

# THE UNSUNG EARTH: MAN'S REGENERATION AND REDISCOVERY OF THE EARTH AFTER SOCIETAL BREAKDOWN IN MAURO CORONA'S *LA FINE DEL MONDO STORTO*

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## **Sommario**

*L'articolo affronta il racconto La fine del mondo storto (2010) dello scultore, alpinista e narratore trentino Mauro Corona: l'apologo di Corona descrive la situazione apocalittica di un mondo in cui, a causa della globalizzazione, "la tecnica delle apparenze ha prevalso sulla nostra naturalità" e l'uomo, esaurita ogni risorsa, si candida ad auto-immolarsi; non senza la proposta di uno happy ending, cioè l'utopia di un riscatto e di un rigenerazione basate su una strategia di 'decrescita felice' e su un progetto di riconciliazione con la Natura.*

In considering this reading I have chosen to adopt primarily a thematic approach as opposed to a critical one. The former has allowed me to examine ways in which an event of a cataclysmic nature such as in *Il mondo storto* can result in a range of discourses and radical changes within man and society.

Apocalyptic narrative is one of many ways to tell the environmental story and the unfolding ecological crisis that has been embedded in our social consciousness since the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the end of the world has been documented in literature since soon after its creation, prophecies of doom, apocalyptic predictions and dystopian scenarios have been strongly associated with environmental thought since the late 1960's<sup>1</sup>. Today the danger is man-made technology versus the

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<sup>1</sup> *Make Room! Make Room!* (Harry Harrison, 1966); *The End of a Dream* (Philip Wylie, 1970); *The Sheep look Up* (John Brunner, 1972) are all novels where the authors posit either an utopian or dystopian world revolving around environmental calamities.

environment. Man, creator of his own processed environment, lives in a world designed by consumerism; a world of incessant advertising, sales and the desperate, frantic pursuit of material things. He rarely, if ever, experiences an intimate connection with the natural world he is hoping to save. Man's obsession with technological innovation and his infatuation with electronic connectivity have cut him off from the web of life force energy and have substituted it with an artificial construct. Subsequently, current writers are delivering a new message – mankind alone will be implicated in the calamity that will spell its end. Therefore, these potentially disastrous consequences should inspire one to make a series of substantial lifestyle changes.

In most of his novels and short stories<sup>2</sup> Mauro Corona, writer, sculptor and mountaineer, brings his readers into contact with a world that has almost disappeared, in which the ecosystem succumbed overnight to a violent 'cataclysmic' upheaval as a result of a massive landslide in the Vajont Valley in northern Italy. The disaster, brought about solely by human negligence, could and should have been avoided<sup>3</sup>. His social critique also addresses man's weakening relationship with nature brought about by advancing economic and technological progress. Corona, born in 1950 in the village of Erto, part of the destroyed region of the Vajont, acknowledges that his first-hand experience with the *diga del disonore*<sup>4</sup> has profoundly influenced his vision on life as well as his writing:

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<sup>2</sup> *I fantasmi di pietra* (2008); *Nel legno e nella pietra* (2003); *Il volo della martore* (1997); *Vajont: quelli del dopo* (2006); *Gocce di resina* (2001).

<sup>3</sup> "The Vajont dam was completed in 1959 in the valley of the Vajont River under Mount Toc, 100 km north of Venice. A 1963 landslide caused the overtopping of the dam and around 2,000 deaths. The overtopping was caused when the designers ignored the geological instability of Mount Toc on the southern side of the basin. Warning signs and negative appraisals during the early stages of filling were disregarded, and the attempt to complete the filling led to a landslide, which created a wave that brought massive flooding and destruction to the Piave valley below, wiping out several villages completely. On the 12 February 2008, while launching the International Year of Planet Earth, UNESCO cited the Vajont Dam tragedy as one of five 'cautionary tales', caused by the failure of engineers and geologists". <http://www.documentingreality.com/forum/f240/vajont-dam-disaster-italy-9-october-1963-a-112175/>.

<sup>4</sup> Title of film on the Vajont disaster by director Renzo Martinelli which has now come into common use when referring to the Vajont dam.

