In a rich and extensive interview, the Black Metal band Wolves in the Throne Room argue that the age of ecology is an age of hypocrisy:

One of the many contradictions of Black Metal is that it is a music that decries civilization, but relies on so many modern contrivances to exist. I don’t think it is a natural sound at all. It is really the sound of paradox, ambiguity, confusion, being caught between two worlds that cannot be reconciled. I have had people throw this in my face before—“how can you play music that is supposedly anti-civilization on electric guitars?” Frankly I find this line of reason boring and pointless. I remember a common line against rioters trashing the Nike store in downtown Seattle. There was a famous picture of some black-clad kid smashing the Nike sign, but zoom in and . . . ah-haa!! He’s wearing Nike sneakers! I say, who fucking cares? Catharsis is our objective, not a lily-white and guilt free existence. We are all hypocrites and failures.¹

This very suggestive statement resonates powerfully with what I take to be the time of hyperobjects, a historical moment in which nonhumans make decisive and irreversible contact with humans, within the discourses of rationalism, empiricism, and science. Of course, these contacts and affiliations have existed throughout the history of the human species, and some cultures have acknowledged them more potently than others. But the
time of hyperobjects makes it impossible for anyone, anywhere, not to be affected by nonhumans.

The notion of hypocrisy is based on the fact of being trapped inside a gigantic entity, or a series of them, like Jonah in the Whale. I argue that Wolves in the Throne Room perform this entrapment in their version of Metal. By creating sonic hyperobjects, the music of Wolves in the Throne Room is highly congruent with the contemporary social and political situation. Moreover, as allies of the environmental advocacy group Earth First!, Wolves in the Throne Room have performed a very significant distortion of normative environmentalist subjectivity, also related to their assumption that, “Against the hyperobject we are always in the wrong,” to adapt Kierkegaard’s phrase.²

Hypocrisy is not simply a contextual nicety that helps us understand what Wolves in the Throne Room are “about.” Hypocrisy is also directly significant in the artworks that Wolves in the Throne Room produce. Hypocrisis is the Greek term for the fifth stage of rhetoric: delivery. I shall argue why this fact is profoundly significant for understanding the powerful novelty of Wolves in the Throne Room’s contribution to Black Metal. In particular, delivery is the performative dimension of rhetoric, which I argue is a fully causal dimension. By playing with hypocrisy, Wolves in the Throne room are exploring causality—exploring, that is, directly tampering with it. I shall argue that in doing so Wolves in the Throne Room allow for the possibility of forms of speculative metaphysics that invite humans to think about the real, even as they are trapped on the “outside” of their skin, unable to inhabit their own flesh.

THE SMOKING POOL OF DEATH

Like all good names, the band name Wolves in the Throne Room evokes many things at once. There is a throne room, which is ruined and overrun by wolves. There is a throne room, in which wolves are the queens and kings. There is a throne room, in which wolves accompany humans, subservient and protective. There is a throne room, in which there are criminals who have been placed beyond the law: homo lupus as Giorgio Agamben has argued, humans who may be hunted and killed, but not sacrificed.³ There is a throne room, in which there are philosophers: “wolf” is Bruno Latour’s term for “philosopher.”

Circling around the name, then, like a pack of wolves, is a pack of questions. The wolf pack as question: Who let them in? Did they arrive of their own accord? Where are we? More tellingly, when are we? Some legendary Norse past? The far human future? The near human future? If we are in the far human future, is this 100,000 years from now, when seven percent of global warming effects will still exist, slowly being absorbed by igneous rocks—rocks made of various kinds of Metal? Or perhaps this is a post-nuclear holocaust,
up to 24,100 years from now, while plutonium is still deadly. The presence of wolves and the uncertainty about the time are part of one and the same syndrome: the eruption of a basic, searing anxiety.

Like a tangled thicket of thorns, the calligraphy of the band’s logo cuts us, almost illegible, beautiful yet strange. The symmetry of the logo defeats the compulsion to read from left to right, “to make it mean something.” The matted fibers of the Two Hunters sleeve evoke unseen things, unseeable things. Writing is twisting itself into the fibers and filaments of trees: cryptic, encrypted—but not divorced from Nature, only an outgrowth of the same process.

