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Commodification Processes and Alternatives

Spring 2017

Midterm Self Evaluation #1: The Animals and the Poets

I hold the very simple minded view that everything is related to everything else-and that every *one* is related to everyone else, and that every species is related to every other. The only way out of this tissue of interrelations, it seems to me, is to stop paying attention, and to substitute something else-hallucination, greed, pride, or hatred, for example-for sensuous connection to the facts. I think it is not the world's task to entertain us, but ours to take an interest in the world.”

 ― Robert Bringhurst, poet

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On page 58 of *The Lives of Animals,* a conversation takes place between John and Elizabeth Costello.

 “Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?

“No.”

“Then why do it? You said that you were tired of clever talk about animals, proving by syllogism that they do or do not have souls. But isn’t poetry just another kind of clever talk: admiring the muscles of the big cats in verse? Wasn’t your point about talk that it changes nothing?”

 Later in the same conversation, Elizabeth says, “John, I don’t know what I want to do. I just don’t want to sit silent.”

This conversation, in which J.M. Coetzee plays both mother and son, feeds directly into some of the questions I am interested in exploring in my ILC. First off, I feel that I must address Elizabeth’s answer to her son. No, she does not believe that poetry classes are going to shut down slaughterhouses, but she knows that she doesn’t want to be silent. I find that I disagree with her, in some sense, when she answers no. Of course a poetry class isn’t going to directly shutdown a slaughterhouse, but as with any difficult question about the relationship between humans and non-human animals, the answer is much more complex than a simple no.

We are living in a very interesting time. For the first time in recorded history a single species is responsible for a rapid loss of biodiversity, a rapid increase in deforestation, and extreme fluctuations in climate. That species is *Homo sapiens.* That species is us. We have all the scientific data that we should need to change our behaviors, yet it’s not working. We carry on as if nothing is wrong, or when we do stop to consider the dilemma, we seek out technological solutions that will allow us to continue the consumptive behaviors that are the very root of the problem and continue to harm the biosphere they purport to protect.

As with anyone who thinks on these problems, I can’t say for sure what would fix them, but I have my ideas. I think these problems, at their root, are cultural problems that will clearly not be healed by rational, scientific forms of thought alone. On p.23 of *The Lives of Animals,* Elizabeth says “Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking.”

For those of us interested in viewing the world through a lens other than the lens of rationalism, poetic and metaphoric ways of thinking provide an escape. Through engaging again with the mythopoetic ways of our ancestors it seems possible that we could find a lost sense of kinship with the other living beings whom share the biosphere with us and remove ourselves from the anthropocentric, hierarchical ways of thought that have led us to the brink of ecological disaster.

The poet Robert Bringhurst, whom I quoted at the beginning of this essay, defines myth as “a theorem about the nature of reality, expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate narrative form.” Like the scientific method, mythic forms of thought were based on close observation of the natural world that led to a greater understanding of that world. Many myths were encoded with ecological wisdom that not only helped to preserve the life of humans, but kept human/non-human relationships balanced.

Here in the modern, technoutopic world, we seem to have forgotten the important role that story plays in our lives. Rationalism is not an escape from mythic ways of knowing, but instead is a corruption of them. The narratives of agriculture, colonialism, and industrialization are stories of separation and control. Whether or not we want to admit it, we still live by story and it is only the belief in these stories that enable them to continue. Take for example the almighty dollar bill, which is made of 75% cotton and 25% linen. A dollar bill is nothing more than processed plant material. Yet through belief in money, we have imbued currency with value that is not inherent to the materials it is made from. If I were to walk into a grocery store and try to purchase food with cotton and linen, I would be laughed right out. Likewise, the gold that theoretically backs up money is an elemental metal that is dug from the ground. At some point, someone decided that this particular element was of value, but in reality it has no more value than any other element that can be pulled from the ground. It can’t be eaten or drunk, and it would take an awful lot of gold to build yourself a shelter.

Likewise, it is a narrative thread that has led humans to believe that we hold dominion over the Earth and the other species who make their homes here. Where, other than religion, did we develop the idea that the Earth and all its resources belong to us? It is this myth, the myth of human superiority, that has led us to behave in such an abusive way towards the very systems that make life possible.

A huge component of the work that Kirsten and I have undertaken this quarter is trying to find a way into a not completely rational way of thinking. In the broad sense, the ideas that Kirsten and I are working with are seeking out alternatives to the commodification of life itself. This is an idea that I feel is at the root of Elizabeth Costello’s struggle in *The Lives of Animals,* how do we, as human beings, find a new narrative that works to unravel the illusion that we are separate from “nature” and that the Earth is ours to do with as we please, without having to suffer any consequences?

As with any big undertaking, this inquiry has been wrought with anxiety for both of us. How can we talk about these very big ideas within the confines of the culture we were born into? How can we explain an amorphous, instinctual concept without sounding insane? How can we interact with ideas that were, and still are embraced by many Indigenous peoples all over the world, without falling into the trap of romantic appropriation? I believe that poetic and metaphoric ways of thinking may provide the answer. Have we been successful up to this point? I can’t say for sure, but I believe there is value in trying. Will we be successful over the next five weeks? Again, all we can do is try and I feel confident that that is what we will do.

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Coetzee, J. M., Gutmann, A., Garber, M. B., Singer, P., Doniger, W., & Smuts, B. B. (2016). *The lives of animals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Myth Is a Theorem About the Nature of Reality. (2014, May 15). Retrieved May 01, 2017, from https://www.guernicamag.com/myth-is-a-theorem-about-the-nature-of-reality/