The Flag and the Fir Tree

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> "You are fearful. You cover yourselves with clothing and again with roofs and walls, locking your doors, reading from your black book and quoting distant presidents and kings. You are afraid of hunger and solitude. You want and you want. You are never silent and you are never at ease. You are a weak degenerate and fearful people who could not survive without your axes, your guns and your horses. You are destroyers, leveling the forest, hacking roads along the deer trails, driving all game away. You whites are not at war with us; you are at war with the earth."

One hundred and seventy two years ago, in the long October sunlight, the half-breed interpreter, William Wells, turned away from the Potawotami chief, from the Wea and the Piankishaw, the Miami, the Shawnee who had come to treat for peace with the chief of the "big knives," and translated such words to General Wayne. "Mad Anthony," with a three day march behind him, with blood that would not wash out of his leather trousers, with the screams and crackling rifle fire of "Fallen Timbers" still fresh in his memory, was not overly impressed with this first authentic spokesman for nature preservation. In all probability, Wayne sighed a deep sigh, ordered a feast of pork and dog, gifts for the red men, and double rations of whiskey for everybody. A few decades later, the eminent geologist, David Owen, set out northeast from the village of New Harmony, to collect specimens from the valley of the Maumee. On the morning of the third day, he awoke to the sounds of a juggernaut; the whack and thudding of axes, the laughter, the swearing, the wild pornographic singing, which turned out to be the advance party of three hundred drunken Irishmen, building the national road from Columbus to Vandalia. It was obvious—the heartland of America was becoming civilized. A few decades later, Karl Marx would write, "The business of philosophy is not to understand the world, but to change it."

Somewhere in our history there is an ironic image. It is the flag with the fir tree. The liberty tree flag. The paradox is that these should occur as a single banner—a flag and a fir tree—for they *can* be construed as the central symbols of two opposing ways of life; ways of life whose conflict became a series of wars which is a part of our nation's history. Collectively these conflicts comprise a single war in which both sides were defeated.

That war, in one sense, was our determined effort to displace a garden with Athens. "You whites are not at war with us, you are at war with the earth." So spoke the garden. But it was more

than that. It was, I think, necessarily a war with ourselves. Our fundamental religious beliefs are deep-rooted in a garden myth. The garden has always been something we've lost, or were thrown out of, or one which we ourselves rejected. The notion of that garden is of a state of harmony, some golden age of natural law and grace from which man has fallen. In spite of all their hardships, to the 18th and 19th Century immigrants from an overly managed Europe, the American wilderness was, in large part, Eden-revisited. It was a land of Lebensraum, a land of room-enough. What motivated so many of those early settlers was not the idea of quick wealth and opportunity, but rather of a land free from the old social, political and moral restraints which had become so oppressive in the societies they fled—societies of Europe and the eastern seaboard, societies based on the idea of a *rational* harmony deriving from human intelligence, societies rooted not in the garden myth but in the myth of Athens.

Never have men given to exaggeration had such material to work with as in that garden land across the Cumberland Gap, in what forever afterwards would be called "the west." "There was only one way they compared size on the frontier," one old settler reminisced, "one thing was *big*. The other was *powerful big*." "Rich ground? Why Lord love us you hafta coat your corn seed in axle grease or the plants'll burn themselves up shootin outta the ground!" And out of the yarns and tall tales, but more importantly, out of what men saw with their own eyes, evolved a new myth. They had spoiled their garden within twenty-five years; and they had cut too many of their cultural ties to Athens; yet clearly, these early western Americans had the substance of another myth, a myth new to the cultural history of man. Supporting that myth all about us is a most visible heritage. It is the myth of abundance, the super-colossal, the better-than-most and the orientation of our consumer nation. So plentiful was land, even Jefferson would counsel that it was better to clear forty new acres than waste time reconstituting the old. The only item which needed conserving in Jefferson's America was time for building a nation.

"May 1st, 1822. Township 17 North, Range 10 West, continuing west 22 rods from last stake, Corner Section 35. Sugar 14 inches, 48 links 03 degrees, White Oak 43 inches, 22 links 121 degrees, set stake. This section gentle, rolling. Sugar and Walnut land. Very fertile. Continuing west, 18 rods. . . ." At the very heart of our democratic society is the concept of private property. This idea of the personal ownership of land was very difficult for the Indians to comprehend. It was their notion that they belonged to the land; the land did not belong to them. So Tecumseh would cry at Harrison, "What do you mean by "white father?" "The sun is my father. The earth is my mother." We believe most assuredly that the land belongs to us, and in the twentieth century, as a species, that the earth belongs to us. In so believing, knowing it or not, we reject again the precept of our garden myth, as in that myth, Adam rejected the restraint required for continuing occupancy of Eden. Dispossessed

