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“Cock-a-Doodle-Doos”: Calls for Conscience in the Age of Global Warming

Abstract: This essay calls for a profound rethinking of our cultural reflections on the environment in this disastrous age of global warming. It explores the principles of ecology, especially humanity’s unity with nature, through a reading of John Donne, Thoreau, Shel Silverstein, and others. Paul Virilio’s concept of the specific accident and Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s documentary film *Home*, for instance, help shed light on the perils caused by rampant human desires and technological development. This essay further examines how Thoreau puts into practice Emerson’s transcendentalism – mostly in order to regard human beings as inhabitants, or part and parcel, of nature. It delves into Thoreau’s keen observations on humankind’s dilemma in society, especially his call for citizens of good conscience to actively oppose improper policies through non-violent resistance. In an age when man has become, as Freud put it, “a kind of prosthetic God,” the transcendental chanticleer in Thoreau’s *Walden* stands for an urgent call for conscience in action. Hopefully, it will prompt people not only to adopt a simpler and more eco-friendly life, but also to confront bravely the exploitative global structures that destroy ecosystems.

Keywords: ecocriticism, global warming, *Home* (dir. Yann Arthus-Bertrand), Paul Virilio, Thoreau

> I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. (Thoreau 1992, 30)

In Shel Silverstein’s poem “I Won’t Hatch,” a chicken refuses to be born into this world. It resolutely rejects birth as its manifest destiny because it hears “all the talk of pollution and war / As the people all shout and the airplanes roar” (Silverstein 1996, 127). Given current anthropogenic pollutants and the concomitant global warming and natural disasters, the complaint of Silverstein’s chicken sounds most legitimate, compelling, and alarming. Its grievance, in a larger sense, stands for the outcry of all threatened and endangered species on earth, human beings included.

As citizens of the earth, where should we go from here? Industries, institutions, and individuals alike – what can we do together to address the situation? How can literature help? How can it help us to better understand our crisis, and in turn harvest wisdom for the future? Can literature anticipate life and mould it

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110645033-034

to its purpose, as suggested by Oscar Wilde in "The Decay of Lying" (1973, 983)? Can literature add to reality by enriching "the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides," as claimed by C. S. Lewis (quoted in Holmer 1976, 75)? To put it another way, can we, in this age of global warming, witness a commitment to social responsibility on the part of writers in a manner similar to the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement, which rebelled against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and the excesses of the Victorian age? To shed more light on truth and reveal hope for the future, are there any valid enquiries that expose insatiable and rampant human desires as the very cause or, at least, the accomplice of the imminent global perils? Are there any viable ways to empower commitment to social responsibility, to carry social conscience into action, and thereby to encourage many a "Silverstein's chicken" to hatch, live, and respond to the urgent summons of nature?

To recover in old wisdom regenerative energy for the future, this essay engages in a two-pronged investigation. On the one hand, it takes into consideration the various crises in our natural environment in order to spotlight the treacherous "developments" of modern technology and the hazardous consequences that already seem to have followed in its wake. On the other hand, it explores the voices of concern about the destruction of ecology. With the dialogue between present-day environmental contexts and pertinent literary texts from the Western canon as an axis of its argument, this essay brings to the fore the current dilemma of human existence. Most importantly, it highlights the significance of humankind's sense of unity with nature – the vital link which, more often than not, gets lost in humankind's insatiable desire for more.