Tutto quello che ci è accaduto, o che abbiamo udito raccontare ha lasciato un segno dentro di noi, un insegnamento, o, quantomeno, ci ha fatto riflettere. La vita, nel bene e nel male è maestra per tutti. Un individuo guarda il mondo in un certo modo, sorride con certi occhi, cammina con un certo passo, perché è figlio di ciò che gli è accaduto e del luogo dove è vissuto.<sup>5</sup> (Corona, 2001: quarta di copertina)

On a personal level, Corona's multifaceted character and extreme eccentricity have led him to live an isolated life in the mountains surrounding the Vajont Valley where his passionate love for the environment is manifested not only in the manner in which he has chosen to live but also in his numerous writings and in his wooden sculptures. Writer and critic Claudio Magris, in introducing Corona's novel *Il volo della martora* (1997), maintains that the writer's hands have the ability to recreate life from wood and that his figures reflect life's duality: its incredible strength and painful fragility. For many readers "*il poeta del legno*"/"poet of the wood" as Magris aptly puts it, is also "*poeta della parola*"/"poet of the word"<sup>6</sup>. In his writings, daily life is always associated with the need for oneness with nature pervaded by feelings of loneliness and nostalgia for a world that once was. Corona's personal relationship with the mountains<sup>7</sup> of Friuli has launched him on a journey of self-discovery, where each ascent becomes an apotheosis of how his relationship should be with himself and with nature: "la montagna mi ha regalato ciò che gliuomini, le donne, i genitori, non sono riusciti a darmi. Dalla montagna mi sono sentito compreso, ascoltato, degnato di attenzione. Qualche volta

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<sup>5</sup> Everything that has happened to us, or that we have heard recounted has marked us, a lesson or at least it has made us reflect. Life, for better or for worse is a teacher. A person looks at the world in a specific way, he smiles with specific eyes, he walks with a specific step, because he is the son of what happened to him and of the place in which he lived.

<sup>6</sup> Magris was cited by Laura Cioni in LETTURE/Mauro Corona, cantore di quel mondo che non abbiamo mai visto.; 21 ottobre 2010. [www.ilsussidiario.net/news/cronaca](http://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/cronaca). Accessed 20/06/2014.

<sup>7</sup> Corona is an avid "Alpinista e arrampicatore, ha aperto itinerari sulle Dolomiti d'Oltre Piave" [www.infolibro.it/speciale\\_mauro\\_corona.htm](http://www.infolibro.it/speciale_mauro_corona.htm) accessed 20/06/2014.

anche spintonato, ma sempre dopo essere stato avvertito”<sup>8</sup> / “The mountain has given me that which men, women, parents have not succeeded in giving me. From the mountain I have felt listened to, understood and worthy of attention. At times even jostled, but never without warning”.

Although there is nothing original or revolutionary about Corona’s apocalyptic fiction *La fine del mondo storto* (2010) – the world does not come to an end, get destroyed nor infested with aliens and zombies – he succeeds nonetheless in shocking the reader out of a position of comfortable apathy with a topic that has much relevance in today’s climate. The writer pursues the ‘what if?’ logic, taking a premise about current social and environmental developments and following it through to its possible conclusion<sup>9</sup>. In this book Corona explores a cataclysmic “natural” change in the Earth’s environment with the depletion of natural resources. The author postulates a scenario in which the power goes out one night in the dead of winter in every corner of the world, like a global short circuit – and never comes back on. However, the worst and most trenchant truth is that, as with the Vajont disaster<sup>10</sup>, the warnings were all there but went unheeded by greedy, disinterested or simply apathetic societies. Although written in 2011, the blueprint for *La fine del mondo storto* had already been set in the 2003 novel, *Nel legno e nella pietra*. It is there on the highest peaks of the mountains surrounding the Vajont

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<sup>8</sup> “La Montagna” di Mauro Corona. 2008. [http://www.Lerkaminerka.com/forumsave/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID=485](http://www.Lerkaminerka.com/forumsave/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=485).

<sup>9</sup> “Mettiamo che un giorno il mondo si sveglia e scopre che sono finiti petrolio, carbone ed energia elettrica. Non occorre usare fantasia per immaginarselo, primo o dopo capiterà, e non ci vorrà nemmeno troppo tempo” / “What if the world one day woke up and discovered that crude oil, coal and electricity were depleted. One doesn’t need much inventiveness to imagine it, sooner or later it’s going to happen and it won’t even take that long” (Corona, 2010:9).

