Make-Believe Nature

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The following essay is a translation of a lecture delivered in December of 1992 to the Seto Nature Association at the Seto Civic Center. It reµects the concerns of a series of public seminars held these past few years at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in which we have examined the estrangement of religion from immediate experience, from work, technology, and the primacy of the natural world. The sponsors of the lecture were one of several civic groups working to halt the progress of long-range plans to make their city the site of an International Expo, and I welcomed the offer to toss another sabot into the works.

GIVEN THE CURRENT progress of civilization's onslaught against the natural world, only a refusal to look at the facts can allow a people to compliment itself any longer on its love of nature. Such self-µattery is based on a distinctively modern habit of thought that I will call the "sentimentalization of nature." In conclusion I will offer a few concrete proposals for breaking the habit. Before doing so, I know of no better way to shed light on what has in effect become a mass addiction to a make-believe nature than to talk circles around the problem—like a hawk playing with a sparrow, driving it higher and higher until it runs out of breath and can be taken hold of effortlessly. It is not that the point of what I have to say is too complex, but that it is almost too simple and its gravity too evasive to grasp at ³rst swipe.

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The *sentimentalization of nature* is a phenomenon that takes different forms in different cultures. But it also cuts across traditional cultural borderlines and indeed has become one of the mainstays of the process of "internationalization" that has resulted in what we are now accustomed to call "global culture."

The dominant cultural attitude toward nature today conforms to a uniform measure of the quality of life that we may call "economic-developmental." Our ideal of the good life, and the way it has led us to look at the natural world, is all but blind to distinctions of agricultural and industrial, rich and poor, warring and peaceful, democratic and despotic. It µows along in the modern mind beneath the surface of our weightier daily preoccupations. Indeed, it is only by tacit agreement to leave this attitude just beneath the surface of awareness that we can embrace it without having to think about whether it is morally acceptable or not.

Simply put, the dominant cultural attitude toward nature has two de³ning traits. First, it values nature primarily as a nourishing, livable, enjoyable environment for human beings; and devalues nature when it proves to be a hostile, disobedient, malnourishing

environment for human beings. In order to promote the former and gradually eliminate the latter, civilized communities have assumed the *right* to adjust and transform the world that surrounds them. This right is mitigated only by the accompanying moral *duty* to assure that human persons, and not mere economic pro³t, are given ³rst place of honor. Should circumstances face a people with a choice, however, between the health and preservation of animal and plant species on the one hand and human well-being on the other, this same morality obliges them to sacri³ce the nonhuman world for the sake of the human.

Second, the dominant attitude toward nature holds that human understanding of the natural world progresses by trial and error, building on its past achievements and mending its past misbehavior as it goes. When some unforeseen or unfortunate damage is done to the natural world by the application of new technologies to human work, damage that might actually affect humans adversely, the assumption is that further investment of time and scienti³c research will teach our trained experts how to right the wrong and insure us against its repetition. Moreover, if the generation of new tools and methods to correct the abuses and oversights of the old is made economically pro³table, there is every reason to believe that technology will remain at the service of people and not the other way around. However, in adverse economic situations, where too much attention to the devastations technology has inµicted on the natural world might threaten overall economic development, concern with the environment has occasionally to be compromised or postponed.

These two ideas—that nature is our lawful environment and that technological excesses can be repaired by further technology—are at the root of the human-centered philosophy underlying development. I referred to this earlier as a *common sense,* but when we turn to the world of fact, of what has actually happened in the name of this philosophy of ours, we see it to be a dangerous common *nonsense* of ecocidal proportions. For all its scienti³c moorings, our dominant cultural attitude toward nature functions like a myth that cannot be brought into question wihtout harassing the style of life to which we have become accustomed. Instead, public *facta* about the state of the natural world are trans³gured into political *agenda* to be taken up or postponed at the convenience of our elected leadership, while common sense is left to bear the affront by making do with a make-believe world. The willing participation in this conspiracy is facilitated by what I am calling the sentimentalization of nature.

Consider, for example, the fact that the words “clean air” no longer correspond to anything concrete in nature. There is simply no more clean air anywhere on earth—not in the depths of the great rain forests, not on the ice-caps of the north pole—that does not bear the smudge of industrial waste. This has been common scienti³c knowledge for a decade and more.

