

# Ecology and Ecstasy on Interstate 80

Harold Fromm

Spring, 1998

Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,  
For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,  
We questioned him again, and yet again;  
But every word that from the peasant's lips  
Came in reply, translated by our feelings,  
Ended in this,—*that we had crossed the Alps*.  
—Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, VI, 11 586-591

On March 28th, 1996, I packed up the car in preparation for a five-thousand-mile automobile trip to the Southwest and California that would take me away from home for at least three weeks. The plan was to visit Tucson, Los Angeles, Davis, and Reno to see a number of friends and family members as well as to explore a few potential warm spots to which I might move in order to escape once and for all the harshness of Chicagoland's winters. The drive would doubtless be bittersweet, a lonely solo unavoidably retraversing many places that my now dead wife, Gloria, and I had visited together—in our unflagging happiness—sometime around 1985. The final stop would be Reno, where a little book-signing party was to be sponsored by the University of Nevada's English department to celebrate the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, the fruit of half a dozen years of rewarding editorial collaboration with Cheryll Glotfelty.

I packed up my still quite new, rather spiffy, Saturn SL-2 with more than enough provisions and equipment for meals in motel rooms, including a hot plate, cans of wholesome soups and chilies, coffee, oatmeal, low-fat cookies (and other necessities of a health nut's diet), utensils, gifts, clothes for various climates, and 24 compact disks loaded into two 12-disk magazines that could be inserted into the compact disk changer that I considered an essential option in the car's purchase. Some long and lonely days inevitably lay ahead.

The next morning I took off for Springfield, Missouri; then Amarillo, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and on the fourth day—after passing a moonscapish formation of rocks and boulders in southeastern Arizona—I eyed with slight nervousness the faint nimbus of orange sky that greeted my arrival at Tucson. My obsession with ecology had begun in the early seventies when Gloria and I (deceived by the benign direction of summer winds during househunting) were ignorant enough to have bought a little farm in northwest Indiana, captivatingly beautiful but also the most polluted place where I have ever dwelled in my life. In our dispiriting and futile effort to contend with the physical and mental symptoms caused by apocalyptic quantities of effluents from the steel mills of Gary, we quickly turned into hypersensitized canaries, acquiring a new awareness of even the most minuscule amounts of insalubrious air. Now, all my travels resembled the food tours of decadent gourmets, although in my case the ingestions derived not from eager tastings of the sophisticated concoctions of four-star restaurants but from involuntary inbreathings of complex toxic bouquets, the

particular particulates and waste products of distinctive industrial outputs in cities and countrysides all over North America and Europe.

Tucson's air turned out to be still relatively salutary, although a far cry from its celebrated purity of yesteryear. But it was better than Chicago's and infinitely better than anything breathable around Los Angeles, so I felt Tucson offered a real possibility for relocation. After a few rewarding days exploring landscape and housing, I headed northwest on the 1-10 to Phoenix, which proved a very different kettle of fish. Halfway there, though nothing obvious was to be seen around me, I began to experience a tightening up of the sinuses and throat—what people call “flu-like” symptoms—as well as the familiar signs of a pollution headache. (But in my years of experience the most toxic air pollution has tended to be partially or totally invisible.) Once into Phoenix, however, I began to feel well again under sunny blue skies. I now could see that the northeast wind was blowing a vast dark orange plume of smog to the south and west of the city, a plume whose outer edges I had probably briefly traversed en route from Tucson. This plume, broadening rapidly into a wider and wider triangle as it expanded from its source, accompanied me all the way to Blythe at the California border, a distance of roughly 175 miles. As it gradually dissipated into the California desert, I could begin to see, leaving Blythe, what I took to be the outer edges of pollution from Los Angeles, still about 225 miles to the west, extending welcoming arms to embrace me in a chokehold. The smog became increasingly intense as I got to Palm Springs, a polluted desert oasis, and as I approached Riverside, one of the most notoriously smoggy areas in the United States, the entire valley from Los Angeles eastward appeared enveloped in a cloud of toxins.

