More Nature in Art, Aldous Huxley

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In my last lecture I presented the factual side of the situation in which man finds himself in relation to his planet, the rather dismal story of the way in which he has ravaged and greatly destroyed the world—the home in which he travels through the Universe. In this lecture I propose to speak about the events on the other end of the bridge. I want to talk about the human or psychological end, because I feel that we must always try to bring together these two generally separate aspects of life, the purely factual and scientific, and the purely human-value end.

Let us begin with the practical problems involved. We now know enough to repair a good deal of the damage which has already been done to our planet and to prevent further damage from occurring. The necessary information and knowledge exist. But as usual there is a great gap between the ability to do a thing and the likelihood of its being done. It is very easy to describe the conservation methods which should be put into effect at once, but it is extraordinarily difficult to carry out what we know we can do.

First of all, in order to implement a satisfactory conservation programme, we have to communicate with immense numbers of human beings. After all, there are in the world several hundreds of millions of peasant farmers and workers who, if conservation is to be carried out effectively, must in some way be influenced to work along the lines which we know they should work along. Simply to establish relations with these people is obviously one of the major problems. And once relations have been established, there is the problem of persuading them to give up old traditional methods in favour of better modern methods. Furthermore, these vast numbers which are already here are increasing at a tremendously rapid rate. And the heavier the pressure of population upon resources, the more urgent becomes the need of man to produce food and the greater the temptation to use exploitative methods. Man simply has no choice but to live for the next year, and he must do his best to extract his living from soil which has often been already damaged and is in a precarious condition. The Germans have a good term for this kind of exploitative economy; they call it Raubwirtschaft (robber economy).

Now we have to consider a simple psychological fact. It is extremely difficult for human beings to follow a course which, though it may be manifestly helpful in the long run, in the short run imposes hardships upon them. This is a most serious problem, one which we shall come up against in several other contexts. How, by democratic means, are you going to persuade people to adopt measures which are excellent in the long run, but which may cause some discomfort in the short run? How are you going to persuade people not to exploit the soil when they desperately need food, and when this need is increasing year by year? This is not merely a question of organization and capital; it is a question of getting people to accept certain ideas. The trouble is that it looks as though it is going to be exceedingly difficult to reach the countless millions of people who must be indoctrinated and to get them to act upon what we know is the scientifically best method of doing things, without considerable totalitarian control and coercion.

The only alternative to coercion is persuasion and education. Unfortunately these democratic methods take time, and because of the rapidity of the increase in population there is exceedingly little time. Nevertheless, since we are committed to the democratic idea, we have to

think in terms of education and persuasion, and for this reason we have to think about the mental climate in which a proper approach to the planet on which we live can be made. And this involves a reconsideration of the problem of ethics, the problem of the general philosophy of life, and problems of artistic expression and artistic sensibility.

Let us begin with the ethical problem: What ought to be the relation of the human race with the world upon which it lives? I would say that the most obvious consideration emerging from the facts which were brought out in the last lecture is that the golden rule holds good not only for man's dealings with other men, but also for his dealings with lower animals and even with the inanimate world. The rule—do unto others as you would they would do unto you—applies not merely to man but to nature in general. There is a perfectly clear utilitarian basis for this ethical point of view. If we want to be treated well by nature, we have to treat nature well; as a matter of plain fact, if we harm or destroy nature, nature will do us harm and will destroy us.

It is worth pointing out that this ethical point of view, in which nature is regarded as having rights and we are regarded as having duties towards nature, is not found within our Western tradition, nor within the theological-scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages, which still remains orthodox in the more conservative churches. Instead, we have what seems to me to be a very shocking formulation, which is that animals possess no souls. Therefore they have no rights and we have no duties towards them, and consequently they may be treated as things. I feel that this is a most undesirable doctrine and also a most unrealistic one, because not only have we no right to treat animals as things, we can go further and say that we have no right to treat things as things. When we treat even inanimate objects as things which we can exploit to our heart's content, the consequences are disastrous. We have to treat the planet as though it were a living organism, with all the love and care and understanding which any living organism deserves. If we do not treat it in this way, then we shall destroy the world on which we live, and this destroyed world will in turn destroy us.

A very helpful idea in this context is the Greek idea of hubris. Hubris means wanton violence inspired by bumptiousness, arrogance, and the pride of power. The Greeks insisted that the gods would never put up with an arrogant man who committed hubris. And the interesting fact is that, in Greek thought, one could commit hubris not only towards other human beings, but towards nature. In Aeschylus's tragedy of The Persians, one of the crimes of Xerxes is that he has committed hubris not only against the Greek people—by invading them—but also against nature. To us, the particular crime against nature that he committed would seem rather forgivable—he built a bridge of boats across the Hellespont—but the principle seems to be profoundly true and right: We are capable of committing crimes of violence against nature, and they are as bad in their way as crimes of wanton violence committed against men. It is unfortunate that this idea did not go on into the Judaeo-Christian tradition, where the fundamental notion is that man is the lord of creation and is in some way apart from nature and free to do what he wants with it.