<sup>10</sup> “[...] il Vajont non è altro che l’arroganza dell’uomo che si perpetua, cercando di modificare la naturalità. Una torrente è una cosa naturale, bellissima. Era un paradiso terrestre la valle del Vajont, isolata dal mondo. Quando tu interrompi l’andare naturale di una cosa, da qualche parte deve esplodere” / “[...] the Vajont is none other than the arrogance of man that perpetuates itself, trying to modify that which is natural. A stream is a natural thing, beautiful. The Vajont valley was an earthly paradise, isolated from the world. When you interrupt the natural course of something, somewhere it will explode” (intervista a Mauro Corona).

valley, disconnected from all that is man-made that the writer experienced first-hand the magnitude of nature and as a result perceived the true value of his existence: “La montagna mi ha insegnato che dalla vetta non si va in nessun posto, si può solo scendere, una grande lezione: scendere, tornare in dietro all’essenziale, alle origini”/“The mountain taught me that from the peak one can go nowhere, one can only climb back down, a great lesson: climb back down, return to the essential, the roots” (Corona, 2003:224). The ultimate message in *La fine del mondo storto* is a warning to mankind to re-examine his actions in order to rediscover the essence of life. Such a concept is not that far removed from Science Fiction literature<sup>11</sup>.

If Erto, after the Vajont disaster, is today a ghost town (“abbandonato, silenzioso e triste, dove i giorni non lasciano tracce [...] dove spolpato dai predatori come un cervo dai denti delle volpi, il paese sta disteso gambe all’aria senza più fiato”/“abandoned, silent and sad, where the days leave no trace [...] where, picked at by predators like a deer by wolves, the village lies supine, legs stretched out, devoid of any breath”<sup>12</sup>), it is also a village whose community harbours great sorrow and unresolved anger, and it is this very anger towards man’s selfishness and reckless defiance of nature that Corona channels and conveys in *La fine del mondo storto*.

To achieve this quasi messianic end, Corona leaves his home town Erto and surrounding mountains (focal point to his novels), and sets the plot of *La fine del mondo storto* in the cities. He does so to mount a biting attack on man’s need to focus more on the world as fashioned through the minds and hands of men, and less on the natural world in which he lives. *La fine del mondo storto*, winner of the 2011 *Premio Bancarella*, leaves both readers and critics divided<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko states that “in the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmopolitical thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and most important – a mapping of possible alternatives” (Darko, 1979:12).

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Andrea Riscassi from *I Fantasma di Pietra* on his web page <https://andreariscassi.wordpress.com/tag/mauro-corona>.

<sup>13</sup> One of the major criticisms is that the book is repetitive and lacks the finesse of his other novels. However, Corona himself makes no excuses for his novel: “È un libro astioso che

One of the criticisms directed at *La fine del mondo storto* is that it is a novel without central characters. Arguably, there are no heroes and no villains. Yet, despite the fact there is clearly no one single person who stands out and whose character is drawn out and developed, it is *il mondo* itself and those who have rendered it *storto*, *gli uomini*, who take centre stage. It was the writer's intention to represent a people no longer capable of producing heroes or even one-dimensional characters. Corona refuses to develop characters because like the writers of *Roman Nouveau*<sup>14</sup>, he recognizes that industrialization and technology are one of the causes of a depersonalized society in which men are pressed into a common mould and made to conform to accepted standards of thought and behaviour. In doing so the author succeeds in introducing a state of radical anonymity, and, in choosing the city as his setting, the *uomini*, stripped of their individuality, are guaranteed depersonalisation. This trend towards depersonalization reflects the innermost tendency of the machine age, leading away from what is vital and organic and turning toward the mechanical and organized.

As the world is plunged into darkness and freezing temperatures grip the city, there is at first an uncontrolled rush to purchase supplies. Then, ever reliant on its technology humanity begins to wait for things to sort themselves out. Alone in their high rise apartment buildings surrounded by fake fires, designer furniture and computerised gadgets, *gli uomini* spend endless hours in solitude, staring at silent plasma screens. Corona's message is intended to hit home forcefully. *Gli uomini* have learned to live in little bubbles of safety which cut them off from their fellow-humans. They no longer live in the actual world, but rather in their own self-created world, by means of the latest form of technology, and, with the vanishing digital infrastructure of telephones, internet and television, it is not surprising that the writer's *uomini*, weaned on access to instant information struggle to communicate face to face with their

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offende e ferisce, è una tesi provocatoria, quasi antipatica. Ma d'altra parte io sono antipatico". <http://accademiamontagna.tn.it/leggere-di-montagna>.

<sup>14</sup> The French literary movement of the 1950's generally manifests itself in a condensed, repetitive manner with no intention of explaining or developing characters. It also explores the alienation of life in a technological and consumerist society.

neighbours. “In città si è sempre soli. Soli e arrabbiati, e ognuno è abituato a badare ai fatti propri, ma senza combustibili la gente è costretta ad andare d’accordo, a darsi una mano”/“In the city one is always alone. Alone and angry, and everyone is used to minding their own business, but without fuel people are forced to get along and give each other a hand” (Corona, 2010:12).

