

Green Humanism: A New Vision for a New Century

Louise Westling

ABSTRACT

The Western humanism that came out of a classical Greek philosophical tradition became involved with imperialist colonial expansionism when it emerged in more intense form as Renaissance humanism and 17th-century Cartesian rationalism. Descartes posits a split between the rational human consciousness and objective nature; as corollary we have the separation between a rational, subjective, "divine" humankind and the rest of nature, which is there as an object to be colonized, controlled, manipulated, used by man. Certain dominant threads of our current, postmodernist and "globalizing" late-capitalist thinking further reinforce the techno-scientific understanding of human beings in relation to nature—moving us beyond subjectivity and beyond humanism on the way to becoming mindless cyborgs, cyberspace-linked man-machines, money-making and nature-exploiting machines. But this move beyond (neo)classical humanism is not what we need. Rather we need what has been called "green humanism": we must maintain our sense of humanity or human subjectivity, human creaturehood, while dwelling intersubjectively and non-anthropocentrically with all other organisms and ecosystems on earth. This involves adopting (or returning to) the sort of understanding Merleau-Ponty speaks of: an awareness that we are through our bodies intimately intertwined with, infolded within the world, which we can experience only from the particular perspective of this bodily involvement. We must now become embodied human citizens of the biosphere, whose minds are part of the world and intertwined in participation with its myriad lives and energies.

KEY WORDS

humanism

green humanism

Renaissance rationalism

postmodern cyborgs

"body-subject"

alterity

Cartesian rationalism

classical humanism

colonial expansionism

intersubjectivity

infoldedness-within-world



Humanism is a European cultural formation that is essentially imperialistic or colonial and that has fueled the enormous expansion of European interests since the 15th century. Because of colonial successes and the Industrial Revolution with its scientific and technological aftermath—coupled with the colonial apparatus to implant it all over the globe—Humanist premises underlie the erosion of many traditional Asian cultures, and the development of modern, European-style economic and industrial systems in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and India. The out-sourcing of manufacturing processes from American and European settings to Asian ones has further intensified the movement of faith in human technologies and resource exploitation, also into Latin America and Africa, often destroying indigenous subsistence patterns of life. Thus in effect, Humanism has been spread as an implied doctrine along with all of this economic and political change. While I don't expect the intellectual history of Humanism to be as familiar to intellectuals in the Republic of China as in the U.S. or European countries, I hope to strike familiar chords with the following discussion of the basic tenets of Humanism and their connections with the environmental problems that beset the Earth. We are now all members of a global community that has applied Humanist values to reap huge benefits from exploiting the land and sea and their living communities and we are all experiencing the disastrous ecological consequences of that exploitation.

In what follows, I want to show how Humanism developed in the Italian Renaissance as a philosophical doctrine of imperial conquest which justified both geopolitical and technological expansion. We know this expansion as the rise of the modern European and eventually American powers and the explosion of their technological projects in

the Industrial Revolution, which treated the natural world as inert matter to be ripped out of the earth and seas for human use. Such attitudes continue to shape public discourse all over the world, and many postmodern theorists have carried it to extreme positions which define humans as free to create almost any reality they wish. Jean Baudrillard makes the sardonic claim in *The Illusion of the End*, that our present era represents the triumph of Walt Disney, who anticipated a world in which “all past or present forms meet in a playful promiscuity,” and where, as immensely privileged citizens of industrialized Western countries, we can inhabit any reality we choose (118). The postmodern play of signifiers constructing “Place” and “Nature” allows us free enjoyment of a virtual cyberspace where all strange desires can be gratified, where we can morph ourselves or images of others into strange forms, and where we can consume an endless array of products from all over the globe. Donna Haraway tells us that we are all cyborgs and must accept the erasure and overlapping of boundaries, indeed celebrate the perverse multiplicities of our identities produced in the present era of “the implosion of the natural and the artificial, nature and culture, subject and object, machine and organic body, money and lives, narrative and reality” (14). Yet if we notice the fragments of news, the faint sounds of protest and pain that sometimes break through the fog of advertizing and consumerism surrounding our comfortable New World Order, then we know that our playful Walt Disney reality is not a virtual or innocent one at all. The pleasant spaces of our lives require the violent manipulation of other kinds of spaces. Actual physical landscapes in India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, Guatemala, northern Mexico, and southern New Mexico and Arizona, and of Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and many others, are inundated with toxic waste that sickens and kills millions of plants and animals, including people who are almost always poor and dark-skinned. In fact, despite their playfully postmodern rhetorical practices, both Baudrillard and Haraway catalogue the perversions and dangers of our culture’s insatiate power. Baudrillard flatly states that “the distress of the rest of the world is at the root of Western power” and points to the way we feed upon that distress to entertain our jaded imaginations, in a “catastrophic canni-

balism, relayed in a cynical mode by the news media” (68). What we fail to notice is the way our cheerful techno-paradise is destroying our own species along with the idealized “natural” spaces we pretend to idealize.