For a few days I settled with friends in Fullerton, near Disneyland, the same friends who had told me on each previous visit that in Fullerton they were “not bothered by smog,” an ambiguous report I never could fathom. Did it mean that Fullerton itself was exempt from smog or that my friends recognized its presence but were never personally “bothered” by it? Whatever they intended, my days there were marked with virtually nonstop headaches and malaise, the skies were orange, and one of the friends who claimed not to be bothered fell into drowsy states several times a day that segued into brief catnaps. It struck me as more than a funny coincidence that these naps corresponded perfectly with my worst headaches and “flu-like” symptoms. And indeed, I myself had several bouts of pretty irresistible drowsiness during the week I spent in the greater Los Angeles area, even after some exceptionally good nights of sleep.

When my visit had ended, I headed north on Interstate 5, the Santa Ana Freeway in Los Angeles, which soon crosses the San Gabriel Mountains and makes its way up the San Joaquin Valley, the vegetable-growing capital of North America. The wind was from the south and the plume from Los Angeles was dispersed into a blurring haze throughout the valley, almost as far north as the imaginary line one could draw from Salinas to Fresno, about 225 miles from L.A. I vividly recalled stopping for gas on an earlier trip up this route with Gloria and my Fullerton friends, issuing my customary complaints about the shockingly bad air, complaints which often rub people the wrong

way, impatient with what strikes them as sheer crackpotism—since *they* claim not to be “bothered.” Here, perhaps 75 miles north of Los Angeles, the gas station attendant had completely surprised me by volunteering the information to my party that this polluted mess in the middle of nowhere was Los Angeles smog! I regarded him as a secret ally.

As I reached the Sacramento/Davis area, about 90 miles east of San Francisco, the skies looked good and I felt pretty okay. The winds were carrying Sacramento smog far to the north, beyond my projected route, a sharp contrast with my experience several years earlier when I flew to Sacramento from Chicago and was surprised to find the ground completely obliterated by orange smog as the plane circled in for a landing, a more representative picture, as I since have learned, of what happens to smaller cities as they grow into large ones.

So there it was. I had already covered about 3000 miles; and as I traversed the great open spaces of our heroic pioneering West, everywhere I looked were miles and miles of toxic air, the fruits of expansionism and technology, fruits that, in my mind, were making millions of people feel wretched every day (without their knowing why) and contributing to long-term, often fatal, diseases which one day would suddenly appear as if from nowhere to do them in. Electric power plants, oil refineries, steel mills, millions of automobiles, dry-cleaning plants, suburban lawnmowers, jet skis, snowmobiles, sport-utility vehicles, copper smelters—you name it. Meanwhile, trees that produce oxygen were being cut down to produce Big Macs, methane gas from cattle, and pollution from animal wastes; water was being fouled by paper mills and oil spills; fish killed by pesticide runoff—you know the story: the nightmare of technology, the inheritance of the Industrial Revolution. “Abundance makes me poor,” as one of Ovid’s wiseacres would have it. To suppose technology is not among contemporary society’s chief critical problems would be to live in a fool’s paradise, to be permanently out to lunch.

After spending two days with my friends in Davis I was concerned to leave early enough to arrive in Reno before dark, perhaps a two-hour drive now that the speed limits have been raised to 70 or 75 mph. I said goodbye, hopped into the Saturn, turned on the compact disk player—my salvation—and sped off into the not-yet sunset. Davis and Sacramento are flat, flat, flat, but the Sierras’ foothills were not far to seek and within an hour I could see the road starting to climb. I was already feeling a little inebriate, having just heard Beethoven’s *Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra*, that curious melange of styles and themes that eventuated in the “Ode to Joy,” rapturous when done by the right conductor but a flop in less capable hands. My spirit was soaring as the road reached higher and the air thinned out, the rich vegetation of the western side of the Sierras took on the intense green of a late afternoon in mid-April, and the curves were getting sharper. Like Dr. Johnson in his primitive horse-drawn coach en route from London to Edinburgh, I felt there was nothing more exciting than racing along a highway at top speed. Sweeping through woods edged by sudden declivities with panoramic mountain views that a solo driver dare not examine too minutely, I was a little surprised to hear the opening orchestral chords and shouted “kyries” of

Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, which for the moment I forgot I had loaded into the CD player's magazine. This was the great performance by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, recorded in 1960, certainly one of the best on records, issued first on LP's and now (along with the aforementioned *Fantasy*) digitally remastered on SONY compact disks, more clearly audible than ever before. The *Missa Solemnis*, one of the dozen or so most sublime musical creations of Western culture, sounding even today grotesquely cacophonous in its Dionysiac syncopated frenzy, requires—like the symphonies of Bruckner—the most skillful of conductors to hold it together, or else it can simply fall apart into a series of disconnected and stumbling episodes. Caught in its mania, I was driving faster and faster, struggling to negotiate the curves and forced over and over again to slam on the brakes to avoid going off the edge. Monumental vistas were unfolding, my excitement level kept rising, all my senses were being stimulated at once. I was reaching 7000 feet, I had just passed the stunning sights of Emigrant's Gap—when the most stupendous moments of the entire *Missa* commenced—the high-speed fugue on “*et vitam venturi*” in the Credo, insanely executed by Bernstein and his chorus about twice as fast as the speed of my car, music that at mere ground level always left me in a heap, a pulp, a burned-out shell of a person. Now, at high speed and high altitude, I reached a pitch of excitement almost hysterical. I was traversing Donner Pass, skirting Donner Lake, trying to take in this incredible panorama of sights from the world and sounds from the car, thinking inevitably of the tragically fated Donner party, half of whom perished right there over a hundred years ago when California was little more than a string of Spanish missions founded yet another hundred years earlier by Father Junipero Serra. The strain (to borrow from Donne) on that “subtile knot” that joins spirit and flesh reached the breaking point as the fugue drew to its frenetic close, and I burst into tears of sensory overload while pressing down on the brake-pedal to keep my car from swerving off the road. The slant of light from the late afternoon sun was still painterly, coloring the multilayered geological cuts through which the roadway was passing and sharpening the relief of trees against mountainsides, of roadcurves against mountain passes.

It was at that precise ecstatic moment I experienced my ecological epiphany. Though it didn't come from God, John Muir's Sierran hosannas to what he called divinity and what Shelley more aptly called “the intense inane” were never far from my mind. It derived, rather transparently, from easily identifiable components of some of the most major intuitions and experiences of my reflective life, but now, like the treescape's sun-illuminated relief, my ordinary horizontal thinking had been shot through by a vertical bolt of lightning-insight, casting the mundane into the sublime by making it possible to think a host of thoughts simultaneously.

And exactly what did the mountains have to say?

Put somewhat baldly: “Everything human is technology!” Perhaps one would prefer to say not *everything*, but almost everything. The spiffy car I was driving, with its air bags and antilock brakes. The compact disk player, the disk with the *Missa*, the analog tapes from 1960, the recording process itself, the original performance with all of the

