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# Ecology and Spirit: Reflections on the CIT Seminar

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### Ecology and Spirit: Reflections on the CIT Seminar

I entered the CIT seminar in May of 2007 with some ideas about spirit and nature in American literature, and now, over a year later, I have, in the best traditions of philosophical enquiry, even more questions about how this complex relationship works. These new questions, however, have led to a significantly deeper and richer understanding of the texts I read, study, and teach, enlarging my intellectual horizons and sharpening my inquiries. My enriched scholarship has taken a number of forms, and in this report, I will briefly present three specific and important examples. In February of 2009, I will present a colloquium as part of the Common Core series with Professor Barbara Pierce from the Biology department; we will be considering the question of ecology and spirit from the perspectives of our respective disciplines. After attempting to make my new ideas fit into a section of an article on Barbara Kingsolver and modernism and discovering that the ideas were too large, I have decided that the argument works better as a chapter in a longer work, and I have submitted a book proposal to SUNY Press. Finally, in discussions with other teachers in the English Common Core, I realized that many of us, myself included, can find it difficult to incorporate the core question on the natural world into the other core questions; to many, the question does not naturally (to coin a pun) flow into the other questions, such as "What does it mean to be human?" At the request of Michelle Loris, I wrote a short essay to present some ideas about how the question of nature can be more effectively integrated with the rest of the class; my CIT scholarship helped me formulate my answers.

Before I present the fruits of my latest scholarship, I wish to explain the connections I found in the seminar discussions and consider how these topics aided me in my quest. It is

appropriate that our seminar discussions began with Augustine, particularly in light of the conundrum facing the teachers of the core classes. Augustine's confrontation of one of the largest question facing humans—what is a human?—has, of course, profound implications for the first of the core questions. As I saw it, though, this question also leads to other connections. The “me,” the personal imperative in the question of our humanity, is, in Augustine, developed in terms of “us.” The Augustinian sense of community as a reflection on the personal is a crucial point in many American texts. Thoreau begins his seminal work of American nature writing, *Walden*, with a short dissertation on the virtue of using the first person pronoun. The “I” is what he knows, so he will write using it and not hide behind a falsely modest “he.” Moreover, Thoreau uses the I as the starting point, the “hard bottom” of the pond on which he may build his philosophy of all humanity.

Augustine shows up elsewhere in American nature writing. His *vita philosophica*, the freedom to pursue ideas is a driving force in the genre, as writers from Emerson to Annie Dillard can attest. Augustine's evocative phrase, “eye of my soul,” further establishes his importance to a particular strand of nature writing. Emerson notoriously speaks ecstatically of his becoming a “transparent eyeball,” through which the currents of the Universal Being flow. For Emerson, the momentary transparency of his self allows him to reach further and achieve some sort of contact with the divine. In terms of my study, it is crucial that Emerson's moment of ecstatic awareness arrives while he is in a natural setting. Many other writers in the same tradition similarly seeks their Augustinian or Emersonian transport in nature.

The strands of American nature writing are not purely Augustinian, however, and Aquinas shows his distinctly Thomist nature in even the most Emersonian of writers. The Thomist dialectical mode of expression informs so much of the American nature writing

tradition. Thoreau, for example, resolutely searches for a rational starting point for his philosophies, a rigorously intellectual process illustrated clearly in his search for the accurate depth of Walden Pond. He rejects ignorant claims that Walden is bottomless and seeks the answer. In the process of seeking, he realizes a deeper spiritual truth.

These points of contact between Augustinian and Thomist philosophical styles seems to lead to our seminar discussion of Yves Congar, and his point that the identity of a Christian in the world is spiritual as well as bodily. For all American nature writers, this point, a dialectic of spirit and flesh, is the basis of their faith. Their contacts with the infinite often challenge their faith, as when Thoreau, in *The Maine Woods*, looks out from the top of Mount Katahdin and experiences an existential crisis. The contact may serve to strengthen or awaken faith, as happens several times to Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

The colloquium I am planning with Barbara Pierce will address these issues while considering these authors and more. We will look at the question of ecology and spirit from the perspectives of our disciplines. Frequently artists and writers take the point of view expressed in Edgar Allan Poe's "Sonnet—to Science," in which the speaker castigates science for removing the wonder from the world and ruining it for poets, driving the hamadryad from the woods. This is an all too easy point to make and is either made in ignorance, or, in the case of Poe, a curmudgeonly spirit of complaint. Many other writers, such as Puritan divine Edward Taylor, instead use their powers of observation to explore creation, and they see evidence of the transcendent in the wonders of nature. I will argue that the walking a spiritual pathway frequently leads to an ecological epiphany as well as a religious one. Augustine's notion of defining the "me" in terms of "us" is, of course, profoundly spiritual, but it is also, at its heart, a



deeply ecological point: an ecologist recognizes that all things are interconnected. In John Donne's formulation, no man is an island; we are all connected.