In aiming for virtual (technical) immortality and ensuring its exclusive perpetuation by a projection into artifacts, the human species is precisely losing its own immunity and specificity and becoming immortalized *as an inhuman species*; it is abolishing in itself the mortality of the living in favour of the immortality of the dead. . . . As a result, by going down these paths of artifice which were supposed to ensure its indefinite survival, it is perhaps hurtling even more quickly to its doom. (84)

Haraway attacks media manipulation of images of poor and dark-skinned people as a phony racial universalism that masks increasing racial hatreds and exploitation of minority populations around the world. And she anatomizes the dangerous power dynamics at the heart of technologies such as genetic engineering. Yet, in her most recent book, she has adopted a troubling new persona to replace her earlier playful cyborg, this time one that reflects her own position within the power elite. It is the figure of the vampire “who effects category transformations by illegitimate passages of substance; the one who drinks and infuses blood in a paradigmatic act of infecting whatever poses as pure; the one that eschews sun worship and does its work at night; the one who is undead, unnatural, and perversely incorruptible.” Haraway’s vampire is “the cosmopolitan, the one who speaks too many languages and cannot remember the native tongue, and the scientist who forces open the parochial dogmas of those who are sure they know what nature is. In short, once touched by the figure of this monster, one is forced to inhabit the swirling semantic field of vampire stories” (214-15). This is a nightmare vision of globalization. The language of the passage betrays Haraway’s own—and Baudrillard’s—implication in the power and privilege they decry. They still describe humans as existing outside the rest of nature, with the power to

mans as existing outside the rest of nature, with the power to manipulate it into the forms of desire expressed by the rich and the powerful, to the detriment of the majority of our own species and the destruction of the global community of life.

I will argue that this approach to the human place in the world is disastrous. I want to advocate for its replacement by a very different value system which sees the whole world as alive, with humans immersed in it, bound by interrelationships and responsibilities to their surrounding community.

In the so-called Western countries of Europe and the Americas, Humanism is under attack from every direction these days, it seems. Postmodern theory has demolished the unified human subject, religious conservatives crusade against godless Secular Humanism, the fortunes of traditional humanistic disciplines continue to decline in the academy, and ecotheorists inveigh against anthropomorphism, which is just another name for the human-centered gaze which looks down on the rest of creation from a masterful height. David Ehrenfeld might have been a bit extreme in his 1978 *Jeremiad* when he claimed that humanist arrogance lies at the root of all the activities creating the environmental crisis, but most thoughtful environmental theorists would agree that we need to reject the imperial, heroic notion of human capacity that we have inherited from the Renaissance and Enlightenment. However, the environmental community involved in science and public policy has not really responded to these critiques, perhaps because in many respects it remains committed to the premises under attack. Ecologists and other environmental scientists share key humanist notions of separation from a supposedly objective natural world. They may trace the interconnections of living beings and natural processes, but as philosopher Monika Langer explains, "some forms of 'scientific systems ecology' have sought to sever any connection with natural history and have, in effect, adopted the mechanistic assumptions of classical physics as well as the general concern with prediction, manipulation, and control. They have thus converged with the dominant Cartesian scientific paradigm and have become closely allied with resource management" (119). Langer expresses a widely-held view that "An appropriate response to

'the environmental crisis' thus requires . . . a rejection of our present, predominantly Cartesian ontology, and the development of a radically different ontology. This would mean a profound transformation in our conception of alterity and, in keeping with that, a fundamental alteration in our relations with the nonhuman other" (115). Because we are human, however, we will in a general sense always see the world from a "Humanist" perspective. The question is whether we can change its angle, or revise the sense of who we are as humans, to accord with an ecological sense of the interdependent reality of life. I propose that we can do so, by revising the concept of how we live and know, but in ways that turn the Humanist tradition inside-out.

