing across the galaxy in oversized metal phalluses, and it should be just as obvious that suggesting that the *Star Trek* future won’t happen does not rule out a vast number of these. That this isn’t obvious—that the only future that counts as “optimistic” and “hopeful” in the eyes of today’s culture is one in which current trends keep going in a mindlessly linear fashion out to infinity—shows the power of the paired myths of progress and apocalypse as instruments of mental limitation: Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles” given a comprehensive technological upgrade.

CA & ASM: The richness, size, intricacy and architecture of your body of writings taken as a whole—not to speak of the spiritual practices with which you openly accompany them—are so unique and original that trying to encapsulate their objective seems like a Sisyphean task. Nevertheless, the trilogy of books centering around your novel *Retrotopia* offers an entry point that’s as good as any, and probably better than most. (The trilogy is composed of *After Progress*, *Retrotopia*, and *The Retro Future*.) On the back cover of *Retrotopia*—a story about an envoy from the Atlantic Republic of America, basically a de-industrial wasteland hoping to reconstruct itself, visiting the neighbouring Lakeland Republic which has embraced an altogether different, appropriate-tech future—the slogan hits the reader like a lightning bolt: *Forward to the past*. In a very real way, this phrase lends access to the whole of your work as a writer on de-industrial pathways, as a practicing Druid and as an operative mage. (Yes, let’s just put that out there right away. Let’s also emphasize that in your conception, “magic” is not what one popularly associates with the word. More on that in a moment.) Would you agree that one thing that’s central in your work is a specific way of blurring the boundaries between the past and the future, of making what has worked in the past an integral part of what might work again in the future—which fully coheres with the rejection of the modern notion of perpetual progress which we discussed above? Does this mean we can and should travel in

time in both directions, neglecting the difference between the old and the new? How would you convey your conception of time to a reader wishing to be initiated into your philosophical universe?

JMG: Any writer who claims that there's one and only one theme that's central to their work is either a bit of a monomaniac or has been spending too much time reading literary criticism! No, my writing has no single objective, and of course it's also relevant that my views on various subjects have changed considerably from the time of my first publications more than a quarter century ago. My work all relates in one way or another to the relation between past, present and future, granted, but that's true of any writer: all writers inherit language, genre, subject matter and a galaxy of other things from the past, and rework these in the present with an eye toward some conception of the future. Equally, every writer without exception has some sense of what the past has to offer the future, whether that sense expresses itself in the attempted re-enactment of the past by traditionalists, the attempted rejection of the past by the avant-garde, or some less hackneyed response.

I suspect the role of time in my work stands out to many readers nowadays precisely because I dissent from the modern mythology of progress. Most writers nowadays place their work seamlessly into the standard narrative of the grand upward march from the caves to the stars, and that placement doesn't stand out as interesting to most readers precisely because the narrative is so familiar to them. Since I see history as a cyclic rather than a linear process, by contrast, the past is always a resource for the present and the future: I can always ask, "What happened the last time someone tried this?" and get insights that seem useful to me, while the believer in progress is stuck insisting that every turn of events must be wholly unprecedented because the past is irrelevant to the future. That makes my writing startling to those, the majority these days, who have never imagined that the past might be relevant to their lives.

I do want to point out that my Druid spirituality has much less to do with the past than most people seem to think. Druidry is a modern tradition of nature religion; it draws inspiration from the few surviving scraps of data we have concerning the ancient Celtic Druids, but as a living tradition it dates from the early eighteenth century, when small groups of eccentric British intellectuals adopted the old name for themselves and their nascent vision of a spirituality of nature. The Druid organization I headed for twelve years was founded in 1912—a little this side of Celtic antiquity! Modern Druidry might best be seen as one of the indigenous nature religions of modern Anglo-American culture. Yes, I know that the term "indigenous" is taboo in relation to industrial cultures, which is one of the reasons I find it useful here.