manufactured instruments and trained voices, the system of producing and distributing the disks, Bernstein's jetsetting existence and materialities, Beethoven's own life, his music paper, his pens, his piano, the musical "logic" that enables composition. As for his deafness, more advanced technology might have alleviated it, changing everything. Then there was the roadway on which I was driving, the incredible engineering feats that cut through the mountain passes, and the geological layers thereby revealed (illuminatingly examined by John McPhee in *Assembling California*). The mountain views were themselves the fruits of technology—of decisions where to put the road and the angles of vision that resulted, of the appearance of the layered roadcuts and their contribution to the aesthetic experience. Mostly everything about me and my life had a technological connection as well: the clothes I wore, the computer I used every day, the manufactured food I ate, my shaving equipment, electric toothbrush, my wristwatch, the crowns in my teeth, my glasses, orthopedic shoes. Maybe Donna Haraway was right: we're already cyborgs, half organism, half prostheses; half Nature, half technology. Surely the uplift I felt at this landscape required a healthy body, good food, bourgeois nurturing and education, modern equipment and appliances—all from technologies. Indeed, that I had survived childhood to become a physically fit adult after several potentially fatal diseases was due in large measure to the biotechnologies of medicine. From the first stone tools of Paleolithic peoples to the latest modem access to the World Wide Web, from the poisoned Roman populace who drank water in leaded cups to the irradiated corpses from Chernobyl—the good and the bad of human life were mostly technology. Technophobes may praise the Amish for their simplicity, but what distinguishes the Amish derives not from eschewing technology but from fixation upon one of its earlier stages. Why should any particular phase of technology—or of evolution, for that matter—be thought of as more "natural" than any other? Are animals bred by humans to pull wagons more "natural" than machines designed to do the same thing? Without technology—the payoff from opposable thumbs—human beings would never have been able to lift themselves out of primal animal existence. Even the most nature-committed postmodern adventurers are completely dependent on the latest inventions. Edward Abbey, for all his chest-thumping bravado in *Desert Solitaire*, was not as solitarily self-creating as he liked to make out. Floating down the Colorado River in his inflatable raft stocked with tinned and dehydrated foods or roughing it in Havasu with telephone-ordered provisions mailed from the grocery store at the Grand Canyon, he was as much a child of technology as the bourgeois tourists he satirized in the recollections of his ranger days at Arches National Park. Today's wall climbers and backpackers would hardly exist without L.L. Bean, Gore-Tex, Rockport, water purifiers, camping stoves—and their four-wheel-drive gas-guzzlers. The sciences of ecology are themselves enabled by devices to measure pollutants in air and water, pesticides in vegetables, radiation from failed power plants. The air pollution in New York, Chicago, northwest Indiana, Phoenix, and Los Angeles may have tainted my life with an ongoing malaise, but my epiphany on 1-80 made it plain that the bad and good were so inextricably tied together that to be against technology was to be

against human life itself. I thought of the absurdity of Max Oelschlaeger's nostalgia for hunter-gatherers in

*The Idea of Wilderness* as the decadence of a technologically pampered bourgeois philosophy professor. The war of the well-feds against technology looked less like Ludditism than like the religious and political cults of Jonestown, Waco, and Oklahoma City.

Indeed, the "ecocentrism" and "biocentrism" of the deep ecologists has an alarming resemblance to the right-wing power ploys of misanthropes like Phyllis Schlafly and Pat Robertson. If the reactionary right can be said to fear and hate adult consciousness and to love only what they can safely ventriloquize and control without back-talk—namely God and fetuses, creatures that express the fantasies of their ventriloquist-creators—then the deep-ecological left can be said to constitute their mirror image, with the Unabomber their basket-case *doppelganger*. If the religious right spouts self-regarding, repressive, and maudlin essentialisms about the will of God, about the *real* nature of men and women, sex, marriage, and family life, the deep-ecological left essentializes transient stages of evolution and speaks of ecosystems, natural habitats, wilderness, animals, and "nature" as though they were Platonic ideas, fixed for all time instead of evolving aspects of a universe without stasis, an evolution no less "natural" after the Industrial Revolution than before. In an evolutionary universe, things adapt or perish, so Nature is anything survivable, not just the familiar species that happen to have populated recent centuries or our own more recent childhoods to provide deep ecologists with "eternal" Platonic forms. Instead of mendacities about "the will of God" and human normalities, the deep ecologists have their own mendacities about "speaking for the Other," for trees and wildlife and mountains, just one more disingenuous stratagem of the will to power. Their counterpart to God's will is the notion of "intrinsic value," which replaces the narcissistic humility of religious extremists with denunciations of anthropocentrism for its "instrumentalism," a relationship to the natural world—it is claimed—that fails to recognize the intrinsic value of other species. "Intrinsic value," however, is itself an instrumental oxymoron. Its purpose is to foreclose conversation, like references to God, and to establish the "innocence" (i.e., reverence for life) of biocentrists vis-a-vis the selfish predatoriness of anthropocentrists. But nobody is innocent. *To be alive is to be a murderer!* Recycling is the Master Algorithm of the universe. The only authentic biocentric act is suicide, freeing up finite matter for the benefit of others. Everything is instrumental except survival of oneself. Inasmuch as all value is conferred by a reflective consciousness, nothing has *intrinsic* value except a reflective consciousness reflecting upon its own incarnation. When Dave Foreman tells us that grizzlies are more "important" than people or when Phyllis Schlafly tells us that atomic bombs are the gifts of a wise God (to keep down non-Western, non-WASP adults so North American fetuses can be turned into religious conservatives) we learn nothing about either intrinsic values or God's will, only the bad news we already knew: that Foreman and Schlafly are misanthropic powermongers for whom "nature" and "God" are not-so-secret agents of desire.