1 Humanity's desires running wild

Given the necessary evil that accompanies every technological development, or what Paul Virilio in *Pure War* calls the "specific accident,"[1] one cannot but ask how far and high humankind can go with ever-developing technology while re-

1 *Pure War* depicts the invisible war waged by technology against humanity. In his dialogue with Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio asserts that the riddle of technology is also the riddle of the accident: every technology produces, provokes, and programs a "specific accident" (Virilio and Lotringer 1997, 37–38). He notes the accidents that inevitably arise with every technological development: from car crashes to nuclear spillage, to the eradication of space and the derealization of time wrought by instant communication. In the new and updated edition of *Pure War*, Virilio and his co-author Lotringer (2008) consider how the omnipresent threat of the accident – both military and economic – has escalated.

maining safe and sound. The answers perhaps are yet to be found. One thing for sure, nevertheless, is that, the further we venture and push our luck, the more we risk. In terms of humankind's relationship with the world, should we take at face value the claims of progressive good that come with the excessive development of science and technology? Or, rather, to avoid the specific accidents that inevitably arise, should we pledge our allegiance to faith in moderation and simplicity, just like what Thoreau practised in *Walden*? To put this in a different manner: should the Tower of Babel and the fall of Icarus give us pause, even if only for a while? The former is a biblical story about humanity's desire to reach heaven, the latter a tale about the mythical Greek pioneer's disregard for the limitations of human invention. While each narrative unfolds against its specific cultural background, both of them highlight humankind's unquenchable thirst for more than we can afford.

Icarus and his artificial wings, together with humanity's intricate relationship with God in the construction of the Tower of Babel, correspond interestingly to Sigmund Freud's survey of man's great achievements and his desire to become God, or to obtain a Godlike quality: "Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times" (Freud 1989, 44). Freud further maintains that "present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character" (45). Does such unhappiness on the part of man have anything to do with the trouble given by the "auxiliary organs," the artificial inventions, which "have not grown on to him" naturally? In our age, the answer seems affirmative when it comes to the chaos and disasters of recent history. If permitted to develop out of control, science and technology might strike back in ways that go beyond human imagination, like the creation of Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's fiction.[2] The "History of Global Surface Temperature since 1880" graph in Lindsey and Dahlman (2018), released by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2018, for instance, alerts the public to the rapidly growing menace of climate change. Also in 2018, the world seems to be on fire – or so it appears in an image from NASA's *Worldview* tool (Jenner 2018). Thanks to the immoderate development of malevolent science and technology, accelerating global warming has given rise to more and more crises and disasters. Humankind's hubris, the overestimation of human technology, finally reaches breaking point

2 The Chernobyl disaster in 1986, for instance, released large quantities of radioactive contamination into the atmosphere, which spread over much of the western USSR and Europe. It is considered the worst nuclear power plant accident in history. And history tends to repeat itself. So does the "specific accident" in Paul Virilio's theory. Four more nuclear reactors were damaged during the 2011 Fukushima nuclear emergency in Japan (Black 2011).

when humanity's achievement is also humanity's downfall. The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, for example, tolled the warning bell in a most alarming way, chasing after people like the chariot galloping in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress":

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.
> (Marvel 2006, 543–544)

There is no denying the fact that time is indeed running out. Not, however, for the shy mistress in Marvell's poem to accept the speaker's passionate courtship under the pressure of the inevitable mortality of all human beings: the nature of the crisis now is not romantic at all. For the people of the twenty-first century, it is going to be absolutely devastating. It will endanger lives on this planet on a much larger scale and to a much greater degree than ever before. The warning bell, according to a report in *The Atlantic*, has reached the villagers of Newtok in Alaska and other potential climate refugees in this age of global warming. What is happening in "the village that will be swept away" will eventually happen to the rest of us if we do not take action in time. It is, in the words of Barack Obama, a "wakeup call" (Semuels 2015).

2 For whom the bell tolls

When the chariot of time is hurrying near, and when the warning bell is tolling loud and clear, it is perhaps time for us to ask: "For whom does the bell toll?" An answer to such a question, firstly, emerges from John Donne's "No Man Is an Island," originally published in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Donne 2001, 421). The analogy of island and continent in Donne's work bespeaks the relationship between each individual and their fellow human beings. As structural members of the organic whole, the component individuals cannot live outside the totality of their community at large. All are connected and related, deeply enmeshed in the entirety of their common existence. The private loss of each person also stands for the public loss of the whole community. For whom does the bell toll upon emergent occasions? Confronting the crisis of his life, Donne finds the answer in the unity of the global community. The warning bell reaches both the island and the continent. It tolls for each and every individual in Donne's demographic landscape.