But now a group of young people take advantage of a long week-end to get away from the soot and cement of the city into the clean, green world of nature. They walk for hours into the mountains and pitch camp in a small woods. Awakening in the early morning to the chirping of the birds and the rustle of the trees, one of them climbs to the summit of a nearby hill. As the sun rises in the east he ³lls his lungs with the fresh, clean air and feels himself cleansed body and soul from the sickness of everyday life. Were he to pause and consult his knowledge, he would realize that the air he is taking in carries the same damaging elements as the air in the city, only in lesser quantities; and that the work whose wages paid for this escape into nature is contributing generously to the impuri³cation. But nothing is quite so devastating to the rapture of natur-

al beauty as the heartless invasion of facts, and so he wraps his conscience in the innocence of make-believe, and allows the moment instead to recon³rm his faith in civilization: nature is *our* environment, and as long as we remember that, one day a way will be found to make the air clean for us to breathe again.

Aristotle opens his *Metaphysics* with the words, "All people, by nature, desire to know." The accumulation of knowledge and the relentless drive of the scienti³c spirit seem to demonstrate how right he was. The way we sentimentalize nature, however, tells us the opposite. All of us also desire by nature *not to know*. What we do not want to know is that there is simply no longer any place for us to go to "get away from it all." Wherever we are, the poison of civilization is right there with us.

The consequences of dirty air turn out to be far more radical than anyone could have imagined. During our own lifetimes, the weather has permanently changed, so much so that previous meteorological records have become all but irrelevant for forecasting. There is no turning back from this state of affairs. There is nothing that can be done to undo the damage. No future technology can alter this fact any more than it can bring back the thousands of species of plants and animals lost to "progress." When a tree that has stood longer than human civilization itself is felled to build a highway so that people can commute faster to work, the mourning is left to a powerless few. For the rest, it is enough to remember that, after all, it is *our* world and someday, given the chance, we will ³x it.

Whatever cultural or spiritual values the weekend gardener might have in mind when building a little garden or raising a few µowers and vegetables, it can no longer be a question of "doing one's part" for the cultivation of the natural world. The civilized management of nature has long since broken away from metaphors of tending one's garden. The backyard µower-patch no longer mirrors a larger cultural reality, and therefore no longer nourishes a state of soul that has anything to do with the way we manage nature. It is sentimental make-believe.

When I said that the facta of nature became political agenda, I did not mean to imply that our governments do not reµect the will of the people. There is no national government anywhere in the world prepared to offer its voting citizens the choice of putting their nation's economic progress, their personal and corporate wealth, second to the protection of nature. A vote for nature would be tantamount to a vote against civilization, which no modern society is willing to tolerate. At the same time, there is no government that does not require its children to study in school the facts of environmental problems that make this very choice more and more inevitable. Sentimentalism is no longer a private matter, like taking a vacation from the factory to breathe pure mountain air or raising a garden to demonstrate one's love of nature. It is a chosen way of life for which there appear to be no alternatives.

Because this dominant attitude toward nature is a global convention, the cultural differential shows up only in the *forms of expression that our sentimentalism takes*. Cultural attitudes towards nature are no longer distinguished primarily by present patterns of thought and behavior as by diversity of historical pasts which sets one culture off from another. What is particularly Japanese about the Japanese people's attitude toward nature, for instance, today belongs to a way of life that has ceased to exist, to a way of thinking and behaving that once was but no longer is. Insofar as one's sense of cultural distinctiveness fails to distinguish fact from make-believe, it indulges itself in a kind of sentimentalism that savors the wonders and terrors of nature without so much as a thought to the contradictions this raises for daily life.

The sentimental habits that make the eyes water just enough to blear the vision of nature, represent a kind of global addiction masquerading as local custom. When one drives to a well-lit and heated cultural center to practice haiku or ikebana in the belief that one is doing something of age-old cultural signi3cance, one is also consenting to believe what one has been made to believe, ignoring the facts one knows to be true. What was once a spiritual exercise now requires for its practice a state of mind that turns the eye to a nature that does not exist by turning the eye away from the nature that does—a nature that is there to see at the exhaust coming out of the tail pipe or the wastebaskets full of half-used paper. It matters not whether one de3nes one's country as developed or developing. Sentimentalization renders impotent once dominant cultural attitudes towards trees, animals, air, water, and soil, and in their place leaves a shimmering but empty fantasy.

What needs to be done is clear to any schoolchild faced with the facts of civilized life at the end of the twentieth century. First, and most important, we need to "let nature be nature," to stop wounding what has lived for aeons before human progress began infecting the planet. Then—and *only* then—have we to begin repairing the cultures that contributed to this wounding.