The master motive for human beings was always human survival and its attendant human interests. Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic and his role as a father figure of biocentrism were necessary and heroic developments after the destructive technologies of World War II, when a new awareness of suicidal human depredation (the result of shortsightedness and ignorance about what makes for survival) was desperately needed. But fifty years later, Leopold's biocentric commandments have become pious clichés for undergraduate term papers and for political reappropriation by the bourgeois anti-bourgeois left. Whereas Leopold could speak pioneeringly in the war-shattered forties about "reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free," in the late nineties these words function merely as invidious political terms, however benign their original intent—or as poetry. As ontological concepts, "natural," "wild," and "free" now seem almost meaningless, if not preposterous. Today, biocentrism and "intrinsic value" can be seen simply as other forms of human interests, as "anthropocentric" as the rest, no more disinterested than acts performed "for the greater glory of God." Even in the case of Leopold, biocentrism was offered as an enhancement of human life (both practical and aesthetic), since human life depends on a particular ecological mix that war and unbridled capitalist/communist technology have threatened to destroy. From a human perspective (and what other do we have?), the wilderness (a recent invention) and grizzlies (a recent obsession) aren't being preserved "for their own sake," but because certain people like them, need them, or regard them as necessary for a better sort of human life. If "existing for their own sake" were the real criterion of "intrinsic value," then cockroaches and cancer would be as entitled to exist as anything else. If wolves can be reintroduced into Yellowstone ("for the ecosystem"), why not smallpox into the Western world?

As I moved at high speed through the wondrous Sierras while the sun declined in the late afternoon sky, my electrifying sense of the primacy of technology—ever in need of control—and the ineluctability of anthropocentrism—which does not always recognize its own survival interests—was intensified by recollection of the passage from *The Prelude* that I have quoted above. What so shocked Wordsworth and his party, psyched up as they were by the notion of traversing mountains that had seemed dauntingly majestic from a distance, was to learn that they had already crossed the Alps! In Wordsworth such a realization inevitably leads to a passage extolling the wonder and power of the human imagination, a faculty that half creates what it beholds (and, one might add, that makes Nature in its own image, just as it has always done with God). But I thought too of John Muir's seemingly ecocentric hosannas in these very Sierras: "every crystal, every flower a window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator," a passage (one among many) so different from Wordsworth's yet finally as anthropocentric as his. Wordsworth's was an unabashed celebration of human faculties even greater than the Alps; Muir's, an erotic ecstasy that figured itself in the orgasmic language of hallelujahs—for nothing is quite so humancentered as imagining a universe made for our delight by a deity that has given his all.