However, at the outset I had better indicate the place from which I speak, remembering Raymond Williams's reminder that "More than we ever believe, we understand life from where we are." [as well as M-P's insistence—which I will examine later—that as bodies immersed in contingent situations, we can only know what experience and the present angle of vision offer to us.]

However much I may have worked to broaden my sense of environmental problems beyond provincial concerns, I remain an American whose ideas of "Nature" are obsessed with wildness, spacially defined by the continent of North America with its relatively low human population densities and large open vistas and landscape features such as big mountains, rivers, swamps, deserts, and plains. As a white, upper-middle class person, I have inherited the imperial nostalgia of the colonizers and their infatuation with isolated, "wild" places of privileged leisure that were created by my government after their native inhabitants were either killed or pushed away. Automatically I think of myself as *outside* of nature, though as a woman I have been taught that I am supposed to be closer to "it"—or "Her"—than men are. It is too easy for me to assume that "Nature" is a place to visit—Salmon Creek in a grove of old growth Douglas Firs forty miles from my house, or the Three Sisters Wilderness a two-hour drive away, or even farther away, the Wallawa Mountains of Northeastern Oregon, the sacred homeland of the Nez Perce Indians who were driven out of them only a little more than a hundred years ago. Wild places like that seem to us Americans to be

places where nature is pure. Such an automatic response—or unconscious assumption—can be resisted, but it takes a lot of conscious effort.

Having lived for thirty years in Oregon—recently the logging capital of the world—and having watched its huge rainforests mowed down during that time, I am part of an environmentally active university community that simultaneously agitates for environmental legislation on many fronts and lives a highly consumptive, technologically enhanced existence not available to most of humanity. As a student of American literature and an ecocritic, I have become more and more interested in writing by people from poor, dark-skinned, and environmentally damaged communities that protests their colonization and exploitation. Political tensions within the American ecocritical/environmental community caused by the reluctance of mainstream environmental groups to attend to or include poor people and urban problems have made many of us turn to fiction and poetry that raise issues of environmental justice. And yet we aren't doing anything much in any practical sense to advance that cause.

These problems have been brought to light in the past couple of decades by the wider postcolonial movement in literary theory that has complicated older American narratives of pastoral escape or Manifest Destiny. Any effort to evaluate the American movement of ecocriticism, or study of literature and the environment, and its relation to its humanistic heritage, must take these political and historical complications into account. David Mazel's new book *American Literary Environmentalism* works towards this end in an admirably rigorous way, but even the most passionately committed ecocritics have yet to reorient their work as he suggests.

The place where I grew up is a good example of how American environmentalists have been personally enmeshed from their earliest days, in the complexities Mazel explores. My childhood home was a white, middle-class community protected from widespread surrounding poverty that existed in segregated African American neighborhoods as well as poor white ones. This was Jacksonville, Florida in the 1940s and 1950s, a town probably at least one-third black in population, named

for a famous Indian fighter who, when he became President, banished all the eastern tribes across the Mississippi River to Oklahoma along what became known as the Trail of Tears. My kind of people in Jacksonville had good schools and libraries, and a little culture in the form of occasional symphony concerts and a small art scene. We had lots of lush open land around us—a tidal river more than a mile wide, with swamps and woods along it teeming with birds and reptiles, where we children were free to roam. In that semi-tropical climate, we were outdoors most of the time—playing in the swamps and playing Indians. Those Indian fantasies were as suspicious in my and my playmates' cultural situation as James Fenimore Cooper's and Karl May's Indian romances were within their imperial American or German contexts. The indigenous tribes of Florida—such as the Timacuanas—were wiped out by European diseases and Spanish massacres. The Indians who moved in to take their place were racially mixed rejects from the Creek tribes to the north. These were the Seminoles, many of them part African-American. They quickly adapted to the steamy landscape of Florida and became so comfortable in the marshes and swamps that they were able to evade all U.S. Government attempts to conquer them. They never signed a peace treaty until the 1960s, instead living in the Everglades—or Florida wilderness—where white men could not venture. Thus the landscape of Florida in the 1950s was one with a tangled human history, most of it ignored by the people among whom I lived. When my friends and I played Indians or explored in the swamps, we were reenacting and celebrating that history.