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Culture, as the word has classically been understood, is the balance that a community of people strikes between *cultivatio* and *cultus*, between efforts to make nature over and reverence for the divinity of what nature does on its own. This is not to say that the work of remaking nature to sustain and enhance human life was ever experienced, even in the most primitive of societies, as a harmonious cooperation between a people and their Gods. Displeasure at the unreliability of nature, even when ascribed to the interference of heavenly powers, seems to have been behind the aspiration of toolmaking throughout human history. Thus as tools became more and more ef3cient for managing the environment, reliance on the rule of the Gods over the natural world weakened correspondingly. Often enough this led to reinforcing belief in the sway of divine destiny over the trials and blessings of human life, so that the gradual transformation of nature into a human environment was mirrored in a comparable transformation of the Gods into a Divine Providence ruling over human history but driven out of nature's story.

This is not the place to go into detail. The only point I wish to make is that the transition from agriculture and animal husbandry to industrial manufacturing, from cultivation to fabrication, was hardly an unexpected shock to the soul. Its requisite spirituality had been brewing almost from the start of civilization, and harbored problems far more momentous than simply that of who should control the means of production and what was an equitable relation of work to pro3t.

At the time of the industrial revolution, a new belief in the ef3cacy of the division of labor, and its accompanying disassociation of the individual worker from the 3nal product, was promoting the environmentalization of nature both too quickly and too subtly to be noticed. While theologians and philosophers were debating over redrawing the boundaries between science and religion, manufacturing technology was busy forging a new culture of life and work indoors. Progress in the control of temperature and lighting created not only a new climate for the uninterrupted manufacture of goods, but lent support to a universal creed of progress that viewed the natural world as an inexhaustible resource for enhancing the lifestyle of the human community.

It is in the context of this history that I believe we have to view our current habits

of sentimentalizing nature. It bears recalling, too, that the world of nature has not suffered the transformations of this history gallantly. However "natural" it seems to us to imagine the nonhuman world as a collection of laws and reproductive codes, the sickness that the world has contacted in the name of human progress—in some measure, already a sickness unto death—has turned the dream of an environmentalized nature into a human nightmare. The technological reliefs available to the wealthier countries, who consider themselves more "developed" because of the quality of their life indoors, are by and large closed off to the "undeveloped," who must suffer the increasing revenge of life outdoors. What makes our modern sentimentalization of nature morally unacceptable is precisely that the nature we enjoy in packaged doses, whose wonders and mysteries we applaud in art and poetry and religion, is a luxury item paid for by continued abuse of nature. Nor should the irony be lost on us that these same abuses pay for our gathering here in this hall today to lament what is happening.

Against this background, the injunction to "let nature be nature" is nothing other than a call to put a halt to the environmentalization of nature. Nature has no choice but to be what it is. As the Sino-Japanese term *shizen* suggests, it is the nature of nature to work of itself, without relying on anything outside of itself. Now that we have seen how nature exercises that choice against the aggressions of human technology, we must renounce the dream of taking that choice away from nature. It is not a question of something we can do or might do if only we can muster the will—it is something we *must* do.

For my part, I see this obligation beginning with the resuscitation in modern consciousness of a number of very old and very simple ideas, pulling them up from our past slowly enough so that we can see just where we lost touch with them. One of those ideas, and one dear to the heart of much oriental art and culture, is the idea of "the usefulness of being useless." There is a story in the "Inner Chapters" of the *Chuang-tsu* that speaks to the point eloquently and offers a good starting point for tracing the story of our distraction from respect for the natural world. It is a story about a certain master carpenter named Stone and his apprentice, and how they happened one day to encounter the truth about useless trees.

It seems that on one of their voyages the two chanced to pass by a gigantic oak tree standing by a local village shrine. The young apprentice stopped short and stood aghast at the towering majesty of the tree, whose trunk he thought must measure a hundred spans in girth, and whose branches were to immense that at least ten of them could be carved into boats. But the carpenter Stone just stalked off ahead without so much as giving the tree a second glance. Catching his master up, the apprentice inquired why he should have shunned such a chance for timber, more splendid than any he had seen since taking up his axe.

"Stop it!" the master rebuked him. "The tree is useless. A boat made from it would sink, a cof³n would soon rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap, and a beam would have termites. It is worthless timber of is of no use to us. That is why it has reached such a ripe old age."

That night the oak tree appeared to the carpenter Stone in a dream and complained of being compared with useful trees that are stripped and pruned and robbed of their fruits or cut down in their prime because they attract the attentions of the common world.

"As for me," said the great tree, "I have been trying for a long time to be useless. I was almost destroyed several times, but at last I have found a way to become useless, and this the most useful thing of all. If I had been useful, could I have ever grown so large? Besides, you and I are both things. How can one thing just another thing? What does a

dying and worthless man like you know about a worthless tree?"

