

Climbing the Crests

John Elder

ADE Bulletin 117 (Fall 1997), pp. 27–30

ISSN: 0001-0898

CrossRef DOI: 10.1632/ade.117.27

Copyright © 1997 by The Association of Departments of English

All material published by the The Association of Departments of English in any medium is protected by copyright. Users may link to the ADE Web page freely and may quote from ADE publications as allowed by the doctrine of fair use. Written permission is required for any other reproduction of material from any ADE publication.

Send requests for permission to reprint material to the ADE permissions manager by mail (26 Broadway, New York, NY 10004-1789), e-mail (permissions@mla.org), or fax (646 458-0030).

Climbing the Crests

JOHN ELDER

WE HAVE entered an era of environmental crisis in which we must rethink our approach to education. I would like to share my perspective on this crisis and its implications and to describe my own direction as one who has begun to teach both in an English department and in an environmental studies program. My intention is testimonial, not prescriptive. Since some readers may have read the 1995 article "The Greening of the Humanities" in the *New York Times Magazine* (Parini), I want also to frame these brief remarks with a disclaimer. I have never advocated the abolition of English departments per se. My actual position, as repeated in a follow-up letter the *Magazine* did not publish, was that we need to move beyond separate departments and disciplines as we have understood them over the past century.

"For the Children," a poem from Gary Snyder's Pulitzer-Prize-winning collection *Turtle Island*, evokes the challenges facing human beings in our day:

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light

Snyder's first stanza describes an exponential curve, the steeply rising slope of an era in which human population, consumption of fossil fuels, extinction of species, and accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere all go "up, / up, as we all go down." Imagine two dotted lines

that parallel the x and y axes of a graph. The vertical one is the boundary an exponential curve approaches ever more closely but never touches. This upward thrust charts the politician's dream of endless growth—a rocket blasting through gravity to glide forever along its own triumphant vector. But there is another dotted line on this graph as well, a horizontal one that represents the earth's carrying capacity.

When I was discussing the concept of carrying capacity with a student last semester, I learned the word *catastrophian*. This term is applied by certain economists to all who believe the earth does in fact have a limited carrying capacity. Those who use such language often refer to themselves as *cornucopians*. They assert that no particular natural resource can be totally exhausted. Increasing scarcity brings rising prices, which in turn lead consumers to choose cheaper, alternative commodities. What this blithe confidence does not address, however, is where we will find a cheaper, alternative planet.

A 1994 article in the journal *Population and Environment* entitled "Natural Resources and an Optimum Human Population" spells out the rapid spiral into poverty that has already resulted from population increases. Accompanying this human misery is a drastic reduction in biodiversity worldwide. The United States population, whose annual growth rate is 1.1%, is expected to double, to over half a billion, within sixty-three years. The world population, now approaching six billion and increasing at the rate of 1.7% annually, will likely double within forty-one years. Even China, the world's most populous nation and one with an official policy of one child per family, continues to grow at 1.4% a year. I challenge self-styled cornucopians to explain how either a decent living situation for human beings or a diverse biosphere can be maintained in a world whose population is projected to reach 8.4 billion by 2025 and 15 billion by 2100 (Pimentel 349).

The author is Professor of English and Environmental Studies at Middlebury College. This paper was presented at the 1996 ADE Summer Seminar East at Boston College.

This situation is of course compounded by the fact that citizens of our own country consume on average twenty-three times more goods and services than the average resident of the Third World and fifty-three times more than the average Chinese citizen (Pimentel). As people around the world aspire to the levels of consumption typical of our highly publicized way of life, where will they find a new Third World from which to import resources and where will they find a new atmosphere into which to pump their carbon?

A recent issue of *Harper's* features an essay by Ross Gelbspan called "The Heat Is On: The Warming of the World's Climate Sparks a Blaze of Denial." Gelbspan points to drastic changes that have already taken place in the world's climate and reports on the unusual degree of consensus among 2,500 climate scientists participating in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Their report, issued in September 1995, confirms the role of carbon emissions in promoting the greenhouse effect. This effect leads to global warming, whose drastic effects are vividly expressed in Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*.