All Americans are entangled in such historically complicated landscapes, and I would agree with David Ehrenfeld that our love of the land and desire to protect its wild spaces participates in a Humanist meta-narrative which is basically imperialistic. But this is only one local example of similarly imperial stories replayed all over the earth. Americans are heirs not only to a particular hemispheric story of geographical conquest and exploitation, but also to a much longer European cultural history that justified such projects. That is the reductionist dualism of Western humanist philosophy that came down to us from Plato and triumphed in Cartesian and Newtonian mechanistic

models of the cosmos. Much of twentieth century philosophy has struggled against this heritage, but popular culture and techno-science now on a global scale continue to assume its premises. An ecological, or Green, Humanism will have to articulate itself within these human cultural and political dynamics. Perhaps we have arrived at a Kuhnian moment of transition just before a long-standing paradigm collapses and is replaced by a new one. If so, as I hope is the case, the environmental movement (with ecocriticism as one important center for its theorizing and dissemination) is in the process of defining the new paradigm against the massive inertia of the Enlightenment heritage.

Rather than rehearse the well-known history of that heritage, I need only to remind you of the central Humanist trope that prepared the way for the Enlightenment and the development of mechanistic science based on the presupposition of transcendent human agency outside an objectified natural world. Then I will try to suggest how humanism might be changed.

As literary scholars we all know that Humanism began with Renaissance philology focused on the newly-recovered literatures of Greece and Rome. One early and characteristic expression of its premises is that of Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* which he prepared for delivery in 1487. If we think about its central claims about the human place in nature, and then briefly glance at its scientific and geopolitical contexts, their inappropriateness for ecological thinking will be quite clear.

Pico works of course within an inherited Judeo-Christian notion of human superiority described in the Biblical book of Genesis. There man is created in God's image, with orders to "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (1:28).

But Pico extended these concepts into such heretical territory that the Pope intervened and blocked his presentation of the oration. It wasn't published until 1496, two years after Pico's death. In the *Oration*, Pico offers a revised creation story in which man is an amphibian who can move at will up and down the hierarchy of nature, with the

power to transcend the flesh, the earth, and even the position of the angels. According to this little allegory, God set man in the middle of the world, with an active mind and will to use in selecting his own form and gifts from all the possibilities in creation. God said, "I have placed you at the very center of the world, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine" (7). Thus man can transcend all embodied life, and become "a pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the chambers of the mind . . . [a creature neither] of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh" (10-11). Here is an heroic, epic, imperial pose, fashioned enthusiastically from an idealized synthesis of Greek and Roman models. The great ancient empires represented possibilities of vast conquest—geographical, technological, cultural, and political—which early modern Europeans eagerly sought to emulate. Pico's model of man is thus a free agent responsible only for his own destiny, ready to surpass even the ancients in innovation, ambition, and imperial expansion.

It should be remembered, from our contemporary, ecologically-informed perspective, that the Hellenistic and Roman empires so admired by early modern Europeans, devastated the landscapes around the Mediterranean, deforesting the whole area for their navies and massive building and engineering projects, with the Romans exhausting the soils of North Africa in order to supply grain for their armies. Tacitus reports the eloquence of a Briton named Calgacus (or Galgacus in Modern Library trans.), who understood this very well, as, with his back to the sea, he rallied his compatriots to oppose the Roman invaders, calling them "Ravagers of the globe" (*raptores orbis*) who, "having by their universal plunder exhausted the land," now turn "to rifle the deep." (*Auferre, trucidare, rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*)—"to such activities as snatching away, cutting to pieces, and dragging away, they falsely give the name of empire, and where they make a desert or wasteland, they call it

peace." (My rough trans., with the help of Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 49; see 695 of Modern Library edition).

Pico della Mirandola's intellectual position was closely related to signal events in his world occurring about the same time, which unleashed a similar colonizing devastation. To choose just two of the most obvious of those events—Columbus in 1492 sailed across the Atlantic to claim a new world, and Copernicus (1473-1543) wrote his great work, *On the Revolution of the Celestial Bodies* (*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*) in 1530. Each of these men heralded one aspect of an era of explosive European conquest in the arts and philosophy, in geopolitical colonization, and in science, that surpassed the sweeping enterprises of the Roman Empire and led to the vast technological, economic, and political colonization by the so-called Developed Countries of our own day. The metaphoric violence imagined by the Humanist revolution, that still energizes modern national and transnational colonial powers, has been thoroughly anatomized by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*, a book with which I'm sure you are all familiar.

