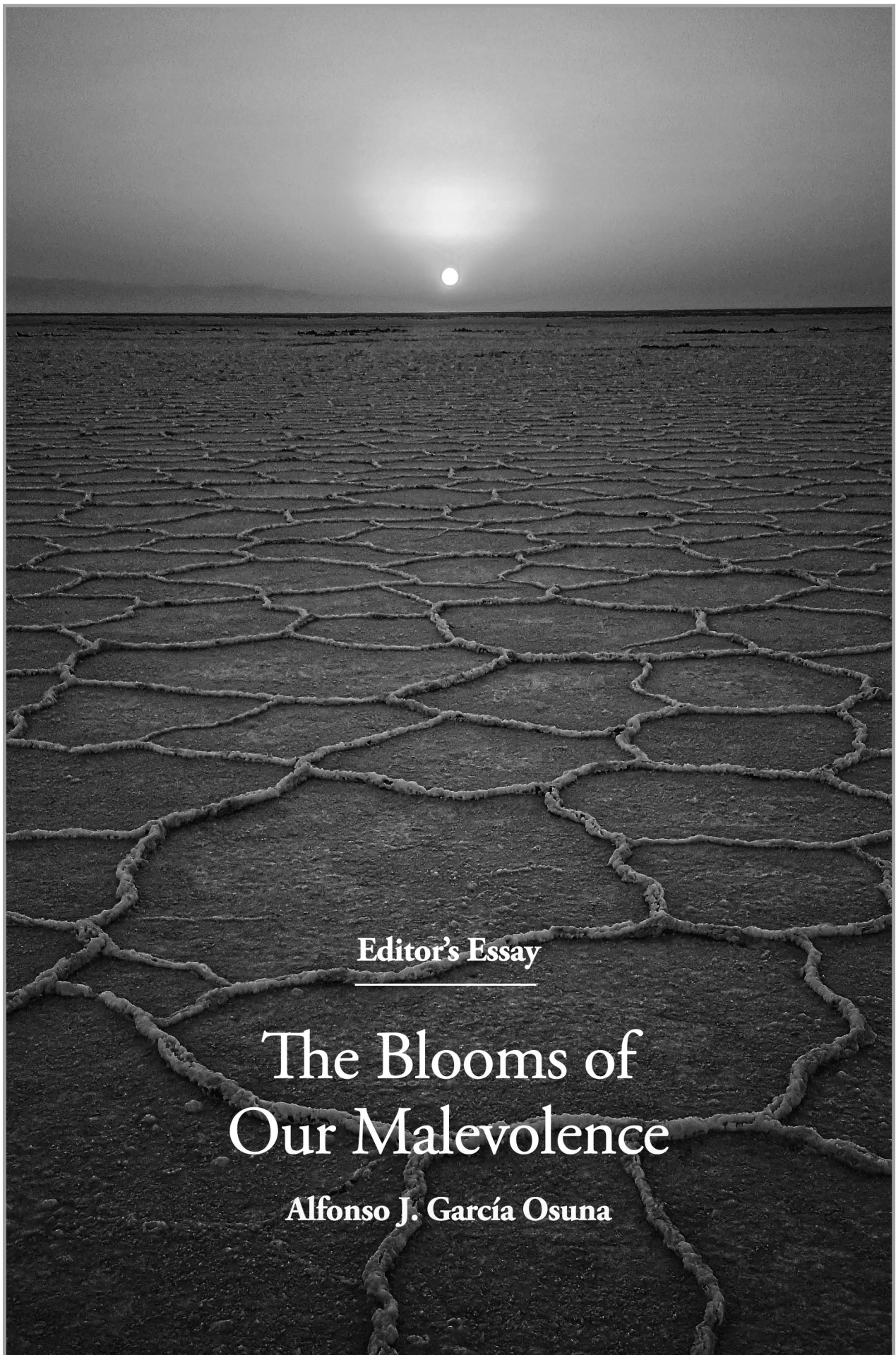




Editor's Essay

The Blooms of Our Malevolence

Alfonso J. García Osuna

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In the first story recorded in writing, the sage Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh of the events leading to the great deluge. As the story goes, the gods ordered this immense flood in order to get rid of a harmful and malevolent species (mankind) that was doing much to destroy the balanced, harmonious world envisaged by the all-powerful deities. In Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, Critias tells the story of Solon, a Greek traveller in Egypt who consults with an Egyptian priest called Sais. In essence, Sais tells of the many destructions of man and portends that there will be many more in the future. In the Old Testament story, mankind needs to be destroyed by the rising waters for disobeying the mandates of a just and loving God. All of these stories have human transgression as leitmotif, and the punishments that bring destruction to humanity are always portrayed as telluric events: plagues, floods, earthquakes, storms and the like. It strikes me that what is represented as the work of God might be seen by modern readers as an analogy for the works of nature. Nature, then, would need to be considered as possessor of an atypical sort of sentience, one that guides the efforts it makes to protect itself.

This is a peculiar analogy indeed. If we push the analogy we would be compelled to ask if the biosphere could be senseless and apathetic and still be able to activate seemingly sophisticated self-preservation mechanisms. I am convinced that it can. This belief is not based on scientific analysis; it is merely the product of my particular cognitive appraisal of the present pandemic and of the emotional response that it has elicited. Be that as it may, the current contagion leads me to believe that for this living, balanced, harmonious ecosystem, the human population, with its ever-increasing rates of environmental exploitation, has become an existential threat. The planet, then, might be seen as mounting a courageous defence against us, against an organism that behaves much like a devastating virus.

