

Our opening words come from the very end of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "The World Soul"

Spring still makes spring in the mind
When sixty years are told;
Love wakes anew this throbbing heart,
And we are never old;
Over the winter glaciers
I see the summer glow,
And through the wild-piled snow-drift
The warm rosebuds below.

Today's reading come's from Marilynne Robinson's book Gilead

"I wish I could leave you certain of the images in my mind, because they are so beautiful that I hate to think they will be extinguished when I am. Well, but again, this life has its own mortal loveliness. And memory is not strictly mortal in its nature, either. It is a strange thing, after all, to be able to return to a moment, when it can hardly be said to have any reality at all, even in its passing. A moment is such a slight thing. I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve."

Going Back: Family, History, Memory, and Myth Along the Hudson River

I. Preface

A few months ago, I was asked to write something about the artist Thomas Cole and his home (Cedar Grove) in Catskill, NY. Cole is considered to be the "father" of the Hudson River School, a group of 19th century painters who depicted the American (and other) landscapes in a romantic if not idyllic manner.

I happily agreed to take on that task for both professional and personal reasons. Cole's work, thought, and homestead overlaps with my own interests in architecture, art, landscape, and ecology. Its location also resonated with me. Catskill is just across the Hudson River and a few miles south of Hudson, NY, which is where my father is from. It is place I have visited countless times since childhood.

The essay I wrote combines my personal memories with historical facts and some speculative conclusions. My memories, even if fuzzy, are presented as another set of historical data. In doing this I suggested that history is open to and includes a myriad of personal impressions and experiences. This raised the old questions regarding the relationship between objective history and subjective memory, as well nostalgia and myth. This place, this religious place, First Unitarian seems like a good one to revisit and reflect upon such things, in particular because these topics (history, memory, and myth) seem to me to have a specific relationship to our religion. I'm not positive, though. We'll see how this goes. By the end I will make an unexpected leap into cyborgs to make my point. Yes, cyborgs. I wanted to warn you. They are coming!

II. Personal

Despite passing within 100 yards of what is now the Thomas Cole National Historical Site dozens of times, before this past April I had never been there. The site opened to the public in 2001 yet I really didn't know it existed as an institution. Taking on the aforementioned assignment gave me an excuse to finally visit. It also meant a return to Hudson, a journey that still makes me happy, makes me feel like I'm going home, like I'm going back to one of the best parts of my childhood.

Going back. A pregnant phrase. Going back in space. Going back in time. Going back(wards), repeating ourselves, these are not always things we admit as being desirable. Never mind that going back in time is impossible. And yet, we do it, or try to do it all the time. Memory is a personal version of this journey. History an allegedly more objective one. Nostalgia is a special kind of “trip.” It is the memory (or history) of and a longing for something that didn’t necessarily happen. It is a false or manipulated memory, a myth. But, like all myths, they can be more powerful, maybe more accurate, than the literal truth.

I know the folks who asked me to write about the Cole site well. They trusted me. In short, I knew that I could write something more personal in scope and more casual in tone. The day after getting the commission I wrote 1,000 words. That’s a lot for me. It came out easily. It was mostly accounts from my memory of visiting Hudson and Catskill and the roads and bridges and trains and trees and mountains and rivers near them. I wrote of the first sunset I remember paying attention to; of my grandmother “stealing apples” from the floor of an orchard; of the rows and rows of fruit kugel she made in her dank basement; of the sounds and sights of the NYS Thruway and Taconic parkway. I wrote about train stations, and oil tanks, and pollution and abandoned factories, of economic downturns and gentrification. These were all things I knew. They were also things Cole painted 140 years before. Were my reflections accurate? Where they false memories? It’s impossible to know. Were they nostalgic? Probably.

Recounting these events to myself in the context of Cole’s work and times made me realize how my personal life, my so-called inner life, was not my own, that it had been guided by larger, much larger historical forces. This was also true for Thomas Cole. Unlike most he recognized this quite early in his life and was able to record his insights on canvas and on paper. His insight in the 1820s and 30s was that the unchecked industrialization of the landscape would lead to physical and moral destruction. In a word, things would get ugly. The conception of nature as a resource had to be combated by depicting it as an Eden. He fought progress with nostalgia. In Cole’s paintings the past (along the Hudson River and into the Catskill mountains) was a more peaceful, harmonious time when humans and nature lived in harmony. Echoing the Classical (i.e. Roman) tradition, he called such landscapes “pastoral,” which was not to be confused with (and was an improvement upon) “savage” landscapes. This version of the past was also his vision for the future, a future where a large part of the land would be preserved as forever wild, while the rest of it would be earmarked for development. The allure of Cole’s (and every other) nostalgia is that it brackets out all the unwanted and unpleasant parts of the past. It is an idealized version of the past and the future. This is its allure. It is also what makes it dangerous.