It is this destructive pattern of hostile objectification and manipulation of a Nature conceived as outside and under the control of human beings that we now find ourselves struggling to escape. Somehow we need to rediscover the kind of harmonious sense of community within the biosphere that we nostalgically project onto remaining tribal cultures around the globe. This is an enterprise with its own dangers, of course, as we have been reminded by Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*, Raymond Williams's *Country and the City*, and by recent post-modern theoretical studies like Timothy Luke's *Ecocritique* and Andrew Ross's *Strange Weather* and *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*.

But I believe that an effort to reimagine ourselves *within* the whole of nature has been in progress for some time, and that it has been closely interrelated with the developments of relativity theory and quantum mechanics that destroyed the mechanistic Newtonian model of the cosmos with its promise of human control and positivistic certainty. In the early decades of the twentieth century the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and German phenomenologist

Edmund Husserl led a movement away from the disembodied idealism that has dominated Western intellectual life since Plato. While Husserl never completely abandoned the notion of a transcendent subject, Dewey saw all mind as embedded in a dynamic, evolving, material world. In *Experience and Nature* (1929), Dewey insisted that aesthetic and moral traits extend into all of the natural world and “testify to something that belongs to nature as truly as does the mechanical structure attributed to it in physical science” (2). For him, human concepts were not the names of real essences. He said, “Permanence, essence, totality, order, unity, rationality, the *unum, verum et bonum* of the classic tradition, are eulogistic predicates,” that represent “an artificial simplification of existence” (28). Consonant with Einstein’s discoveries about the relation of mass and energy, Dewey saw mind and matter as different characteristics of natural events (74), and he argued that symbols are not empty signs but rather incarnations (82). His 1934 book *Art as Experience* builds upon these assumptions about the enmeshment of human activity in the rest of the living world, defining experience as “the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (22). Art is prefigured in the very processes of living—including those of all animals and even plants—and form in the arts “is the art of making clear what is involved in the organization of space and time prefigured in every course of a developing life-experience” (24). Form thus grows out of natural processes of rhythmic conflict and fulfillment in animal life, and our ideas and purposes are generated by organs inherited from our evolutionary past (24-25).

Although Husserl never totally broke with idealism, or connected his philosophical inquiries as directly with science as Dewey did, his successors undertook a critical examination of Cartesian thought (Dillon 5) that culminated in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s development of an ontology that erased traditional distinctions of mind and body, spirit and matter, human and natural. “We have relearned to feel our body,” Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*; “we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body

that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body.”¹⁷ He explicitly called for the destruction of the objectivist ontology of the Cartesians and set out to achieve that destruction himself (183). His work attempts to recover in modern form something like the ancient recognition of the dynamic interplay between human life and the myriad other lives and energies surrounding us. In doing so he suggests a reorientation of humanistic understanding that ought to be considered as radical as the reorientation of scientific thought brought about by quantum physics. It is a deeply ecological way of thinking which is informed by the New Physics but also parallel to recent developments in biology such as the work of Lynn Margulis and other proponents of James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis.

To understand how radically Merleau-Ponty revised the premises of Humanism, we need only to remember Pico della Mirandola’s definition of man as a being outside the ordinary laws of nature, free to shape himself as he chooses, and in essence a pure mind not concerned with the presumably temporary encumbrance of a body. In complete opposition to this conception, Merleau-Ponty asserts—as we have seen—that we are nothing but bodies (206) immersed in the contingency of timespace and shaped by our interrelations with the things and forces around us. To rightly understand ourselves, he said, we must reawaken our attention to things themselves. In other words, we must reopen our awareness of “that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is” (ix). “The world is not what I think,” he said, “but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible” (xvii). Each person is within herself a network of relationships (xx), enmeshed in the world and continually interacting with everything around her. There is no hierarchy of beings here; in-

stead all things and beings are intertwined within what Merleau-Ponty came to call "the Flesh" toward the end of his life.

His final work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964, published after his sudden death in 1961), focuses attention upon this concept of "the Flesh" which includes the body of the whole world. David Abram calls it "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity" (66).