I recently completed an article on Barbara Kingsolver and modernism in which I argued that Kingsolver uses sentimental rhetoric—the language of human interconnection and community—to point out both the human and ecological ties that link us all. There is a tendency in modernism to separate humans from their environment, to consider us as something separate from nature; nature therefore becomes the Other. In Kingsolver's richly evocative language, the Other becomes part of us and artificial boundaries are dissolved. Originally I included a section in which I considered the religious implications of Kingsolver's narrative. I used the argument between two characters, a woman with a strong scientific bent and a man arguing for "Creation Science," to illustrate the manner in which Kingsolver's sentimental rhetoric seeks to close this gap. However, as I pointed out above, I quickly realized, as did my editors and proofreaders, that this argument, if taken to completion, would grow far too large to include. Because of this, I reluctantly cut it, but I decided to devote an entire chapter of my book project to religious language in sentimental ecology.

Finally, in a recent meeting to devise strategies to teach the English core, Literary Expressions of the Human Journey, more effectively, several confessed to being puzzled about the best way to approach the question, "what does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world?" To them, the question did not seem to have an obvious relationship to the other three core questions, and integrating the "nature question" into the rest of the class felt problematic. I had some ideas, fueled partly from my research and partly from the CIT seminar, so I spoke up. When I finished, Michelle Loris asked me to write up my thoughts to help guide the teaching of this question. My answer grew a little longer than I had originally intended:

As we discussed during our meeting this past Monday, the best way to incorporate Question #3 (what does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world?) can be puzzling, and the connections between this and the other three questions is not immediately obvious. DJ's point about the importance of *oikos* in Homer provides an excellent starting place to explore the interconnections among all four of the core questions and to incorporate a complex and interesting investigation of environmental and ecological questions into our lessons.

*Oikos*, as DJ pointed out, is Greek for household, home, or family. It is also, not coincidentally, the name of an ecology journal. The term "ecology" comes from this root, plus the suffix *logos*, meaning knowledge. Ecology is also related to the term "economics," which comes from *oikos* and *nomos*, meaning law or custom; therefore economics is the law or custom of the household (which means "home economics" is either redundant or a retronym like "acoustic guitar" or "analog watch"). Interestingly, Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who developed the modern scientific taxonomic system (e.g. *homo sapiens*), used the phrase "œconomy of nature" to refer to the manner in which different species and systems interconnected; it wasn't until 1866 that Ernst Haeckel coined the term "ecology."

Ecology is the study of the interconnection of all living and non-living things on the planet's thin biosphere. A simple example of ecological interconnection is the carbon cycle, where animals (including humans) breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, while plants absorb carbon dioxide to aid in photosynthesis and release oxygen as a byproduct. If we expand our understanding of ecology to encompass larger systems, we can easily start to see how the interconnections become increasingly complex, and, as the complexity increases, the effects become more visible.

The difficulty of incorporating the natural world question into the core probably arises from the standard western conception of nature as something "out there." Although Enlightenment rationalism led to many great accomplishments, one of the most dangerous (in my eyes) side effects is the modern nature schism, in which humans are valued as being apart from rather than a part of nature. Nature thus has become the Other, alienated from humans and human concerns. To give you one little example of this from my own current research, let me turn for a moment to Rachel Carson's groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring*. When this was first published in serial form in *The New Yorker* in 1962, thousands of outraged letters flooded the editors' offices. One writer insisted that we "can live without birds and animals, but, as the current market slump shows, we cannot live without business." Here, in glaringly obvious logical fallacies, is the schism. Nature is something separate from us and not really needed, a faulty point that ignores the simple fact that humans are products of nature.

One good place to start rebuilding connections between nature and humans might be John Donne's *Meditation XVII*. He says:

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body

whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. There was a contention as far as a suit (in which both piety and dignity, religion and estimation, were mingled), which of the religious orders should ring to prayers first in the morning; and it was determined, that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignity of this bell that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours as well as his, whose indeed it is. The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God. Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee. Neither can we call this a begging of misery, or a borrowing of misery, as though we were not miserable enough of ourselves, but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon us the misery of our neighbours. Truly it were an excusable covetousness if we did, for affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion, or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current money, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. Another man may be sick too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell, that tells me of his affliction, digs out and applies that gold to me: if by this consideration of another's danger I take mine own into contemplation, and so secure myself, by making my recourse to my God, who is our only security.