CA & ASM: One of your central ideas is that in the future, progress—if that word still has any meaning—will come through widespread “ecotechnic” (in the sense of Patrick Geddes) experimentation and, therefore, through an artisanal and unpredictable process of “muddling toward frugality” (to borrow a phrase from another mentor of yours, Warren Johnson) which will rely very little on massive governmental subsidies and a lot on small-scale, community-level initiatives. (All this is set out in detail in Greer, *The Ecotechnic Future*, as well as *The Wealth of Nature*.) Dissensus and decentralization appear to be the name of the game—yet, you have expressed regret and even a bit of scorn at how movements such as Voluntary Simplicity and Transition Towns have, in your opinion, been swallowed up and rendered ineffective by consumerism and the relentless drive to maximize corporate profits. What do you think will protect future experimentation with appropriate technologies from not succumbing to the same fate? Do you believe that one key element will be their ability to counteract the massive mind manipulation—the “thaumaturgy”—of commercial advertisers and corporate political operatives? How could this be done in practice?

JMG: Here again I have to start by taking issue with the terms of the discussion. “Progress” is a mythic narrative. Doubtless it could be applied to ecotechnics, and indeed it was so applied during the heyday of the appropriate-technology movement of the 1970s—it’s very often forgotten that in those days, passive solar heating and homescale windpower were the last words in cutting-edge progress—but as a mythic narrative it has no fixed content. Anything can be defined as progress, and which content will be given that label at any one time will be determined by complex and contested social processes, without any necessary relation to the fitness of the content. Once you start insisting that progress will only come in this or that way, you’re caught in the myth.

Let’s set the entire language of progress to one side, recast your question, and see if it makes more sense. The near to middle future of the industrial world is taking shape in a complex landscape of competing influences in which the major political, corporate and non-profit power centres (three heads of the same ungainly beast) and the mass media they dominate form one pervasive factor. Another pervasive factor is the downward pressure exerted by resource depletion, environmental disruption and the other unwanted but inescapable products of our civilization’s frankly hare-brained attempt to achieve infinite growth on a finite planet. Those two large-scale factors inevitably influence the environment in which Johnson’s “muddling toward frugality” is taking place.

Johnson’s choice of phrase highlights the crucial point here. We are talking about muddling, not about movements. Voluntary simplicity, the

Transition Town movement, and their varied equivalents are all part of the muddling. I've criticized these at times, and I think the criticisms are justified; in particular, I've done my best to challenge those movements that have claimed that they have the solution to the predicament of industrial society. It is in the nature of a predicament that it has no solutions, only responses.

The decline and fall of industrial civilization has been under way for much of a century now. To judge by past examples, neither we nor our grandchildren's grandchildren will see the end of that process. In that immense movement, dissensus and decentralization have two roles. First, they are useful strategies for those of us who want to weave the patterns of our lives and communities in the context of the Long Descent, on the one hand, and the failings of the power centres of our society on the other. Second, they are inevitabilities in the longer run, precisely because consensus and centralization are only viable when a society has the coherence and the resource base to support them. We no longer have that coherence and we are rapidly losing the resource base, so dissensus and decentralization are increasingly the only options we've got. Taking them up and using them before we are forced to do so by the pressure of circumstances can be another form of useful muddling.

Magic, the art and science of causing change in consciousness in accordance with will, is another form of useful muddling. Positing a grand confrontation between Gandalf and Sauron as your model for the future, however, does not seem especially helpful to me! Even in the novels in question, it was the patient muddling of Frodo and Sam, passing under the radar of the contending powers of the age, that made the difference. In much the same way, I'd like to suggest that simply empowering individuals to muddle through with a little less interference from all sides, the corporate media among them, is the most useful thing a teacher of magic can do just now. Nor is the corporate media as omnipotent as its putative enemies like to insist. To a very real extent, people blame the media and the corporate system for their own compliance, instead of reflecting on why they comply so easily.

CA & ASM: In *The Wealth of Nature*, you write that “[r]elocalized communities must be economically viable or they will soon cease to exist, and while viable local communities will be possible in the future—just as they were in the Middle Ages—the steps that will be necessary to take to make them viable may require some serious rethinking of the habits that now shape our economic lives” (22). Assuming we ward off the malevolent thaumaturgy of the corporate elites, will we need to engage in the “theurgy”—the personal work of changing the way we think and feel—needed to rethink our habits? You seem to indicate as much when, in the

same book, you envisage “a future for Victory Gardens,” which symbolize the appropriate tech toolbox you call “green wizardry” in the book with the same name: organic gardeners, conservationists, solar-power buffs and the like. The allusion to wizards is not fortuitous, since for you, as you reminded us a moment ago, magic is basically “the art and science of causing changes in consciousness in accordance with will” (Greer, *The King in Orange* 4). So according to you, will the future be decided by a duel of one kind of consciousness change against another—of the green wizardry of sustainable practices against the darker magic of planet-denying economic growth? And what are the odds of the former being victorious?