All knowledge is therefore situated and contingent. As Miles Dillon explains, "Problems of knowing are [therefore] problems of being" (2), for meaning is embodied attunement within the dynamic life of this Flesh. Merleau-Ponty explains that "the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved . . . ; the perception of the world is simply an expansion of my field of presence without any outrunning of the latter's essential structures, and the body remains in it but at no time becomes an object in it. The world is an open and indefinite unity in which I have my place. . . ." (304). Within that place, sensation is active participation, indeed for Merleau-Ponty, it is "literally a form of communion" (212) with a sacramental value. "If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them . . ." (214). For example, when looking into the blue of the sky, we abandon ourselves to it and plunge into its mystery. The sky thinks itself within us. In such a way it is through our relations with things that we know ourselves (383). Indeed, we extend ourselves into things, for example the blind man into his cane, which ceases "to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight" (143). Or the way our own skin feels the dryness of the earth when it is cracked and the air and trees are listless in the heat. Or the way we come to feel the body of our car as if it is part of our own, extending into its dimensions and sensing its shape.

Such a definition of the human situation in the world means that we can no longer consider ourselves separate from wildness or the lives of animals and plants. Instead we are intertwined with them as sensing bodies immersed in a sea of primal being. In the manuscript he was working on at his death, Merleau-Ponty was exploring what he considered the essential wildness of this primal reality. "What I want to do is restore the world as a meaning of Being absolutely different from the "represented," that is, as the vertical Being which none of the "representations" exhaust and with all "reach," the wild Being. . . . Moreover the distinction between the two planes (natural and cultural) is abstract: everything is cultural in us . . . and everything is natural in us (even the cultural rests on the polymorphism of the wild Being)" (253). Many of the notes he left behind are fragmentary and tantalizing in the ways they suggest that he might have elaborated this idea if he had lived longer. But he did firmly assert: "This environment of brute existence and essence is not something mysterious: we never quit it, we have no other environment" (116-17).

Since Merleau-Ponty's untimely death, poets, nature writers, and philosophers developing pragmatist and phenomenological perspectives have continued the project he left unfinished. Poet Gary Snyder writes, "Our bodies are wild. The involuntary quick turn of the head at a shout, the vertigo at looking off a precipice, the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath, the quiet moments relaxing, staring, reflecting—all universal responses of this mammal body. They can be seen throughout the class. The body does not require the intercession of some conscious intellect to make it breathe or to keep the heart beating . . ." (16). Similarly George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their ambitious recent book, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), remind us that most of the cognition of an individual person is wild, invisible, outside of our control. "There is no Fregean abstract realm of disembodied senses and no mystical relations between such supposed senses and objects and categories in a supposed mind-independent world," Lakoff and Johnson tell us. Basing their conclusions on cognitive science and their own long study of the basic metaphoric structures of conscious thought, they continue, "Our brains and minds do not operate

using abstract formal symbols that are given meaning by correlations to an allegedly mind-independent world that comes with categories and essences built in. The body and brain are where meanings arise in and through our interactions with the environment and other people. . . . It is not true that all thought is conscious and that we can know it completely through a priori philosophical reflection. Most of our thought is unconscious, and empirical investigation is necessary if we are ever to understand its nature" (463).

If we accept such an understanding of ourselves and of the human place in the world, we have to abandon many presumptions of our positivistic systems of knowledge. A Green Humanism based on Merleau-Ponty's ontology would shape an epistemological modesty like that required by Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle, according to which it is understood that observer and observed move within an embrace of mutual influence. Merleau-Ponty suggests the premises of such an epistemology in his definition of the proper language of philosophy in *The Visible and the Invisible*. There he claims that "the words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but rather those that most energetically open upon Being, because they more closely convey the life of the whole and make our habitual evidences vibrate until they disjoin" (102). Rather than attempting to control or fix meaning, in other words, the most appropriate uses of language must be open and radically interrogative. As he explained this respectful, dynamic relationship near the end of his life, Merleau-Ponty claimed that we can only know things in attending to the ways in which they offer themselves to us. They only do so, he believed, "to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them—not to hold them as with forceps, or to immobilize them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness their continued being . . ." (101).

Finally, we would see human language (and all intellectual systems) as integrally involved in what we have called "Nature" and presumed to separate from ourselves since the Renaissance.

As Merleau-Ponty put it, "In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning,

or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And, in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests" (155).

