

Man, Man, and Again Man

by Thomas Fleming

"Qualis artifex pereo"

—Nero

I cannot remember a time when I was not what would be called an environmentalist. I spent much of my childhood on an earth unconstricted by concrete streets and unburdened by the weight of buildings. I was never happier than when I was out fishing with my father or picking berries with my sister, or helping friends with their traps. Until we moved near Charleston, I had never seen a city that did not deface the landscape, and to this day I prefer, when I am traveling, to spend my time in the countryside.

This is not to say that I am necessarily a misanthropist, at least not for this reason. Actual wilderness is something to reserve for rare occasions: the experience of wilderness is as brutal and depersonalizing as falling in love, while our everyday contacts with the cultivated parts of the natural world seem more like marriage or friendship. Robinson Jeffers sometimes wrote as if he preferred hawks to human beings, and when he complained of all the people moving to Big Sur, his wife suggested that they move to Alaska. Jeffers replied that landscape, untouched by humanity, was without interest.

There are places in the world where man, working over the generations, has sculpted landscapes that serve his needs, his desperate need for beauty as well as his need for food. There are parts of Umbria and Southern England that prove that

Eden, where the first man and woman were put "to dress it and to keep it" in perfect happiness, is no myth, or rather one of those myths that define us as human beings. The remarkable Frederick Turner once explained to me that tourist traps like Stresa and the Borromean Islands, with their carefully cultivated air of antique fishing villages, have acquired a secondary kind of naturalness as the generations go by. If it is true that man's nature is art, then it is hardly worth the effort to distinguish between them. The most beautiful landscapes are the points at which man, through his art, has expressed the purpose for which he was put here: "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it."

The cultivation of gardens—the hedging and terracing, the walling and diking—can go on even in cities. I know a philosopher in Atlanta who devotes his free time to building stone walls that turn the slopes of his "undesirable" backyard into a Tuscan half-acre of garden. London, despite the hideousness of the housing flats and the tedium of its mock-Manhattan skyscrapers, is still a city of parks and gardens, where a bit of the countryside can be enclosed within the iron gates of a quiet square. Ancient cities, no matter how great, were never completely detached from the countryside, and Babylon was famous for its gardens. Babylon also (so it would seem) inspired

the fable of the Tower of Babel, the permanent warning against the presumption and follies of men who turn from landscape gardening to high-rise construction “whose top may reach to heaven.” Not content with subduing the earth, with shaping and “dressing” it, “now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.” The punishment, then and now, is confusion, not merely in the sense that we do not understand each other, but in the deeper sense that we do not understand ourselves.

Sometimes it takes a city to teach us about the country—it is no accident, for example, that pastoral poetry is cultivated by people undergoing urbanization. I was living in San Francisco in 1969 and spent much of my time wandering about on the cliffs by the Legion of Honor Museum, imagining the voices of the seals who were no longer there. Downtown I went to see a new cathedral—all glass and concrete—and it was there that I realized, nonbeliever though I was, that man cannot properly express any of his aspirations except in natural materials that reflect his landscape.

I was not, I hope, falling into the foolish idiom of art theorists like Vincent Scully who reduce architecture to something like an excretion of local landscape, because some of our landscape we have been carrying around with us since Eden. As bizarre as English-style Greek-revival architecture might seem on the banks of the Mississippi, both England and Greece were part of the mental universe of Southern planters. But man-made materials—ferro-concrete, glass, plastic—are mere reflections of our own imaginations, and the more “imaginative” the material, the less we are constrained by the physical and mathematical laws that determine our sense of beauty (as explained in *On Growth and Form* by the classically trained biologist D’Arcy Thompson).

Things made from plastics can reflect only our self-conceit, our vain desire to liberate ourselves from the laws of our own nature, including the law of death. It is no accident that the plastics industry is the faithful servant of American consumption, the force that subverts all traditions—moral and political, as well as aesthetic—in its drive to reconnect humanity—divided since Babel—in one universal libido. This is the only world order that really counts, and the good news is that we are already choking to death like the greedy Viking in the folktale.

