

Un Poète Maudit:

Stanley Cavell and the Environmental Debate

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O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does the nature live:
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth —
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life the element!

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *Dejection: An Ode*

Images of landscapes and encounters with the natural world feature prominently throughout Stanley Cavell's texts — so much so that Coleridge's romantic visions of the natural environment (the cold, icy region through which the Mariner's ship drifts) represent one of the cornerstones of Cavell's understanding of "romanticism as working out a crisis of knowledge,"¹ and "skepticism [as] what romantic writers are locked in struggle against."² Indeed, skepticism as an interpretation of "metaphysical finitude" as "an intellectual lack"³ is seen by Cavell as something that has to be overcome

1. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1988), 52.

2. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8.

3. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 263.

(and not, say, refuted); and this overcoming, at least when it comes to the external world skepticism, is envisioned as the “acceptance” of the world, or even as “the idea of a romance with the world.”⁴ The “world” romantic writers have in mind is, of course, the natural world, for we should “Let Nature be [our] teacher.”⁵ It seems, then, that overcoming of skepticism is inextricably bound up with accepting the natural world and its “gift of life.”⁶

However, if accepting the world could be a right step towards the overcoming of skepticism, then failing to do so may mean something close to Othello’s killing of Desdemona, or the Mariner’s killing of the albatross: by refusing to accept the world, we might find this world dead at our hands, and the consequences of skeptical doubts could lead to “the death of nature.”⁷ This point, explored in the first part of present essay, might seem obvious to readers of Cavell; however, as I try to show in the last part of the paper, the idea that the human attitude towards the natural world is characterized by the human condition, by the fact that the modern subject may avoid acknowledging, or accepting, the other (be it other human being, or other forms of life, or nature, or external world as such), is largely obnubilated in contemporary literature on environmental ethics. The reason for this negligence might be seen in something Cora Diamond, following Cavell, calls “deflection”, a specific intellectual maneuver often present in academic mode of philosophical discussion, where encountered difficulty of reality is transformed into discussion of a moral issue,⁸ where “philosophy in the academic mode [...] avoids what is really at issue in its engagements with skepticism.”⁹

One of the most important consequences for environmental ethical debate that follows from this analysis is its undermining of the idea largely present in environmental philosophy: the idea that humans should try to merge with the natural world in the sense of Arne Naess’s concept of Self-realization which is understood “as a

4. Russell Brian Goodman, *American Philosophy and the American Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

5. And “quit [y]our books,” as Wordsworth advises us in *The Tables Turned*, for they are “dull and endless strife.”

6. Cavell, *Quest*, 61.

7. *Ibid.*, 60.

8. Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, ed. Cary Wolfe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 59.

9. John McDowell, “Comment on Stanley Cavell’s ‘Companionable Thinking’,” in *ibid.*, 138.

term for the widening and deepening of your self so that it embraces all life forms.”¹⁰ I’m arguing that such desires can be seen as analogous to the Mariner’s, or Othello’s, desire, and that their consequences can be similarly tragic for humans as well as the natural world.

I. Lost Souls

When talking about Cavell and environmental thought one would, perhaps, first think of his essay that appeared as a part of *Philosophy and Animal Life*, a collection of papers written by various authors as a response to Cora Diamond’s text “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” reprinted in the collection. The reason why the “Companionable Thinking” essay might first spring to mind is because of its engagement with, broadly speaking, animal ethics and the question of vegetarianism, and thus with issues that seemingly resemble the environmental problematic. However, as John McDowell points out, “Cavell’s response does not do justice to the wonderful way Diamond has found to cast light on Cavellian themes.”¹¹ Thus when one considers Cavell’s frequent references to nature and nature metaphors in authors like Coleridge, a somewhat different platform begins to offer itself for construction, or reconstruction, of Cavellian environmental thought, based on texts that at a first glance do not seem connected with the environmental problematic at all.

I already pointed out that specific natural vistas play an important role in understanding skepticism lived by a romantic hero. Indeed, Cavell starts his Berkeley lecture “Texts of Recovery”, the lecture in which he talks about *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* in connection with Kantian philosophy at some length, with a curious interpretation of the Mariner’s excursion into the icy southern ocean:

10. Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” in *The Ecology of Wisdom. Writings by Arne Naess*, ed. Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 92.

