

On the Machine in the Garden

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See also: "The Machine against the Garden" (author's introduction) in this issue, FE #321, Indian Summer, 1985.

Your comments as well as the urgings of other friends stimulated me to read Leo Marx's book *The Machine in the Garden*. I quickly recognized the reviewer of *Hawthorne's Secret* and also the author of the Foreword to my Signet Classic edition of Hawthorne's superb novel. But I do not regret reading the book. The central themes of Leo Marx's book have for several years been among my main concerns, and the book's range as well as the profundity of many of its observations impressed, provoked and disturbed me.

You may be right in your assessment of Leo Marx (in this book) as "more historical observer than advocate." He does let his "characters" speak for themselves, and he does not make his own views obtrusive. But his own views do come through; by the end of the book he unobtrusively expresses a coherent outlook on nature, humanity and technology; to a reader with different and often diametrically opposed views, Leo Marx does not seem a mere observer, but an advocate.

A barbed wire fence can be described in many ways. To one observer it may look like a device for the protection of good people from criminals and predatory beasts; to another it may look like a device created by criminals and predatory beasts to repress good people. The side from which the observer sees the fence is important, but not determining; imagination enables an outsider to "see" with the eyes of an insider, or an insider with the eyes of an outsider. The vantage point may (or may not) provide insights, but it does not make one an authority. I, for example, have never been incarcerated in a concentration camp, yet I've tended to see barbed wire fences with the eyes of the victims imprisoned in them. Other people I've known, who were no closer to (and no further from) the fences than I, have tended to see all such fences, except the specific one behind which their kin perished, with the eyes of those who benefited from fences. Naturally we argued. We hurled "reality" into each other's faces. Leo Marx's book is a continuation of that argument. Leo Marx hurls "reality" into my face, a reality I've chosen not to accept, his reality.

For me the knowledge that there is an "outside," the knowledge (and not merely the belief) that the rest of the world does not consist of concentric circles of barbed wire, has been critical. Leo Marx qualifies such knowledge as "naive, anarchic primitivism" (p. 10) and dismisses it as an "escape from the Reality Principle" (p. 9), a "recoil from the pain and responsibility of life in a complex civilization..." (22). I refer to the "outside" with terms like Community, Freedom, and sometimes Nature, and I realize that others have used the terms, concepts and literary conventions that were available in other times and places; Ancient Greeks, especially during the days of Hellenistic despotism, referred to the "outside" with poetic images of a pastoral Arcadia, and some Western Europeans, during their Renaissance, borrowed this language. The statements became stilted, and they admittedly conveyed less and less. But Leo Marx asserts that these statements never conveyed anything at all, that they had never been anything more than "literary patterns" (18), poetic gimmicks. He goes on to claim that such statements express the opposite of what they claim to express, that they "reveal the inadequacy of the Arcadian situation as an image of human experience" (23), that they "call into question...the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture..." (25). For this man, war and disharmony are the realities, even in green pastures.

The “Facts of Power”

After I had read twenty-five pages, my main thought was: I’ll be damned if I’m going to read this whole book. As someone who considered Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* more informative about species than all of Darwin’s words about the “struggle for survival,” I was repelled by Leo Marx’s crude latter-day Darwinism. But you (and other friends of mine) had recommended Marx’s book, so I read on. The themes he was tackling were dear to me; I could see that he was heading toward a confrontation with profound critics of his “reality”; I wondered how he would wiggle out of the corners in which the critics left him. I thought he was bent on repeating the feat of rhetorician Daniel Webster, a feat Leo Marx describes as follows: “His trick is reduction in the technical literary sense of giving in to a feeling or idea in order, eventually, to take it back.” (213). Webster, a friend of Industry, pretended to be dismayed by the devastation only in order “to neutralize the dissonance generated by industrialization. The rhetoric forms an emotional bond between the orator and the public. It puts him in touch with the mass surge toward comfort, status, wealth and power that rules the society...Webster understands the practical political truth—the facts of power” (217).