The last time I allowed myself to think of these things, I was in Genoa, a monument to the follies and corruption of mismanagement. The ancient alleys, haunted by Tunisian drug dealers, stink of things worse than the merely human excretions they have been accumulating for centuries. The polluted harbor is virtually empty of ships, because of the high prices imposed by labor unions with the connivance of government. Yet all around are the relics of wealth and beauty from the time when Genoa was a proud mercantile capital of the Mediterranean, rivaled only by Venice. Columbus came from Genoa and must have imparted some of its pride and some of its love of wealth to the New World. In our beginning is our end—only we shall leave behind so much less that is worth preserving.

In Genoa I spent several hours talking with Pier Luigi Zampetti, some of whose political views I have previously discussed. His book *La Sfida Del Duemila* (Rusconi, 1988) takes up the crisis of democracy—and Zampetti is a highly original advocate of participatory democracy—but from a distinctly moral point of view that includes the great question of the environ-

ment.

For Zampetti, materialism is the obvious culprit, responsible for our spiritual malaise as well as environmental catastrophe, and although he is staunchly antisocialist, he sees capitalism as the primary vector of the disease:

Materialism has become the dominant philosophy both in the West and in the East. . . . Capitalism, as we know, is the economic system of the entire contemporary world. East and West are worlds bound by capitalistic systems, even if of different types. But, how is man considered in these systems? Can he express himself, his free and responsible choices; in other words is he considered a person? Not even in a dream.

We are no longer properly “persons” because Cartesian dualism has led us to consider ourselves objectively. “Man is considered an object, not as the subject of the system of economic production” to the extent that others make his economic (and social) decisions for him. If we are no longer persons, we have sunk to the level of the mere individuals so dear to the hearts (if it is fair to say that they have hearts) of economists:

The consideration of man as object instead of subject . . . means the exclusion of the conception of man as a being constituted by the integration of the spiritual force and the material or bodily force. We call “the individual” the man in whom spirit and matter are separated. We call “person” the man in whom the two forces are integrated. Man can be considered an object only in the first case, not in the second.

Capitalism *per se* is not evil, he says, but it provides the conditions that facilitate the descent from person to individual:

Individualism does not necessarily lead to the predominance of matter, in relations between the world of the spirit and the world of matter. In early capitalism, the phenomenon was not yet manifested, or if it was, it came about in an indirect manner. The economy was only a part of society, and in this phase man was treated only occasionally as object. In any case, the exercise of liberty was always possible, and therefore choices in many sectors of the economic world, especially in the world of consumption based on the law of supply and demand. For such reasons, in the individualistic conception the spiritual force and the material coexisted, and one could not speak of a primacy of the second over the first. Capitalism, therefore, as an historical phenomenon, did not have to issue, necessarily, in a materialistic conception of life . . . [but] the event was possible and could not be excluded. And this possibility was owing to the individualistic and no longer personalist conception of modern thought.

This possibility was not arrived at until the last phase of capitalism, which he calls *consumismo*, a term with a broader significance than the American term “consumerism,” which means little more than “shop ‘til you drop.” *Consumismo*, on the other hand, implies an entire way of life defined by getting and spending as the ultimate activities. The advertising jingle that comes closest is a billboard I once saw: “Shop like you

mean it.”

Materialism and consumism retard the development of the human person. Just as we have been taught to regard nature as something “other” and objective, we have given ourselves the same treatment:

The drama of man today lies in this: with his degradation from subject to object, the objectivity of man gets made equivalent to the objectivity of nature. Man is not in a position to exercise his own spiritual capacities that elevate him above nature. . . . He withers and runs the risks of going soft and dying.