11. McDowell, “Comment,” 128. McDowell thinks that Cavell misses crucial point in Diamond’s paper: “The role of Coetzee’s Costello in Diamond’s paper is not to raise the question whether Costello’s unhinging perception is a perception of how things indeed are — that is, whether meat eating is what she thinks she sees it to be [...]. The role of Coetzee’s Costello for Diamond is rather to provide an analogue for the unhinging perceptions of separation and finitude that, according to Cavell himself, constitute the real point of philosophical skepticism” (137-38). I agree with McDowell on this point.

In particular, when Coleridge's "prose gloss" beside the poem speaks of the Mariner's ship drifting across the line and of its being guided back toward the line, I took the line in question to be (among other things, no doubt) the line implied in the *Critique* "below" which or "beyond" which knowledge cannot penetrate.¹²

The "line," according to Coleridge's gloss, delineates the region of "good wind and fair weather" from "[t]he land of ice, and of fearful sounds where no living thing was to be seen," and with this romantic move the Kantian abstract distinction becomes clothed in vivid environmental imagery. In Cavell's interpretation, this crossing of the line is, in fact, more fundamental than the actual Mariner's act of killing the albatross which can be seen as derivative of the transgression, a consequence of the overstepping of boundaries of sensible human knowledge. With his understanding of romantic writers as authors that are "locked in struggle against skepticism,"¹³ and in understanding their project as stemming from dissatisfaction with philosophical (Kantian) skepticism,¹⁴ Cavell also claims that for Coleridge the region beyond the line *can* be experienced, but that this region has a "definite, call it a frozen, structure."¹⁵ However, the question as of why precisely the Mariner actually pierces the albatross with the arrow persists.

In tracking the motive of this "perverse" (and thus seemingly unmotivated) killing, Cavell turns to his well-explored idea of the modern subject's effort to *deny* burdensome pieces of knowledge, the effort to repress the uncanny fact of one's existence. This idea, the idea that links his writings to psychoanalytic explorations, underlies several Cavellian interpretations of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and many other authors which Cavell finds challenging. In *The Rhyme* the motive is thus seen in "the

12. Cavell, *Quest*, 50.

13. Cavell, *Disowning*, 8.

14. When it comes to Kantian "victory" over skepticism, Cavell says that "one will sometimes feel, Thanks for nothing" (*Quest*, 53). This is because Kantian philosophy leaves the *Ding-an-sich* unknown, and unknowable. Romanticism thus expresses "a disappointment with the Kantian settlement with skepticism" and tries to reclaim "a human relationship to things, *things in themselves*" — Joshua Wilner, "Communicating With Objects. Romanticism, Skepticism, and 'The Specter of Animism' in Cavell and Wordsworth," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (London: Continuum, 2011), 153. And so the abovementioned "clothing" of abstract philosophical distinction in natural imagery can, perhaps, be understood as a romantic (more "humane") redefinition of the issue.

15. Cavell, *Quest*, 50.

denial of some claim upon him [the Mariner],”¹⁶ and the moral of the poem is understood — somewhat analogously to *King Lear* — as the ability of letting “yourself *be loved* by all things both great and small.”¹⁷ In this sense the killing of the bird can be thought of as “the human denial of the conditions of humanity,”¹⁸ as the act resulting from a desire:

[A]t once to silence the bird’s claim upon him [the Mariner] [is] to establish a connection with it closer, as it were, than his caring for it: a connection beyond the force of his human responsibilities, whether conventional or personal, either of which can seem arbitrary. In dreaming his solution, to pierce it with his arrow, he split off the knowledge that the consequences of his act would be the death of nature, this piece of nature.¹⁹

This desire brings the Mariner close to Othello and his torments, for Othello is a tragic hero that kills in order to stave off knowledge regarding his human finite existence. As Cavell sees the play, Othello’s sacrifice, his killing of Desdemona, is a consequence of Othello’s inability to “forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain’s captain.”²⁰

Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial. According to me further, his professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a terrible doubt covering yet more terrible certainty, an unstable certainty. But then this is what I have throughout kept arriving at as

16. Cavell, *Quest*, 56.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 57. It is worth noting here that for Cavell there is nothing more human than trying to surpass one’s humanity: “Cavell’s oft-repeated point [is] that there is in fact nothing more human than the desire to transcend the human (to become, even, somehow inhuman or post-human” — Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, “Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, ed. Eldridge and Rhie (London: Continuum, 2011), 5.