III. Nostalgia

We are living at time when nostalgic and anti-nostalgic views of the past are prevalent in everyday discourse. They are competing against one another.

The 1619 project, Critical Race Theory, and the removal of historical monuments are some of the well-known versions of the latter. They belong to a larger historiographic movement that is known as decolonial history, which not only attempts to reveal the continued (and ugly) presence of colonial practices and mindsets in the present, but it also seeks to undermine them by exposing their structural foundations, prejudices, and continued ill effects. Decolonial history reveals what has been left out of history, and by reinserting it shows us a different understanding of the present. At Cedar Grove this is being addressed by contrasting Cole’s romantic work with the presence of slavery and industrialization present in the history of the site, specifically through the stories of specific individuals, (slaves and slave holders) and narratives.

Not everybody thinks doing such things is a good idea, including certain governors and state legislators. Decolonial histories is met daily with resistance – both physical, discursive, and pedagogical. Those who want to legislate slavery, racism, sexism, and science out of history textbooks and curricula are contemporary examples of the preference for myth over history. Such a position is reactionary. It is also pure nostalgia – it present an incomplete if not mythological version of history .

I read and assign decolonial history. I support it. It is essential to long lasting (if slow) social justice. And yet, I worry that it is not enough. I worry that it would be a strategic mistake to assume that fuller, more detailed, more accurate histories will inevitably triumph over mythological ones. History (and the newspaper) says otherwise. I wonder if myths and nostalgia can only be replaced with better (fact based) myths. That is, instead of disposing of myth and nostalgia, how can we add them to our facts to achieve the ends we desire?

A myth, writes the French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes, “could not care less about contradictions so long as it establishes a euphoric security.” [repeat] In the context of the American landscape, for Cole and his 19th century colleagues, the contradiction to be addressed was the triumph of “infinite power of man over nature” at the expense of the divine, a loss “which man cannot yet do without.”ⁱ How could humans triumph over nature if nature was the work of God? This would literally be sacrilegious. To overcome this contradiction and produce “security” required isolating the one from the other. Certain environments were conceived and established as virtuous, and true, and beautiful, and sacred. Today we call these parks or preserves. The rest were deemed open and empty and profane. We call this the frontier, development, or real estate. This division, and the myth that binds them, made it possible for the mortal and the divine, the pragmatic and the spiritual to exist side by side without one having to pick a side.

Cole’s work contributed to this myth by painting and writing about the region around Catskill as an ahistorical paradise, a place of (unchanging/unwavering) beauty and rapture. However, he challenged it by excluding the other side of it. The forces of modernity are rarely depicted in his work, even though they surrounded him in Catskill. He was early to recognize the physical and psychological damages a purely “utilitarian” attitude would have on the nation’s physical and political environments.ⁱⁱ He was no radical. His environmentalism was rooted in fundamentalist religion, his anti-industrialism in conservative politics. Still, he saw the future. A future of toxic sunsets and unswimmable rivers – both parts of my childhood visits to Hudson. Perhaps he was naïve to think that worshipping nature would protect it from exploitation. Still, he tried.

Among the problems with myths, and it is a big one, is that they fail to address the cause of the contradiction they seem to reconcile. The myth of the landscape as unequal sacred and profane I parts suggests that there was an original unity or wholeness that is forever lost. This is what Cole painted. The myth perpetuates the nostalgic longing for this unity, without ever asking if such a unity really existed in the first place. Myths don’t always distort reality, sometimes they just prevent one from asking the right questions about it. This allows the status quo to stay securely in place.

Religion, of course, is full of myths, nostalgia, and pleas for unity (through God). The current efforts to censor textbooks, ban books, and deny climate change are often made on religious grounds by groups (of parents) that revere a particular version of the past and a particular vision of the environment; a vision that would replace history with myth. If Cole (and others) equated nature with God, many still see it as a

gift from “him” to us. For such folk the Earth is not divine, rather, it is our divine right to use it as we see fit, including establishing which parts of it are holy and which are not.