Denied the dependency of their nocturnal entertainment, *gli uomini* struggle to sleep and in turning to books, find them to be in short supply in the homes “va bene quello che capita. Riviste, giornali, libri, sillabari, elenchi telefonici. Tutto ciò che contiene parole viene arraffato”/“Anything goes. Magazines, newspapers, books, children’s reading books, telephone directories. Anything containing words is snatched up” (Corona, 2010:20). And as libraries unexpectedly acquire a new value the race is on to find distractions to fill the vacant hours. However, with store supplies running out it soon becomes certain that the situation is not going to change and so panic sets in.

Science fiction, post-apocalyptic literature and television series have all illustrated *ad nauseam* the dystopian future that would result if society were cut off from the conveniences that it takes for granted. Without electricity in our industrious civilization, our cities would crumble in the inevitably ensuing chaos. This is the scenario that is played out in *La fine del mondo storto*, enabling the author to steer a course towards confused paralysis that often strikes in troubled times.

Panic goes hand in hand with fear as the *uomini*, no longer able to tap into their technological appliances, turn to their forgotten God more in anger than in desperation: “ah signore Benedetto, perché hai mandato questo castigo?”/“Oh Blessed Lord, why did you send us this punishment?” Not surprisingly, Corona’s God is no longer listening: ““Ve lo siete costruito voi” dice il Signore ‘non l’ho mandato io”/“You did it all yourselves” says the Lord, ‘I didn’t send it to you” (Corona, 2010:22). Throughout the novel the author’s anger at what man has become pours out without restraint. Man is that monster who has shamelessly ransacked the earth with little consideration of the resources it yields. The enviroing world has been objectified and denied any relevance; Corona’s humans assumed unlimited rights to re-construct the world. Perhaps this begs the question; is this where

the really substantial ethical issues of environmentalism and technology begin.

Unequipped in the art of survival in a world void of machines, *gli uomini* in Corona's *mondo storto* reluctantly begin to look around their designer homes in search of items to burn. The need for warmth and food has surpassed all other basics. Man, consumer and collector of costly artefacts, thinks little now of burning his once enviable material wealth to ward off the cold: "Adesso, con sul collo la falce della paura, il gelo, la fame e poche speranze di futuro, quelle reliquie diventano zero, cianfrusaglie. Ora c'è da portar fuori la pelle e basta. Il resto non conta"/"Now, with the sickle of fear, cold, hunger and little hope in the future breathing down their necks, those relics are worthless. Now all that matters is survival. The rest counts for nothing" (Corona, 2010:16).

Almost immediately cold and hunger claim their first victims. First it is the sick who succumb quickly to the lack of medical-supplies, followed by the elderly, the new-born and then the children. In the ensuing chaos, Corona's anonymous characters show no compassion for the dying, especially the dying aged, and their merciless words reflect a cruel truth of today's modern society: "Crepate pure, rompiloglioni di vecchi, storti e rimbambiti. Siete sempre a brontolare e a pisciarvi addosso. Puzzolenti vecchiacci, crepate pure"/"Kick the bucket, old pain in the ass, crippled and senile. You are always moaning and pissing in your pants. Filthy old people, drop dead" (Corona, 2010:23).

Corona's modern man has betrayed the core essentials of his culture and legacy, and it is in mankind's disdain of the elderly that the betrayal reaches its lowest point. The very people who were once the backbone of the transmission of heritage, values and wisdom have no worth in Corona's *mondo storto*. And so the discarded elderly "muoiono piegando la testa piano, come fiori senz'acqua"/"die bending their heads slowly, like a flower without water" (Corona, 2010:23). Could it be that man's advance in technology has produced a compensating reversal in his capacity for compassion and community? If this is the case, then the further technology is developed the less mankind maintains the qualities of a loving, caring and attentive human society.

At first social norms dictate that the dead be buried with solemn memorial services, but as the number of the dead increases this cultural practice is soon dismissed and burials take place haphazardly. Eventually the dead are simply abandoned or burnt and used as a source of warmth.

One month after the world was plunged in darkness the cities of *il mondo storto* are a shadow of their former self. Frozen corpses line the streets and cadaveric looking men walk the cities in constant pursuit of food and warmth. Corona's *uomini* are at a loss "di colpo tutto ciò che era creduto essenziale si rivela inutile. E questa nuova e fatale consapevolezza unita all'incapacità di fare qualcosa con le mani, dissemina il terrore tra la gente"/"suddenly all that had been thought essential reveals itself useless. And this new and fatal realisation combined with the inability to do anything with one's hands disseminates fear among the people" (Corona, 2010:22).