19. *Ibid.*, 60.

20. Cavell, *Disowning*, 136.

the cause of skepticism — the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle.²¹

But there is more to Othello's and the Mariner's likeness than just their common desire to remove the object — or, for that matter, the independent, separate *subject* — that heralds their ontological incompleteness: both, the play as well as the poem, are relevant for Cavell in his discussion of the issue of *animism*. While talking about *Othello*, Cavell finds a curious connection between doubt, jealousy, and animism. If jealousy makes “the object of suspicion uncomfortably animate”, then “the shift of philosophical balance seems [...] to uncover the animism, so to speak, in the philosophical idea of doubt itself.”²² But if Othello has to demand a “de-animation” of Desdemona, “imagining her incapable of response” by turning her into *stone*, then romanticism demands “a certain animation of the material object,”²³ or perhaps its re-animation.²⁴ Indeed, Cavell sees *The Rime* as one of the attempts of “bringing the world back, as to life,”²⁵ and thus animism finally proves to be of central importance in understanding Coleridge's poem as well.

However, this reclaiming of the world from the hands of Kantian philosophy (which left it dead and alien to us by limiting our experience to appearances, thereby denying us access to the thing-in-itself, and thus to meaningfulness and value), or its re-animation, cannot happen through, say, an external intervention: “For an intellect such as Coleridge's, for which objects are now dead, they will not be enlivened by an infusion of some kind of animation from outside.”²⁶ On the contrary, as Russell B. Goodman notes, “[t]he solution Coleridge offers in the poem is not an external influx

21. Cavell, *Disowning*, 138.

22. *Ibid.*, 7. The idea of animism latently present in philosophical doubt stems from the fact that philosophers put the world (say an object they investigate, like Descartes' wax) in the position of a speaker: “In turning the concept of belief to name our immediate or absolute relation to the world, say our absolute intimacy, a relation no human other *could* either confirm or compromise, the philosopher turns the world into, or puts it in the position of, a speaker, lodging its claims upon us, claims to which, as it turns out, the philosopher cannot listen” (*ibid.*, 7-8).

23. Cf. Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.

24. Perhaps “re-animation” is a word more appropriate here, since romanticism actually wants to bring “the world *back* to life” (Cavell, *Disowning*, 8, my emphasis). In other words, the philosopher couldn't have killed the thing-in-itself if it hadn't been alive first. In this sense the romantic project can be understood as a specific “undoing” of philosophy.

25. Cavell, *Quest*, 53.

26. *Ibid.*, 54.

of grace but an outflow from the heart of the Mariner.”²⁷ This last observation is crucial: for if this is a sound description of state of affairs, then it must follow that without this outflow from the Mariner’s heart the world will be dead; the Mariner himself will then be death to it. Indeed, without light, glory, and fair luminous cloud issuing from our souls, the world will be inanimate and cold, as Coleridge will say in his other great poem, the *Dejection*.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of these observations which offer us an understanding of why the Mariner’s ocean froze, and why Desdemona was turned into stone by Othello. But what I want to draw attention to next is the fact that whereas Desdemona is turned into stone metaphorically in Shakespeare’s play, the natural world was turned to stone more literally in modern period of Western history. In fact, I’m arguing that, for instance, Cartesian treatment of animals can be seen as structurally similar to Othello’s turning of Desdemona into stone, and the Mariner’s seemingly frivolous killing of the albatross. This last observation is based on the fact that Descartes denies the existence of animal souls — which is actually somewhat unusual for his time²⁸ — without providing any clear, observable reasons as to why animals, compared to humans, should be *so* different. Here is what he says about the distinction between humans and animals:

And the same may be observed in animals. For although they lack reason, and perhaps even thought, all the movements of the spirits and of the gland which produce passions in us are nevertheless present in them too, though in them they serve to maintain and strengthen only the movements of the nerves and the muscles which usually accompany the passions and not, as in us, the passions themselves.²⁹

Indeed, it seems that what Cavell says about the distinction between body and soul can easily be said also about the distinction between animals and humans in Descartes: “the one [is] characterized in opposition to the other, each essentially what the

27. Goodman, *American*, 12.

28. See Harrison’s superb paper on “The Virtues of Animals in Seventeenth-Century Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59:3 (1998): 463-84.

29. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 348.

other is not.”³⁰ Cartesian distinction between animals and humans, then, turns on nothing but — as Irigarayan scholars would call it — “pure negation.” The reason for Descartes’s denial thus has to be meta-*physical*. In fact, it seems that it is foremost existential. For in the *Discourse* Descartes says that imagining “beasts” having soul is an offence which is second only to denying the existence of God, for if their nature is the same as ours, then “after this present life we have nothing to fear or to hope for any more than flies and ants.”³¹ And so Descartes has to deny the existence of animal souls in order to save the eternal existence of his own; he has to, so to speak, kill them, turn them into soulless matter, in order to rescue meaningfulness of his own existence.

Now, if one bears in mind the interconnection of doubt and jealousy, then one could venture a hypothesis that Cartesian denial of animal consciousness exhibits a special form of envy; of envy that cannot bear the fact of separate (animal) existence, on a par with Othello’s jealousy, and the Mariner’s “perversity.” I’m bracketing the adjective “animal”, for it is well known that Descartes doesn’t stop here: indeed, after animal souls came all other souls, including human, and thus Cartesian doubt finally starts to envelop everything except for itself — the doubting subject. Or, as Harrison has observed:

Somewhat ironically, the Cartesian doctrine of the beast-machine was eventually to lead to the postulation of the man-machine — an entity in which mechanical operations were deemed sufficient to explain the phenomena of consciousness.³²

It is curious, though, that one would have to deny somebody’s soul in order to save his own in the first place; for Descartes could have embraced something like a Pythagorean doctrine, or something like *apocatastasis*, universal salvation, where everything would be animated and, for that matter, also redeemed. This, again, leads one to venture a conclusion that the death of Cartesian nature stems not from

30. Cavell, *Disowning*, 127.

31. Descartes, *Passions*, 141.

32. Harrison, “Virtues,” 484. Although we may actually say that the *reverse* is true, and that the non-existence of animal souls is in fact a consequence of doubt in — or jealousy of — all souls, separate from the mediating subject, be they human or animal.

its misfortune, or some sort of its malady, a lack, but from Descartes's own soul. Or, as Emerson will put it in the final chapter of his *Nature*, alluding to the common phrase: "The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye."³³

While one cannot simply generalize and take the Cartesian doctrine of nature-machine as being representative of modern Western attitudes towards the natural world *in toto*, it still holds true that the idea of the universe as more or less finely tuned clockwork predominate in western science (Newton), economics, and politics ("green capitalism", for instance). But leaving this debate aside, I would next like to briefly expose another Cavellian idea, the idea that links the Mariner to the poet. What I have in mind is the idea of a "fear of inexpressiveness", according to which the Mariner can be seen as the *poète maudit*, a radical "incommunicado," whose suffering cannot be communicated to others and who seems to dwell in a state of radical incomprehensibility. Cavell connects this fear with the human effort to escape the human, and he does this by exposing a desire that underlies the fantasy of Wittgenstein's "private language", i.e., the desire that the connection between my knowledge of things and things themselves should occur outside language games, without my concession to the ways we talk, or "apart from my agreements."³⁴ For Cavell, "the dissatisfaction with one's human powers of expression produces a sense that words, to reveal the world, must carry more deeply than our agreements or attunements in criteria will negotiate."³⁵ He goes on to say that

[h]ow we first deprive words of their communal possession and then magically and fearfully attempt by ourselves to overcome this deprivation of ourselves by ourselves, is a way of telling the story of skepticism I tell in *The Claim of Reason*.³⁶

33. It is true, of course, that at the end Descartes manages to save the souls of other human beings by invoking God. However, animals are never redeemed, and nature remains an automaton; even with God on stage, some of the initial Cartesian "jealousy" still remains. One could say that even the existence of a supreme omnipotent and benevolent being is incapable of rescuing such tiny beings as flies and ants from eternal darkness.

34. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 352.

