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Letter to the Editor

THE HUDSON REVIEW

Dear Sir:

Bravo for your "Poetry and Ecology" issue, especially for your own call for "a spiritual change...of at least the magnitude of those which accompanied the birth of Christianity and the rise of modern science," a change without which man will fail not only to thrive but even to survive, and for your vision of poetry's role "in the forming of a new sensibility."

While you do not say so, I sense that you would like to "bring us together," at least see all of us who are under the prophetic burden of ecological doom come together in whatever alliances and coalitions are needed to alert America and mankind and to move people and peoples to the emergence of global, world-affirming man.

But as for Wendell Berry's "A Secular Pilgrimage," his sectarianism tends to cancel his own intention of moving us to feel and act together. His open motive, man's surviving and thriving in partnership with nature, is unexceptionable; but his ulterior motive is to preach a narrow, pluralism-denying religion antipathetic to the main roots of our (i.e., Western man's) spiritual heritage and therefore sure to alienate the mass of his major potential allies, viz. Jews and Christians. His tragic self-canceling here seems to me to need some spelling out. Toward this, I append a few notes, and plead that he and others who yield to the sectarian temptation will liberate themselves both from the tribal bondage of eristic orthodoxy and from the inauthentic use of the ecology issue to subvert others' religion—for such subversion is a cheap evangelistic trick unworthy of a poet and subversive of Mr. Berry's own primary intent. Here, now, the few notes:

1. Poet's are natural animists, and I do not object to Berry's preaching animism over against polytheism and monotheism: he has as much right to his religion as I have to my Christian faith. But if he wants to move me toward action on his ecological vision (which I share), he ought not to divert my attention from this goal by distortive rhetoric against the major roots of my motivation. If he were as strategic as I believe he is sincere in his call to action, he would lend his poetic gift to the orchestration of motivations (with their various world-picture grounds) rather than to blessing one motivational mix (the animistic) and cursing others.

2. What seems particularly pathetic is that what Berry wants to say depends not at all on his ontic dogmatism. "The essential double awareness of the physical presence of the natural world and of the immanence of mystery or divinity in the physical presence" (p.410) can be promoted and celebrated as easily under polytheism and theism (both of which he

strongly rejects and even execrates) as under his animism (or neo-animism, if he'd prefer the term). Granted that most contemporary American nature poetry avoids Western ontological imagery (e.g., "Creator"/"creature-creation" in its original, biblical Weltbild) and leans Eastward--both, I think, for the Oedipal reason: can poets justify this imaginal impoverishment in the light of their craft? I think not. But the Berrys in the craft hinder the emergence of truly liberated poets.

3. Lest I am thought to be crediting Berry as a wellspring of divisiveness in our ecology camp, I hasten to remark that he seems to me rather more a victim of the cheap antibiblical, antiWestern propaganda in the counterculture in general and in our ecology movement in particular. It is cheap because it preaches what its hearers want to hear (e.g., that their parents' religion is dead and poisonous), cheap because its preachers don't have to pay up (at least yet), and cheap because based on shabby, tendentious scholarship (no higher than the academic level of Hefner's Playboy Philosophy). Consider, e.g.,

a. The romanticizing of the primitive (shades of Rousseau's noble savage!). Western man is now struggling to save nature from primitive man, as e.g. Africans' depredations of fauna, now threatening the extinction of a score of animals. Or man's overgrazing vast tracts of land (e.g., North Africa and the Middle East), creating deserts long before there was any biblical religion. Or man's overcutting of timber on Asian slopes, causing disastrous and irreversibly damaging floods long before any Western influence in Asia. Or...why go on with the list? The honest truth is that quite apart from particular cultures and their depredations, man as man on this globe has been progressively bad news to nature. Western man, as the latest dominant man and history's only world-dominant man, has been bad news not fundamentally because of Western religion but because of the numerical factor: bad news written large with power is worse news only in the sense of being bigger bad news. Massive paleontological-anthropological evidence suggests that primitive man was less bad news to nature not because he had a religion ecologically superior to ours but simply because he had less power to pervert and pollute nature....Let's not have our "nature poets" pushing romantic nonsense about human primitivity and pandering to pathetic nature-freaks in the counterculture. Our poets have more serious work to do, life-and-death work.

b. The perception of the Bible, in Berry and others of his ilk, is a tissue of half-truths. E.g., the Bible's stress is not on man over against nature, but rather God and man over against chthonic forces in nature and man that war against nature, man, and God (e.g., in the eighth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans): man is bad news for nature (Genesis 3, "the Fall") but is intended to be good news with nature. If our poets can't "dig" this, it's because of their own inner impoverishment, not because of a defect in the Bible. Which reminds me: why did your ecology issue have no piece presenting the ecological potential of biblical-Jewish-Christian imagery?

c. The faulty logic of concluding from the fact that primitive man did no (less?) damage, the "truth" that modern Western man's religion lies at the base of his depredation of nature--the genetic fallacy in reverse! To this is added the proleptic fallacy: the ancestors are accused of lacking ecological sensitivity, i.e. of not having a modern consciousness! Truth is, they were handling the threats to their existence at least as competently as we are handling the threats to ours: will Consciousness IV be able to say that about Consciousness III?

4. I must shorten the notes, lest they not be read! I make final complaint against poet Berry's liberal illusion that man is soon-enough educable to survive. I believe not, and therefore favor coercive conception control (automatic sterilization of the world's women at the third birth). As apolitical, Berry is largely irrelevant to the crisis of survival.

Willis Elliott