

## Within the Clearing: Reimagining Cities as Forests

---

David Ward

David Ward is a student at Arizona State University where he studies anthropology, creative writing, and ecocriticism.

---

### Human Relationship with Nature

In his book, *Forests*, Robert Pogue Harrison presents a striking approach to the popular problem of man's dualistic relationship with nature. He imagines humanity as neither an entity separate in fact from the natural world, nor as an entity that merely imagines its separateness. Harrison instead states that humanity dwells not in nature but in relation to it, that "the relation *is* the abode."<sup>1</sup> This relation happens as *logos*, translated loosely as language, and is described by Harrison in the early chapters as a clearing in the primeval woods from which humanity emerged. The advent of human consciousness and the capacity for *logos* necessitated a clearing, a physical space within forests where civilization and cities began to grow, and it also necessitated a metaphysical space of awareness within the spontaneity of nature. Harrison depicts the scene of the opening of the clearing as a technological feat, perpetrated by Vulcan, the "master of technical skill," who creates the boundary of deforestation: the blurry line between human and nature throughout *Forests*.<sup>2</sup>

This line, this distinction, is blurry because we extend ourselves across it. The city is the clearing, burned out of the forest. By the very act of living, of dwelling, a person appropriates and relates to the non-human that exists outside of the clearing. We emplace ourselves. *How* we do this is determined by the "historical modes of consciousness which determine our relation to nature," and they fluctuate with the events of history.<sup>3</sup> One such mode of consciousness is anthropomorphism, the

capacity for which “was a gift from nature.”<sup>4</sup> Anthropomorphism is more than merely a symptom of anthropocentrism; it is the carrier of a vital metaphor that bridges the space between clearing and nature.

The metaphoric action of anthropomorphism is to imagine nature as human and human as nature. The appropriation goes both ways. Wordsworth’s poem “The world is too much with us” advocates the human appropriation of nature. “Little we see in Nature that is ours;/ We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”<sup>5</sup> For Wordsworth, to live in a world where one could glimpse “Proteus rising from the sea” is to reclaim nature as something human and thus to restore the heart of humanity. Conversely, the figure of Dionysus from Greek mythology appropriates his human form as something wild. He upends social structure and kinship bonds by leading Agave to kill her son Pentheus, on whom he places the guise of a mountain lion. He is nature appropriating the face of humanity, claiming it as his own.

By anthropomorphizing, then, humanity finds a poetic way to place itself in nature. More than mere personification, it connects human and nature on the level of sameness, which “gathers what is distinct into an original being-at-one.”<sup>6</sup> The metaphoric ties serve to remind both sides of the dualism that the line of deforestation is not a boundary but a bridge; it allows humanity to dwell in relation to nature from the space of his clearing. “Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling.”<sup>7</sup>

---

### **Inside the Clearing: Human Relationship with Cities**

The first puzzle of ecocriticism is the relationship of man to nature. The second puzzle of ecocriticism is man's alienation from himself. We find ourselves alienated from forests *and* cities; as strong as the human/nature, mind/body schisms may be, there is also a divide between humanity and its constructs. The fact of our discomfort with ourselves and our technological offspring can be seen in environmental activism—we are not content to let the last old-growth forests be cut down, and there is a general sense that miles of parking lots and strip malls are somehow less desirable than meadows.

It may be helpful to apply the ideas of clearing and dwelling to human constructions and to technology. But first: what, exactly, is the nature of the human/city dualism? Heidegger, again, provides insight:

But man not only cultivates what produces growth out of itself; he also builds in the sense of *aedificare*, by erecting things that cannot come into being and subsist by growing. Things that are built in this

sense include not only buildings but all the works made by man's hands and through his arrangements. Merits due to this building, however, can never fill out the nature of dwelling. On the contrary, they even deny dwelling its own nature when they are pursued and acquired purely for their own sake.<sup>8</sup>

The ecosystem of civilization is out-competing the ecosystems of "nature," and humanity finds itself with more square miles of urban and suburban area than in any other period of history. We are more isolated and distant from nature than ever before; no longer can we look over the city walls and see the line of deforestation. In other words, the clearing has opened so wide that "At the center one eventually forgets that one is dwelling in a clearing. . . . The wider the circle of the clearing, the more the center is nowhere and the more the *logos* becomes reflective, abstract, universalistic."<sup>9</sup> Human constructs are not organic. They do not happen "of themselves," they happen "of humanity," and, as such, we experience them as being inside the clearing. Human constructs exist in a different timescape than humans. Where the flora and fauna of nature exist in cyclic patterns of death and renewal, we experience our concrete buildings as, at most, entities undergoing a sort of static decay. In short, it has become much more difficult to ground ourselves using our poetic ties to a distant natural world. We are not at home in cities, and we imagine that we have lost "unspoiled nature" forever.

It seems, then, that humanity needs to reimagine cities in such a way that clearings can be made within them; as Vico says, "they shall turn their cities into forests."<sup>10</sup> This, it can be argued, has already happened. Our cities are becoming forests—not literally growing bark and leaves, but similarly covering the earth, harbouring their own ecosystems and intricate networks of relationships. For all of the reason and science that go into their growth, cities are no more open books than are forests. We utilize the phenomena of cities (stoplights, busses, computers, etc.), with most of us not really understanding them, as the Paleolithic peoples utilized the phenomena of nature. The individuals who understand best are revered and consulted: shamans and chiefs, scientists and CEOs.