Chaos and social disorder rule, the apocalypse is in full swing as *gli uomini* in all their ineptness and arrogance take centre stage. In the first part of the novel they struggle to survive in a world deprived of modernity, seen as the fallacious accumulation of technology without humane values. This is a pitiful mankind who, when confronted with its lack of basic skills, looks on clueless.

In the cities everything is closed, "fabbriche, osterie, scuole, discoteche, uffici, negozi. Chiuso con porte aperte. Dentro non c'è rimasto niente"/"factories, pubs, schools, discothèques, offices. Closed with open doors. There is nothing left inside" (Corona, 2010:22). Items formerly considered crucial in the *mondo storto* have lost all practical value in this new post-apocalyptic world. In the winter "della morte bianca e nera" there are only two things that count: food and warmth. Everything else becomes meaningless. In his article "Hunger and the Apocalypse of Modernity in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*"<sup>15</sup>, Mullins suggests that "the satisfaction of hunger uncovers both ontic and ontological answers to fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and, perhaps more

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<sup>15</sup> *The Road* is a 2006 novel by American writer Cormac McCarthy. It is a post-apocalyptic tale of a journey of a father and his young son over a period of several months, across a landscape blasted by an unspecified cataclysm that has destroyed most of civilization and, in the intervening years, almost all life on Earth.

importantly, what it means to be human alongside other humans” (Mullins, 2011:2). In Corona’s novel, *gli uomini* at first consume anything remotely resembling food, from circus animals to leather. Soon, however, starving and desperate, as the final resort the *uomini* turn to eating human flesh:

Manca da mangiare, la terra è indurita, non può dar frutti subito. Allora i superstiti continuano a cibarsi di morti. Come cani affamati che azzannano l’osso, loro azzannano i morti. Li divorano in silenzio, e mai guardandosi in faccia. La carne umana va mangiata a testa bassa.<sup>16</sup> (Corona, 2010:51)

As in the novel, *The Road* (McCarthy, 2006), hunger in *La fine del mondo storto* has a significant role. It manifests itself as the silent interrogator of *gli uomini* asking what they are willing to do to fill their stomachs, in other words probing what “being human means at a time when the ethical has been overrun by the innate physical drive to survive” (Mullins, 2011:7). The introduction of cannibalism in the novel also serves to indicate that the mental state of the inhabitants has been pushed to the limits of humanity and is also a reminder that this action has been brought about by humanity’s own doing:

Se i superstiti non si fossero decisi a mangiare carne umana, l’inverno che ha portato la fine del mondo storto non avrebbe risparmiato nessuno. Ma era destino che qualcuno restasse, Restasse a vedere, a rendersi conto di quel che l’uomo aveva combinato alla Terra. E a mordersi le mani, per la ricchezza semplice ed essenziale persa per strada, a favore di una ricchezza insensata, complicata e superflua.<sup>17</sup> (Corona, 2010:52)

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<sup>16</sup> There is nothing to eat, the earth has hardened, it cannot immediately bear fruits. So the survivors continue feeding on the dead. Like starving dogs that gnaw at bones so they gnaw on the dead. They devour them in silence, never looking at each other. Human flesh is to be eaten with a bowed head.

<sup>17</sup> If the survivors had not decided to eat human flesh, the winter that brought the end of the crooked world would have saved no one. But it was fate that someone should remain.

With cities in ruins and lifeless landscapes littered with human corpses, the *uomini* in the novel struggle daily to hold on to their humanity. However, Corona's interest does not lie simply in the usual apocalyptic concerns of how man is destroyed or finds a technology of escape. Rather, he uses the reaction of man to the loss of technology to stress his disconnection with nature. Having done this, Corona subsequently penetrates the heart of the apocalyptic experience by integrating the changing physical universe with a changing psychic experience, as mankind progresses to an intense new relationship with nature. In her paper, Lisa Garforth suggests that the environmental crisis should be seen as an opportunity to enhance and expand human well-being in the context of ecological integrity and that in recognising and challenging the possibility of an eco-apocalypse, critical texts such as *La fine del mondo storto* open a way to "re-imagine social relationships with nature that aren't simply about survival but include the possibility of a better way of being" (Garforth, 2005:403).