The fibrous calligraphy is of a piece with the “nature” imagery on the cover of their album Diadem of the 12 Stars: gigantic waterfalls shrouded in mist, the rocks coated with trees. Rightly, this album cover is wordless. Nature is saying something to us, something unspeakable. The image, which cannot be pronounced, evokes the silent functioning of things. It is a word that we can see but which is unspeakable. This is not Nature as a correlate of human imagination. This is the nonhuman in its most fully post-Romantic mode, a mode that I here call the smoking pool of death.

This is the sound of Wolves in the Throne Room. The opening moments of Two Hunters, which begins as the faint sounds of rural ambience, yet explodes into a horrifying, beautiful, horrifyingly beautiful sequence of chords that My Bloody Valentine would have killed to invent. The opening moments of the latest album Celestial Lineage perform the same mystery, as if Wolves in the Throne Room are miners digging under the sonic worlds evoked by the shoegaze band Slowdive, to discover a huge, abandoned cave covered with crystals. In this sense, the sound itself is speculative and realist, tunneling beyond the depths of melancholy into darker, yet more beautiful, realities.

Why a pool of death? It is as if Wolves in the Throne Room allow us to see what the Wheel of Life paintings of Tibet also allow: that life is caught in the jaws of death. The quiet rural sounds are only the tip of a gigantic iceberg. The frail flickers of living are small ripples on the gigantic pool of death, a pool evoked in the fjord of sound that does not assault but rather descends upon us with welcome, lapidary intensity—majestic, uncompromising. How deep is the pool? Why are there wolves in the throne room? The question of existence resounds, the question about existence, the question that is existence. Not an innocent question. Or perhaps yes, a purely innocent question, the only innocent question, but innocent not in the sense of ignorance, but in the sense of never having committed any harm, any time, any place (Latin, innocens). The kind of innocence that William Blake talks about, a disturbing innocence, not naivety, but armed to the teeth, with nonviolence.
And as the song descends still further into the next song, “Vastness and Sorrow,” we feel the sharpness of those teeth. The screaming breath of a voice not raised in anger but pitched to the frequency of the violence of existence, moving with the precise torque of suffering. The ruthless gentleness of a 1:1 scale map of the smoking pool of death.

Why is the pool smoking? Mist seems to be rising from it. The cold hissing of distorted guitar and cymbals evokes the way water vapor rises from a cold pool in a forest clearing, the way dry ice seems to float around the dark hulk of bass bins. There is one pool, one mist rising: not a group or collective of instruments, but a single instrument with several heads, heads of wolves, like the vicious, mournful Thing in John Carpenter’s film, a Thing discovered by a Norwegian who runs to the Americans, trying to warn them about a wolf that is not a wolf.\footnote{24}

Why the smoking pool, and not a smoking pool? Simply because this is a real pool, that preexists me. To use the definite article is to use the most powerful first word in realist fiction. There are many examples but consider the first two words of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray: “The studio . . .” Which studio? Why this one, the one that is here already, before I started reading. I find myself already in the pool. I wake up drowning in a fjord, which was always already there. What seemed like little rocks floating on the ocean surface turned out to be the tips of gigantic mountains descending into the smoking pool of death. A woman’s voice sings to me as I sink deeper into the coldness, spelling out a ritual catharsis (“Cleansing”). It is clean in the darkness of the smoking pool of death. It is honest and uncompromising. An immensely disturbing peace floats there.

There is nothing to do but decide to live authentically at the edge of the smoking pool of death, now we have entered the still waters in the dreamtime of sound. And so, the final song on Two Hunters is a promise: “I Will Lay Down My Bones Among the Rocks and Roots.” Rocks and roots—human or inhuman; living or dead; organic or inorganic? With perfect inevitability, the album fades into the kind of faint ambience with which it begins. Yet the end is the sound of meadow birds, the sweetness of a summer’s day. Was the smoking pool of death just a dream? The beginning is the thick night of crickets and owls. What beckons us out of this darkness?