The idea of unity in Donne's text of 1624 finds modern reinforcement in SueEllen Campbell's investigation of human civilization in "The Land and Language of Desire." She particularly emphasizes humankind's sense of unity with nature. Succinctly, she singles out the loss of control of humankind's desire as the cause of the current environmental crisis:

> Because our culture does not teach us that we are plain citizens of the earth, because we live apart from the natural world and deny our intimacy with it, we have lost that sense of unity that is still possible in other cultures. Our desire marks what we have lost and what we still hope to regain. Desire, for ecology, goes beyond the human. (Campbell 1996, 135)

How humankind defines its role on earth, as Campbell argues, determines its living relationship with the natural world. It is a shame that humankind's ignorance of its true position in the universe, under the sway of desire-oriented culture, should have contributed to its alienation from nature. By lamenting its absence, Campbell centres attention on the significance of that sense of unity for today's ecosystems, revealing the urgent task at hand for people today.

In a similar vein, Rutherford Calhoun depicts the sense of unity with the world in Charles Johnson's historical novel *The Middle Passage*. He recollects his position in society: "The 'I' that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this, was indebtedness" (Johnson 1990, 162–163). Spanning time and space, the "I" thus merges into a sense of oneness with the intertwined whole. Closely related to Calhoun's view of ecological entanglement in today's ecocriticism is Timothy Morton's concept of the "mesh." Specifically, it refers to the interconnectedness of all life forms on this planet. On this basis, Morton posits "the thinking of interconnectedness," or what he calls "the ecological thought," as a great opportunity for humankind to open its mind, think, and thereby cope with the great crises in this rapidly warming age (Morton 2010, 30). Furthermore, Calhoun's insight into his involvement in the overall network of ecology corresponds to Ralph Waldo Emerson's view of human existence in nature. Transposed into American transcendentalism, it turns into the "transparent eyeball" in Emerson's *Nature*: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (2001, 29). Humble yet self-reliant in believing in the divinity of every human being, the transcendental individual thus helps reshape humankind's intimacy with nature, retrieving and revitalizing that lost sense of unity.

We embed this crucial worldview even in nursery rhymes that we teach to our children. "This Is the House That Jack Built," for example, lends itself to exploring further humankind's indebtedness to the unity of the world. What has the farmer in this rhyme to do with the house built by Jack, who probably was a total

stranger to the farmer? How is the cock related to "the rat that ate the malt"? Through its cumulative technique, this nursery rhyme maps a miniature social network, depicting how the house is linked to numerous people, animals, and things in an intricate way. It reveals, in a broader sense, how all living things are connected in a chain and closely related to one another in this world as an interlinked whole. It further stands, in essence, for a symbiotic community, an ecosystem in miniature. Yet a chain is no stronger than its weakest link. The strength of this ecological chain thereby depends totally on each and every component. Take one away, and the others will crumble. Put differently, what would happen if the cow in this nursery rhyme died of a disease caused by polluted water or/and air? "The maiden all forlorn," presumably, would have no cow to milk, which in turn might jeopardize the kiss from "the man all tattered and torn." As a consequence of the absence of that kiss, the priest might not wed the man and the maiden. The cock would therefore have no need to crow in the morning to wake up the priest. Once started, the chain reaction would not stop until it exhausted itself. Likewise, any change in the ecological links will give rise to a ripple effect affecting each and every member of the community. The demise of any link, as Donne has it, diminishes the universal oneness.