35. Cavell, *Quest*, 60.

36. *Ibid.*

But what is of special importance is the fact that by refusing my concession to public criteria of language I also deny my connection with community, my “natural” social bond. In this light, then, the Mariner’s affinity with not only the poet, but also an advocate of private language, becomes explicit. Indeed, the interconnection between the act of the acceptance of “the Earth” and the corresponding — if one may call it so — “speech act,” a “voice” sent out from the soul, is nowhere more apparent than in one of the most dramatic parts of Coleridge’s *Dejection*, the ode that deals precisely with the problem of inexpressiveness, cited at the beginning of this essay. What the ode can thus be understood as conveying is, among other things, the sense that it is up to my own soul to issue forth a ray of light and a voice which envelops the earth and gives birth to the soul. The light and voice thus seem to be not only coterminous (in the way the natural social bond and the language are), but also up to me. However, if the light and voice depend on me, then their *absence* must depend on me as well. This seems to be a crucial remark, and I will try to briefly revisit it in the next section.

II. Murderous Love

“Could our relation with the world be as murderous as Othello’s is with Desdemona?” asks Russell B. Goodman in his monograph on *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*, and, few pages on, answers affirmatively that if “Romanticism [...] is correct, we live a kind of skepticism not just concerning other minds but also concerning the world.”³⁷ While this answer brings to the fore the question of (a)symmetry between other-minds skepticism and external-world skepticism, an issue often present in Cavellian debate (and an issue I’m leaving aside here for the sake of brevity), it also points to the fact that the “acceptance” of the world — analogous to the “acknowledgment” of other minds — is “our problem in a deep sense”, and thus “[t]he responsibility is ours, and the solution is an act or an attitude of our own.”³⁸

Goodman finds one of the most interesting, and appropriate, answers to the problem of the relationship of self and world in Wordsworth’s idea of marriage with

37. Goodman, *American*, 10, 13.

38. *Ibid.*, 13.

the world in his *Recluse*, where both partners remain separate while wedded: “This structure, so common in Romantic writing, expresses the closeness of the mind-world relationship, the ‘fitness’ of the partners for each other. But it acknowledges their separateness as well.”³⁹

A similar idea, albeit coming from an altogether different tradition, is present also in Luce Irigaray’s late writings, where natural beings (in her case the animals) are to be respected as *others* to humans if a proper relationship between humans and the natural world is to be achieved:

These familiars of our existence [the animals] inhabit another world, a world that I do not know [...]. To make them simple objects of study is not appropriate anymore than to make them partners of the universe they do not share.⁴⁰

The final point I want to make in this essay, the point that ties Cavellian observations to the debate in environmental ethics, is that by neglecting the fact of the separate existence of the natural world and all the beings it harbors, we end up either in tragic denial and impoverishment of non-human life (like Descartes), or in fanatic “love” towards the natural world which reduces it to an anthropomorphic terrain, presumably suited for human redemption. This later is, quite explicitly, the case in Arne Naess’s philosophy, the philosophy of “Deep Ecology,” a highly influential strand in environmentalism.

For Naess, as we have seen in the introductory passage of the present essay, the final goal of human striving should be something like enveloping “all life forms” by one’s Self. According to Naess, this process, also called “Self-realization,” should be motivated by nothing else but “egoism,” although an “extended” version of it, which covers interests of all beings and thus aligns my desires with those of others. Critics like Rosi Braidotti and Val Plumwood were fast to point out that such a maneuver doesn’t really take us far; on the contrary, it shows itself to be in conflict with what environmental ethics should, in the first place, be about:

39. Goodman, *American*, 15.

40. Luce Irigaray, “Animal Compassion,” in *Animal Philosophy*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (London: Continuum, 2008), 195.

The problem with this position is that in spite of and in flagrant contradiction to its explicitly stated aims, deep ecology promotes full-scale humanization of the environment. Naess's deep ecology does not question the structures of possessive egoism and self-interest, but merely expands them to include non-human interests. What we end up with, therefore, is a quantitative expansion of liberal individualism, but individualism nonetheless. The human dimension here equates with the most classical anthropocentrism.⁴¹

Similarly, Plumwood argues that dominant forms of deep ecology

choose for their core concept of analysis the notion of identification, understood as an individual psychic act, yielding a theory which emphasizes transformation and ignores social structure [...]. A similarly apolitical understanding is given to its core concept of ecological selfhood [...]. The result is a psychology of incorporation, not a psychology of mutuality.⁴²

However, what one could add to these criticisms from Cavellian perspective is a reflection on the motive of such a process: if Othello and the Mariner kill their respected objects heralding their separate, finite existence, then the attempts to merge with the natural world exhibits similar jealousy on a part of a seemingly benevolent, and presumably non-violent, environmentalist. Even though it may seem that Deep Ecology's attempts are analogous to the Mariner's reanimation of the world — since both acknowledge the existence of animated beings — the underlying logic of the Mariner's romanticism and Naess's "Self-realization" is substantially different: whereas the first contemplates the water-snakes in their element as they are, the second wants to incorporate the existence of separate beings. This Naessian inclination, then, corresponds precisely with the attitude that triggered the Mariner's tragedy.