JMG: It sounds from your question as though you think that planet-denying economic growth is possible in more than the very short term. I find that an exceedingly dubious claim. If your car has half a litre of gas in the tank, your destination is a hundred miles away, and there are no gas stations between where you are and that distant goal, does it make sense to say that whether the car will reach the destination will depend on a struggle among the passengers?

It’s a notion as pervasive as it is delusive among today’s intelligentsia to see human beings as the only active factor in an otherwise passive cosmos, and to insist on that basis that the future depends on who gets to tell the cosmos what to do. I suggest that a less hubristic take on the nature of collective change may be useful here. The belief that economic growth is as inevitable as it is beneficent, the central ideology of twentieth-century industrialism, was not the cause of the great petroleum-fueled economic boom of that century—it was one of the effects of that boom. Human beings figured out how to extract fantastic volumes of cheap energy from the planet’s store of fossil carbon, *and therefore* ideologies that celebrated the consequences came into fashion.

The all-time peak of conventional world petroleum production was reached in 2005, and the ordinary inertia of human thought has kept those ideologies in place up to the present. As it becomes obvious that they are no longer functional, we can expect them to be discarded and replaced with other ideologies better suited to an age of declining energy and resource supplies, in exactly the same way that older ideologies suited to relatively stable energy and resource supplies went out of fashion when the exploitation of fossil fuels hit its stride. Such shifts inevitably begin on the cultural fringes—that is, out here where I spend my time—and so it’s possible that my work will turn out to be a small part of that reconfiguring. It’s at least as possible, of course, that the core ideas of the de-industrial future are taking shape in the heads of other fringe intellectuals in Lagos or Montevideo or Mumbai.

CA & ASM: You lend quite a lot of credence to authors such as Oswald Spengler (*The Decline of the West*) and Ioan Couliano (*Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*), who might legitimately be categorized as “Traditionalists” (see e.g., Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*). The constellation of those who revolt against the modern world is rather complex—but once one promotes, as you do, a heightened agnosticism vis-à-vis any hierarchy between the past and the present, and once one argues that many older or even ancient aspects of human life are better suited than newer ones, how does one disentangle oneself from the suspicion that one is harking back to an idealized past made up of oppressive traditions and possibly authoritarian regimes? On the whole, your socioeconomic outlook as it transpires from your books seems pretty progressive, so how do you avoid—how to put it—problematic regressions? Are ecology and druidic spirituality bulwarks of sorts against unpalatable forms of traditionalism, as seems to be the case for instance in your *Mystery Teachings from the Living Earth*? Or do you feel the question should be asked differently, because pitting progressive against regressive reproduces the modern fetishism of progress?

JMG: Traditionalism has become quite the buzzword of late, and it’s been applied as freely and as carelessly as some other buzzwords of recent memory. Yes, I know that Mark Sedgwick and others have labeled Oswald Spengler as a Traditionalist, but that claim strikes me as risible: at best, rooted in an embarrassing failure to grasp the nature of Spengler’s project. Spengler argued that one of the normal stages in the life cycle of a great culture was the replacement of plutocratic oligarchies (disguised as republics) with populist autocracies, and that this was going to happen in the Western world in the next few centuries. He was not saying that this was a good thing, or for that matter that it was a bad thing, but simply saying that this is what happens and we might want to be aware of that. Accusing him of glorifying autocracy is a little like insisting that the weatherman who predicts a coming snowstorm wants you to freeze in the dark.