The next day, when the apprentice heard of the dream, he was puzzled. "If the tree had so great a desire to be useless, why does it serve as a shrine?" This time the master took up the cause of the tree. "It is just pretending to be a sacred tree so that it will not be hurt by those who do not know that it is useless. If it had not, it would probably have been cut down. It protects itself in a different way from ordinary things. We will miss the point if we judge it in the ordinary way."

The story reaches across the ages from ancient China in the third-century BCE to our own with so little loss of power that it is almost superfluous to comment on it. The oak tree speaks to us directly of a nature that struggled then, as it does now, to be useless to human civilization. It enjoins us, as it did the carpenter Stone, to find it in our hearts to let nature be nature.

But there is one detail in the story, easy to pass over on a first reading, to which I would like to draw your attention: the tree found its uselessness in serving as a sacred tree. For the carpenter Stone, this was no more than its way of protecting itself from misunderstanding by pretending to be something that people could understand. But surely there is more. The "shrine" in which it stood was a traditional sacred grove set apart in nature by a local community for worship, a place where they could invoke the blessings of the Gods and beg their protection against the ravages of nature. As such, it represented limits to the usefulness of nature in creating a human environment. The Gods were believed to watch over the human world because they were privy to the higher purposes of an apparently useless nature.

Belief in the uselessness of nature as mediating the relationship between the human and divine is a fundamental religious fact that has taken a great variety of forms throughout history. In the biblical myth of creation, God created nature out of nothing. Nature was not made out of God nor even out of the same stuff as God, but was generated by a word ordering it into existence. From the beginning there was no natural bond between what was created and the onewho created it. The moral law that set human beings apart from the rest of nature and gave them a sense of sin, was also established by divine decree. Immorality was an offense against a higher reality that transcended the natural world, whose commandments began with an uncompromising stricture against revering as divine what were no more than idols of the natural world.

That the philosophical criticism of Western civilization which followed on the heels of the Industrial Revolution should have included a pronouncement of the death of the transcendent God of creation in modern consciousness is hardly to be wondered at. Nor is it surprising that in our own day, where the echoes of that pronouncement ring louder than ever, a renewed interest in polytheism should have flooded in to fill the spiritual gap. The irony is that the "new polytheism," as it is called, is still largely viewed as an archetypal reality of the psyche or as some kind of phenomenon of the spirit world. The cultural critique aimed at the cult of a transcendent divinity does not yet seem to have reached a critique of the excesses wrought by the cultivation of the natural.

Seen in the context of a general history of religions, Japan's myth of creation is rather more typical—and in that sense closer also to the kind of myth the Genesis account was pitted against. There Gods and humans are believed to have come from the same stuff, as we read in the first lines of the *Nihongi*, born of a common chaotic mass. To walk the earth is to be in touch not only with our ancestors but with the Gods. Despite Japan's equally sophisticated and cultural-

ly important myths of creation, evolutionary theory did not cause the religious upheaval here that it did in the Christian West. For one thing, the distinction between literal truth and symbolic truth never developed in classical Oriental cultures, so that demythologization never posed much of a threat to religious belief. But equally important, the special relationship between the divine and the human never seemed to require transcendence of the natural world.

This does not mean that there is no equivalent to the "death of God" in modern Japanese consciousness. There is, and from the standpoint of the natural world, it is of greater historical moment than its counterpart in the West. For the *Kami* of Japan have become no more than ornaments of modern nostalgia, their powers harnessed to the economic forces that move modern life and determine what is of value in it. If one does not hear talk of the death of the Kami in Japan, it is because they are dying not through assault but through neglect, a form of murder too civilized to be even aware of its own deed.

To read what Japan has to say of its own spirituality, one would think—and there are many who do in fact think just this—that here is a fully modern society to which the claim of the ancient Greek philosopher Thales continues to apply: "all things are full of Gods." In actuality, the Gods of ancient Japan continue to fall victim, one by one, to the same sentimentality that glosses the surface of Japan's ongoing contributions to the devastation of the natural world.

I have a finely crafted table made of nara wood in my home. To touch it is to know that it houses a Kami. But the formica desk at which I work each day is completely godless. No one would give a second thought to the idea that there might be a Kami in the styrofoam cups that fall out of the vending machine on the corner, but neither would anyone fail to recognize the Kami in the *chawan* that sits on my shelf. Taking the irregularities of nature and the finger prints of the human artisan off of the artifacts may have contributed to quality control of mass-produced goods, but it also severed a bond between us and the Gods that leaves us much the worse for it all.