It is in this context, of human degradation, that Zampetti takes up the question of pollution, wresting it away from the specialists who have not searched for the cause and finding the

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answer he is looking for in a passage from St. Mark (7:15-23):

There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. . . . For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

Zampetti observes that this passage might have been directed at modern man, who pollutes himself by misusing his liberty. “Pollution of the spirit (greed, adultery, murder, egoism . . .) or moral pollution is the cause of the pollution of the body and, even though in a different way, of the pollution of nature.” The real question, he argues, is the degradation not of nature but of man, and he cites as examples the spread of drugs and AIDS:

Drugs are not called a plague, because he who takes them does so freely and thereby becomes sick voluntarily, as opposed to those who contract other diseases. But then the same argument can be applied to AIDS, which is actually the fruit of drug addiction and homosexuality. We could say that both are social plagues that result from man’s poverty of being and to the drying up

of the spirit.

Man is ultimately the proper subject of any discussion of the environment, because it is the interior man who makes the decisions which shape the world. “Drugs do not exist, but the drug addict. AIDS does not exist, but the man who has contracted the disease. The polluted sea does not exist, but man who, with the economic-productive system directed toward the satisfaction of individualistic interests, has polluted the sea. Man, man, and again man.” Zampetti concludes his analysis of pollution by declaring that “man is dying together with society and nature” and calling for a diagnosis that will enable man to save himself—and society and nature as well—from destruction.

I shall not follow the philosopher in his ambitious proposals for reconstructing society, not because they are uninteresting or impossibly utopian. They are neither. But if modern man had shown the slightest inclination toward common sense, he would not be where he is today. Oh, we all talk as though we cared about what kind of world we lived in. We complain about the low level of political morality and then go out and vote for Bob Dole. We say we want our children to be educated, and then we send them to public school. We may even say we believe in God, but on Sunday we end up at the golf course or some ex-Calvinist church that reassures us that it is now OK to murder our children. Treat the fair words of man the consumer just as you would treat the pretty speech of a glandular teenage boy saying “I love you” to your daughter.

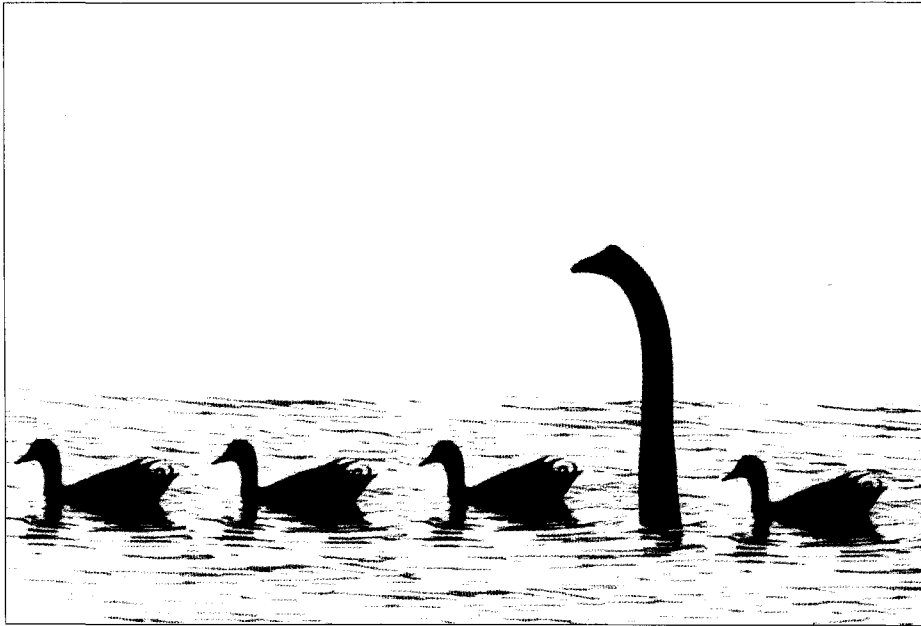
Consumism was the religion of Sodom, and if that city was not treated to a plague, it was destroyed by the fire and brimstone that fuel the industries of the modern cities of the plain. In those days, only one righteous man was found, though even his wife pined for the soft life of the French Quarter and a house in Georgetown. I used to hope that what man had done, he could undo, but the greatest mischief we have done is to ourselves, in destroying our capacity for leading a normal life and settling for everyday pleasures and duties. Birthday parties and good old books. Telling the old stories one more time and fishing with tackle that did not advertise our net worth. Living in a world where walking made sense, because the stretch between here and there was more interesting than either here or there.