The difference between the romance with the world and an attempt at the unification of the self and world can also result in differing emotions: in the romantic metaphor of the Albatross falling from the Mariner's neck one can sense a relief, a

41. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge: Polity), 116.

42. Val Plumwood, "The Ecopolitics Debate and the Politics of Nature," in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. Karren J. Warren (London: Routledge, 1994), 71.

feeling of ease and gratitude (“The self same moment I could pray”), whereas the desire to unify with the universe seems to exhibit certain restlessness, perhaps even craving. In this light the process of “self-realization” can be seen as entailing specific violence that tries to erase separateness of other creatures and, consequently, the fact of our own finite existence, by clothing this bothersome emotion in love and redemptive lingo. Thus what on the surface appears as a hand, offered to the cosmos, ends up as a proclamation, declaring: “L’univers, c’est moi!”⁴³

Attempts to come as close as possible to the unspoiled nature have not only shabby theoretical consequences; they can also result in quite grave interventions in the natural world. A practical example that has to do with wildlife watching provides a good illustration, which is, tellingly, connected with popular religious discourse, the discourse that seemingly resembles Wordsworth’s in his abovementioned *Recluse* (where “Paradise and groves Elysian” become, when one is “wedded to his goodly universe”, “a simple produce of the common day”); however, in reality this discourse couldn’t be further away from the poet’s sentiment, because in the poet the universe is not appropriated in such an aggressive manner as here, where seeing “wild” gorillas

was an unforgettable moment. Somehow the gorilla symbolized what is left of the wilderness, of a world belonging to the animals, free and unbridled by men and materialism. To see the greatest of the great apes at close range was to see a glimpse of Eden, of the world as it once was, without computers or condominiums, schedules and the draining sense of time.⁴⁴

For what McClary actually describes are “tourist gorillas”, and Bruner comments that “[i]n both Zaire and Rwanda gorilla tourism has become such a successful multimillion dollar enterprise that efforts to expand it include domesticating additional gorilla

43. Cavell at a certain point talks explicitly about the violence towards the earth and dominance of it (in connection with Heidegger's idea), which he sees as “a competing response to, or consequence of, skepticism” (*Quest*, 172). He also says that “the loss of presentness (to and of the world) is something that the violence of skepticism deepens exactly in its desperation to correct it” (*ibid.*, 173-74). These claims — now from a somewhat different angle — again enable us to see the violence at work in, say, the idea of “Self-realization” which tries to accomplish precisely what Cavell describes: closing the gap between us and the world.

44. Janice McIlvaine McClary, quoted in Edward Bruner, *Culture on Tour* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 37.

groups.”⁴⁵ One could argue that such aggression may, perhaps, be present in common, popular, “tourist” attitudes, but that professional environmentalism, even though it might exhibit some degree of latent violent sentiment in theory, does not translate those sentiments to practice. Unfortunately, this would be wrong: Murray Bookchin, a social ecologist, thus described what David Foreman, co-founder of the radical environmental movement Earth First!, shared with Bill Devall, a renowned ecosopher and advocate of Deep Ecology:

Foreman, who exuberantly expressed his commitment to deep ecology, frankly informed Devall that “When I tell people that the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid — the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve — they think this is monstrous.”⁴⁶

The underlying motive of “murderous love” towards the natural world, exhibited in Deep Ecology literature, and described above as some form of jealousy of nature’s separate existence, is, however, largely absent from the consciousness of certain environmental philosophers. The reason for this absence can be seen in something similar to Cora Diamond’s “deflection”. Drawing from Cavell, Diamond talks about deflection in connection with Coetzee’s lectures in the following way:

[H]ere I simply want the notion of deflection, for describing what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.⁴⁷

45. *Ibid.*, 38.

46. Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” in *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy*, ed. Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 284. If we leave aside the fact that human population in Ethiopia often starved because the food produced there was transported to Europe (Ethiopia being referred to as “breadbasket of Europe”), one could, again, argue, that in this case the aggression is turned toward people, not nature; But this move seems to be in flagrant contradiction with the underlying assumption of Deep Ecology: that humans are a part of nature in the same way all other creatures are (biocentrism) — for if this were not so, then the process of Self-realization could not even begin, yet alone extend itself all over the cosmos.

47. Diamond, “Difficulty,” 57.

To put the point briefly, “deflection” occurs because the problem we encounter represents such a trauma in our ordinary way of life that it threatens to “shoulder us out of life”. And so one approach of dealing with this trauma is to start talking about it in terms of academic moral discourse, in terms of what is, or seems to be, right and wrong. In this way the traumatic fact becomes, so to speak, tamed. Applied to environmental philosophy, “deflection” would then mean transforming lived difficulty (say our awareness of pollution, of human impact on the natural world) into a discourse about “biocentrism”, redemptive “Self-realization” (and “natural balance”, as we have seen above in Foreman). Such transpositions, however, do not only remove what is most bothersome, they also obscure their own motives and with them also the motive of our unabashed “love” towards the universe.

Conclusion: A Stone vs. a *Stone*

What I want to do in concluding this essay is to touch upon a difficulty I kept arriving at while thinking about Cavellian philosophy and the debate in environmental ethics. It is the difficulty connected with “accepting” the world versus “acknowledging” other minds. Let me describe the difficulty in the following manner, without referring to (a)symmetries between external-world and other-minds skepticism(s): if one — like Othello — fails to acknowledge another soul, then one risks turning that soul to stone; but imagine failing to accept the world... what happens? Does then one turn, say, *a stone* to — a stone? What would *that* mean?

The difficulty, of course, arises because of the fact that in “accepting” the external world we are dealing, at least in part, with inanimate entities, with objects like fields, watersheds, mountains, rocks. But inanimate matter, like automata and stones, serves precisely to define the spot in the intellectual matrix where other *animate* beings end up if we fail to acknowledge them. The difference between what is alive and what isn’t plays a crucial role in defining the fate of unacknowledged minds. In other words, the difference between things and beings is “*the difference!*”⁴⁸ Or, as Wittgenstein put it somewhat differently: “Could anyone imagine a stone’s having

48. Cavell, *Claim*, 468 (exclamation mark and italics appear in the original).

consciousness? And if anyone can do so — why should that not merely prove that such image-mongery is of no interest to us?”⁴⁹

An intuition of how to tackle this riddle — how to make sense of “accepting” the world in these terms — came to me, perhaps unsurprisingly, while rereading Emerson’s *Nature*. There, in his chapter on “Idealism”, Emerson says that “the poet animates nature with his own thoughts,”⁵⁰ and that thereby he “invests dust and stones with humanity.”⁵¹ It was in this moment that I started toying with a thought that “accepting” the existence of a, say, stone does not entail accepting the existence of its “soul” (whatever that might be; in whatever form), but rather accepting its existence *outside* a soul; that is, accepting its existence as independent from a consciousness (or independent from *my* consciousness). Now, in this sense a stone is not “invested with humanity” in the sense Adam is in-spired by God, from outside. Rather, a stone’s “soul” turns out to be, perhaps paradoxically, its existence independent of my soul. It’s “soul” is its separate, real existence, the fact of its “being there.”

What was just said seems to be at odds with what we read in Emerson. Indeed, in order to reconcile these views one first has to see that “investing nature with humanity” first and foremost means “accepting” its existence. But what, then, has this to do with “humanity”? The answer lies, I believe, precisely in accepting, or rejecting, this existence. And so, paradoxically again, the fact of independent existence of an inanimate other nonetheless depends on *me*, on my human (in)ability to accept this fact. If nothing else, then these thoughts offer us insight into the nature of romantic “animism”, for this animism is, of course, not a return to some prehistoric state of mind, but “the claim, that the world’s life and meaning, not only its spatiotemporal and causal structure, are made possible by humanity. Unlike the latter structures, which we have no choice but to encounter because of the automatic operation of our sensibility and understanding, the animation of the world is understood as under our control, subject in some sense to our will.”⁵²

49. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), §390.

50. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 43.

51. *Ibid.*, 42.

52. Goodman, *American*, 13.



»when Silence returns, there will also be a language«
Hölderlin, *Celebration of Peace*

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