The size of the population which modern civilization has to service seems to make these losses seem minor or at least unavoidable, but it is more than a matter of adjusting to formica desks and styrofoam cups. We have come to accept the permanent disfiguration of nature brought about by rampant gluttony for manufactured goods as a matter of course. The pattern is ever and again the same. A small wood is leveled to the ground and cement is poured for a new road to alleviate traffic congestion, or rather to transfer the focal point of the congestion to some other as yet untouched patch of nature. The deed is then crowned ceremoniously by planting a new row of trees along the sides of the road as a tribute to the "natural environment." But the trees are no replacement at all. They are no more than denatured, Godless parts of the traffic system, each standing like a tombstone to a Kami that has given up its spirit so that civilization might live better.

The systematic banishment of the Kami from nature has left its own spiritual vacuum, which (perhaps because the deed has gone so completely unnoticed) has tended to fill up with ideas of the divine imported from elsewhere in the developed world. The sentimentalization of an abused nature is not unconnected with current fashions in Japanese religiosity in which the spirit world, the psychology of the unconscious, the search for information about one's former lives, out-of-the-body and out-of-life experiences, and the like have moved from periphery to center. Whatever personal benefits may accrue to the individual as a result of all this, on a broader cultural plane it is but another sanction to the banishment of the Kami from nature, demonstrating yet

again the poverty and utter naivete of the Meiji-era ideal of "Japanese soul, Western know-how." This is why I see no other path of salvation from the conspiracy of sentimentalization against nature than one that resolutely refuses to view the past through the lenses of today's common sense and seeks rather to look at the present anew, as if for the first time, through the eyes of the past.

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However high the hawk might fly to drive its prey out of breath and take it in its grasp, it cannot fly above itself. In the end, it must return to the earth to nest, and so must we. I conclude my considerations today, therefore, with three simple and serious, if also somewhat ironic, proposals.

First, I propose that the Japanese Federation of Economic Organizations (*Keidanren*) establish a prize comparable in amount to the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of outstanding contributions to the cause of ecology. The prize might fittingly be named after Bashõ, the world-honored haiku poet who understood that the primary environment was nature's not ours. The reason for proposing the Keidanren as the sponsor of the prize is that this group seems best to represent the actual economic powers that at present produce 24% of the world's heavy machinery and 26% of its automobiles. Since the ruling myths of self-identity in Japan seem to share a common belief that its indigenous morality is based on "shame" rather than on the "sin-and-guilt" of Western cultures, it is hard to think of any method better suited to halting the arm that brandishes such a formidable array of weapons against the world of nature than to bring the warriors to shame themselves into an act of virtue.

Second, in line with plans to decentralize the government of Tokyo, and as part of the celebrations accompanying the transfer of the Northern Territories from Russian to Japan, I propose that the Ministry of Education be transferred to the islands immediately upon their return. The move would contribute considerably to the liberation of the Ministry from its captivity to modes of thought which victimize the very world of nature that has figured so importantly in the education of the nation's youth. To live in a city where the instrinsic value of a bush or a tree is overshadowed by the market value of the land on which it stands, where one can be so bound to life indoors that one can go for months, even years, without seeing a sunrise or a sunset, hardly amounts to a healthy environment from which to dictate how young children are to be instructed on the foundations of civilization, the mysterious of the universe and the dignity of life, on literature and musics and the arts. The survival of the natural world depends too radically on the generation now in school to risk anything less in the way of bureaucratic reform.

Third, as residents of one of the richest economies of the world, let those who can, actively seek a higher culture based on the rediscovery of a simple life and a deliberate renunciation of current patterns of consumption. The renunciation of luxury I have in mind here is the exact opposite of asceticism as the term is usually understood. I hope to return to this question at a later date, but I have come to think that the range of actual asceticisms inflicted on those who live in developed countries—even if the infliction appears to those in poorer countries to be synonymous with the development they are aiming at—is too high a price to pay for progress. We all know what it is to be trapped by some product or service that modern society advertises as necessary but which actually ends up defrauding one of time, free choice, or even health of mind and body. If one can bring this experience to bear on the expenses and wastes of everyday life, the human envi-

ronment is certain to look very different: more transparent, less demanding, but perhaps also a greater enemy to the world of nature than one had imagined.

When all is said and done, the necessary change of heart, the resolve to resist the gigantic pressures towards unlimited development of the environment, calls for the very thing that nature itself—the animals and plants, the earth and water and air—have joined in chorus to shout out at us: *Let nature be nature!* We have but to learn to listen.