Regarding Couliano, two comments may be relevant. First, I have yet to see any attempt to describe him as a Traditionalist that isn’t straightforward guilt by association—he can be linked to Mircea Eliade, so he must have caught Trad cooties! Second, the only idea of Couliano’s that I use is his analysis of modern advertising and propaganda as third-rate sorcery. I disagree sharply with the rest of his analysis of magic in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, and in fact I’ve put some elements of that dispute in print. He was a fascinating man but I don’t find his ideas especially useful or relevant.

As for Traditionalism properly so-called—the ideology created and deployed by René Guénon, Julius Evola and their heirs—it derives from the myth of progress in exactly the same way that Satanism derives from sacramental Christianity: it embraces all the preconceptions of its parent belief system but inverts all the moral markers with a Miltonian “Evil, be thou my good.” The believer in progress insists that what is new is better precisely because it’s new, and what is old has been disproven by the mere passage of time. The Traditionalist stands this on its head, insisting with equal heat that what is old is better precisely because it’s old, and every novelty is a degeneration. It’s the self-same vision of linear time moving from one moral extreme to the other, varying only in which end gets which moral tag. What Spengler is saying, by contrast, is that history moves in cyclical patterns of rise and fall, and that labelling any part of those patterns with moralizing labels is an irrelevant self-indulgence, on a par with considering summer virtuous and winter wicked.

Notice, to turn to another aspect of your question, the way that certain common modern attitudes suggest that if one claims that *any* premodern way of doing things is preferable to its modern equivalents, this amounts to glorifying and wanting to reimpose whatever aspects of the past are least acceptable to the modern imagination. That’s a pervasive strategy in the rhetoric of progress. It’s worth unpacking that strategy a bit. First, notice that it’s quite simply irrational; I promise you that it’s entirely possible to recognize the quality of a German camera made between the two world wars, and even to take pictures with one, without being overwhelmed with a desire to put on an armband and start goose-stepping!

Beyond that, it’s central to the argument we’re discussing that each historical period must be seen as a package deal, as though you can’t use the camera we’re discussing without also taking on the armband and the ideologies that go with it. That’s another central theme in the contemporary politics of technology. If you can pick and choose from the elements of previous eras, after all, it would then follow that you can pick and choose from the technologies available in the present: assessing each of them according to your own needs and desires, let’s say, and refusing to buy into those that don’t interest you. That’s not an attitude the corporate system can tolerate. Consumers are supposed to buy what they’re told, not to choose this and reject that! From any other perspective, however, it should be obvious that the freedom to accept or reject any given technology is essential to individual autonomy in an age of plutocratic industrialism.

CA & ASM: As we emphasized at the beginning, and as the title we chose for this interview makes abundantly clear, your endeavour to *look to the past to reinvent the future* is utterly fascinating. The multifarious ways in

which you shed light on how this reinvention could happen—through impressively competent excursions into political science, economics, technological knowledge and religious studies—make you one of the most relevant thinkers in the crowded landscape of what, for better or for worse, can be called “sustainability studies.” What you bring to the field is a distinctive refusal to cordon spiritual questions off from the rest of what can be talked about. By showing very convincingly that the modern belief in progress is a form of civil religion, by insisting that a graceful and livable path towards a de-industrial future will only be possible if consciousness changes according to our will, and by pointing out that our willing a different—possibly very ancient—relationship to nonhuman living beings and to the whole cosmos is a matter of survival, you inevitably point towards THE question that looms behind all discourses on sustainability: how can we fully accept our transience and mortality as living organisms, and how can we resist the will to transcend the physical world and to seek our “true home” outside of physical boundaries and limitations (be it through eternal growth or through the conquest of outer space)? How can we avoid the Christian and theistic *contemptus mundi* while both rejecting capitalist materialism and getting reconciled with the living Earth as mortal beings? As expressed so poignantly by the frantic businessman in the graphic-novel version of your remarkable short story “The Next Ten Billion Years,” “*Humans are the masters of this rock. We won’t just give up like pathetic animals! If we die out it will be by our own hand, we will blow it all up! We’ll never just fade away!*” (10 Billion).