The idea of man's being apart from nature is actually a fairly recent one. Primitive man never had this idea; he has always regarded himself as a part of nature, as intimately and fundamentally concerned with and imbedded in it. This idea has been expressed by primitive peoples in such notions as totemism, which defines man's relationship to animals and even his identity with them; fertility rites, which insist on the fact that

human sexual processes are identical with those of nature, and that there is a deep-rooted connection between the two; and in notions of polytheism and the divineness of natural objects. This was the primitive pattern of the world, and remnants of it went on for many centuries after the acceptance of Christianity, in the so-called witch cults in Western Europe, for example, which were essentially old fertility cults that had survived from very ancient times.

In general, however, the conception which primitive man had of his oneness with nature was abandoned throughout the civilized world during a period which began about the eighth or seventh century b.c.; the whole conception then changed to the idea that man is in some sense apart from nature and that deity is transcendent and also apart from nature. The process is seen in India with the rise of Jainism and Buddhism; it is seen in the Near East with the rise of the Hebrew prophets; it is seen in Greece with the rise of Pythagoras and the Orphic religion.

Now there has been, so to speak, a counter-revolution. In a curious way we can say that the revolution accomplished by Darwin a hundred years ago—this is the centenary of the Origin of Species—was a revolution away from the traditional Judaeo-Christian notion of man's relationship to nature and back towards the primitive idea of man's union with nature. We seem to have passed on a kind of spiral course through the totemistic stage—a very early stage of cultural evolution—into a more self-conscious stage in which a sharp line was drawn between man and nature, and around to a point immediately above the totemistic stage which is an analogue to it on the scientific level. We see the old intuitive feeling for nature transformed into the ideas of ecology. We see polytheism transformed into the new biological philosophy of organicism—the idea of organisms within a greater organism.

It is perfectly clear, when we come to think of it, that we are indissolubly one with nature and depend completely on the natural environment. Anybody can do a simple experiment to find out how much he depends on the natural environment even though he lives in a world of television and automobiles. He merely has to put a clothespin on his nose and tape up his mouth to find out that he can't do without his natural environment for more than about sixty seconds.

Not only are we physically dependent on the outward environment, but we are also psychologically dependent on it in a very interesting way. This has been shown by the experiments conducted in recent years by D. O. Hebb at McGill University in Canada and John C. Lilly at the National Institute of Health in Washington on the effects of what is called 'limited environment'. If individuals are completely cut off from external stimuli, the most extraordinary things begin happening—mostly very unpleasant. Curiously horrifying visions and nightmare thoughts invade the mind, so that we discover that stimuli from the external world are required just to keep us sane.

It is not only that we need the external world to keep us alive, we need the external world to keep us from going mad. When we go into the matter more thoroughly we find that this direct psychological and physiological dependence is not merely upon our immediate environment, it is upon environments very remote, both in space and time. It is obvious, for example, that our entire life depends upon physical events taking place in the sun. It is also quite clear that our continued existence depends upon events taking place in distant mountain ranges and in the tropical and polar regions where our weather is made.

Over-populated countries such as England and most of the Western European countries depend for their very existence on events taking place far away and completely outside their political jurisdiction. What is going to happen to Western Europe when the New World has no more exportable surpluses? (Professor Paul Sears of Yale foresees that this will probably happen by 1980.) Nobody knows, but clearly the problem is of extreme importance in our political thinking.

We are also dependent on events which took place in very remote periods of time. Most of the world is still immensely dependent upon coal and oil, both of which are the products of events which took place in the distant past; thus we find ourselves bound up with the world in the closest possible way. The details of this binding up of ourselves with the world, and of all parts of the world, in a single quasi-organic whole are studied in the science of ecology, which is an extremely recent science—the word was invented by Ernst Haeckel less than a hundred years ago—and has unveiled the basic facts that living organisms exist in exquisitely balanced communities and that this balance can be very easily upset.

What has become abundantly clear from the study of ecology is that man has rushed in where angels feared to tread and in ignorance and stupidity and arrogance has everywhere upset these balances in a very alarming way. In the previous lecture I talked abut deforestation and erosion, which are the more conspicuous examples, but similar examples on a smaller scale abound. The interesting thing is that we discover after the balance has been upset how delicate it was; and we also realize that it is incredibly difficult for us to foresee what the results of our actions are going to be when we upset the balances of systems where the disturbance of any one element will throw the whole system out of gear.