I have suggested elsewhere that Virginia Woolf was making very similar claims in her last novel, *Between the Acts*, where human conversations include the voices of cows and birds; where Miss LaTrobe's pageant is deliberately interwoven with falling rain, the flight of swallows, and the yearning calls of cows; and where the only possible human knowing is of "scraps, orts, and fragments" from which we must construct our own individual and contingent meaning against the backdrop of immanent catastrophe but within a timeframe of geological eras of destruction, rebirth and evolving novelty. ("VW and the Flesh of the World"). Many other writers have been engaged in similar efforts since, as ecocritics are now busily demonstrating in books and articles. One of the writers especially deserving of this kind of attention is Eudora Welty. In a story from *The Golden Apples* Welty has described a state of bodily awareness very close to what Merleau-Ponty sought to restore. Here Virgie Rainey, a woman whose mother has just died, walks down to the river in the evening for solace.

She stood on the willow bank. It was bright as mid-afternoon in the openness of the water, quiet and peaceful. She took off her clothes and let herself into the river.

She saw her waist disappear into reflectionless water; it was like walking into sky, some impurity of skies. All was one warmth, air, water, and her own body. All seemed one weight, one matter—until as she put down her head and closed her eyes and the light slipped under her lids, she felt this matter a translucent one, the river, herself, the sky all vessels which the sun filled. She began to swim in the river, forcing it gently, as she would wish for gentleness to her body. Her breasts around which she felt the water curving were as sensitive at that moment as the tips of wings must feel to birds, or antennae to insects. She felt the sand, grains

intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas, and the many dark ribbons of grass and mud touch her and leave her, like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear now dismembering and losing itself. She moved but like a cloud in skies, aware but only of the nebulous edges of her feeling and the vanishing opacity of her will, the carelessness for the water of the river through which her body had already passed as well as for what was ahead. (*The Collected Stories* 439-40)

Here the subject's individual body is embraced by the physical world around her. She moves as a part of the river feeling the planes of her skin as surfaces of contact rather than separating boundaries. The temporary qualities of her consciousness, and indeed her very existence, are suggested by the suggestion that she is like a nebulous, changing cloud in the sky. Even time (or history) is embodied in the river's watery flow and the tiny grains of sand or strands of grass she touches.

What I have tried to discuss here is an enormous subject that I have only crudely and superficially described. Many of the individual points or claims that I have made have been discussed by others—scholars, ecologists, nature writers, environmental activists, and of course poets and novelists. But we need some overview or philosophical underpinning that puts them all together in a coherent whole. A Green Humanism based on philosophical positions like those of Dewey and Merleau-Ponty suggests the kind of large-scale conceptual structure that can support an ecological world view.

Finally, a few practical considerations that I derive from such a world view. If we take seriously the ecological metaphor for the world—in which all living things and dynamic forces and substances are intricately interdependent—then we have to see the many areas of intellectual and technical activity in our human world as similarly interdependent. Thus we must know more about other academic disciplines than our own and acknowledge the relationships among them. For example, ecocritics and others in “Humanistic” disciplines need to pay more attention to scientific developments of the past century. We

tend to be extremely backward, lavishing attention on such 19th century or turn-of-the-last-century figures as Darwin and Freud, without considering the revolutionary work of 20th century physicists and biologists. That is beginning to change, but we're still almost a century behind the times. A Green Humanism should therefore absorb the lessons of relativity and uncertainty from early 20th century physics, but also the ramifications of Chaos Theory and Super String Theory. Anti-reductionist biology as described by Richard Lewontin of Harvard, Lynn Margulis of University of Massachussets, and Stephen Rose of the Open University here in UK needs to be compared with mechanistic theories of Neo-Darwinists like Richard Dawkins. New work in geography, geology, climatology and other Earth Sciences needs to be explored, side-by-side with James Lovelock's Gcophysiology (or Gaia Hypothesis).

Here are a few examples of what such attention can reveal:

By absorbing the lessons of quantum physics and emphasizing cooperative participation within the community of planetary life, a concrete sense of both epistemological and ethical limits for human ambition and action can be shaped. Lynn Margulis's work with anaerobic bacteria and bacterial evolution (see *Microcosmos* and *Symbiotic Planet*) establishes very different ground rules for the kinds of metaphors writers, artists, and university teachers (and perhaps ultimately popular culture) might use for social and political activity. Instead of the domination of public discourse by metaphors of Darwinian competition, for example, metaphors of collaboration and alliance could come into prominence.