So does Leo Marx. His facts of power begin in the America of the 1840s, with what W.W. Rostow called the “take-off” into industrialism (p. 26). At that moment, escapists from the reality principle have “a sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction” (26). Realists are euphoric. The middleman, the entrepreneur, the man who undertakes to cut up the environment into processed, saleable commodities, becomes the model realist. The type was already envisioned by William Shakespeare in the character Prospero, the autocrat who wielded his empire’s inhabitants as “hands” and even concocted a tempest to shipwreck his foes.

Prospero’s reality is “a symbolic middle landscape created by the mediation between art and, nature” (71), namely by what Thorstein Veblen called Business Enterprise.

This “great revolution in science and technology,” this “massive shift in prevailing ideas about man’s relation to nature” (74), this “mingling of mind with brute matter” (93) becomes America’s “all-embracing ideology.” (87) Page after page describes the euphoria for “that irreversible and accelerating process of change now regarded as the very powerhouse of history.” The raped landscape, referred to as a “well-ordered garden” is “magnified to continental size” (141); the rape requires “a stronger, more centralized government with power to enforce uniform economic policies” (152). With such a government and with machinery, Prospero’s heirs “conquer nature,” remake a “waste land” into a synthetic garden, “abolish space and time” by imprisoning surviving human beings in enclosed spaces and clock time, set out toward the “liberation of the whole world” (183–206) and use the language of pastoralism to advertise the real estate and the merchandise of their processed world.

Improved Real Estate

Leo Marx is not himself an advertiser of the improved real estate. He does not prettify America’s industrialization. But he expresses a certain nostalgia for the period when intellectuals were urged to “conquer the new territory opened up by industrialization” (241), the period when there was “nothing inherently ugly about factories and railroads” (ib.). [sic] And he expresses something close to contempt toward early critics of that conquest of “new territory.”

He dismisses Montaigne’s critique of the European expropriators, “On Cannibalism,” as “one of the fountain-heads of modern primitivism” (49) (and for Leo Marx, the word “primitive” is neither positive nor neutral). He expects the reader to chuckle when he says that “What finally enables us to take the idea of a successful ‘return to nature’ seriously is its temporariness” (69).

He blandly claims that “it was not easy for intelligent men to maintain a primitivist position,” and he “proves” this claim in the oddest manner: “Jean Jacques Rousseau was drawn to the spontaneity and freedom he associated with primitive life; but he too had to face the undeniable fact that ‘natural man’ was, by European standards, amoral, uncreative and mindless” (101). The “fact” (of European superiority) is so “undeniable” to Leo Marx that T. Jefferson’s occasional claim to the contrary strikes him as a “charming absurdity” (120).

He finds that Thoreau's *Walden* goes "to the verge of anarchic primitivism," (245) but he, Leo Marx, rescues Thoreau from falling into the abyss. He considers Thoreau's "indictment of the Concord 'economy' " to be "over-drawn," but assures the reader that "Thoreau feels no simple-minded Luddite hostility toward the new inventions" (247). Thoreau said, "I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its [the railroad's] smoke and steam and hissing." In Leo Marx's translation, Thoreau "says that the pastoral way of life...is doomed" (254), and after a few more such translations, he demonstrates that Thoreau "redeems machine power" (261).

His translation of Hawthorne's story "Ethan Brand" is even more sanguine. Hawthorne's character separated himself from the whispering forest, from the life-giving sun, and set out on a quest for the fire that fueled Blake's "Satanic Mills," the fire of the Enlightenment, of knowledge as an end in itself, of Science and Industry, of the Western Spirit's dominion over the wilderness. The man's intellect became severed from his heart and, at the end of his quest, burdened by a "sense of loss, anxiety and dislocation," he threw himself into the fire. And when the Satanic fire was at last extinguished, nature recovered her former grandeur. Leo Marx points out that Hawthorne is ironic in his description of nature's recovery (presumably more ironic than in his description of the Satanic fire), therefore the story is a parody of its apparent message and its real message is surely the opposite of its apparent message (269–275).

