Radical Politics…Noble Savagery?

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> We are free to create culture as we wish, but the prototype to which the genome is accustomed is Pleistocene society. As a culture we may choose to invent any language or set of gods we like. But that we must make up a language and choose gods is what it means to be human.
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> — Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*[1]

I.

The great American philosopher/critic Kenneth Burke is said to have asserted his prerogative to defend to the death the right of every man to worship God in his own metaphor. That was towards the end of his life, when his literary theory had taken a distinctly theological turn. Burke's remark came back to me with peculiar force as I mulled how best to approach Paul Shepard's "Radical Politics." What gods did Shepard himself choose? At what god's altar did he worship, in his work and in his life? And was that god created in his—Paul's—own image and likeness?

Questions like these had to have been percolating very close to the surface of his thinking, when he wrote this rough-hewn little piece, sometime in 1995. A year earlier he had been diagnosed with a virulent form of lung cancer; a year later, he would be dead. He was working on *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, at once a brief compendium of his thinking over the years and a coda to its major themes. Given his keen awareness that his time was limited, this valedictory work had to have taken on a special urgency for him. Yet Florence Shepard describes the period during which the book was completed—and during which Paul's health was rapidly deteriorating—as a time of relative tranquility, positive creative energy, friendship, and love. "He was," she writes, "the light at the center of our fire circle."[2]

He was also, at least at some point during that period, an angry and frustrated man, as "Radical Politics" bears out. Existentially, of course, he had plenty of reason to be. But there is something here both more and other than a raging against the dying of the light, á la Kubler-Ross.[3] Read against the "Introduction" to *Coming Home* (the very last writing he would complete, three weeks before his death), and the observation therein that many of the

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[1] Paul Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene,* ed. Florence R. Shepard (Washington, D.C.: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1998), 38.

[2] Ibid., *x.*

[3] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner, Reprint Edition, 2012).

questions with which he was dealing at its end had persisted since the beginning of his intellectual odyssey in the early 1970s, "Radical Politics" covers familiar ground. Indeed, it does not give the reader—even one well-versed in his thinking, even one influenced by his ideas and their range—anything particularly new or deep to go on. A clearly unfinished work, it reads less like an essay—a literary form at which Shepard, at his best, was artfully adept—than an exercise in bricolage. Was it a stab at an op-ed? So the title and the word count might suggest. Was it a first run at an introduction to *Coming Home to the Pleistocene?* If so, then why the title and word count? What was the intended point of this thing?

The most obvious answer to this last question seems to lie in the direction of an indictment of academe—the academy in question being at least as old as Plato's—where "dialogues . . . flame through college campuses and boil out into the public." Thus, the university of the later twentieth century directly spawned three successive and somewhat parallel movements: civil rights, feminism and, to use his rather awkward phrasing, "attention to third world deprivation." For Shepard, these amounted to new takes on very old problems; indeed, the history of human strife and striving displays a tiresome conformity marked by cruelty and in-fighting legitimated ever since the Renaissance by the "dogma of an earth without organic and spiritual integrity," which shores up the hegemony of an intellectual and economic elite. In his years in the university, Shepard has seen it all, thanks to "the rhetoric of this narrow notion of historical progress in every discipline," and thus he launches into a tirade naming the end results of such rhetoric:

> …solutions to sexual injustice as empowerment, navel scrutiny therapy for social strife, the endless horse-opera of political intrigue, economic myopia, aesthetic secularism, scientific reductionism, and other-world theologies—all seeking The Way on issues, as infinitely important as the life of a child, by looking into mirrors.[4]

So: six thousand years of Western civilization amounts to just so much narcissistic posturing, self-aggrandizement, and navel-gazing. Liberals are not liberal, nor conservatives conservative, enough. One side turns animal others into pets, the other renders them commodities. Meanwhile, the fate of the planet hangs in the balance. Darkness falls. And academic life goes on.

Shepard emphasizes that the "planet-wide devastation of ecosystems" is an intellectual process. True enough—although his own invoking of the concept of "ecosystems" surely implicates him to some degree in that abstractive process. Perhaps sensing that possible conclusion about his own work, he launches a second tirade against the politics of environmental coalitions, "social groups" which "rise and fall, working out their compromises

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[4] Paul Shepard, "Radical Politics," *The Trumpeter* 31, no. 2 (2015): 91.

on the shared assumption that the world has no intrinsic structure, few givens, but rather an order projected upon it by humans that creates coherence. One chooses ecological relationships the way one chooses a political party or brands at a grocery." It all amounts to an "ideological myth."