From studies of our primate relatives by Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey as well as many other animal studies, we have learned that most of the traits we once claimed as demonstrative of human superiority when we saw ourselves as the paragon of creation—such traits as tool-making, language, reasoning and innovative adaptation, as well as cooperative social structures—are shared with other animals still commonly assumed to be ruled only by crude instincts. Birds and primates also use tools, wolves have complex social arrangements and cooperative habits, and even viruses and plants communicate and actively

shape their environments and destinies. Lynn Margulis is only one of many contemporary theorists of evolution to deny any greater level of evolutionary complexity or superiority to our species than can be found in any other living creature that has survived into the present era. A microbiologist friend told me recently that he observed a geranium turning off a gene that had been introduced into it to prevent it from blossoming. Human beings are not the unique, or solitary, agents among living beings.

Neil Evernden writes, in *The Social Creation of Nature*, "One of the remarkable features of the human being is its ability to adapt, sometimes at speeds rivaling the mutation rate of viruses. We evolve, so to speak, through metaphor: one day the world is respoken, and a new being is released. Whether or not we have reached this point, whether there actually is the possibility of a re-imagining of things, we cannot know . . ." (123-24).

I think a Green Humanism has been gradually developing since the nineteenth century, with American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir; and English writers like Wordsworth and Shelley, Hopkins and Hardy. It has been more fully articulated in the last one hundred years by D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, Ted Hughes, J. R. Prynne in England; and by American writers such as Mary Austin, Eudora Welty, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Gary Snyder, A. R. Ammons, Simon Ortiz, Octavia Butler, and a host of other poets, novelists, and nature writers up to our own time. There are many ancient traditions from which these writers draw inspiration: some are oral, tribal traditions like those of poet Simon Ortiz's Pueblo Indian ancestors, and many come from Asian cultures, as for example, the *Tao Te Ching* of ancient China and many schools of Buddhism, such as the Zen Buddhist traditions that inform the travel writing and *haiku* poems of Japanese master Matsuo Basho and have been so important for contemporary American poet Gary Snyder.

Modern philosophers like Merleau-Ponty have offered radically different ways of understanding who we are, and these new perspectives connect us to the ancient traditions and provide a framework for understanding the importance of the work of writers like those I have

mentioned above. Through all of these writers and philosophers, the world is being respoken all around us, in spite of the roar of techno-scientific-imperial propaganda that saturates public discourse. The real Biosphere in which we have our being is reshaping itself in frightening ways at the same time—with open ocean appearing at the North Pole, increasingly violent weather, die-offs of massive coral systems like those in the Maldives and off the coast of Australia, huge dead zones spreading in the sea like the 1600 square mile one at the mouth of the Mississippi River, and dramatic northward migrations of sea life as the oceans warm. I hope our job as teachers is to help create the critical mass of voices that will release a new being—the new embodied Human citizen of the biosphere, whose mind is part of the world and intertwined in participation with its myriad lives and energies, and who will learn to live responsibly before it is too late.

WORKS CITED

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Pantheon, 1996.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Illusion of the End*. Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994. (Orig. pub. in France as *L'illusion de la fin* by Editions Galilee, 1992)
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Norton, 1929
- _____. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee, 1934..
- _____. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Perigee, 1939.
- Dillon, M.. C. *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Haraway, Donna. *Modest_Witness@Second_Mllennium. FemaleMeets OncoMouse*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- _____. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh*. NY: Basic Books, 1999.
- Langer, Monika. "Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology." *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1990. 115-29.

- Luke, Timothy. *Ecocritique*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford, 1964.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.
- Pico della Mirandola. *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Trans. A. Robert Caponigri. South Bend: Indiana UP, 1956.
- Ross, Andrew. *Strange Weather*. New York: Verso, 1991.
- _____. *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Snyder, Gary. "The Etiquette of Freedom." In *The Practice of the Wild*. NY: North Point P, 1990.
- Tacitus. *The Complete Works of Tacitus*. Trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodrib. Ed. Moses Hadas. New York: Modern Library, 1942.
- Welty, Eudora. *The Collected Stories*. New York: Harcourt, 1980.
- Westling, Louise. "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World." *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 855-75.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- _____. *What I Came to Say*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941.