Take a simple example of a few years ago, when the Forest Service attempted to do something on behalf of a special variety of deer which lived in the Kaibab Forest on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. There were only a few thousand of the deer left. The Service thought that the poor things were being persecuted by too many mountain lions, and men were sent out to slaughter a great number of the mountain lions. The result was that, in a few years, the deer population went from four thousand to nearly a hundred thousand. The deer ate up the entire range in the Kaibab Forest; then there were frightful epidemics and they began dying like flies. Only when mountain lions were reintroduced and had killed off the more sickly deer was a stable balance re-established. Gradually the forest recovered from its over-grazing, and the deer flourished fairly well.

This kind of thing has happened again and again. In Scandinavia, hawks were killed off because they killed game birds. The game birds multiplied, they got diseases, they almost became extinct, and the hawks had to be reintroduced. Much odder still is the result of the elimination of hippopotami from large areas in Africa. The fish population in the lakes and rivers where they lived depended to a large extent for nourishment on the minute animals which came from the excrement of the hippopotami. Since the hippopotami have been destroyed the whole fish population has gone too, and the natives have much less protein to eat. So we realize that in dealing with these extremely delicate ecological balances, we come in in the clumsiest way, without really knowing what we are doing.

Not only do we upset the balance by destroying elements, we also upset it by introducing new elements. The introduction of the Chinese crab into

Hawaii and the West Indies was a disaster, and a still greater disaster was the introduction of the rabbit into Australia, Patagonia, and other parts of the world. The only place where the introduction of the rabbit didn't result in a disaster was Ceylon, where fortunately they were kept down by poisonous snakes—animals which may be extremely useful to us and do us much more good than harm in spite of the fact that we don't happen to like them.

All this shows how immensely careful we must be in relation to the world. It is only by a combination of love and knowledge that we can get on in the world, and it is only on condition that we act with love and knowledge that we can dominate nature. We must remember that man is a paradoxical creature: he is one with nature, but he is a completely unique animal inasmuch as he can become conscious of his position and inasmuch as he can influence nature in an enormous and sometimes terrifying way. Whether we like it or not, it is quite clear that henceforward we have to take responsibility for what is happening on our planet, because if we don't take responsibility and if we don't act according to our knowledge of and affection for nature, we shall destroy the ground on which we are living and finish off our species.

I have said that with Darwinism we have returned to the primitive position, but on a higher level: we now recognize our oneness with nature and try to act upon it in a rational way. I think it is worth making a digression here to point out that the modern conception of nature has a great deal in common with the traditional views of the Chinese, that in a non-scientific, intuitive way, the Chinese anticipated modern scientific thought in many respects. The Chinese way of thinking about nature has always been very different from that of Western man. In the first place, unlike European philosophers, the Chinese have never thought in terms of substance. European philosophers have always asked, What is so-and-so? The Chinese have never asked this question; they've always asked, What are the relations between so-and-so and so-and-so? Now thinking about relationships rather than substance is quite characteristic of modern science. Not only did they think in terms of relation, the Chinese thought in terms of pre-established harmonies, of mutual action and reaction within fields of force.

These notions go back in China to the foundation of Taoist philosophy, probably in the sixth century b.c.; already in Chuang Tzu, in the fourth century b.c., we see the very clear formulation of a philosophy which is extremely close to modern organicism. The Chinese idea was that things are what they are and act upon one another in the way they do act by virtue of their position within a system of patterns. The Chinese spoke about individual patterns being subsumed in the Great Pattern, the Tao. They haven't been bothered with the idea of mechanical causation (which is extremely difficult to apply to biological entities) and have been able to think in organic terms from very early times.

Strangely enough, this organic, organismic conception of life was carried over to Europe in the eighteenth century and had a profound influence on the European philosopher Leibniz, who became interested in the translations of Chinese philosophy which the Jesuit fathers brought back from China, especially in the philosophy of Chu Hsi, a twelfth-century neo-Confucian who had combined the notion of Taoism with those of Confucianism. Leibniz's philosophy in turn has had a profound influence on such modern organicist philosophers as Whitehead, Needham, Bertalanffy, Smuts, and Lloyd Morgan. The fundamental Chinese idea of the Tao has been likened to a kind of cosmic field of force, which is a field of force not only in the physical world but in the spiritual world:

things are what they are and act as they act simply because of their position in the cosmic pattern.