My purpose in these remarks is not to dwell on such problems. We must certainly begin by facing up to the gravity of our situation, but it's also crucial that we ask ourselves where we can go from here. Snyder's second stanza offers his own vision, transforming the graph into a Chinese ink painting, with habitable valleys and pastures rolling away beyond the present's looming brow. One way or another, the curve must ripple back down. The real question is, in Snyder's words, whether "we make it." Can we call on the resources of our artistic, spiritual, and scientific traditions to help us guide the process and, at least to some extent, to mitigate the suffering? Can we find, as Snyder seeks to do, a beautiful and sustainable vision that will unite us in a community of effort?

As teachers of English, we can participate in such an effort in several important ways. One is by identifying literary works that speak powerfully and directly to environmental issues. The burgeoning of scholarship related to what is called "nature writing" has brought attention to an extensive tradition in American literature, running from the Mayflower Compact through William Bartram and Thoreau to contemporary authors like Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, and Terry Tempest Williams. The genre might be described as a form of the personal essay grounded in appreciative awareness of science yet also alert to the spiritual meaning of nature. The past decade and a half has seen a wave of creativity in this field that has been celebrated by several influential anthologies and many important critical works.

I believe, though, that scholarship about literature and the natural environment may now begin moving in two

directions. One will be attention to the environmental vision of canonical authors like Shakespeare, Milton, and Frost, whose writing about nature has a particular density, intensity, and precision. The value of literary education can be related to the goal of perpetuating a living culture, and these poets continually point to culture's roots in a healthy earth. Simultaneously, we will want to connect such insights from Western literature with expressions of sensitivity to nature from other traditions. I have found, for instance, that the Japanese poet Basho has a remarkable affinity both with the Thoreauvian tradition and with poets in the school of Wordsworth.

In this regard as in others, we need to avoid a simplistic view of culture, such as the assumption that the canon and multiculturalism are clearly defined, separable alternatives. One flaw I find in some writers who have exerted a strong influence on American environmental thought is their tendency to blame the Western tradition for contemporary environmental problems. Lynn White, Jr., for example, in his often cited essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," fingers the creation stories in Genesis, with their emphasis on "dominion." The problem with such arguments is that they tend to be ahistorical. To take dominion over and replenish the earth meant something altogether different for an ancient pastoral people from what it means for us today. We are called on not to reject the Bible but to bring it into serious dialogue with all we know and with the concrete circumstances of our own lives. Similarly, as scholars and critics, we are responsible for relating our literary tradition to our era's environmental crisis.

In higher education as in environmental thinking, it sometimes seems as if the angriest voices drown out the rest. We seem to have accepted the German proverb *Wer schreit, hat recht* 'The one who yells the loudest is right.' Those who harshly reject the Western tradition inspire a counterpolemic from those who assert it as a clearly defined canon. Debate among professors of English thus descends with regrettable frequency to the level described in book 9 of *Paradise Lost*:

Thus they in mutual accusation spent
The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,
And of their vain contest appeared no end.

(lines 1187-89)

It is more fruitful to view culture, literature, and education alike as a process of continual, adaptive change. The tradition one inherits cannot be dispensed with lightly, nor can it be accepted as a self-contained and knowable artifact. Rather, as T. S. Eliot proposes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," we are required to enter into our past and, through our greatest creative efforts, both to sustain it and to make it new.

In seeking literary insights on our environmental situation, I have found the poetry of William Wordsworth of

special value. The meaning of nature is for him always personal, yet it becomes available only as he fixes his gaze on and takes his excursions through the dynamic, non-human world. The following fragments from Wordsworth's Alfoxden notebooks appear in the collection of his poetry edited by Seamus Heaney:

Why is it we feel
So little for each other, but for this,
That we with nature have no sympathy,
Or with such things as have no power to hold
Articulate language?

And never for each other shall we feel
As we may feel, till we have sympathy
With nature in her forms inanimate,
With objects such as have no power to hold
Articulate language. In all forms of things
There is a mind. (33)

I treasure the tentativeness and sincerity of these two passages. For Wordsworth, the beauty of “inanimate” nature leads to a fellow feeling that encompasses humanity as well. The most effective response to this era of environmental crisis will come neither from a sense of noblesse oblige on behalf of some static construction of nature nor from self-preservation in the narrow sense. Rather it will express a power of sympathy, both with “all forms of things” and with “each other.” I have always found, both as a reader and a teacher, that among literature's greatest gifts is its ability to foster enlarged powers of sympathy. Forster's epigraph to *Howards End*, “Only connect . . .,” distills the wisdom of Chaucer, George Eliot, and many of Forster's other great predecessors. It may also serve to encourage intensity and sincerity in our own interdisciplinary efforts today.