Donne's famous lines have long been used to emphasize a sort of "brotherhood of man," where we are forced to become acutely aware of the social and spiritual interconnections we share with each other. We can easily expand Donne's "ecological" vision to include the natural world. When we destroy a part of nature, we are destroying



a part of ourselves. More to the point, when we do something like pollute a river, we are sickening our brothers and sisters downstream. Ask not whom the PCBs poison; they poison thee. Thus, Donne's ethical position is very consistent with a contemporary ecological ethic.

How can we make this work in the classroom? With my last example, we can easily make connections to the other core questions. What does it mean to be human? Being human at least partly means being an animal and subject to the same laws of nature as other animals: we live and breathe, we breed, we eat, we sicken and die. It also means that we have the power to alter our environment in ways that other animals cannot, and to quote Spiderman, with this great power comes great responsibility. What does it mean to forge a more just society for the common good? Do our actions relating to the environment contribute to the common good? Or, as I suspect is the case, do they more often detract from the common good? There is a very strong social justice component to a great deal of modern environmentalism, and it has become widely known that the price of environmental degradation falls most heavily on the poorest in all societies. It's no coincidence that the worst air quality in New York City is in the South Bronx, which is also the poorest part of the city.

As Donne's meditation pointed out, one of the things that makes the bell toll for all of us is that the church is "Catholic [and] universal." Therefore, there is a spiritual component to the things that connect us. Our common humanity is invested in our common spirituality, or, as President Cernera likes to put it, we are all sons and daughters of a loving god. A good deal of nature writing in the last few centuries has had a strong spiritual component, and we need look no further than America's own Puritan forebears to see this. If god created all of nature, then perhaps we can seek the divine in the natural world. Edward Taylor's poem, "Upon a Wasp Chilled With Cold," illustrates this seeking the divine in the smallest parts of nature. Even more to the point, in Jonathan Edwards's personal narrative, he recounts a time he was walking in his father's pasture and felt an overwhelming sense of the sweetness of the divine. His ecstatic connection with his god is echoed in Ralph Waldo Emerson's notorious "transparent eyeball" passage, where he feels opened up to the universal currents and becomes part and particle of god while walking across a bare common. Over a century later, Annie Dillard, writing in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, stops at a gas station to get some coffee and gas. While there, she sits on a curb and pats the gas station worker's beagle puppy. Without warning, while staring off at the forest-covered mountains, she feels an Emersonian transcendental connection to some larger, greater force.

The point of all of these examples is that writers have long sought the divine in nature, and many of their ecstatic visions come to them when in the natural world. The mystic tradition tells us that when we need to seek spiritual truths, we need to do so at a distance from the distractions of the human mediated world. By getting in touch with our natural selves we get in touch with our divine selves. If we wish to connect this to a biblical passage in classes, we can easily turn to Jesus' experience of 40 days in the wilderness. Though he encounters Satan there as a figure of temptation, the wilderness experience serves to strengthen his resolve to become the redeeming sacrifice for all humans.

There is, of course, a very dark side to this seeking in nature. Several of us are planning to use *Into the Wild* as our question #3 text. Jon Krakauer follows the life of



Chris McCandless, aka Alexander Supertramp, as the young man divests himself of most of his earthly goods and sets out on a wilderness odyssey that ultimately ends in his death. McCandless grew up in a solid middle-class family, but he was tormented by many things, including his troubled relationship with his parents and his conception of his place in the world. Krakauer uses the story of the young man as a way to investigate his own escape to nature and the near-death experiences he had as a young and reckless mountain climber. By making the personal connection to his subject's biography, Krakauer exposes an important theme in nature writing: the quest for meaning and peace in a troubled world. There are precedents for this. John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club and writer, had a very difficult upbringing, with his father, a very strictly religious man (a member of an extreme reform movement within the Church of Scotland), punishing him severely whenever he stepped out of line. Muir enrolled in "the university of the wilderness" partly as a way to escape the confines of his father's narrow beliefs. Other nature writers were similarly social misfits who seemed to seek in nature a connection that they failed to make in their human interactions. They sought redemption and spiritual release in nature.

This is, of course, a very short and not at all comprehensive note on the core questions as they relate to nature. Because I've already rambled on for nearly 2200 words, I'll stop now, but if anyone wants to discuss this more, I would be happy to do so.