This sounds harsh, and it is surely intended to. Shepard has neither the time nor the patience for mere ideology, and the mythology it both creates and upholds. Fair enough. But when he seeks to name the problem, things become murky indeed:

> The ideological myth presupposes a definition of being which is at odds with modern ecological and ethnological understanding, hence those sciences are seen as subversive and often in tandem with feminist concerns, sharing an organismic and intuitive core. The myth has an enormous momentum. Environmentalism itself is highly power and patriarchy based. Social and natural sciences with their value-free fact-finding all seem to confirm that "humans make themselves" no matter how the world is made.[5]

What is he saying here? What are "those sciences," exactly? And what of feminism, which he initially invoked as a seemingly positive movement, only to dismiss it three paragraphs later as a "narrowly defined" notion of "the solution to sexual injustice as empowerment"? Is it part of the problem or the solution? Does he really believe the social and natural sciences are (or think themselves to be) "value-free," or is he being sarcastic in their regard? Shepard continues:

> Literally ideology is the "study of ideas." But in practice it means the advocacy of a position consciously taken, framing one's beliefs around an issue. As an expression of how-things-come-to-be, it is a myth in the anthropological sense. The old gods and goddesses are replaced by historical figures who formulate political choices.[6]

Shepard clearly wants those old gods and goddesses back. But he appears loath to admit that they, too, demand "the advocacy of a position consciously taken," which an older ideology might have called a leap of faith. It was also, of course, that older ideology which placed humans "next in rank to the angels," a positioning of which Shepard takes a very dim view.

If "to choose gods is what it means to be human," what gods remain for Shepard, as he nears the end of this problematic little essay, as well as the end of his life? The concluding paragraph of "Radical Politics" reads like a précis of the concluding chapter of *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*:

> Clues to the choices before us are spelled out in precious genetic codes that contain the wisdom of millions of years of evolution, in healthy and harmonious

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[5] Shepard, "Radical Politics," 92-93.

[6] Ibid.

ecosystems, and in traditions of place-based cultures that have survived the test of time. The past is not a place of obsolescence but a tracery to the present where the constraints of choices before us become evident and we choose a path that is spiritually and ecologically based.[7]

Yet we live in a world where there are fewer and fewer "healthy and harmonious ecosystems" to point to, and those that remain—stretching from the polar ice caps to the Great Barrier Reef—are deeply imperiled. As to the traditions of "place-based cultures that have survived the test of time," if one considers on the one hand the status of the two longest-surviving continuous cultures on the planet—the Australian Aborigines and the Khoi-San peoples of the Southern African bush—and on the other the remnants of indigenous peoples like those in the Amazon, the fate of these primal peoples looks ever more dire.

And so a question remains, and it is thorny enough that it perhaps was the source of the simmering anger that drives "Radical Politics." Shepard's constant goal, developed in ever greater detail throughout the course of his writing, is to return "home" to the Pleistocene. He acknowledges that such a homecoming is obviously neither possible nor desirable for *all* the folks who share this over-inhabited planet. But what if, genome be damned, it isn't possible for *any*? What if the answer to the most compelling question at the heart of Shepard's *opus* is simply, flatly: "No. You can't go home again"?

II.

Crafting a constructive response to "Radical Politics" has been something of a struggle for me. Recently, I mentioned that I was wrestling with this paper to a friend and colleague of mine—one roughly as knowledgeable as I about Shepard's work, but not so deeply influenced by it as I have been. "Oh, God," he sighed, "not that just-so story again!"

"Well," I averred, "yes. That story, again. But with an odd ideological bend to it. And it has to do with feminism, of all things."[8]

I had been pondering a passage that occurs early on in *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, shortly after an indictment of "the literature of environmentalism [which] has descended on the Western world like a pall during the past quarter-century," with its near-unbearable emphasis on species extinction and habitat loss. By way of example, Shepard takes up the then-popular

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[7] Shepard, "Radical Politics," 91.

[8] It is worth noting here that in my first book, *Woman the Hunter* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997)*,* while I appropriated Shepard's idea of the hunter as an "agent of awareness" for culture at large, and his overall historical scheme regarding the consequences of the shift from hunter/forger to agrarian/cosmopolitan lifeways, I took sharp issue with Shepard's ready acceptance of patriarchally-determined gender roles and the stereotypes that follow from them.

hypothesis that human hunting was the root cause of the mass extinction of megafauna in North America roughly ten thousand years ago:

> The cruellest form of modern criticism of primal peoples depicts them as stingy and greedy as anybody else, implying that to be human is to be selfish.
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> The most strident of these theories projects overkill onto aboriginal inhabitants of the world by claiming that, being basically avid, they were responsible for the extinction of many large animals at the end of the Pleistocene. Invading humans from Asia, the argument runs, exterminated the giant sloths, mammoths and horses. Their relentless pursuit of hapless and trusting animals who had never seen humans presents a portrait of grisly slaughter indeed. We are encouraged to picture cliffs where men drove bison or horses to their deaths—a kind of epigram for the whole sordid episode of the hunters' blood lust.[9]

Shepard is on solid ground, as far as the science goes; the theory has now been largely discredited, hunting clearly having been but a small factor, and climate change a far greater cause, in the disappearance of animals like the mammoth. But what drew my attention in this passage is not *that* he argues against the theory of mass extinction, but *how* he argues his case.