Our UU faith seems to be less nostalgic than other religions. There is no ideal (and shared) past we long to return to, no original sin to overcome. If we are nostalgic it is for a future (anterior) that may or may not arrive.ⁱⁱⁱ What we long for is a future (anterior) that looks back on its past and sees us working for a more interconnected web of life and fighting for the worth and dignity of every human. Call it a future nostalgia. Call it optimism.

We would also appear to eschew myth. Are there any UU myths? Certainly, there are contradictions. A religious movement without the divine. A belief in the dignity of tyrants. A split between the worth of humans and the respect for every other life form. An individualized pursuit of meaning and a communal space to achieve it. Is there a mythical structure that reconciles these and “establishes a euphoric security” for us? If so, it is not about the loss of an original unity. Rather, we believe that wholes, a whole community, society, environment, individual, is something that needs to be created, not reestablished, or found (in the divine).

Within the terms of the relationship between humans, nature, technology, and the divine, i.e. the relationship Cole (and we) are most concerned about, it too can be understood as a combination of diverse things rather than the division of one thing into parts. Rather than isolating each element, when they are coupled with one another they become what the eco-feminist-biologist Donna Haraway calls cyborgs: biological creatures fused with living, non-living, coded, and artificial kin. We cyborgs contain multitudes of natural and artificial supplements. Is this true? Or, is it, as Haraway herself claims, a useful myth that tries to contain a most basic (human) contradiction: that we are isolated entities that are completely reliant on other (living and non-living) entities for our existence; reliant socially, physically, intellectually. It seems that UU with its emphasis on the individual right to pursue “a free and responsible search for truth” would be very much open to such mythical creatures, impure entities that don’t rely on their genealogy for their identity. Rather than an original (nostalgic) wholeness that one needs to (or can never) return to, our subjectivity, our religion, is an assemblage of unlikely parts. Rather than static human beings we are humans becoming more than ourselves. That is a myth I can live with, for the reality it secures is one in which multiple stories and voices and memories can be told and can be heard.

IV. Post script

The last time I went through Hudson was when I visited the Cole Site and learned how the institution is expanding its history to include its heretofore marginalized occupants.

To get there I again took the Thruway from New Jersey. From there I drove from Hudson to Troy at dusk on a road I’m pretty sure I never was on before. I had no memories of it. It hugged the river and train tracks and landfills and warehouses and villages. There is less cut and fill, less engineering the path of least resistance. It is of the land not placed on it.

Did that ride make me feel nostalgic? Did I wish I could share that experience with my father and grandfather and ask them if they ever took 9G to Albany? Yes, yes, and yes. Was it also just fun? Will it produce a memory? Yes again. Did it combine the past, present, and future? Did it combine personal experience with historical forces? Yes, again

It was also a cyborg experience. I was strapped into a machine. I could feel the landscape but it was a technological touch. Such hybrids can be dangerous, both personally and collectively. Rather than reject

them and seek a nostalgic return to some original or pure state (e.g. before the fall of fossil fuels), what if we accept that we are and always will be incomplete and in need of coupling with other matter, people, species, and technologies to make us full but never finished beings? As Haraway insists, this would make us impure and mythical creatures. It would make us UUs

Cedar Grove was/is a cyborg too. Well, it is at least a hybrid. It was a working farm and orchard. It was an artist's studio. Cole's in-laws ran shipping lines and invested in railroads from it. Prior to his arrival they also owned slaves and profited from the slave economy. It was connected to many many natural and cultural systems. It was messy, it was strange. To suppress any of these facts is to suppress the fullness of its and our country's history, and it would deny the presence, memories, and dreams of all of those who were evolved and affected by these systems. Their truths, our truths, their myths, our myths, all deserve to be searched for and told over and over again. Maybe even nostalgia can be used to bend the arc of history towards justice.

Closing Words

"Memory can make a thing seem to have been much more than it was."

"It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for."

— Marilynne Robinson, Gilead

ⁱ Barthes, Einstein's brain (last page?)

ⁱⁱ Cole's quote about utilitarian

ⁱⁱⁱ French text on time machine