In addition to deflecting the critical content of stories, Leo Marx refers to the old argument that technology furthers democracy (174), but writing his own book in the age of technocratic totalitarianisms, he does not offer this argument as his own. He also wants to make sure the reader knows that "there was no effective opposition to industrialization" (180) (although he does not tell what rendered the opposition ineffective), that overwhelming majorities were enamored with steam and rails—but he knows that overwhelming majorities were also enamored with Hitler, with Nixon, with Reagan, and he doesn't make much of this argument either. He offers yet another argument, a bizarre one in a book whose subject is the opposition between nature and artifice: the machine, the artifice, is also a part of nature, as everything else is, so there's no opposition. But he quickly drops this argument since, with no opposition, there's no book.

Prospero and Caliban

Leo Marx is not shy or secretive about revealing the purpose of all his debunking, his ridicule, his translations and revisions. His aim is to rub our noses in what he considers the stinking reality behind the fragrant pastoralism. "Today...we can easily see what was wrong with the pastoral theory" (114), he confidently announces. That theory was blind or indifferent to the fact that "the savages, the limitless spaces, and the violent climate of the country did threaten to engulf the new civilization " (44).

Dealing with an author (Beverly) who "comes out with an almost entirely favorable impression of the natives" (79), Leo Marx makes haste to tell us that this author "does not shy away from the unpleasant truth [*sic*] about the Indians. He describes the massacre of the colonists..." (ib.) Leo Marx admits that Beverly "invariably puts the ultimate blame on the aloof, superior English" (ib.). (The English may have been aloof; they thought themselves superior; they also possessed the additional attribute of being invaders, an attribute that is not mentioned once in Leo Marx's book about America). Leo Marx does not let Beverly get away with blaming the English. He does not call Beverly a liar—not quite. He says, "Beverly's Indians are an admirable people. They are gay, gentle, loving, generous and faithful. And for him the reason is not far to seek. It is implicit in his controlling image, the garden landscape..." (80). Such people are nothing but figments of "Beverly's ruling metaphor," they are fictional inhabitants of pastoral myths.

Leo Marx knows who those people really were, and he uses Melville's novel *Typee* as a vehicle for conveying his knowledge to us. "In *Typee*, as in *The Tempest*, the movement toward nature is checked by Caliban—by a Melvillian counterpart, that is, to Shakespeare's 'thing of darkness'" (284). For Leo Marx, Shakespeare's Prospero symbolizes the invading "civilization"; Shakespeare's Caliban symbolizes the exterminated "savages." Caliban is an anagram for Cannibal; it is a mindless, cruel thing that threatens "to engulf the new civilization." "...the Typees are in fact cannibals. In a series of quiet but sinister episodes Melville leads his hero to the edge of primitive horror" (ib.).

Leo Marx disregards Melville's words about racist historian Francis Parkman, words that Melville wrote after his extended stay with South Sea islanders, after he wrote *Typee*: "When we are informed that it is difficult for any white man, after a domestication among the Indians, to hold them much better than brutes...we beg leave to dissent...Why should we condemn them? Because we are better than they? Assuredly not...We are all of us—Anglo-Saxons, Dyaks, and Indians—sprung from one head, and made in one image. And if we regret this brotherhood now, we shall be forced to join hands hereafter. A misfortune is not a fault; and good luck is not meritorious" (Melville "On Parkman's Indians" in W. Washburn, *The White Man*).

For Leo Marx, the misfortune of being expropriated and exterminated is a fault; it is this that makes the victims Calibans. His book is not a comparative study of the eating practices of Romans, Englishmen and South Sea Islanders; its author does not ask whether the crime is in the killing or in the eating; nor is he concerned to determine who "engulfed" whom.