We are all caught up in it, I as much as you as much as they, and if we actually made ourselves happier in destroying the planet, I might say: go ahead. There is a scrap of Greek verse which goes, “When I am dead, let the earth be mixed with fire. I’ll no longer care.” When someone quoted it to the emperor Nero, he emended the first line to “While I’m alive.” That’s the stuff. The worst of the Caesars—spoiled punks like Nero, Caligula, and Commodus—would fit right into the youth culture of the past 30 years, except Nero and Caligula had both been given an education. Gorged and dulled by the endless cycle of titillation and satiety, these “troubled youths” of ancient Rome turned to violence, when gluttony and fornication grew stale. Those who pursue pleasure for its own sake become impotent in the face of life. Life is already Hell for many Americans—five minutes of television should be enough to convince a sane man. But nothing lasts forever, not the towers of Babel or the dark Satanic mills. Lot escaped from Sodom with at least some of his family, and the reconstruction of the personal—like almost everything else of value—begins at home.



Conservation and Animal Welfare

by Stephen R.L. Clark



Igor Kopehinsky

Not so long ago, nor all that far away, we knew our place. The old could command the young, parents command children, the well-born command the lowly-born, men command women, and the High King over all. No one need have any doubts about his duty. We all owed duties of deference to those above us, and of care to those below. Horses, dogs, and cattle had their position too (and one that was sometimes higher, in its way, than those of many humans). On the one hand, they could be punished for stepping out of line; on the other, they would be valued and rewarded for playing their part. Wild creatures were assigned to similar roles, at once a reflection of, and a justification for, the status society of civilized humanity. The vision still has enormous influence, even among people who think they have escaped. Witness that reactionary fiction *The Lion King*, which requires us to believe that the land will be fertile, and “at peace,” if the rightful king (high up in the food chain) withstands the incursion of undisciplined hordes (hyenas) who seek to transcend their natures.

Status society does have merits. In its proper form, it is because we fulfill our duties of care, to our inferiors, that we may be owed obedience. As Humphrey Primatt, an 18th-century Anglican clergyman, insisted in his plea for decent treatment of nonhuman animals, *The Duty of Humanity to Inferior Creatures* (1776), “He who boasts of the dignity of his nature and the advantages of his station, and thence infers his right of oppression

of his inferiors exhibits his folly as well as his malice.” Those duties of care, and forbearance, were diminished when political and moral theorists successfully challenged status society in the name of contract. Instead of owing obedience to our natural superiors, the story went, we owed it only where there was, or could reasonably be thought to be, a contract of obedience. Mutual obligations, it was said, rested on an actual or hypothetical agreement, and a decent human society, accordingly, imposed identical duties of care and forbearance on all human beings. Nonhuman creatures, being incapable of making contracts or abiding by them, were excluded, as they had been by the Stoics, from all forms of justice. On the one hand, they could not be punished (strictly speaking); on the other, nothing that was done to them could be unlawful. They existed, as the Stoics had said, entirely for our use and profit. Nonhuman creatures had a lower status than any human being. Even as status crumbled as a moral and political norm for civilized humanity, it was reinforced, in its least respectful form, for everything nonhuman. Actually, uncivilized humanity, or “savages,” were also treated as fair game: they too could not be judged to “own” the land they lived on, or to have made bargains that a civilized court would enforce. Nowadays, we pay lip-service to the thought that *all* human beings have equivalent rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Nonhuman creatures are still largely undefended.

In its 17th-century beginnings, contract society did not in fact give absolute rights of ownership and use to human beings. Strictly, we could never own the land itself, but only, at most,

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