Shepard's riposte to the intemperate tone of the overhunting theory is, of course, equally "strident," characterizing the theory as pitting "hapless and trusting animals" against blood-thirsty slaughterers. But those cliffs that he says "we are encouraged to picture" did and do actually exist, and the archaeological evidence at the scores of sites that have been excavated in the High Plains makes it indisputably clear that bison—far more in number than the human community needed or could use—were driven to their deaths by Paleo-Indians and later Native hunters.[10]

Interestingly enough, while Shepard's approach to the over-hunting hypothesis is uncertainly rooted in archaeology or palaeontology, it would have been right at home in the radical feminist theory of the mid-1990s, inspired as that movement was by a mixture of animal rights ideology and a gender essentialism that assumed male rapaciousness to be the root cause of all the evil in the world. Shepard repeatedly contended that the male of the species "is genetically programmed to pursue, attack, and kill for food," while the female(s) of the species "share with the apes a pre-hunting perception and psychology. . .from which men are excluded: a world of frugivorousness and pensiveness, at once more intensely social and more tranquil" than the

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[9] Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene,* 31-32.

[10] There is more than a little irony in the characterization of these *pishkuns* as "buffalo jumps"—as if the bison were actively participating in their own slaughter.

male hunter's world.[11] This smacks of the same nature romanticism as evidenced in such radical screeds as Andrée Collard's *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence Against Animals and the Earth.*[12] His depiction of humans peacefully cohabiting the landscape with other species with whom they shared a largely vegetarian diet amidst a generally routine abundance of resources mostly gathered by nurturing women sounds an awful lot like Carol Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat,*[13] and like Adams's work, Shepard's relies on anthropological studies that were—even at the time Adams and Shepard were writing—being radically called into question because of their gender-stereotypical treatment of "Man the Hunter" and "Woman the Gatherer." As I have argued in this regard, these figures make powerful metaphors, but they are hardly role models.[14] Nor does what we have come to know about surviving indigenous peoples and their necessarily evolving lifeways square with gauzy visions of "place-based cultures that have survived the test of time." At this historical juncture, arguably all such cultures are "surviving," some of them just barely, to the extent that they have found ways to manage and recontextualize their interactions with the dominant culture. There are no purely "primal" peoples, untouched by civilization. Even those who seek to return to the "old ways" are effecting that "return" in light of vastly changed social, environmental, and historical circumstances.

It is fair to say that Paul Shepard possessed, at best, a limited understanding of what the feminists of his time were attempting, in terms of transformations that ranged from the social to the imaginal. What he saw—and seemed to like—about feminism were precisely those aspects of so-called radical or cultural feminism that tended to re-inscribe traditional, patriarchal categories of sexual difference, and the gender roles that arise out of that difference. It is telling, in this regard, that throughout his work he places a heavy emphasis on woman's primary role as procreator and nurturer. There is, for him, clearly something unnatural about the feminist challenge to this understanding—hence, in "Radical Politics," his remark about the failure of solipsistic modern ideologies to deal adequately (or perhaps at all?) with "issues, as infinitely important as the life of a child." Similarly, in the introduction to *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, he declares, apparently with regard to the feminist push for abortion and reproductive rights:

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[11] Paul Shepard, *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1973), 122-123 and 278.

[12] Andrée Collard and Joyce Contrucci, *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence Against Animals and the Earth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[13] Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

[14] See my *Woman the Hunter,* Chapters 1 & 2.

> As I complete this book, I see new questions that deserve consideration in the future: How is one to accommodate an ethics of normal killing—the mien of the predatory [male] human—and the ethics of widespread infanticide by mothers?

This leads him to further speculate: "Must our modern amenities be sacrificed for us to become savage again?" [15]

As much as Shepard may have disliked the idea of the "Noble Savage," his overall social theory certainly tilted in that direction, and—like other iterations of the theme stretching back to Rousseau—it privileged masculine experience, men being genetically designed to be questers, and women nesters. Yet growing numbers of women and girls, as Shepard was writing and subsequently, are for a variety of very good reasons unwilling to "sacrifice" those "modern amenities" that feminism has achieved, particularly over the course of the past century. One might say that Shepard appears to have had an unfortunate blind spot in that regard. Or, one might say he did see the light, to the extent that feminism presented both a force to be reckoned with and a fundamental challenge to some of the essential underpinnings of his intellectual project.

"No," say those women—and men—who embrace the myriad forms of feminist discourse and activism that reach beyond the comfortable stereotypes and gender essentialism of goddess spirituality and radical feminism, "No, Paul. You can't go home again. Or, if you do, we cannot follow."

III.

Wendell Berry has long argued that the environmental movement needs to attend to the voices of poets and essayists, workers in words and ideas who may or may not have some specialized training in environmental science, but who are spiritually and creatively at home in the humanities. For it is these thinkers and writers who provide depth and breadth, who "essay" ideas with courage and flair, who return us to our roots even as they train our imagination to branch ever more heavenward. . . artists in ideas and weavers of imaginative webs like Gary Snyder, Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, and Richard Nelson (to name a few of my favourites). Paul Shepard belongs in their visionary company. And there, for me anyway, the wrestling with his ideas, and their sometime shortcomings, ends. There is more than one god or goddess at work in all this, and more than one way to come home.

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[15] Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, 4. I think it is fair in this context to assume that "normal" predation is a male prerogative.