As the layers of lives superfluously lived are pulled back so the values of men begin to change. Gradually, *gli uomini* begin to realise that in order to survive they have to tap into their ancestral origins. Ironically, "l'uomo diventerà 'ecologo' solo quando avrà fame. Allora conserverà anche la buccia della patata, il pezzo di spago e così via"/"man will become an 'ecologist' only when he knows hunger. Then he will conserve even the skin of the potato, a piece of cord and so on" (Corona)<sup>18</sup>. Consequently, Corona offers the reader an interesting view of man one in which his behaviour distinguishes him from other creatures. "Gli uomini ancora in forza scoprono di nuovo la spinta del vento, l'energia del fuoco, la forza dell'acqua. Motorinaturaliche non siesaurisconmai"/"Men, those with strength rediscover the strength of the wind, the energy of fire and the force of water. Natural engines which are never depleted"

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Remain to see, to realize what man had done to the Earth and bite their tongue for the essential and simple wealth lost along the way in exchange for a senseless, complicated and superfluous wealth.

<sup>18</sup> La Natura, gli uomini: intervista a Mauro Corona. Giovanni Agnoloni.

(Corona, 2010:57). In recounting the desperation, resignation and finally man's ultimate will to survive in a world that is no longer *storto*, Corona reminds us that along with our predisposition to trash the Earth, we as a species are also curiously blessed with the ability, in the right circumstances, to mend it. As Wallace Stegner wrote, "we are the most dangerous species of life on the planet, and every other species, even the earth itself, has cause to fear our power to exterminate. But we are also the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy" (1955:17).

[...] l'istinto di conservazione, la voglia di vedere ancora altri giorni prevalgono sulla morte. Si mette via il dolore, si stringono i denti, si controlla la paura, e si riparte ogni mattina da quello che resta.<sup>19</sup> (Corona, 2010:110)

So the author tells of how, after the initial panic and the rush to stockpile, after egoism, isolation and arrogance, men slowly discover how to use their hands in order to survive, how to socialize and collaborate with each other and learn to live with nature because it is only by doing this that man's survival is ensured. Corona creates a scenario which is designed to see past our blind spots and with it the post-apocalyptic setting ironically triggers the survival instinct in man. The question, to be considered is, of course, if the goal of the post-apocalyptic scenario can be said to be re-establishing civilization and getting the world back to its pre-apocalyptic state.

Sotto la guida dei contadini, all'ombra della morte bianca e nera, si comincia a piegarsi la terra. Nelle città, uomini e donne, giovani e vecchi, tutti quelli scampati alla fine del mondo storto scavano e rivoltano zolle di terreno. Dal centro alle periferie, ogni lembo di verde, ogni angolo dove c'è terra viene accuratamente dissodato e con l'aiuto dei contadini, seminato. [...] Pian pian, tra morti e

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<sup>19</sup> The instinct to treasure, the need to see better days triumphs over death, grief is stashed away, teeth are grit, fear is controlled, and every morning one starts again with that which remains.

caos, freddo e silenzio, è tornata la primavera [...] ora tutti si mettono in ginocchio sul tesoro più prezioso che esista: la terra.<sup>20</sup> (Corona, 2010:67)

As man returns to the centre stage, renewed and regenerated, he learns to readapt to all from which he originated, and in exploiting the difficulties and the tragedies, he emerges strengthened. The natural world, the earth itself; the air, the trees, the vast realms of animals, plants, oceans, deserts and mountains begin to acquire new meaning and value in the lives of the men who once inhabited *il mondo storto*:

Ci si accorge che la terra si rigenera, si pulisce, si disintossica dai veleni che l'uomo le aveva fatto ingerire. Il cielo dei sopravvissuti è limpido, pulito, terso. Nella città chi alza la testa di notte vede le stelle. Chi non la alza ne sente lo sguardo, e vede riflettersi nei fossi la luce della luna.<sup>21</sup> (Corona, 2010:110)

In the second part of the novel Corona offers a compelling voice of hope and succeeds in steering the reader away from apocalyptic thinking into a future where man can live to build a better world. When Henry David Thoreau<sup>22</sup> retreated to a cabin at Walden Pond in

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<sup>20</sup> Guided by farmers, in the shadow of the white and black death, they begin to bow down to the earth. In the cities, men and women, young and old, all those who survived the end of the crooked world dig and roll over clumps of earth. From the centre to the suburbs every patch of green, every corner where there is land, it is carefully ploughed and, with the help of the farmers sowed. [...] Slowly, among the dead and chaos, the cold and the silence, spring has returned [...] now everybody bows down on their knees to the most precious of treasures: the earth.

<sup>21</sup> So they realise that the Earth regenerates, it cleanses itself, it detoxes itself from the poisons that man had made it swallow. The sky of the survivors is limpid, clean and transparent. In the cities if one looks up at night one sees the stars. Those who don't look up feel the gaze and see the light of the moon reflected in the ditches.

