

# cezanne's apples

Robert F. Perkins

Being a naturalist is not unlike being a painter: the goal is to bring alive for ourselves and others qualities from the various worlds we inhabit, be it everydayness or the more unusual. Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers, Maraden Hartley's landscapes, Pisanello's animal drawings, Van Gogh's night skies, Goya's dreams, Picasso's portraits of women, Cezanne's apples (those humble fruits, seen through his eyes, which helped change the way we perceive the world). I have been greatly moved to stand in front of works of art as powerful and perceptive as these.

Observing the natural world is no less telling. To try to enter into the life of things and creatures, to be an eye, to be present not as a manipulator, but as an observer. To learn that the vacant space surrounding an object is as instructive as the object itself. Increasingly, instead of the facts of the world, which tend to be the concrete things we see and feel, I'm drawn to the influences we cannot as readily see -- the empire between the facts. Wind is a simple example. We see the wind only where it touches something. Currently in what I read, see, and hear concerning nature, and what we are told, I sense an eerie feeling, a presence not concrete, but no less there; a foreboding element underlying the impasse the human world and the natural world have reached.

For me, reading the work of the historian, Elizabeth Pool, brought together these strands through an aspect of her story about the Spanish arrival in South America. She says, the Spanish galleons first appeared off a peninsula named Tabasco. They were lying off shore days before they came on land. Not until the Spanish actually landed did the Native Americans take any notice of them. Even then, in the beginning, the natives acted kindly toward these strangers. What followed reads as very sad history.

In Pool's narration, what shocked me most is realizing that at first the native Americans didn't even see the galleons. Couldn't see them. There was nothing in their past, or present, to prepare them to see ships, or to know what absolute devastation the Spanish would wreak upon their highly developed civilization. Before reading her account, the only analogy I could make was to see in my mind's eye a cast of poorly paid Hollywood extras waving madly and joyously at Charles Laughton and his crew on the *Bounty* as they arrived "out of the blue" in Hawaii. By contrast, the unusual element in Pool's South American tragedy is that nothing happened. You can't perceive something (be it a galleon or a threat) you haven't ever thought existed.

Growing up in North America I was taught to believe we are the great civilization. Perhaps we are, but now, instead of patting myself on the back, I spend more time wondering what the "Spanish Galleon" of our undoing will be: will it be AIDS? An atomic holocaust? Acid rain? Deforestation of the Amazon forests? Our departure for outer space? Overpopulation? Any one of these, or combination, could as utterly change our world as the arrival of the Spanish ships did the South American world. A future generation will look back at us and say, "They had the manpower, the technology, the knowledge, the wealth, to change and solve their problems. Why didn't they?"

The painters George Braque and Henri Matisse loved to create works of art in the form of the cut out. This art form uses both positive and negative space. The object's absence from the cut-out paper being just as powerful as the object cut out. The threat I feel is of something less obvious, less dramatic, but equally as dangerous as any issue mentioned above. These issues are the cut outs; the

threat less readily seen is the negative space surrounding them. An alternative way to perceive this is to imagine the words you're reading without the paper they are printed on. One requires the other, but do you read the words or the paper?

By 1988, the majority of the world's population lives in a city or near one. This percentage grows larger with each passing year. Cities are made in our image. They are carved out of the land. They are the creation of our various sciences. You might say we live in a science fiction: we fly, we drive 110 km/hr, we talk to people next door or around the world without being there. We live in a world of endless light, fresh vegetables, and energy. In some of our laboratories we even fulfill Mary Shelly's vision of creating Frankenstein monsters. Our cities now dream us. Is it that, living in a world totally created and supported by science, we feel less and less a dependence on nature?

On the other hand, wilderness areas the world over are shrinking. The statement, "we need wilderness," cuts both ways: we need it for farmland, lumber, mineral resources, housing, recreation. We need it for itself, too. A wilderness is like our unconscious. By developing wilderness, by each of our sciences raking wilderness and its creatures over and over their coals, we poke it awake; uncover its mysteries, its mechanisms. We invent languages, theories, and systems to interpret and manage each aspect of its self. As we would disintegrate without our sleep, those areas left as wilderness are sleep for the planet. What will happen when they are all completely awake, made completely useful to mankind?

Worldwide, we are constantly told wilderness is doomed. Some of us give money, others devote their lives to preservation, but we all shake our heads and put the blame on other shoulders: Don't blame me, I don't own a sealskin coat, I never cut down a tree in the Amazon, I don't throw plastic in the ocean, I don't eat meat, I don't drive a car. We turn to the experts both to interpret the problem and to provide the solutions: to the politician, the scientist, the economist, the conservationist, the industrialist.

However, what is in jeopardy is not nature, but our attitude toward her. What's shrinking faster than our wilderness areas is our attitude about nature, along with the possibility of our seeking to have any kind of relationship with the natural world. Doesn't there remain an immense amount of the natural world in every country? Outside any window there is something, even if it's just a slice of sky. Nature is more resilient than we think, but have the majority of us isolated ourselves, not only physically in cities, but mentally inside the medias of print, television, and the movies? Do we now not believe our own eyes, ears, and tastes? Are we now so civilized? The "Spanish Galleon" of our day is invisible because we don't see it's so close to each and every one of us.

It's possible the answers to what threatens our wilderness do not lie in the sciences, but in the human heart.

What do I do?

I read and re-read men like John Muir.

I look at Cezanne's apples.

Lit.: Prologue to the Present by Elizabeth Pool  
A Narrative World History in three volumes  
published by Independent School Press, 1984

---

## CANADIAN CANOE ROUTE CLEAN UP PLANNED

The Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association (CRCA) has approached Environment Canada officials to support the proposed "Canadian Canoe Route Environmental Clean Up Project" (CCRECUP) for 1988 and beyond.

The CCRECUP is a co-operative effort on behalf of all canoeists to do their part to ensure the preservation of Canada's canoeable wilderness areas. The project would designate canoe routes across Canada that are in need of environmental clean-up (ie: picking up cigarette butts, bottles, tin foil, general debris, etc.) based upon the input of provincial/territorial recreational canoeing associations and canoe clubs. Volunteer canoeists would then concentrate their efforts over the summer time period to bag garbage along the specified canoe route to restore it as an environmentally desirable area. Volunteers would be asked

to photograph the individuals or groups of canoeists who helped to clean up the area along with the garbage collected, so the environmental clean-up can be publicized in local and national newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations. This will help raise the awareness level of all Canadians of the importance of a clean environment and hopefully increase the number of environmentally active people across the country.

Any comments or suggestions with regard to the CCRECUP would be appreciated. Please write to: CRCA, P.O. Box 500, Hyde Park, Ontario, NOM 1Z0.

(Excerpted from the winter 1988 issue of *Kanawa*, the national newsmagazine of the CRCA.)