Thus the two Nature samples function very differently, yet with an underlying unity. The opening sound is the beginning of dying, the first glistening droplets of liquid exiting the life-form as the inside of the being turns inside-out to face the music. The closing sound is the ongoing relief of the end of dying, the coinciding of the essence of things with the way they appear, the end of the rift, as the smoking pool of death seems to evaporate into a Norwegian summer meadow.

Where are we? When are we? Are we in Washington state, where Wolves in the Throne Room live (the beginning)? Or are we in Norway, where Black Metal originated
(the end)? We are the world, it seems, finally—not in the horrifying affirmation of a Michael Jackson, but honestly, in a being-towards-death.

**The Age of Asymmetry: Life-in-Death on Earth**

The term *Heavy Metal* evokes the toxic entities that humans have forged since a decisive moment in what geology now calls the *Anthropocene: 1945*, when a thin layer of radioactive materials was deposited in Earth’s crust. The term *Black Metal* suggests an uncompromising dwelling with the poison and intensity of the nonhumans that now exist: plutonium, uranium, global warming. Wolves in the Throne room dwells upon the darkness of Metal, that most chthonic of things, refusing to even try to attain escape velocity into the high orbit of affirmative culture that shuns the Earth beneath. As Steven Shakespeare writes, “We are a long way from nature worship. If we are dealing with a religion here, it is more like a contamination, in which spirit goes to ground.”

Robert Oppenheimer witnessed the first exploding nuclear bomb and said: “I am become death, destroyer of worlds.” He was quoting the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text whose reception in Europe and America marked the beginning of the end of Western imperial overreach, typified by Hegel’s philosophy of religion. The statement resonates with what is spoken in the chorus of *Antigone*:

> Many are the disturbing creatures on Earth,  
> Yet none is more disturbing than Man."

Yet, the horrified amazement at the human power to shape the earth and ocean is simultaneous with a realization of the depths of earth and ocean and all the life-forms that swim, crawl, creep and fly within the biosphere that they themselves create. They are all death, destroyer of worlds, in the very fact of living: oxygen is the first environmental cataclysm, along with vast deposits of iron in Earth’s crust. Both oxygen and iron ore are bacterial waste. On this view, the world itself is the destroyer of worlds. Humans have entered an *Age of Asymmetry* in which towering knowledge, including the realization of infinite inner spaces of freedom and creativity (exemplified by the Kantian sublime), is equally matched by towering physicality. We have entered the gigantic fjord of the next moment of history, without even knowing it.

This is reflected in art. Consider Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*. In these lectures, Hegel argues that there are three ages of art, corresponding to greater and greater human knowing. First the symbolic phase, in which physical things outstrip knowing; then the classical phase, a Goldilocks sweet spot in which things and knowing seem equally
balanced for a fleeting moment; then the Romantic age in which knowing outstrips things. As a Romantic himself, Hegel thought that it would be vertiginous inner freedom from here on out.\(^\text{12}\) He made a mistake: he thought his view was the final one, the snow capped summit of human history. He did not realize that, even on the flawed inner logic of his own argument (which this essay does not endorse), nonhuman things would rise again to tower equal to human knowing, yet not in a return to Goldilocks classicism. Instead, there would be a face-off between asymmetrical opponents: the nuclear bomb exploding while Oppenheimer looks on, horrified. Infinite inner space discovers infinite outer space, not just outside the Solar System, but in the very core of things. In addition, a new kind of irony has been born: not the playful vertigo of Romanticism, but the deer-in-the-headlights realization that we are caught in the thicket of things, trapped in a thorn bush, imprisoned in the tree Yggdrasil. It is indeed a monstrous return to the “primitive” symbolic age of indigenous cultures, even if you use the logic of Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris. Even Dawkins exists along with nuclear radiation, and the knowledge of it. The three ages of art return mutated in the Age of Asymmetry.\(^\text{13}\) Wolves in the Throne Room, then, is a tip of the branching Yggdrasil of this new phase of human existence.

The Yggdrasil tree has, of course, always been there. This is not a new phase of existence at all. It is simply a moment at which, even if you are a mechanist materialist, even if you are a pure idealist, or even a solipsist, you still have to deal with your garbage can, and the knowledge of where the garbage goes, and the gigantic island of plastic bags rotating in the Atlantic Ocean like some mad god. This is the moment after the end of the world: when the story we have been telling ourselves, that we live in a foreground whose existence is set off against a background, finally makes no sense at all. When I can Google Earth the carp in my English mother’s backyard pond, the world as a meaningful background “over there” has ceased to exist.