Beyond doubt, the initial success of the planet's most recent actions against us can be measured objectively: in the few weeks that the Earth has been hostile, the atmosphere that allows life to prosper has – to an unexpected degree – cleaned itself from the infection's destructive by-products. Emma Newberger reports in a recent *CNBC Environment* article (para. 3) that “[t]he north-eastern U.S. has seen atmospheric levels of nitrogen dioxide air pollution drop by 30% in March [2020] compared with the same period last year, according to new satellite data from NASA's Goddard Space Flight Centre.”

The conjecture that the planet is consciously resisting aggression is not so fanciful. In a recent article in *Futurism*, Dan Robitzski speaks of the conclusions to which several researchers have arrived through their work with the intricate mathematics of Integrated Information Theory:

The model, known as Integrated Information Theory (IIT), has long been controversial because it comes with an unusual quirk. When applied to non-living things like machines, subatomic particles, and even the universe, it claims that they too experience consciousness, *New Scientist* reports.

“This could be the beginning of a scientific revolution,” Munich Centre for Mathematical Philosophy mathematician Johannes Kleiner told the magazine. (paras. 2-3)

To further reinforce the hypothesis of a conscious planet employing its resources to exterminate us, I should add that the planet's water is also perceptibly cleaner two months into its response to the human contagion. In a March 20, 2020 article in *Axios, Energy and Environment*, Amy Harder reacts to news of fish returning to Venice's canals by stating that “fish swimming in Venice's canals are a glimpse of what it might look like if we took better care of the Earth”

(para. 2). Unfortunately, not everything on the planet can recover so quickly. A slower recovery would be that of the diversity of species that we are in the process of wiping out. Our actions in this regard have been so destructive, that according to Peter Kotecki (2018) “the planet’s evolutionary diversity won’t recover for 3 to 5 million years” (para. 1). Evidently, one can only start counting those 3-5 million years after the biosphere succeeds in disinfecting itself from us.

The idea that the biosphere is in any way *behaving* in self-defence or *reacting* to danger might sound preposterous to many readers, especially those who are not acquainted with Lovelock and Margulis’s Gaia Principle, with the maths of Integrated Information Theory, or with the work of scientists like V.A. Kostitzin, V.I. Vernadsky and R.V. Rizpolozhensky. How, one may ask, does the biosphere know that we are destroying it? The confusion may stem from the fact that human beings’ ability to incorporate extrinsic, passive forms of knowledge – call it quiescent consciousness – within the range of their experiential frame of reference is very limited. In his *Discourse on Method* (1998, p. 6), Descartes suggests that the individual’s own experience is the *only* thing that is directly and categorically obvious; everything that exists and happens does so within the individual’s experiential pith. Such a suggestion, I’d argue, serves to explain the type of relationship that mankind has with its environment. For human beings, the environment is a sphere of potential pursuits and interests ruled by a set of strategies that are fairly conspicuous, that is to say, they are evident in the manner in which humans construe their natural surroundings as passive objects of consumption. So while it is true that other organisms consume, that activity occurs within the limits of a synergistic system meant to preserve the conditions that make life possible on the planet. Early humans also consumed (and in turn were consumed) within those limits; the problem for the planet begins when humans transcend those boundaries and threaten the continuity of the system.

So our intrinsic characteristics serve to nullify any blossom of compunction for our transgression, making us largely indifferent to the planet’s warnings. Ergo, the scope of our interactions with nature is still reduced to activities governed by a logic of asset-accumulation that has, to a perilous degree, largely ignored the manner in which the biosphere is delicately balanced and fine-tuned to deliver the necessary ingredients for a healthy environment. We have never stopped to think that such a balancing act necessitates an awareness of the conditions under which a system as a whole functions, as well as cognisance of the role played by each constituent part. Balancing, fine-tuning and corrective measures make it evident that nature is not just *being*, but also methodically *doing*.

So now, after treating the planet as an object to be subjugated and devoured, we are encountering an opposing contestant in our arduous game of survival. Is it too late to attempt to frame a new relationship with nature that allows it to forgive our trespasses? Perhaps, but this would require that we ascribe a certain level of apperceptive subjectivity to the flora and fauna that we have so mercilessly decimated, to the minerals that we’ve irresponsibly exploited, and to the seas and atmosphere that we are inexorably turning toxic. This means that we’d have to learn to see nature as an interlocutor and stop *processing* it. Can we?

Maybe. In order to have a dialogue with the planet we should start by recognising that there is a certain type of anonymous consciousness at work in it, one that detects transgressions and takes actions to address them, just like our bodies do when detecting a viral or bacterial infection. In these cases, we don’t deliberately command our body to take specific, directed action against infection, and yet it does take action with an amazing degree of intricacy and complexity. Up to the present day, we have not believed that the planet has a comparable

potential to antagonise its adversaries. Perhaps this pandemic is our wake-up call: We must stop being the infection against which our host planet keeps releasing antibodies.

In the end, it is entirely possible that we will survive the planet's latest attempt to clean itself of this resilient contagion called humanity. One thing is certain: the Earth will keep trying until it succeeds. If it succeeds, as the ancients tell us it has in the remote past, it may be that the compassionate and forgiving planet will again take pity on us and allow another Utnapishtim or Noah to restart humanity's story.

Or perhaps it has had enough.

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