<sup>22</sup> In his book, *Walden or Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau describes his retreat from the encroaching mess of civilization and rapidly industrialized world growing up around him and outlines his philosophy of self-reliance. In order to get closer to nature and to find out what is absolutely necessary in life and what is superfluous he stripped down to the barest essentials.

1854, he embarked on a life long journey of personal education about the natural world:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>23</sup>

Although unlike Corona's *uomini* his retreat to nature was deliberate, he too like Corona's *uomini* embarked on a journey where human life is engaged with the natural world in a bid to return to a more essential and meaningful way of life. In the article, *What is Environmental Philosophy?*, Beckman argues that when Thoreau went into the wild and set the stage for the development of environmentalism, it was much more than just a "plea to care for old-forest trees and improve the quality of air". It was intended to encourage man to re-discover a way of seeing himself in nature with a certain degree of urgency. "For the claim is that, if we do not re-discover a mutual relationship of humanity and nature, we will lose both. We must have nature to have humanity" (Beckman, 2000:9). Indeed, in *La fine del mondo storto* humanity does rediscover its ancient skills by connecting once again with nature:

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<sup>23</sup> [http://literatureproject.com/walden/walden\\_2.htm](http://literatureproject.com/walden/walden_2.htm), accessed 10/06/2014.

*La fine del mondo storto* ha reso i supersiti antichi come gli uomini primitivi, e come tali, dipendenti soltanto dalla natura e dalle proprie forze. Cercate disperatamente e ritrovate velocemente. Dopo la grande ecatombe, che ha fatto fuori quasi l'intero pianeta, sono riapparse queste forze perdute ormai da molti anni, e credute scomparse per sempre.<sup>24</sup> (Corona, 2010:115)

The question, however, is, whether *gli uomini* in Corona's novel, after having survived chaos and societal breakdown and having emerged regenerated and at one with nature, have in fact learnt from their errors.

Had the author ended the novel with this rebirth, *La fine del mondo storto* would have taken on a different meaning, but Corona's intention is to demonstrate man's propensity to self-destruct. Hence, the decline of *gli uomini* from a revitalized state into a new state of chaos is inevitable. In the new world, man rediscovered solidarity, collaboration and friendship only because he realised that they were necessary tools for his survival. Corona refutes the perception that man is fundamentally good and believes that the monster that resides within everyman surfaces not in the face of hunger or impending death but when he is assured of a certain secure status. It is then that it will rise with arrogance and violence:

occorre prendere paura tutti assieme per andare d'accordo e non dare vita a risse, polemiche e reclami. Occorre aver fame tutti allo stesso modo per collaborare a produrre cibo senza rubarselo l'un dall'altro. Senza mire personali, avidità, egoismo. La certezza della morte in salute, aggiusta l'uomo. Solo quella [...] occorre esser ridotti tutti sullo stesso piano, nella stessa barca. Se un certo punto uno salta mezzo gradino più in su, rompe

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<sup>24</sup> The end of the crooked world has made the survivors become ancient like primitive men, and as such dependent only on nature and on their own strength. Desperately sought after and quickly discovered. After the great massacre that almost destroyed the entire planet those forces lost for many years, and considered gone forever, resurfaced.

l'equilibrio e il caos torna a dominare.<sup>25</sup> (Corona, 2010:146-147)

It is not long before the world is once again being reshaped, as *gli uomini*, no longer threatened by certain death, stop reaching out to each other and start regarding each other with suspicion. Petty crime erupts and leaders are soon elected to control the people. “L'uomo non ha capito niente, non ha fatto tesoro della lezione [...] I superstiti non si rendono conto ma sono tornati i padroni, gli hanno creati loro stessi”/ “Man has understood nothing, he has not treasured the lesson learnt [...] The survivors don't realise it but the masters are back, they created them” (Corona, 2010:52); “senza un capo l'uomo non riesce a ragionare”/“without a leader man does not know how to reason” (Corona, 2010:153).