gardeners are not the easiest people to rehabilitate. They forever mumble about green things, about involvement with the old continuum of life in its various forms. By seeing the productivity and continuity of the natural world, they think they see a promise in themselves, some secret, common to all nature, of which they are a part. We have searched a long time in Athens for a rational substitute for this emotional impact of the garden world. In a kind of twentieth century pantheism, we search for some new idea, a new synthesis, some inclusive concept, something we can measure and articulate which will unify our fragmentary awareness and make us whole. A unified field theory in physics, gestalt psychology and philosophy—in biology, reducing our knowledge of variation in the organic world to twisted ribbons of nucleic acid and reading backward through the evolution of life . . . But for the whole of our awareness no unifying principle yet exists. We cannot yet replace the Garden with Athens. The problem is that in so many aspects of our civilization we have rejected both.

Peter Blake, in his brilliantly depressing book, *God's Own Junkyard*, depicts the rejection of Athens by using two adjacent photographs. One shows the campus of the University of Virginia as it was envisioned by Jefferson. The second shows the disordered nightmare of neon signs, electric wires, marques and billboards, which is the principal landscape of almost every American city.

Our government, by lack of statute, maintains that included in our economic freedom is the right of anyone to nail together any species of outdoor advertisement from Northern Tissues to the Second Coming, so long as it isn't excessively obscene. That true obscenity *is* allowed is a moot point. And yet, our constitution clearly stipulates restraint of those freedoms which violate the life, liberty or pursuit of happiness of other citizens. That civic beauty, that some remote sense of sensitivity to the look of a landscape, that these are vital to the above pursuit is a hard case to plea in the face of our economic realities. Preoccupied with our myth of abundance, our society places a decided disadvantage on those businessmen who would practice restraint for the sake of a decent environment. Restraint for one must be restraint for all. That has a strange democratic ring to it. And yet the legislation required has been branded as creeping socialism—even galloping communism—by the outdoor advertising lobbies. And we are left with what Mencken called "a libido for ugliness," and an anti-intellectual, uglification of our countryside, with little of Athens and scarcely a remnant of the Garden. And we continue as a society, with little concerted outcry, to travel "from one inflamation of the retina to the next" (to use Blake's phrase), raising children in the ruins of the war we lost.

In the twentieth century, we are in the dilemma of being dependent upon a synthetic environment for which there is very little translated, perhaps even translatable, aesthetic value. We can write poems or symphonies about industrialized society, steel mills, highways and the Golden Gate Bridge, but we are not sure we know how to believe them. A twentieth century primitive of welded scrap metal

and bottle caps, mobiles of beer cans and sparkplugs, may tell us something about the human experience but not what in our soul we are longing to hear. We are not sure whether such art is an aesthetic stance or a diagnosis, or even a neurotic caricature. But one thing seems certain—it is authentic art—it reflects the age, and more people should take it seriously.

Over the lifetime of all of us, we have witnessed in this country, not only an acceleration in the deterioration of our total environment; we also have had to cope with the consequences of what at times has been a tragic mismanagement of a Garden far more complex and far more delicately balanced than we could possibly have imagined. The same generation has been asked to assimilate a new knowledge about man and about our relation to the world—the world left to us by Darwin and Freud. Our reaction to this knowledge may ultimately shape what is possible as remedy in our environmental crisis. There is the reinforced knowledge that clothing and roofs and walls and locked doors and black books shut out more than nature's weather. They shield us in a highly adaptive way, from the constant and paralyzing realization of the impersonal nature, even tyranny of the physical world; of its loneliness, and of our ultimate helplessness. Our so called "ecological crisis" is only superficially environmental. As pointed out by Dobzhansky and by Lynn White, for western man it is inevitably a crisis in belief. Anthropologists tell us that systems of morality, some form of religious ethics is common to all human groupings. It matters not very much, they tell us, what exactly is the premise for the ethical system. A diversity of beliefs and notions of supreme supernatural authority in various parts of the world at various times, have given shape to the human social order; served to an adaptive advantage as an internal cohesive factor for developing civilizations. Our Judeo-Christian ethos, as it evolved, was uniquely suited to those cultures of manipulative man. The ability to perceive causal relationships and the vigor and temperament *to* manipulate the environment was rigorously selected for at the ends of the Pleistocene summers. The religious ethos attending social evolution in the north temperate zone (a zone nearer the old world civilizations then than it is today), was one which had to accommodate this evolutionary product. One cannot cut down sacred groves for firewood or to build houses or ships if the trees are the home of a god. A first requirement was to take God out of hostile nature and put him in the sky, in heaven—actually any place conveniently out of the way. With nothing sacred left in nature, the natural world, as then distinguishable from the *super*natural, became once again a collection of things, things to be manipulated to man's advantage, "to conquer and subdue, . . . to have dominion over" indeed, put there for that purpose. This rejection of the sacredness of nature, is our ultimate rejection of the Garden Myth and was the beginning of the assumption of the Myth of Athens.

