

Cornell Roundtable on Environmental Studies Topics

The Arrogance of Humanism? : What Is the Role of the Humanities in the Environmental Crisis?

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G01 BioTech

The Arrogance of Humanism? : What Is the Role of the Humanities in the Environmental Crisis?

In Western culture we generally afford science tremendous authority in both identifying and solving environmental problems. There is no question that science gives us unique insights into the scope of the ecological crisis human communities face, as well as offering some solutions to the crisis. But our environmental crisis is profoundly human, both in its origins and in the ways we perceive it. There are some insights into the environmental crisis that only the humanistic disciplines can provide: how the role of storytelling shapes humans-environment interactions; how both religious and secular values systems guide behavior; how time and place shape our understanding of the natural world, even to the point of dictating the kinds of scientific questions we ask. Building on the interdisciplinary dialogue of the first roundtable in November, this roundtable will explore some of the ways the humanities have played and can continue to play an important role in addressing environmental problems.

Wardell Berry
from What Are People For?
(1990)

D A M A G E

I

I have a steep wooded hillside that I wanted to be able to pasture occasionally, but it had no permanent water supply.

About halfway to the top of the slope there is a narrow bench, on which I thought I could make a small pond. I hired a man with a bulldozer to dig one. He cleared away the trees and then formed the pond, cutting into the hill on the upper side, piling the loosened dirt in a curving earthwork on the lower.

The pond appeared to be a success. Before the bulldozer quit work, water had already begun to seep in. Soon there was enough to support a few head of stock. To heal the exposed ground, I fertilized it and sowed it with grass and clover.

We had an extremely wet fall and winter, with the usual freezing and thawing. The ground grew heavy with water, and soft. The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond.

The trouble was the familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge. The fault was mine.

I *was* careful to get expert advice. But this only exemplifies what I already knew. No expert knows everything about every place, not even everything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use.

II

In general, I have used my farm carefully. It could be said, I think, that I have improved it more than I have damaged it.

My aim has been to go against its history and to repair the damage of other people. But now a part of its damage is my own.

The pond was a modest piece of work, and so the damage is not extensive. In the course of time and nature it will heal.

And yet there *is* damage—to my place, and to me. I have carried out, before my own eyes and against my intention, a part of the modern tragedy: I have made a lasting flaw in the face of the earth, for no lasting good.

Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it.

III

It used to be that I could think of art as a refuge from such troubles. From the imperfections of life, one could take refuge in the perfections of art. One could read a good poem—or better, write one.

Art was what was truly permanent, therefore what truly mattered. The rest was “but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.”

I am no longer able to think that way. That is because I now live in my subject. My subject is my place in the world, and I live in my place.

There is a sense in which I no longer “go to work.” If I live in my place, which is my subject, then I am “at” my work even when I am not working. It is “my” work because I cannot escape it.

If I live in my subject, then writing about it cannot “free” me of it or “get it out of my system.” When I am finished writing, I can only return to what I have been writing about.

While I have been writing about it, time will have changed it. Over longer stretches of time, I will change it. Ultimately, it will be changed by what I write, inasmuch as I, who change my subject, am changed by what I write about it.

If I have damaged my subject, then I have damaged my art. What aspired to be whole has met damage face to face, and has come away wounded. And so it loses interest both in the anesthetic and in the purely esthetic.

It accepts the clarification of pain, and concerns itself with healing. It cultivates the scar that is the course of time and nature over damage: the landmark and mindmark that is the notation of a limit.

To lose the scar of knowledge is to renew the wound.

An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars.

IV

“You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.”

I used to think of Blake’s sentence as a justification of youthful excess. By now I know that it describes the peculiar condemnation of our species. When the road of excess has reached the palace of wisdom it is a healed wound, a long scar.

Culture preserves the map and the records of past journeys so that no generation will permanently destroy the route.

The more local and settled the culture, the better it stays put, the less the damage. It is the foreigner whose road of excess leads to a desert.

Blake gives the just proportion or control in another proverb: "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings." Only when our acts are empowered with more than bodily strength do we need to think of limits.

It was no thought or word that called culture into being, but a tool or a weapon. After the stone axe we needed song and story to remember innocence, to record effect—and so to describe the limits, to say what can be done without damage.

The use only of our bodies for work or love or pleasure, or even for combat, sets us free again in the wilderness, and we exult.

But a man with a machine and inadequate culture—such as I was when I made my pond—is a pestilence. He shakes more than he can hold.

1975

H E A L I N G

I

The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common.

In healing the scattered members come together.

In health the flesh is graced, the holy enters the world.

II

The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less.

A creature is not a creator, and cannot be. There is only one Creation, and we are its members.

To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.

The most creative works are all strategies of this health.

Works of pride, by self-called creators, with their premium on originality, reduce the Creation to novelty—the faint surprises of minds incapable of wonder.

Pursuing originality, the would-be creator works alone. In loneliness one assumes a responsibility for oneself that one cannot fulfill.

Novelty is a new kind of loneliness.

III

There is the bad work of pride. There is also the bad work of despair—done poorly out of the failure of hope or vision.

Despair is the too-little of responsibility, as pride is the too-much.

The shoddy work of despair, the pointless work of pride, equally betray Creation. They are wastes of life.

For despair there is no forgiveness, and for pride none. Who in loneliness can forgive?

IV

Good work finds the way between pride and despair.

It graces with health. It heals with grace.

It preserves the given so that it remains a gift.

By it, we lose loneliness:

we clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us;

we enter the little circle of each other's arms,

and the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,

and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.

V

And by it we enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness.

Only discord can come of the attempt to share solitude.

True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation.

One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources.

In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.

One returns from solitude laden with the gifts of circumstance.

VI

And there is no escaping that return.

From the order of nature we return to the order—and the disorder—of humanity.

From the larger circle we must go back to the smaller, the smaller within the larger and dependent on it.

One enters the larger circle by willingness to be a creature, the smaller by choosing to be a human.

And having returned from the woods, we remember with regret its restfulness. For all creatures there are in place, hence at rest.

In their most strenuous striving, sleeping and waking, dead and living, they are at rest.

In the circle of the human we are weary with striving, and are without rest.

VII

Order is the only possibility of rest.

The made order must seek the given order, and find its place in it.

The field must remember the forest, the town must remember the field, so that the wheel of life will turn, and the dying be met by the newborn.

The scattered members must be brought together.

Desire will always outreach the possible. But to fulfill the possible is to enlarge it.

The possible, fulfilled, is timely in the world, eternal in the mind.

Seeing the work that is to be done, who can help wanting to be the one to do it?

But one is afraid that there will be no rest until the work is finished and the house is in order, the farm is in order, the town is in order, and all loved ones are well.

But it is pride that lies awake in the night with its desire and its grief.

To work at this work alone is to fail. There is no help for it. Loneliness is its failure.

It is despair that sees the work failing in one's own failure.

This despair is the awkwardest pride of all.

VIII

There is finally the pride of thinking oneself without teachers.

The teachers are everywhere. What is wanted is a learner.

In ignorance is hope. If we had known the difficulty, we would not have learned even so little.

Rely on ignorance. It is ignorance the teachers will come to.

They are waiting, as they always have, beyond the edge of the light.

IX

The teachings of unsuspected teachers belong to the task, and are its hope.

The love and the work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health.

Rest and rejoicing belong to the task, and are its grace.

Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night.

Order is only the possibility of rest.