A tree grows because its seed was in a favourable environmental context, and as it continues to provide conduits for nutrients and water it continues to expand and mature, until it can no longer provide a conduit or there is nothing to conduct. Cities grow because there are seeds (humans) in favourable environmental contexts (available food, building materials, water, etc), and as they provide conduits for people they continue to grow until the city fails to support people or the people move elsewhere.

The point is not, however, to find all of the parallels between the urban jungle and the green jungle. The point is to see that humanity needs to understand its constructs as being within the realm of nature in order to dwell successfully in relation to them.

---

## **Dwelling within Cities**

Before we can be in a position to create the poetic ties of dwelling, one crucial step needs to be taken. Simply put, we need to understand our cities as natural. We need a new anthropomorphism, a new “historical mode of consciousness” that helps us understand our cities and suburbias as ‘forests’ so that we may dwell in relation to them.

We understand cities to be a product of humanity’s ability to manipulate the natural world through science and reason. For at least the last two hundred years, science has been the dominant mode of consciousness whereby we relate to reality. Science is, perhaps, a kind of anthropomorphism; it is a metaphor, a tie, by which we understand our relation to nature. Unlike mythic anthropomorphism, science ends not in sameness but in equal-ness. “The equal or identical always moves toward the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator.”<sup>11</sup> Science understands everything as reduced to common laws. If humanity’s constructs are the ultimate product of scientific reason, and if both human and environment are “just molecules,” there is nothing to which we can anchor ourselves.

Science, however, is not synonymous with technology; science is just one method by which we alter our technological capacity. Technology, in turn, is the means by which we create cities and all of humanity’s constructs. Technology is the means by which mankind burned a clearing out of the forest, and humans have been using it since Paleolithic man fashioned the first stone hand-axe. Technology, like language, is one of the fundamental descriptors of mankind, an aspect of *logos*. If Gary Snyder can say that “language does not impose order on a chaotic universe, but reflects its own wildness back,” perhaps technology operates similarly.<sup>12</sup> If “good writing is ‘wild’ language,” then maybe “wild” technology need not lead to equal-ness but instead engender the creation of new clearings.

A further step toward unifying cities with nature is taken with Tom Ingold’s notion that the landscape and taskscape are intimately connected.

That generative field is constituted by the totality of organism-environment relations, and the activities of organisms are

moments of its unfolding. Indeed once we think of the world in this way, as a total movement of becoming which builds itself into the forms we see, and in which each form takes shape in continuous relation to those around it, then the distinction between the animate and the inanimate seems to dissolve. The world itself takes on the character of an organism. . . . Our actions do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world's transforming itself.<sup>13</sup>

Cities, then, are not objects standing somehow outside of nature, outside of the landscape, outside human interaction. To the contrary, even concrete buildings present themselves as part of the landscape, as the legacy of our taskscape.

But from the perspective of dwelling, we can see that the forms of buildings, as much as any other features of the landscape, are neither given in the world nor placed upon it, but emerge within the self-transforming processes of the world itself.<sup>14</sup>

In light of this, cities and all of humanity's constructs belong not just to an isolated subset "man's creations" but to nature as a whole; the city becomes something we exist in relation to, something outside the clearing.

---

## Conclusions

In order to understand what sort of clearing can be made in a city, we must move beyond Harrison's metaphor of forest versus city. To understand "clearing" merely as a space—a distance, both physical and metaphysical—necessitated by consciousness and prerequisite for civilization, is to place cities squarely within the clearing as a symbol of civilization; it cements the distinction between the products of humanity and the products of nature. Our inability to dwell in relation to cities is a direct result of this distinction.

A Heideggerian approach, however, would understand "clearing" as something created by consciousness as opposed to necessitated by it. The difference is *action*, and clearing becomes something that happens on an individual level and with varying degrees of success: "beings may or may not be 'let be.'"<sup>15</sup> Cities and everything made by the hand of humanity are then placed, not by default, into or outside of the human clearing. They become part of a material reality that can emerge into being within the light of consciousness; cities become,

potentially, the product of a wild technology. Therefore it is up to us to disclose the being of cities in such a way that we can dwell in poetic relation to them.

## References

- Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Harrison, Robert. 1992. *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2000. . . . Poetically Man Dwells . . . . *Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe, 88–95. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tom. 1993. The Temporality of Landscape. *World Archaeology* 25 (2): 152–72.
- Snyder, Gary. 2000. Language Goes Two Ways. *Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe, 127–31. London: Routledge.

## Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Harrison 1992, p. 201.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 10.  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 161.  
<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.160.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>6</sup> Heidegger 2000, p. 91.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 90.  
<sup>9</sup> Harrison 1992, p. 245.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 12.  
<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, 2000, p. 91.  
<sup>12</sup> Snyder 2000, p. 128.  
<sup>13</sup> Ingold 1993, p. 164.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 169.  
<sup>15</sup> Garrard 2004, p. 31.