One function of English and of the other humanistic studies is to prevent narrowly technological approaches to our pressing environmental problems. Such “techno-fixes,” to which many scientists and policy makers are drawn, have two main problems. One is that they often rely on a naive faith rather than a concrete program. They are reminiscent in this way of Dickens's Mr. Micawber, always expecting that “something will turn up.” The other is that they locate our problems outside ourselves. But the environmental crisis is ultimately nothing other than ourselves. The discipline of English has been defined as a mode of reading that recognizes a primary value in the text itself, that assumes style to be integral to a text's meaning, and that includes the reader's experience as an important element of that meaning. This kind of reading involves the whole person—the senses and the memory as well as the mind's analytical powers. It offers a practice of engaging with complexity that can be of great value as our colleges and universities strive to respond to the environmental crisis.

Rethinking our approaches to liberal education, although at times a daunting challenge, can be an exhilarating adventure. I have found it a joy, if rather a strenuous one, to enter into serious conversation about teaching, learning, and citizenship with environmental studies colleagues from the natural and social sciences, not to mention those from other areas of the humanities. Teaching both English and environmental studies has felt less like a split appointment than like an opportunity to appreciate the confluence of imaginative literature with other areas of learning. This experience of connections has also made me increasingly interested in teaching modes that carry me and my students back out under the sky. Over the last several summers at the Bread Loaf School of English, I have rejoiced in courses that involved several weeks of hiking and camping in the mountains. These shared adventures heightened the experience of intellectual community. We read and wrote, walked the ridges with geologists, studied the indigenous flora with botanists, and shared our findings each evening in discussions around the campfire. I am eager to find ways of integrating such models more fully into my teaching at Middlebury during the regular academic year.

Education needs to move beyond compartmentalization; the disciplines need to hit the trail together and to share their stories outdoors. Americans of every background are also growing more aware of the Native traditions of culture rooted in this continent. The Laguna novelist Leslie Marmon Silko has written in an essay called “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” about her own people's inclusive vision of the earth:

The bare vastness of the Hopi landscape emphasizes the visual impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is there, simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious. Stand on the mesa edge at Walpai and look west over the bare distances toward the pale blue outlines of the San Francisco peaks where the ka-tsina spirits reside. So little lies between you and the sky. So little lies between you and the earth. One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph, that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally—even the most humble insect or reptile. You realize you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year. (894)

To live in such a landscape is to experience the equivalent of a perpetual environmental crisis. Mindfulness in our daily practices and an enhanced sense of community can both be derived from the desert's starkness. Such austere circumstances put a premium on remembering the ancient stories of one's culture, on humility about human prerogatives, and on attentiveness to all who share the landscape with us. They have long reminded the Laguna

Pueblo, as the crisis into which all humanity has now entered should also prompt us, to “stay together / learn the flowers / go light.”

Note

The poem by Gary Snyder, “For the Children,” is reprinted with the author’s permission.

Works Cited

Gelbspan, Ross. “The Heat Is On: The Warming of the World’s Climate Sparks a Blaze of Denial.” *Harper’s* Dec. 1995: 31.

- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random, 1989.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Parini, Jay. “The Greening of the Humanities.” *New York Times Magazine* 29 Oct. 1995: 52–53.
- Pimentel, David, et al. “Natural Resources and an Optimum Human Population.” *Population and Environment* 15.5 (1994): 347–69.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination.” *Norton Book of Nature Writing*. Ed. Robert Finch and John Elder. New York: Norton, 1991. 883–97.
- Snyder, Gary. “For the Children.” *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974. 86.
- White, Lynn, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” *Machina ex Deo*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1988. 75–94.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Essential Wordsworth*. Ed. Seamus Heaney. Hopewell: Ecco, 1988.