My own epiphany was like Wordsworth's, only more so. These wondrously beautiful "Sierras" (which here can stand in for all of "nature") had no real existence of their own. There may indeed be Sierras underlying *my* "Sierras," but as philosophers from Thales to Rorty have made apparent over two millennia, we know very little about them and most of what we do know comes from the natural sciences. We live in a world of perceptions and appearances and, for us, appearance is reality. When I read his great book, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, I could not help picturing Muir amidst the mountains as a dust mite stumbling along inside a rich piece of velvet. Caught deep within the individual strands of pile that make velvet look and feel smooth to a comparatively gigantic human observer, the dust mite doubtless sings hosannas to the grandeur and mystery of each rough and monumental peak, clearly the product of some sublime and powerful deity. When human beings leave their "Scenic Vista" highway-lookouts miles away from velvety mountainside forests and wander closer in, to inspect the rugged mountain trees from inside, are they not like dust mites in velvet, scrounging around in the undergrowth of giant conifers? And when human beings behold the Sierras from a jumbo jet at 42,000 feet, are the dune-like undulations seen from above any the less "real" than the majestic peaks seen from below? And what do astronauts think, hundreds of miles above the earth, the Sierras now flattened into a splotch of color? Why sing paeans to majestic Sierras at all, any more than to strands of velvet pile, if the majestic Sierran peaks are no more "real" than (or just as "real" as) the flattened blotches from outer space? Velvet pile is as awesome as Sierras if you happen to be a dust mite. Sierras are as innocuous as velvet pile if you happen to be an astronaut. Why privilege the ground-level perceptions of a particular species (i.e., us) as representations of the *real* reality? We squash out creations as sensational as Sierras with every step we take: not being small enough to appreciate their microscopic majesty, we fail to sing songs of reverence to mitochondria or particles of clay. Selective attributions of deity are the very essence of anthropocentrism. Assessed from the totality of possible viewpoints, everything would be equally sublime or mundane. Is the world really a spectacular show designed for humanfolk, staged by a cosmic Ted Turner, biggest cable operator in the universe, who stays awake at night worrying about the fall of sparrows and other violence and sex aired daily on his infinite channels?

"Nature," like everything else a contested site (as they now say), is the technological production of our bodies and minds, a *^natural* naturalism. Whatever it may be in itself, its "intrinsic value" is "manmade" for human ends and its "beauty" a function of our sensory apparatus. Protecting "nature" is in our own best interests, unless we are ecocentric enough to bequeath "our" world to the next generation of mutants, perhaps irradiated survivors of Chernobyl (who might thrive on pollution and nuclear wastes) or animals bizarrely transformed by gene therapy run amok.

As I reached the eastern side of the Sierras, everything changed. The lush green mountainsides had now become the dry and sere landscape of the high desert. Off in the distance, like a New Atlantis, glowed the high-rise casinos of Reno, suffused with

an orange halo from the buildings' nighttime illumination systems. Another feat of techno-magic.

I spent a few days in Reno and Sparks with my friends, then moved on to Salt Lake City, whose Wasatch Mountains provide what is perhaps the most awesome stretch on all of 1-80, though again the placement of the city and the cut of the road contribute a very humanized aspect to the spectacle, like a Turner painting. If the ill-fated Donner party could be said to have suffered from a *lack* of technology, doomed as they were by slow locomotion, lack of electronic communications, inadequate maps and weather information, low-tech food storage and preservation, absence of railroads and cities, insufficient ways of keeping warm, then my own near-catastrophic hour in a terrifying whiteout episode at seven thousand feet in the Rockies outside Laramie was the result of advanced technology that was not quite advanced enough. When violent winds began to blow the snow from the mountaintops almost horizontally across the highway, the marvelous roads became virtually invisible and treacherously icy; my high-tech car was comfortable and warm in the twenty-degree April air, but direly in need of X-ray vision or radar. On the side of the road was a disabled juggernaut, a cross-country semitrailer, now overturned from excessively daredevil driving. The other cars I could barely see despite their generally ample lights. All the normally enabling technologies made it possible for me to zoom into incredible danger with the insouciance and intrepidity that technology so often breeds. (The failures of modern technology have been cruelly charted by David Ehrenfeld in *The Arrogance of Humanism*.) With parched mouth and pounding heart, I was nearly rear-ended by another semitrailer that barrelled out of the curtain of snow into my rearview mirror as I crawled along at 25 mph., managing to swerve aside at the last possible second. Then suddenly, as though turned off by a switch, the whiteout lifted and I found myself in crisp bright sunlight. Next day, approaching Lincoln, Nebraska, with winds again howling but sun shining brightly, I was confronted by another sort of technomisadventure, this time a blinding dust storm that probably covered hundreds of square miles, the result of recently plowed fields and drought-like conditions—fortunately not very serious compared to the adventure of the day before. For me the prognosis was plain: not a return to hunting and gathering—a never-never land of innocence and stasis—but a more and more refined technology. Technology was a metaphor for evolving human life, with consciousness as its blueprint. It was no more reversible than consciousness itself.