There is another interesting house in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The house, according to the speaker of this poem, "is in the village, though" (Frost 1979, 224). To wit, it is outside the landscape that embraces the woods and frozen lake, serving as something that goes more with the artefacts of culture than with nature as the ultimate sublime. Throughout the poem, two contending forces flow and dance in between the lines, perhaps in a way which is as gentle and peaceful as "the sweep of easy wind and downy flake." One is the soothing and assuring attraction of nature, the other the call of conscience from outside the landscape – the "promises to keep" and "miles to go" before sleep. His conscience reminding him of duties and promises to be kept, the speaker cannot but evade the woods, which are "lovely, dark, and deep" (224). The sentiment of attraction or love between the speaker and nature in this poem, furthermore, corresponds interestingly to the author's complex emotions toward the world in "The Lesson for Today":

> And were an epitaph to be my story,
> I'd have a short one ready for my own.
> I would have written of me on my stone:
> I had a lover's quarrel with the world.[3]
> (Frost 1979, 355)

3 When Frost died in 1963, this poem of his was in fact inscribed on the headstone of his grave in Bennington, Vermont. The poem was originally published in Frost's *A Witness Tree* (1942).

In pursuing his visions of reality, Frost often sails against the currents of his time. When truth is ignored, a quarrel with his beloved world becomes inevitable. In addition to this "lover's quarrel," Frost also considers humankind's mortality and the nature of civilization in this poem. While science rapidly gains momentum in its further development, Frost contends that human beings are not happy in the dark age of uncertainty, perhaps not unlike "the God with artificial limbs" in Freud's theory. Frost therefore proposes "how to be unhappy yet polite" as the lesson for people of his day (1979, 353). In spite of the darkness and lack of certainty in his time, he refuses to let that uncertainty determine his outlook on life (350). Frost chooses instead to embrace with love the world as well as the woods. Affirmative as well as radical, such a mentality chimes interestingly with what Thoreau made clear in the epigraph to *Walden*. Thoreau, too, refuses to wallow in lament. He proposes instead to alert people to reality the best he can, "to brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning." Although not always smooth and sweet, Frost's intimate relationship with his beloved world, very likely, will inspire adoration, envy, or even anxiety in environmentalists nowadays. This is mainly because such a dear attachment, like humankind's intimacy with the natural world in Campbell's argument, might not survive the disasters induced by the escalating global warming. The nature of the quarrel this time, in other words, may well go beyond human imagination.

Are there ways to regain our intimacy with the world, as Campbell urges? Yann Arthus-Bertrand offers his answer in *Home*, a documentary released in 2009. Through a candid representation of the current situation, this film anticipates humanity's coming life and alerts the public to the impending catastrophe. A few things are especially noteworthy. Firstly, this cinematic critique of today's society reinforces vividly the core principle of ecology: all of us are interconnected in our symbiotic global community. Citing examples from the history of our planet, it joins forces with the common belief in the sense of unity. In particular, *Home* turns the spotlight on the natural balance between all organisms and the earth. What is truly at stake now in our environmental struggles, it further expounds, is maintaining that delicate but crucial balance. Should the balance be tipped by the effects of global warming, our planet cannot but face havoc. The graph and the image from NASA's *Worldview* mentioned above, indeed, speak volumes where this imminent nightmare is concerned. When it truly happens, needless to say, no one will remain intact.

Secondly, *Home* may be seen as a modern filmic rendition of "This Is the House That Jack Built" – one in which the many ecological links of our symbiotic community are revealed to be extremely vulnerable. Besides, right from the beginning of the film, a human voice repeatedly addresses humankind as *Homo sapiens*. Clearly intended as an admonition, it helps raise awareness that wisdom is

an ideal state for humankind to live up to. Ample examples, one after the other, further expose the urgency of today's human beings working together wisely to sustain that crucial balance between all lives on earth. It is obvious that our civilization can no longer tolerate the excessive development of malevolent science and technology, which are often endorsed and manipulated by the exploitative enterprises that jeopardize ecosystems. *Home* thereby proposes a new awareness, "a new human adventure based on moderation, intelligence and sharing." No more greedy monopoly and extravagance on the part of human beings. What is expected instead is an advance – an adventure leading to the eco-friendly mentality of living and letting live by maintaining the natural balance. Last but not least, *Home*, as a title for Arthus-Bertrand's critique of the modern world, if compared with the traditional sense of "house," emits a feeling of warmth and a sense of belonging. Its form of singularity further reinforces the sense of unity underscored by John Donne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Johnson, SueEllen Campbell, Timothy Morton, and others who believe in the common wealth of all lives on earth.