JMG: It’s not as though we have a choice. You can insist at the top of your lungs that you will live forever, after all, but that won’t keep you from getting old and dying. In exactly the same way, people in today’s industrial cultures can (and no doubt will) cling to the various fantasies of pseudo-transcendence through technology long after those fantasies have been definitively disproven by the course of events. I think it’s quite likely that centuries from now there will be little circles of believers clinging to the dream of the interstellar future, long after the last spacecraft have been chopped up for scrap metal and the last satellites have become artificial meteors or lumps of orbiting space junk: I put just such a circle of believers, in fact, into my de-industrial novel *Star’s Reach*.

The future, again, does not depend primarily on what “we” (however that very elusive pronoun may be defined) decide to do about it. As the Long Descent unfolds, some people will adapt to it, changing their thinking to fit the new reality of contracting energy and resource supplies, and some will not. On average—there will doubtless be exceptions—those who make that adaptation will be more likely to thrive than those who

refuse it. Now that belief in limitlessness is no longer adaptive, it will begin to lose its grip on our collective imagination and be replaced by other ideas better suited to new conditions. That’s the way human culture adapts to changing times. Shrieking “Humans are the masters of this rock!” was an exercise in absurdity even at the peak of the industrial age—did you know, for example, that a mid-sized hurricane releases more energy than is contained in the bombs in all the world’s nuclear arsenals? Now that we no longer have the resource base to keep prancing around pretending to own the planet, such attitudes will be even less helpful than they were, and I expect them to fall out of fashion over the next century or so.

Thus, the “changes in consciousness in accordance with will” I recommend to my readers and students are on a considerably more modest scale. On the one hand, it so happens that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mental exercises I study and practice—yes, you can call those “magic” if you like—are effective ways to help foster personal change, in subtle as well as obvious ways. On the other, one of the essential features of adapting to an age of decline is learning to foster a rich and reflective inner life, rather than mindlessly projecting demands and desires onto the outer world and demanding that material things fill needs that are ultimately mental and emotional in nature. The magical traditions I practice and teach can help with that, too. They aren’t the only way—there are many other options—but for those who prefer them, they have their charm.

CA & ASM: The title, narrator and general structure of your novel *Retrotopia*—which imagines a government envoy, in 2065, traveling from a dystopian United States to a self-sufficient country around the Great Lakes area that has instituted five different energy and infrastructure regimes, or “tiers” (ranging from roughly the technological level of 1830 to that of 1950), leaving people in each region the choice of how much, and what kinds of, technology they want to subsidize with their taxes—seem to be inspired by Ernest Callenbach’s 1975 novel *Ecotopia*. Like Callenbach, you obviously researched and thought carefully about the practical, economic and even psychological-emotional aspects of a sustainable society, and the result is a grippingly readable portrait of a world that seems all-in-all much more pleasant and meaningful to live in than the contemporary United States with all its consumerism, social media culture, food waste, traffic jams and extreme disparity between poor and rich. We are actually printing in this issue an excerpt of a screenplay based on *Ecotopia*. What’s your relationship to Callenbach’s novel and how did you encounter it? And what role, if any, did it play in your thinking and your feelings about sustainability (since novels incite emotions as well as ideas)?

JMG: I encountered *Ecotopia* for the first time in its original small-press edition in the Burien Public Library, Burien, WA—that’s in the southern suburbs of Seattle if anyone is keeping track. This was in 1978 or so, while I was in high school; I found it fascinating. I reread it several times in the years that followed and also read the short-lived magazine *Seriatim*, which was founded to promote Ecosophian ideas. Callenbach’s book was the first utopian novel I read, and it got me reading utopias in general, all the way back to Plato’s *Republic* and all the way forward to the latest products of the 1980s and 1990s. That doubtless played a large role in inspiring my venture into the same genre in *Retrotopia*.