Self-serving and power-hungry leaders revert to manipulation and control and in no time *gli uomini* begin to recreate the artificial environment called “civilization”. As technology advances modern civilization breaks the ancient covenant with nature. As the winter approaches Corona's *uomini* will stop living within the parameters of nature, stop benefitting from its beneficence, stop adapting to its rhythms, and coping with its adversities. As is inevitable

un po' alla volta tutto tornerà come prima, prima della morte bianca e nera. Sarà il principio di un' altra fine. Finche l'uomo non sparirà dal pianeta, farà di tutto per farsi male e per star male. Poi si estinguerà. L'uomo sarà l'unico essere vivente ad autoestinguersi per imbecillità.<sup>26</sup> (Corona, 2010:160)

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<sup>25</sup> Men must face fear as one in order to get along e to not give rise to brawls, controversies and complaints. Men must all face hunger in the same way in order to collaborate and produce food without stealing it from one another. Without personal goals, greed, egoism. The terror of death fixes everything. The certainty of death brought about by health, hunger and cold sorts man out. Only that [...] Men must all be reduced to the same level, in the same boat. If at a certain point, one man jumps up just one step, the balance is broken and chaos will return to dominate.

<sup>26</sup> Slowly everything will return to as it was, before the white and black death. And it will be the beginning of another end. Until such time as man does not disappear from the planet, he will do everything in his power to hurt himself and to be hurt. Then he will become extinct.

Reflecting on the Vajont tragedy, Corona is emphatic that “le grandi tragedie non insegnano nullaperché gli uomini hanno memoria corta [...] Di Vajont ce n’è tutti i giorni, basta guardarsi attorno. Guerre, fame, malattie, la natura che sta crepando avvelenata dall’uomo. Dove arriva, l’uomo sporca l’acqua”/“Great tragedies teach men nothing because men have short memories [...] Vajonts occur every day, just look around. Wars, hunger, illness, nature that is dying poisoned by man. Wherever man goes he dirties the water” (Corona, 2006:10).

*La fine del mondo storto* leaves the reader with a bitter taste. It is the story of a mankind that has no hope of salvation. *Gli uomini* will continue to stray from the way of living that fits their evolution best. They will continue to lose touch with the rhythms of the natural world because “Intoxicated with power, they will continue to subdue and dominate the earth, penetrating her secret depths with mines and ploughs, blighting her surface with dams and cities, and even, in the twentieth century tinkering with her very essence through genetic engineering” (Veldman, 2012:4). In *La fine del mondo storto*, humanity will eventually get what it deserves and there will be no spiritual redemption, no moments of warmth. Clearly, the world seems better off without *gli uomini*.

Although potentially perceived as environmental propaganda, Corona’s novel is principally a condemnation of modern civilization as we create it. The writer firmly believes that modernity has rendered our life meaningless. He actively resists society with its rampant consumption and environmental and social exploitation and although he does offer a glimmer of light towards the middle of the novel the reader soon discovers that even if humanity does rebuild society, it is incapable of setting up a new social political enclave among the dystopian ruins of the old order. Our society tells us that the ultimate goal is to make more money, a task to which there is no end, no victory point. We are told that we must pursue this goal at the cost of not spending time with fellow humans, at the cost of being unable to witness the magic of a deeply, complex, beautiful, natural world, and

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But it will be his fault. Man will be the only living being who will become extinct because of his own foolishness.

at the cost of our health and sanity. Corona delivers the criticism with explosive intensity not by way of philosophical sermons but in a simple, articulate, and often, non-eloquent fashion. Clearly provocative, the novel reaches out to those who feel guilty about what man is doing to the planet and offers debate at a time when waste and crisis are highlighted continuously.

Although Corona never ceases to remind the reader of the importance of *naturalità* and *manualità* in the lives of men, it would be wrong to reduce the novel to a return to neo-primitivism as is reflected in his own lifestyle in his mountains. It is not his intention to abolish the constructions made by man be they physical or ideal. His message is that man must find the necessary balance between consumerism, and nature and his natural disposition. Ironically, it is the urban citizen, removed from direct contact with nature, who views the natural world as a valuable resource and who is most aware of the effects of pollution. Environmental solutions are to be found not in a return to a primitive harmony with nature, but in the self-interest of our urban majority in a cleaner environment and a better life.

In his book, *Voice of the Earth*, historian and environmentalist Theodore Roszak suggests that the Earth's cry for rescue from the punishing weight of the industrial system we have created is our own cry for a scale and quality of life that will free us to become the whole and healthy person that more and more members of our species are coming to believe we were born to be. Mauro Corona's novels passionately reflect this philosophy, and like his wooden sculptures, the images he describes at times unpolished, at times refined, are always conveyed with sincerity. Visionary, yet paradoxically realistic, his novels echo the poetic voice of nature and call upon men to be accountable in order to fundamentally alter their relationship with the natural world. *La fine del mondo storto* is ultimately an impassioned plea to humanity to consider the serious risk in the present trend towards environmental and social disintegration. The first step toward reducing our ecological impact is to recognize that "the environmental crisis" is less an environmental and technical problem than it is a behavioural and social one.

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