When it comes to critiques of human influence on the natural world, especially in the context of global warming, Al Gore's remarks invite special attention. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, a 2006 documentary film, he warns that our world faces a true planetary emergency, a challenge to the moral imagination. Gore also calls into question the dubious role of the politician in the face of current environmental struggles. He points out specifically that "it is a politician's natural instinct to avoid taking any stand that seems controversial unless and until the voters demand it or conscience absolutely requires it." Surviving this age of disasters will obviously require commitment from all of us. The voters, in other words, should come together and demand the implementation of all possible precautions. Hope will smile more readily on humankind, I would argue, if all politicians choose to heed the voice and call of their own conscience. However, this seems naturally incompatible with the political instincts of many a politician. The significance of conscientious action in Gore's argument would find better support from global citizens than politicians, given the risk that the latter would probably choose to follow their political instincts when the issues become controversial or "inconvenient."

3 Humans thinking

Gore's emphasis on conscience in the environmentalists' struggles accords with Thoreau's views in *Resistance to Civil Government*. In the nineteenth century, Thoreau espoused the need to prioritize one's conscience over the dictates of

laws. Government, to him, is but an expedient at best. It is the rule of conscience that human beings should follow. Thoreau thus argues:

> Can there not be government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? – in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. (Thoreau 1992, 227)

Here Thoreau appeals to the human instinct that knows right from wrong. It is conscience that can resist gravitation toward the world of false values. And it is the innate goodness of humanity that one can trust when the view of truth becomes dark and confusing.

Applied to the metaphorical chanticleer in the epigraph to *Walden*, Thoreau's reliance on instinct, interestingly, agrees with a discovery in a recent biological experiment. Takashi Yoshimura and Tsuyoshi Shimmura highlight the functions of the internal biological clock that tells roosters when to crow:

> Our observations prove that the rooster breaks the dawn every morning as a function of his circadian clock. It has been known for a long time that crowing is also induced by external stimuli. We conclude that not only anticipatory predawn crowing, but also external stimulus-induced crowing, is under the control of a circadian clock. (Yoshimura and Shimmura 2013, R232)

For a rooster to crow, in other words, requires nothing from the outside. Rather, it takes something natural from inside. It is an instinct that a rooster can rely on when left in the dark. Likewise, in the scenario of Thoreau's philosophy, the metaphorical chanticleer can trust his instinctive conscience and thereby crow heartily and sing clearly to help people remain sober when the rest of the world is in unconsciousness or confusion.

Thoreau, as a matter of fact, is not the only philosopher who underscores respect for what is right, the value of human conscience. The ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius also advocates the innate goodness of the individual. He believes that it is society's negative influence that causes bad moral character. The way of learning, therefore, is none other than "finding the lost mind" (Mencius 1963, 58), and the beginning of wisdom is "the feeling of right and wrong" (65). Likewise, David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, affirms the rule of what is right. In his opinion, the affection of humanity for the public good stands as the foundation of morals:

> The notion of morals implies some sentiment common to all mankind, which recommends the same object to general approbation, and makes every man, or most men, agree in the same opinion or decision concerning it. It also implies some sentiment, so universal and comprehensive as to extend to all mankind, and render the actions and conduct, even of the persons the most remote, an object of applause or censure, according as they agree or disagree with that rule of right which is established. (Hume 1777)

Emphasizing the prevalent conformity to what most people consider to be morally good, Hume's theory thus resonates with the common belief in human conscience. The core of morality, in a nutshell, is telling right from wrong. It requires the capacity not only to recognize the interests of other people but also to choose the public good over self-interest.