After a night outside Omaha, I was returned to bliss once more: as my estimable radio's scanner sampled every AM/FM broadcast receivable along 1-80 in Iowa, I soon discovered the excellent station operated by Iowa State University, audible across most of the southern part of the state. I decided to give the CD player, which had provided exemplary service, a much-earned rest. It was late Saturday morning and the Metropolitan Opera was about to broadcast *Die Walkure*, conducted by James Levine, my favorite part of *The Ring*, With Bruno Walter, Lotte Lehmann, and Lauritz Melchior necessarily delivering a shadow performance deep inside my head and heart, I was moved nonetheless by the power of Levine's introductory thunderstorm and I

was knocked quite flat by the heldentenor virtuosity of Placido Domingo as Siegmund. As I reached the Quad Cities area and began the crossing of the Mighty Mississippi—with due regard for the river-defining technologies of Mark Twain, T.S. Eliot, and the Army Corps of Engineers—signs of spring were definitely in evidence, buds were opening, the air was warming, and Sieglinde was singing the most rapturous passage in all of *The Ring*. “*Du bist der Lenz / nach dem ich verlangte / in frostigen Winters Frist*” As tears of ecstasy again began to flow from the easily unravelled strands of my subtle knot, like Molly Bloom saying “Yes” I experienced a powerful moment of assent to a newfound identity: fighting postmodernism all the way, I had nevertheless to acknowledge that I was indeed, after all... *a cyborg*! Take away technology, I realized, and I would cease to exist. From my daily traveler’s lunch of frozen yogurt spurted forth from machines at McDonald’s to my Visa card swiped through roadside gas pumps, I began to review the adventures of the previous three weeks. And while I can’t provide a summation as resoundingly scriptural as Eliot’s “What the Thunder Said,” I think I can venture a little homily called “What the Car Stereo Said.”

To a greater or lesser degree, I therefore affirm, everything human is technological. Everything human is anthropocentric as well. “Ecocentric Appreciation of Nature” may have a disinterested honorific air (like “for the greater glory of God”), but if the “nature” that we “appreciate,” like Wordsworth’s Alps, is largely produced by our psycho-biological constitutions (Wordsworth called it “Imagination”), then appreciation of nature (and everything else) is an essentially anthropocentric subjectivity. Because, if *we* ceased to exist, the “majestic Sierras” would cease along with us. *Something*, presumably, would remain (e.g., the universe dealt with by the physical sciences), but it would be neither peaks nor blobs, neither majestic nor “serrated,” all requiring a sensibility and a “point of view.” From the point of view of the universe (which has no point of view), to name it is to misname it, because the act of naming makes it what it is *only for us*. Without Nature, no humans; but without humans, no “nature.” If this is true, then what can it mean to be “ecocentric”? The motto of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) reads, “When humans study nature, it is nature studying itself.” But it might just as well read, “When humans study nature, it is humans studying themselves.”

As I pressed into Illinois, now only a few hours from home, Act One was drawing to its close: Placido Domingo, in the guise of Siegmund, shouted his “*Siegmund heiss’ ich / und Siegmund bin ich!*”—a feat of the most glorious vocal technology. He pulled his sword out of the tree with that unbearably potent cry of “*Nothung! Nothung!*” leaving multitudes of technologically equipped people all over the world gasping at their stereos in Wagnerian delirium. Sieglinde, as my libretto so finely puts it, “throws herself passionately on his breast” while “he draws her to him with passionate fervor.” To worldwide gooseflesh, the orchestra played its wild and frenetic coda while the lovers embraced. As the curtain fell at the Metropolitan and the audience went berserk almost a thousand miles to the east, I thought of the way in which everything suddenly falls into place at the end of *To the Lighthouse*—and I felt that I too had had my vision.

The Ted K Archive

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