That’s not to say that my ideas about utopia match Callenbach’s! His work was very much a product of its time, awash with the standard tropes of his own cultural matrix. I don’t think it’s unfair to call it exactly the kind of utopia you would expect from a middle-class San Francisco ex-hippie in the Seventies. Of course, I had it in mind while I was writing *Retrotopia*; I began it much the same way, with a traveller from today’s America (lightly disguised as the Atlantic Republic), and some of the scenes in my story were influenced by scenes in Callenbach’s. On the other hand, the ending of *Retrotopia* was a deliberate rejection of the ending of *Ecotopia*, and by extension of many other utopias down through the years. The usual gimmick is that the traveler settles down in the utopian society, washing his hands of his former society and abandoning his loves and loyalties back home. I wanted to suggest another option—and yes, in case you were wondering, my ending was also written in conversation (or rather in contention) with the exquisite moral ambiguity of one of Ursula K. Le Guin’s best stories, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”

CA & ASM: One final question, about the amazingly rich and poignant story we have included in this volume, “Winter’s Tales,” which imagines three future Christmases (in 2050, 2100 and 2150), two of which are no longer Christmas as we know it, but a solstice celebration and a future holiday called *Nawida* (based on the Spanish word for Christmas, *navidad*). In this story you deftly conjure up three worlds, each more deindustrialized than the last, moving through stages of scarcity and salvage to low-tech sustainability, but paradoxically, the atmosphere of each moves from nostalgia and even bitterness (in the nearest future) to, well, adapted and evolved to a new climate and energy reality. Literature scholars will be particularly intrigued by the way you show language and religion evolving syncretically as time passes, as temperatures keep getting hotter, as energy sources dry up and as the United States breaks up into smaller republics. The story forcefully illustrates your arguments—made in *After Progress* and many other publications—that the decline of energy resources and

technologies will not lead to an apocalyptic end of the world, but to many gradual changes to the world as we know it. How did this story—with all its rich world-making texture and detail—come about? And do you think that stories can sometimes “transmit” ideas better than reasoned arguments?

JMG: Reasoned arguments are among the weakest of all incentives to insight and change. We all know what it’s like to reason our way to one course of action and then do something else! As I see it, the human capacity for abstract reasoning, powerful as it is, is the latest, least stable and most fallible aspect of human consciousness, running atop a standard-issue social primate nervous system that is much more stable and reliable. Reasonably enough, most of us use the primate brain to make most of our decisions for us, relying on emotions, memories, social cues and all the other familiar gimmicks that got our ancestors through millions of years of hard times. That’s why fiction, which speaks the language of the primate brain, so often does a better job of communicating to the whole person.

As for how “Winter’s Tales” came into being, that’s a little complicated, because those three stories—they were first published online as independent tales—marked a turning point in my writing. In my teen years I set out to become a writer of science fiction and fantasy novels, and over the next decade and a half finished five or six manuscripts and mailed them to publishers, amassing a fine collection of rejection slips. (In retrospect, the novels were pretty dreadful.) Finally, I gave up on fiction, decided to try nonfiction instead, and my first manuscript was snapped up by one of the largest niche publishers in its field. That was a pretty convincing argument to me, so I concentrated on nonfiction for the next decade, and published a string of moderately successful books on various subjects.

Fast forward to the end of 2006. This was early in my blogging career, while I was still trying to figure out how best to get my readers to realize that I wasn’t caught in the fake opposition between progress and apocalypse, and they didn’t need to be caught there either. I’d sketched out an imagined future in a 2004 essay using three lives at long intervals, and it occurred to me to try doing the same thing in more detail. The result was the three stories that became “Winter’s Tales.” They were very well received by my readers. I did another sequence of stories the following year, “Adam’s Story,” about a young man with a crippled arm leaving a dying town near the Pacific coast and ending up in another town with a future. That was also well received, and so I revised the best of my old novels, *The Fires of Shalsba*, and started a new novel set in de-industrial North America circa 2480, *Star’s Reach*. Those both found publishers, and so I returned to fiction more generally. *Retrotopia* wouldn’t have been written if “Winter’s Tales” hadn’t gotten the response it did.

I should probably mention, however, that most of my fiction is not about the end of the industrial age. Again, my writing has no one single theme or objective; most of my novels have been written simply because I had a story I wanted to tell. They range from space opera set on a colony world (*The Fires of Shalsha* and its sequel *Journey Star*) to H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos seen through a funhouse mirror (*The Weird of Hali* series and the rest of my "tentacled" fiction) to a political-military thriller (*Twilight's Last Gleaming*), among other things. Doubtless readers will find common themes in them, since they're the products of my somewhat quirky imagination, but they're not intended to belabor the same set of points. Sometimes I simply like to tell a story.