All this has not gone without its critics. At one extreme is the less than happy view of man as a disease of nature, likening his

civilization, his unprecedented population growth to a slow malignancy that is wrecking first one system then another and will soon render dysfunctional whatever is the ecosystemic equivalent of say—the liver, in his supra-organism, the earth. This cheerful but steadily growing minority grades into another group which recognizes that there are simply superior and inferior people. This group quickly affiliates itself with the former by pointing out that the chief avocation of the latter is evidently the world wide dissemination of cigarette wrappers, beer cans and forest fires. Then too, there is the straight-sighted, economic survivalist (some say—surrealist) who admonishes—"just keep the dollar strong—a viable economy is all that is needed. It will find the answers, remember technology—let things grow—have some faith in evolution—that's what I always say'." Many laymen believe that things just inevitably evolve in an upward spiral of ever-increasing, ever-improving progress. Why think otherwise? Why should a biologist remind anyone that for individual species, things can, in fact, evolve from bad to worse to terrible to extinction—the ecosystems of the world being not much the worse for it. Somewhere there has to develop an abnormal rationality, an abnormal selflessness;—men who will consider, listen, who will weigh short term gains against long run losses and who will construct protective and remedial legislation and defend it into law.

Daniel McKinley, writing in Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, recently said this: "Perhaps neither in man nor in non-man are there enough sign posts for all the future, but in the unhumanized landscape lies a certain excellence, both economic and aesthetic." McKinley goes on to make clear that he and a growing number of citizens, including scientists, does not intend to lose these landscapes for lack of funds or for lack of effort in attempt to save them, or to surrender them thoughtlessly to empty verbalisms about national income efficiencies or to industries or agencies, private or public, which destroy these landscapes needlessly and then try to make their deeds invisible behind a host of conservation publications and advertising copy.

To many people it may seem beside the fact in a century of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, of Aldo Leopold and Hugh Bennet, of "Ding" Darling and Paul Sears, the Roosevelts and all that federal money and state parks and Departments of Natural Resources, to be overly concerned about conservation or about the preservation of natural areas. But after all of the mistakes and hard lessons, our sense of preservation today is still tragically uncertain. One underlying reason for this, as Udall points out in *The Quiet Crisis* (which has become noiser than anticipated) is that too many of us lack roots in any one part of the American earth. No matter how worldly we become, emotional attachments are provincial, whether a street corner from childhood, or a remembered woods or river. But the dynamics of our age breeds in us as never before that great expectation that after this brief interlude, over the next ridge, into the next decade—ah, *there* would be the world, and we would be prepared and

knowing. It is the "opening door" idea of growing up. As individuals and as a nation we have known it. But the older we become as individuals, the more we come to realize that the world is here, where we are now. And if we are to be involved, with beauty, in our lives or in our landscapes, it must begin with our immediate environment. Surely, in our lifetime, we must confirm in law and in the attitude of our individual lives, a more genuine land ethic; realize a balance between private and public domain with more in sight than payrolls and profit. For as our population increases in a land area that remains constant, more and more people will be brought together in dispute over why and how land is to be used—industry, highways, recreation, housing, reservoirs and natural areas.

From the beginning, like all animals, we Americans have required two fundamental things in our environment—productivity and protection. It is no longer true that our answers are the envy of the world, for we have created cities few people want to live in, and we have left lands cut to pieces by expedience and greed. Earlier generations had the ingenuity, the will and civic energy to take this continent apart, mile by mile; to bend it into more predictable forms of productivity, to create our myth of abundance and to fashion from it a surviving freedom. It is within the means of our generation to put our civic landscape together again; to acknowledge our dual dependence on the civic *and* the natural; to see the needed mosaic; to teach it from kindergarten onward, to the next generation; to build Athens, but surrounded by the Garden. We *have* the knowledge, the resource and perhaps at last the determination to make of the human environment whatever we will. The freedom of our society to make that choice has been purchased at an incredible cost of lives and treasure.

The American poet, e. e. cummings once wrote, "always the more beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question." Over the years we have had countless men who have asked such a question. And as Earth Day may testify, the coming generation is going to demand the answer.