While echoing the above-mentioned advocacies of morality, Thoreau's call for conscience proves even more radical and challenging. This is mainly because it demands conscience in action, not merely the acknowledgement of the human instinct that knows right from wrong. His appeal for the moral uplifting of society requires the courage to dissent, to break the bad laws, and to do the right things through conscientious objection and non-violent resistance. Thoreau's *Walden*, furthermore, demonstrates the government of conscience in his relationship with the natural world. It is simplicity, not extravagance, which Thoreau pursued in his life. He went to the woods by Walden "to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau 1992, 61) – or, put in Yann Arthus-Bertrand's cinematic language, to live out the true wisdom of *Homo sapiens*. As for Thoreau's belief in action, it affirms the remarks of his mentor Emerson: "Without it, thought can never ripen into truth" (Emerson 2001, 61). Thoreau thereby encourages people to put foundations under the castles of their dreams, not to mention the action he urges people to take for justice. In a sense, he is "Man Thinking," the seer and doer, not a mere thinker, according to Emerson's definition in "The American Scholar" (Emerson 2001, 57). Interestingly, both Emerson and Thoreau fit the vivid portrayal of the transparent eyeball in action in a caricature of 1951 by Christopher Cranch (2015). Enjoying "an original relation to the universe" (Emerson 2001, 27), the transcendental eyeball, the "Man Thinking," thus practices in life his green conscience – the conscience that values humanity's unity with nature.

In this age of global warming, it is also this very conscience that is expected to perform its duty to the global community. For one thing, it has to brave the malicious powers that keep damaging the planet and upsetting the already vulnerable natural balance. Through the joint efforts of conscientious industries, institutions, and individuals, it must hold responsible the exploitative structures that ruin ecosystems. Meanwhile, this conscience needs to be acted out in the daily life of every individual on earth. There is no denying that human beings have now arrived at the point where all must realize that change is necessary to

reduce harm to the environment, and that such change would be in everyone's best interest. The decision to lead an eco-friendly life, in the moral calculus of climate change,[4] has to be the only choice. Accordingly, the rule of insatiable human desire cannot but succumb to the rule of right, which, preferably, is also the rule of "moderation, intelligence and sharing." Hopefully, the collective conscience of *Homo sapiens* in action – embodying a collaborative fusion of acquired technological knowledge with inner wisdom – will make possible a feasible niche of "conscience," the foundation for all virtuous sciences to come together and help save our endangered planet.

4 Coda

In his examination of Robert Frost's relationship with his world, Seamus Heaney calls attention to Frost's letter to Amy Bonner in June 1937 that said "there are no two things as important to us in life and art as being threatened and being saved. What are ideals of form for if we aren't going to be made to fear for them? All our ingenuity is lavished on getting into danger legitimately so that we may be genuinely rescued" (quoted in Heaney 1996, 62–63). Being genuinely saved, in other words, requires being threatened first – to learn to fear for our ideals of form and thereby truly appreciate them. If this argument of Frost proves true, what could we learn from it? Will humankind eventually be rescued after experiencing earthquakes, tsunamis, and a series of nightmarish threats? Fearfully, many people have learned their lesson for today – to fear for the earth which they closely and dearly rely on. Wishfully, many people have been striving for a chance to regain their intimate relationship with the world, a chance to transform Frost's epitaph into an epigraph to humankind's new adventure in a global community that values a dear symbiosis between humanity and nature. And that chance, most probably, will find realization in actions rooted in, and nourished by, the powerful call of human conscience.

4 Alex Blasdel calls attention to Timothy Morton's insight that we are condemned to live with the awareness that we are driving global warming and ecological destruction. We therefore live in a world with a moral calculus that did not exist before. Now, doing just about anything becomes an environmental question (Blasdel 2017).

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