Charges of Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice have been recruiting calls for Final Solutions and justifications for mass exterminations. If the Nazis had carried their Final Solution through as completely as American settlers did theirs, I myself would now be a skeleton of an anonymous four year old European Cannibal.

Leo Marx does not heed Melville's warning to Parkman; he carelessly plays with the term Cannibal as if it were a toy; he ends up applying it to the wilderness as such, to all of nature, again using a work of Melville, this time the one on the whale, as his vehicle. The reality behind the pastoral design, he tells us, is a "primitive mindlessness," (289), "a hideous, menacing wilderness, habitat of cannibals and sharks located beyond (or hidden beneath the surface of) the bland green pastures" (285). Starbuck, one of the novel's characters, is a fool for "his habitual tendency to deny the cannibal underside of reality" (313). So now we know "what was wrong with the pastoral theory."

A System of Cruel Cogs and Wheels

Genocide? Devastation? Not in Leo Marx's book. Cannibals are not human beings; their extermination doesn't count. A "hideous wilderness" is already desolate; it cannot be devastated; it is a waste land, and "a waste land can be transformed into a garden" (183); "...the raw landscape is an ideal setting for technological progress" (203); the technology "is another outcrop of that international upsurge of energy...supplanting obsolete forms in every possible sphere of human behavior." (231)

The pacification (terrorization and extermination) of the indigenous population and its various "obsolete" cultures and communities, the devastation of the "raw" forests, valleys and prairies, are carried through with unmatched energy. But the promise of the machine in the garden is not realized; the actual achievements do not warrant the "confidence...that rises above all possible doubts," the confidence of a Whitman, who "sings the achievement of engineers." (222)

Leo Marx tells us that the "premonition of mankind's improving capacity for self-destruction" was "not wholly fanciful." (184) He lets Carlyle, Emerson and Karl Marx speak of "alienation" (176–9) and of the "use of the outer world as a commodity" (230) without translating or debunking them.

In the last third of the book, he not only gives in to critiques, like Daniel Webster; he immerses himself in the "darker view of life"; he becomes Job wrestling with his soul.

The separation of intellect from heart does not only lead to a sense of loss, anxiety and dislocation. Leo Marx tells us it leads (in Melville's words) to "a system of cruel cogs and wheels, systematically grinding up in one common hopper all that might minister to the well-being of the crew" (286). "In Melville's hero the thrust of Western man for ultimate knowledge is sinewed with hatred" (293). "Melville uses machine imagery to relate the undisguised killing and butchery of whaling to the concealed violence of 'civilized' Western society" (296). "The Age of Machinery transforms men into objects" (298). "The means are sane, the motive and object mad" (300). Ahab, the sequel to Prospero, "dedicated to an unbridled assault upon physical nature, selects and awards men who adapt to the demand for extreme repression" (315). And at last, Leo Marx refers to the pilot's quest as the "psychic equivalent of the shark-like cannibalism of the sea" (316).

Now Leo Marx raises the alarm. How come? The reason is not far to seek. Earlier only a hideous wilderness and shark-like cannibals were attacked. Now Leo Marx himself is attacked. Now Prospero himself is threatened by the products of his "arts." Now the beneficiaries of the fences find themselves fenced-in.

Now Leo Marx himself becomes a critic, alongside the grandson of President John Quincy Adams, Prospero's direct heir. Now Leo Marx accepts a contrast, not between "primitive anarchy" and a "well-ordered garden," but between the Virgin and the Dynamo, between "two kingdoms of force," between Catholic Church and Capitalist State, mother and son. But the Virgin Mother, the Church, forerunner and initiator of the Dynamo that established its dominion over the world's continents, is not as meaningful to Leo Marx as it was to Henry Adams, so Marx is left with only one kingdom of force. And in this kingdom, whatever is still anarchic and primitive, in fact whatever still lives, is already "doomed" by the waiting bulldozers, by the chemical wastes, by the stockpiles of bombs.