The deep geological fact of the Anthropocene arises simultaneously with a deep philosophical reflection on reality, as the Kantian circle of correlationism that restricted thinking to, at best, a kind of PR for “hard science” and “modern” social reality begins to shatter.\(^\text{14}\) Humans are now faced with the fact of coexistence: the fact that existence is always already coexistence down to the hidden depths of its core. Even if I am the only being in the universe, supposing this were possible, I do not coincide with myself. The I that is writing this is different from the me about which the writing is written.

There is a deep rift in the universe, the rift between essence and appearance: deeper than the difference between a substance and its accidents, which from this point of view is only the difference between two kinds of appearance. If we think real things are like boring cupcakes, and aesthetic appearances are like candy sprinkles, then we cleave to the default ontology that has plagued humans—and, I want to argue, all life-forms on this planet—
since at least the days of Aristotle.

If we want to go any deeper than this, and the present ecological emergency demands that we do, we must traverse dreamscapes in which the slightest misplaced footfall could land us in Hell. Why? Because it is very difficult to cleave to the torque of suffering. It is like trying to place one’s hand against a rapidly revolving blade wheel. If we fail to match the speed of the rotation, we will be destroyed. The slightest deviation from the negativity required for what I have called dark ecology could be very dangerous.15

In addition, we are entering a state in which the overwhelming reality of things is accompanied by overwhelming feelings of unreality, for the very same reasons. In this state, it is easy to slip into a protective cynicism, whose hard shell seems to shield us from the worst we know, but which in turn is brittle. If current social conditions persist through the misapplication of cynicism, all will be lost.

The cynic has already lost, in fact. This is because “against the hyperobject we are always in the wrong.” Inside the gigantic object called biosphere, inside the gigantic system called global warming, all actions, all attitudes, all statements are “wrong”: incomplete, ineffective at some point, weak in places, fragile. Everyone is reduced to hypocrisy. Even the cynic: being cynical is a form of hypocritical hypocrisy, now that we know we are inside a gigantic beast. The cynic secretly hopes: if she vomits disgustingly enough, maybe the world will change. The cynic is a hypocrite in denial about her hypocrisy. The hypocrite, on the other hand, embraces her failure fully to grasp, articulate, or respond to the situation in which she finds herself. This is why Wolves in the Throne Room describe themselves as hypocrites. They know too much, as people who discovered one another through Earth First! They cannot unknow what they know. They stand on the edge of the smoking pool of death, along with the rest of us. Standing there is the ultimate act of nonviolence, a quintessentially political act, but one that purists may find apolitical, or even antipolitical.

To protect herself against the knowledge that her shell is fragile, the cynic may develop a certain kind of nihilism. This is a drastic misreading of the smoking pool of death. This is a nightmare, but it is not “just” an illusion. It is not just a “manifest image.” The decisive moment in a horror movie is when the protagonist accepts that “this is really happening.” If we know that it is an illusion, just a neurological blip, then it isn’t an illusion. As Lacan argued, “What constitutes pretense is the fact that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not.”7 The reality of the smoking pool of death is not the reality of some pregiven ontic cupcake. Nor is the unreality of a pure conceptual construction. We are the smoking pool of death, yet when I reach out to touch it, I only touch this butterfly resting on a flower in the Norwegian meadow.

If we want to go any deeper in our social and philosophical journey, we must descend into the smoking pool of death. Wolves in the Throne room provide a kind of musical
antihistamine that enables humans to not have an allergic reaction to working at the depth necessary for retracing our broken coexistence with all beings.

NOTES
4 Wolves in the Throne Room, Two Hunters (Southern Lord, 2009).
6 Wolves in the Throne Room, Two Hunters.
7 John Carpenter, dir., The Thing (Universal Studios, 1982).
11 Sophocles, Antigone, ed. Martin D’Ooge (Boston: Ginn, 1888), 52.