

**Warwick Mules, *With Nature: Nature Philosophy as Poetics Through Schelling, Heidegger, Benjamin and Nancy*. Chicago: Intellect, 2014. Pp. 272. \$43. ISBN 9781841505732.**

Among the German Romantics, it has been said, being a genius was not in question; rather, the only question was what kind of genius one had chosen to be. The first task was to transcend Kant and then to transcend everyone else. Perhaps the most well known of these romantics was the young Friedrich Schelling, who took up the challenge of what Warwick Mules calls the ‘Kantian gap’ (50 ff) between things as they are in themselves and things as they are for us. Since, according to Kant, we have cognition only of the latter (the phenomenal world of the senses) the noumenal realm of things-in-themselves is forever inaccessible to us. Further, what cognition we do have is contingent because it relies on categories of the understanding and ideas of reason with which we find ourselves equipped. Such a stance was not acceptable to the young Schelling, nor is it to Warwick Mules. For one thing, in the act of recognizing the contingency of Kant’s approach we reveal ‘the possibility of a thinking and seeing otherwise from the contingency of human knowledge’ (50). This is nothing less than ‘a potential for a subject to be in the “I think” of absolute thought’ (51).

This analysis raises two fundamental questions for the reader of Mules’s book. First, since we cannot have cognition (in the Kantian sense) of the Absolute, how are we to apprehend and talk about our experience of being in the ‘I think’ of absolute thought? Second, supposing that Schelling, Mules, and others can identify means by which we can communicate what it is to be in the ‘I think,’ why would we want to do this?

To his credit Mules tackles both questions head on. His treatment of the first takes us not only through the works of Schelling, which constitutes a major part of the book, but also through later Continental thinkers Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, especially as they react to the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin. He also draws on the twentieth-century German poet Paul Celan and contemporary figures such as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and modern bioartists, all with an aim to find, though poetics, a way to communicate what cannot be articulated from this side of the Kantian gap.

The second question, dealing with why we should want to move beyond conventional cognition, is motivated by implications of remaining content with the Kantian outlook, something our modern age has largely done. Kant’s restriction of knowledge to phenomena fits well with an attempt to know nature through natural science, especially mechanistic science. The objects of nature are mere things just as they appear to the knowing subject. Since Kant rejects the possibility of knowledge of a substrate underlying things, the entities of nature can have no connectedness to other things. In the Kantian perspective the subject may be able to manipulate the natural world, but the subject operates apart from a nature that exists ‘out there.’ Here the subject is not ‘with nature;’ rather, nature is to be controlled. If it were possible to be metaphysically with nature, we could open ourselves to the possibility of new human-nature relations that would, Mules assumes, creatively revitalize how we grasp the ecological challenge we have as beings who are, after all, part of the whole that produced us.

This is not an easy work to read. To follow Mules as he helps us understand what being ‘with nature’ entails is, at least for this reviewer, extremely challenging. One vehicle that gives us a chance to be ‘with nature’ is art. Mules takes us through Heidegger’s distinction between objects and things, the former regarded generically, often in association with usefulness or function. What art expresses, however, is the thing, presented in an existential encounter that

takes us suddenly to a place we did not expect to be. The experience is laden with meaning because the thing, in its singularity, brings us into direct contact with reality at a deeper level than mere cognition. It is nature speaking to us in a third voice, not meant for the 'I' or 'you' of usual discourse, but for the earth. By reflecting on the experience we are open to new possibilities of what it means to be human with nature.

This is not an analysis that results in specific recommendations; rather, it is a call to grasp nature with radical openness as an ethical task. Mules sees the enterprise of being 'with nature' as a continuation of the Enlightenment project, but without throwing the self onto uncertain contingent ground as occurred in the late eighteenth century. He hopes to have found 'the light that shines through the post-Kantian abyss of reason' (201).

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