Now Leo Marx is no longer as sanguine about his "willingness to accept the world as he finds it" (319). Now a man who accepts the "facts of history," who takes technology for granted, who regards the automobile as a "spontaneous fruit of an Edenic tree," is called a "manufactured man" and even a "modern primitive" by Leo Marx (363). Nevertheless, he says, "until we confront the unalterable...there can be no redemption from a system that makes men the tools of their tools" (355).

But "the unalterable," the "real," the "fact of history" is that we ourselves, the living, the very biosphere that sustains life, are now mere illusions, mere figments of a poet's imagination, in the face of the nuclear and chemical "realities" of Pentagon and Kremlin. What "redemption" is still available to us?

Leo Marx continues to disparage the "belated, ritualistic withdrawal in the direction of 'nature'" (364); he bemoans the "inability of our writers to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape" (365); he concludes that "the machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics" (365). What politics? The politics of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, of Disarmament Conferences, of a Prospero-like Fuhrer, of a seizure of power by The Party?

Barbed Wire That Imprisons

Politics, the "science of power," the "art of the possible"—is that a breach in the fence or the fence itself? Can it provide ways to leave the camp, or only ways to administer the camp? Leo Marx, it seems to me, has reached the ultimate impasse.

To reach this impasse, the modern Job had to stack the evidence; he had to be what C.W. Mills called a "crackpot realist"; he had to project Cannibalism, the "struggle for survival," to the beginning of the world and to all its corners; he had to approach the Biosphere and its inhabitants with a philosophy "sinewed with hatred."

He himself told us "that the New England Puritans favored the hideous wilderness image of the American landscape" because "colonies established in the desert require aggressive, intellectual, controlled and well disciplined people" (43). He did not tell us that the aggressiveness was required because the invaders were setting out to "engulf" the previous inhabitants of the "desert." Like the Puritans, he transferred the "Cannibalism" from the aggressors onto the victims.

But as Melville said of an earlier, similar transference: "We beg to dissent." The term Cannibal, after all, refers to human beings who devour other human beings; at most it refers to animals who devour their own kind. Leo Marx enlarges the term to embrace the wilderness, the ocean, and even the hunted whale. If his enlarged term can be applied to the ocean, it can also be applied to another entity—the Industrial System.

In a curious passage in the middle of his book, Leo Marx had summarized Karl Marx's observation that "within capitalist relations of production, accompanying the division of labor and mass manufacturing, the workingman's product may well become his 'enemy—(177). Leo Marx had understood this to mean that "the more he produces,...the more danger there is that the market will be glutted and that he will lose his job" (ib.); he reduced the problem to one that "politics" can deal with.

But the earlier Marx's observation surely also means that the workingman's product may be the barbed wire that imprisons him, that the workingman produces the integument that encases him, that the workingman is a devoured human being who labors within the belly of a beast which could aptly be named Cannibal.

The enlarged term fits the Industrial System much more snugly than it fits the entities to which Leo Marx applies it. Oceans, winds, whales and sharks have, after all, existed for eons without devouring the countless species of plants and animals nor the innumerable human communities and cultures, whereas the Industrial System has existed for a bare few centuries and it has already consumed numerous species of plants and animals, masticated most communities and dissolved the varied human cultures with its lethal acids.

By removing the term Cannibal from the entities to which Leo Marx applied it, and by applying it to the entity it fits so well, we can immediately see that Leviathan or Cannibal or “survival of the fittest” is not all there is, is not “reality”; we can see that the artificial beast has devoured much, but not yet all; we can see that there’s a “before” as well as an “outside.”

As long as we still live and sing, we’re not doomed, we remain at least as real as it; freedom remains more than a myth, figment or literary flourish; the exterminated live on in us as our dream spirits and guides.

Even if we cannot yet see the breaches in the electrically charged barbed wire; we already know that inmates found their way out of the entrails of earlier mechanical monsters, camped outside the hulks that had seemed so real, and saw the abandoned artificial carcasses collapse and decompose.

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