An ethic and a philosophy are very important in creating a suitable mental atmosphere in which we can act in the right way towards our natural surroundings, but we need more than an ethic and more than a philosophy. We need an aesthetic, an organized sensibility which will polarize our feelings and thoughts in an artistic way towards the world. I am an old and unregenerate Wordsworthian; I regard Wordsworth as among the four or five greatest English poets and as a man who contributed insights of enormous importance in regard to what our relationship towards the world should be. Wordsworth's whole idea was that man and nature are closely interlinked, that morality goes right back into our relations with the world, and that our sense of the divine can be most powerfully mediated through our relations with the world of nature. He says, for example:

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

  Than all the sages can.

And he speaks in The Excursion of being

Rapt into still communication that transcends

The imperfect offices of prayer and praise

He felt very strongly this spiritual relationship of man with nature, and he felt its importance. He felt also that in nature man could discover his own deepest mind, that in his relationship with nature he could discover his spontaneity and an immediate, unsophisticated experience of life.

The quite recent development in European poetry and art which Wordsworth represents has a close relationship with the literature and art of the Far East. In Chinese and Japanese poetry and landscape painting we find images that are curiously prophetic of the Wordsworthian attitude towards nature; in that strange art form of Japan called the haiku, a tiny poem in seventeen syllables, we find it again and again expressed in an abbreviated and elusive way. Consider for example a poem by Basho, which goes like this:

   The hanging bridge

Creeping vines

   Entwine our life

A bridge of living substance links man with the material world, as Wordsworth says in his memorable words in the 'Tintern Abbey':

                  ... a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

This idea, which is characteristic of the nineteenth century in the West, was commonplace in the Far East many centuries before. We see it not only in poetry, but in the rise of landscape painting. Landscapes virtually without figures were painted in China at least one thousand years before they appeared in Europe. There is something profoundly religious in landscape painting inasmuch as it seems to explore and to express that layer of the unconscious which is beyond the personal unconscious and which, it seems to me, is just as much given, impersonal, and not immediately connected with me as the external world. So the value of landscape paintings is not merely that they present us with images of the external world, but that they present us in the most powerful way with images of this deep, fundamental essence of Mind at large, from which the individual mind takes its source. This 'nature mysticism', as it has been called—it's a rather unfortunate term, but I don't think we can invent any other—was in the nineteenth century a thing of extraordinary importance, and I think it represented a very wholesome reaction to the ravages of the industrial revolution, which covered the whole world with an incredible hideousness and led to the enormous expansion of cities and the foisting upon man of a technological environment.

The Wordsworthian reaction followed, imitated and continued by many other poets, in this country in Whitman, above all in certain of the short essays in Specimen Days, which have a kind of quietness about them which much of his poetry does not have. One feels so much with Whitman's poetry that he was addressing a very large audience, but in the little essays of Specimen Days describing his life in the country after his stroke, we have the impression that he was talking to himself. There are descriptions of sitting by a pond and watching kingfishers, or deriving a sense of life by holding on to the sapling of an ash, or sitting under an oak tree, which are wonderfully beautiful, and one can see the religious value the Wordsworthian attitude towards nature had in the bustling, spreading world of modern technology.

In the present world, and this is a fact which disquiets me, the prevailing nature mysticism of nineteenth-century landscape painting and poetry seems to a great extent to have evaporated. It is as though contemporary artists have resigned themselves to the new technological environment and are not paying much attention to the given environment of nature. We have seen in painting a retreat from landscape painting into non-representational painting, into the use of abstract forms which are supposed to be symbolic and expressive of events in the mind, but which to me are a good deal less expressive than the landscapes in which, say, the Sung painters, Constable, Turner, or the Impressionists expressed the states of their mind. And we see in poetry something of the same kind. I personally find a great deal of contemporary poetry too abstract for my taste.

There is a great tendency to use abstract phraseology to escape from the concrete, factual description of natural things into descriptions of some aspect of our technological civilization. For my own part, I am old-fashioned enough to feel that I would like another reaction towards nature poetry, nature mysticism, and nature landscape painting of an earlier day. It could not be the same thing, of course; we can never

repeat what happened in the past. But its general tendency would be towards health and genuine religious feeling which we could very well do with more of at the present time.

What we see then is that we are in a position to patch up the damage we have done to the planet and prevent more damage being done. But it is going to be exceedingly difficult because there are many factors which militate against it. And we need the right kind of mental atmosphere, one in which it will seem natural to people to do what we ought to do in relation to our planet. We need an extension of our present system of ethics; we need a philosophy, some form of what I would call realistic idealism, which will harmonize man with nature and which will take account of all the facts. And we need, finally, not only a good ethic and a good philosophy, but also a good art, which will give us the terms in which we can feel as well as think about this problem—an art which, I regret to say, I don't think exists today because of the reaction against the previous manifestation of it in the nineteenth century, but which I do feel very strongly deserves to come back and to receive all the attention of a young talent.

The end