Nature and the Unlovable

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Abstract • Can our relationship with nature be loving and reciprocal? The claim is hard to sustain when nature is taken to encompass polluted and urban places. The notion of reciprocity loses its force, and the lovability of these places is put into question. Also, the demand of love may obscure the ethical demand in our relationship with nature: to be responsible in our meaning-making practices.

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1 | For example, Bryan Bannon (2017) argues that our relationship with nature should be that of reciprocal friendship.

2 | However, see Sam Shpall (2018) for an illuminating view of love for an ideal that does not generalize.

3 | For Candiotto, loving consists in a huge car park, built where there used to be a forest. Unlike the river, which is polluted but is still there, the forest simply is no more.

4 | The worry here is that we cannot love some places for their qualities. The polluted river is a dirty, inhospitable, violent place: if love is to be based on its traits, which is a requirement for this love to be erotic, the polluted river is unlovable. One response to this worry would be that we are unable to see the qualities of the river, since in virtue of being polluted the river is lacking the qualities for which we should love it (pristine, clean, peaceful and full of life, for example). How can we then love the river for its qualities, without projecting our own interpretation and thus making the relationship unilateral?

5 | Let us take this problem further by considering the hot, littered, asphalt-covered streets of a non-affluent European neighbourhood. As an example, I choose Vallecas, a suburb in Madrid located in the site of a former valley with multiple meadows, creeks, and rivers. Vallecas started as a small human settlement that evolved into a village, then a town, and was ultimately absorbed by the city of Madrid. Now there is little of the valley left, only human-made buildings. After the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, the neighbourhood turned into a slum, and although some parts have been regenerated, it is still a neglected area. At the same time, Vallecas has an important anti-fascist history (the artillery damage from the war is still visible in its walls); a strong sense of community; and an indelible identity as a working-class, socially and politically engaged neighbourhood. It is certainly a lovable place. However, at some point in its history, the creeks in the area looked pretty...
much like Candiotto’s polluted river – because they were permanently covered with asphalt. Indeed, many parts of Vallecas do not look very different from the car park in my example. The story of Vallecas is the story of countless urban places around the world where the notion of reciprocal listening seems to lose its meaning. I am not refuting that we can listen to these places, but these places cannot listen to us back in the way suggested by Candiotto. Recall that we are to understand that the polluted river has listened to us by becoming inhospitable. However, how has the car-park site listened to us? How have the hot and littered streets of a culturally rich suburb listened to us? Candiotto’s view of the river’s reciprocity does not seem available in these cases, not least because it is not clear what is doing the listening in each case: the place that is now, or the bygone pristine nature that the car park and the streets have substituted? Although we may acquire a great deal of understanding while interacting with a place like Vallecas, this will be done by our own interpretation of the place’s history and identity, which is an interpretation by other people of what people have done. The place has not listened to us: we have made it what it is, in its goodness and its badness.

Where does this leave us? I propose that we will be able to make better sense of the ethical demands of our relationship with nature if we recognize that places are what we make them to be. We make a place by our interpretation of the place. As I mentioned above, we can (and we should) acknowledge the harm done to the polluted river and the destroyed forest. We can (and we should) acknowledge the value of humanity in places like Vallecas. Love of urban places should not be diminished by knowing that a place is not the place that it once was. Admittedly, we may still love and interact with some places in the way Candiotto describes, but reciprocal love cannot be the ethical demand. We are the makers of meaning in our relationship with place. That means that meaning-making is not participatory, but that is fine: we still have responsibilities in our interaction with places. The ethical demand is to acknowledge our responsibility to tell the stories of what human beings have done to (and in) these places which cannot be told by the places themselves. We are the ones who need to be responsible in our meaning-making. Candiotto’s important contribution on love of place is, I hope, a further step towards an environmental ethic that has the urban as a main element, and not as an afterthought. However, we can only do this by seeing ourselves as the main meaning-makers, and taking responsibility for our interpretation of a place’s identity and history, as Murdock beautifully puts it:

“The voices, narratives, and experiences of those living within and among urban environments are necessary [...] to theorize as well as populate the archives with narratives and histories of the wonderful, diverse, and resilient environments and communities found there. These narratives will, of course, include stories of injustice, but they will also include stories of triumph and natural beauty, as well as stories of community gardens, soup kitchens, backyard chickens, herbal medicines, art, worship, sport, and play.” (Murdock 2019: 311)

References

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