WORKS CITED

- Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia*. Banyan Tree, 1975.
- Couliano, Ioan. *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*. 1984. Translated by Margaret Cook. U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Greer, John Michael. "Adam's Story" (2007). Reprinted in *The Archdruid's Tales*, Founders, 2017, pp. 41–77.
- Greer, John Michael. *After Progress: Reason and Religion at the End of the Industrial Age*. New Society, 2015.
- Greer, John Michael. *Green Wizardry: Conservation, Solar Power, Organic Gardening, and Other Hands-On Skills from the Appropriate Tech Toolkit*. New Society, 2013.
- Greer, John Michael. *Journey Star*. Founders, 2021.
- Greer, John Michael. *Mystery Teachings from the Living Earth: An Introduction to Spiritual Ecology*. Weiser, 2012.
- Greer, John Michael. *Retrotopia*. Founders, 2016.
- Greer, John Michael. *Star's Reach*. Founders, 2014.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Ecotechnic Future: Envisioning a Post-Peak World*. New Society, 2009.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Fires of Shalsha*. Founders, 2009.
- Greer, John Michael. *The King in Orange: The Magical and Occult Roots of Political Power*. Inner Traditions, 2021.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Long Descent: A User's Guide to the End of the Industrial Age*. New Society, 2008.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Retro Future: Looking to the Past to Reinvent the Future*. New Society, 2017.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Wealth of Nature: Economics as if Survival Mattered*. New Society, 2011.
- Greer, John Michael. *The Weird of Hali*. 7 volumes. Founders, 2018–19.

- Greer, John Michael. *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. Karnac, 2015.
- Greer, John Michael. “Winter’s Tales” (2006). Reprinted in *The Archdruid’s Tales*, Founders, 2017, pp. 3–23. Also reprinted in this issue, pp. 69–80.
- Greer, John Michael, Arnu Knoesen, and Darryll Knickrehm. *10 Billion*. Lulu.com, 2020.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” *New Dimensions 3*, edited by Robert Silverberg, Doubleday, 1973, pp. 1–8.
- Sedgwick, Mark. *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Oxford UP, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195152972.003.0002>
- Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. Vol. 1: *Form & Actuality* (1918). Vol. 2: *Perspectives of World-History* (1922). Translated by Charles F. Atkinson. Arktos, 2021.

John Michael Greer (b. 1962) reflects and writes about the future, both as a science fiction author and as a thinker—who has been publishing both books and blog posts on “energy descent” since 2006—on the de-industrial trajectory that awaits contemporary, industrialized humanity. One of the most astute commentators on the links between ecology, economy, technology, and religion, he describes himself as a moderate Burkean conservative and has achieved wide recognition for his critique of the “religion of progress” and for the “middle way” he traces between the two polar-opposite imaginaries of endless progress and growth, on the one hand, and abrupt collapse and apocalypse, on the other.

His novel ideas about a plurality of technological regimes and about “technological choice,” as well as his cogent advocacy of appropriate technology as an answer to many of the ecological and economic woes of industrial culture, make him a fitting successor to thinkers such as Ernst F. Schumacher, the author of *Small Is Beautiful*. Greer lives in Rhode Island and definitely tries to walk his talk, choosing to forgo quite a few of industrial late modernity’s luxuries and amenities.

Aside from his influential environmental analyses, he is also a prolific writer of fiction and has published, among other things, a seven-volume cycle entitled *The Weird of Hali*, which adopts an “alternative” perspective on H. P. Lovecraft’s mythos and the non-human creatures that people it, and a number of “de-industrial” novels that seek to describe what a post-industrial world characterized by much lower energy consumption and a variety of technological choices might look like. He is also intensely interested in esoteric thought and practices and is a member of the Druidic Order of the Golden Dawn, which he founded in 2014. From his point of view, being a practitioner of a form of spiritual ecology (along

with hands-on energy descent practices which he calls “green wizardry”) and writing about energy descent and the de-industrial future are part and parcel of one single thing—namely, to actively explore the implications of, and to start actually living in, a culture that has dumped the illusory, modern narrative of progress by the wayside.

<https://www.ecosophia.net/>