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Section 303

P2 Formal Draft

The Language Barrier

When he took the stage at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt was aiming to convince his audience to support the United States entry into World War II, likening the war effort to the protection of America’s wilderness, conservation efforts, and values. Through this comparison, FDR was hoping to connect to those listening on a spiritual level, and tap into their values as Americans in order to earn their support. As Roosevelt attempted to connect free spirit to the wilderness of the country, he stated, “In this Park, we shall conserve these trees, the pine, the red-bud, the dogwood, the azalea, the rhododendron, the trout and the thrush for the happiness of the American people” (Roosevelt). Taking care to use a patriotic and proud tone while describing the national park he is residing in, he proves how important nature and wilderness are to the happiness and well being of all Americans. From this exhibit, one can see that the language Roosevelt is using has a large impact on the meaning of nature and wilderness that he is passing on to the audience. Attempting to paint the idea of conservation as a deep rooted value in America, his strong and almost exaggerated syntax succeeds in giving the audience a sense of pride and patriotism. But, it is noticeable that although Roosevelt refers to those attending his speech as “human animals” (Roosevelt), he does not include people in his definition of nature as he continues to speak. Instead, FDR chooses to describe nature as a project worked on by people, or some sort of tool that has improved our lives. His descriptions place a clear separation between humans and nature, such as when he states “There are trees here that stood before our forefathers ever came to this continent; there are brooks that still run as clear as on the day the first pioneer cupped his hand and drank from them.” (Roosevelt). Roosevelt’s descriptions paint the wilderness as some eternal being that was only recently breached by humanity. Rather than uniting people and the wilderness into one category and showing their codependence, Roosevelt is actually drawing a dividing line that shows humans are not part of nature, but simply benefit from its uses. With this contradiction realized, this exhibit can be applied to a topic that is quite significant today: Conservation efforts in America. How is this divide between humans and the wilderness, shown in the way Roosevelt describes nature as infallible, significant to the way we perceive nature, and thus to our efforts to conserve it? Unique perspectives have been given that can be applied to this problem, and can shed light on its importance.

While it is easy to see how Roosevelt creates this gap between the intentions of his speech and his descriptions of nature, its gravity is not immediately apparent to the listener. In his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness”, William Cronon addresses this type of gap and puts forth the idea that thinking of wilderness and nature as remote and separate from our everyday lives negatively affects its relationship with society. In his opinion, humans are part of nature, and Cronon laments the fact that many feel it is necessary to escape our own society in order to experience the wilderness in its “true form”. While Roosevelt has positive intentions tying American values and work ethic to this frontier mentality, does it not imply that the wilderness is the only place these values can be earned? In fact, Cronon would feel that Roosevelt implicitly separating humans from nature was “downright hostility toward modernity and all that it represented” (Cronon 14) and corrosive to our responsibilities for taking care of the land in America. Stating that people “pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, and to justify that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead” (Cronon 17), he points out that the repercussions of using language that creates a divide between humans and nature is more severe than is apparent. In order to avoid this people must escape this thinking and appreciate all forms of nature, even the “gardens we plant and tend ourselves” (Cronon 23), and this could result in a healthier relationship with society.

As far as healthy relationships go, it is hard to find one that is more deserving of discussion than David Hinton’s analysis of early traditional Chinese language. Hinton uses one example of a poem called *Evening Landscape, Clearing Snow* written by Chia Tao, where a line’s direct translation reads, “snow clears evening landscape” (Hinton). Through this sparse and empty syntax, where grammar is “minimal in the extreme” (Hinton), it is apparent how much this traditional Chinese language is able incorporate the audience into its descriptions of nature. This is in direct contrast to Roosevelt’s failed attempt to connect his audience with the wilderness by explicitly stating their relationship as one-sided: Humans relying on nature to provide for them both physically and spiritually. In Hinton’s example, he states “No less remarkable is how the classical Chinese poetic language melds the human into the wilderness cosmology, peopling its grammatical space as sparsely as a grand Sung Dynasty rivers-and-mountains painting” (Hinton). This type of structure gives the reader a massive responsibility, not only to construct the scene in their heads while reading it and drawing from their own experiences, but to see nature as an equal to themselves and thus protect it. Rather than feeling subordinate to nature, like in Roosevelt’s address, here the audience can feel that they are a part of what the Chinese called the “being” and the “nonbeing”, the literary representation of nature (Hinton). Although this seems to be a parallel with Cronon’s vision, he only moves to be more appreciative of nature and all of its forms, while Hinton’s analysis points towards the extreme: that humans are nature themselves, along with everything in their lives.

Obviously Hinton and Cronon paint very different pictures of their respective cultures, and so the question remains: How can these simple differences in descriptions and structure relate to a topic like conservation of nature? The implications of both Roosevelt’s and Hinton’s form are actually quite severe. In America, students experience a distance from nature throughout their lives, especially with today’s modern technology. Interacting less than frequently with the wilderness themselves, students are forced to learn about nature through the values and stories taught in history or english class, much like the one spoken by Franklin D. Roosevelt, and most of the time coming from an American perspective. As Cronon mentions, those who described the frontier life and American wilderness had a tendency to use a masculine tone, and they “became emasculated by the feminizing tendencies of civilization” (Cronon). Hinton also mentions the feminine tone, but in a positive way, stating that the traditional chinese was “deeply ecological, weaving the human into the ‘natural world’ in the most profound way; and it is radically feminist” (Hinton). If the wilderness was such a powerful, masculine force in our lives, a fact that is supported by Roosevelt’s language while he describes the American wilderness as one “that put the hard fibre in the American spirit and the long muscles on the American back” (Roosevelt), then why would nature need protection from people? That which made us who we are and taught us the value of hard work surely is not vulnerable to its own students. If wilderness is described as such a perfect place, then we lose sight of the reality and the vulnerability of nature, and how much our conservation efforts are really needed. Roosevelt painting a picture of the wilderness as a proving ground of the American spirit denies us the responsibility of having to protect it, and it “distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value” (Cronon 23). This type of thought seems to lessen our perceived responsibility for nature, while Hinton’s analysis of the Chinese tone and structure has the opposite effect, leaving emptiness in their sentence structure and allowing the audience to become involved in the language itself. If students are taught to read and learn with such emphasis on living in the moment, then they begin to see nature as part of themselves, not as a teacher but as a peer. Protecting nature then becomes equivalent to protecting themselves and their vitality and history rather than protecting their values and patriotism.

The drastic difference in nature’s role between these cultures, from being the teacher and an infallible object in American culture, to being a peer in Hinton’s analysis of traditional Chinese culture, goes way beyond the question posed in the beginning of this discussion. The verdict is clear: If we keep treating nature and wilderness as a deity, or some sublime existence that will always be there to remind us of our values and place in the world, then we will succeed in wiping it out. Only by treating nature as an equal to ourselves can we sustain it for generations to come. It cannot be forgotten that FDR’s true intention while speaking was not on the subject of conservation at all, but to draw support for a war. Conservation and war are two subjects that are polar opposites of one another, but Roosevelt attempts to manipulate his audience into connecting them with statements like “Our vital task of conservation is to preserve the freedom that our forefathers won in this land, and the liberties that were proclaimed” (Roosevelt) before launching into an appeal to the audience about how those liberties are being threatened from across the ocean. It is up to the audience to decide if this is a responsible use of language, but it is obvious that the disconnect of humanity from the wilderness allowed this to be a convincing argument. Appealing to nature’s significance in order to fight a war that will probably destroy more than it can conserve seems like a backwards argument. Nonetheless, it can be traced back to one element of humanity: language. It cannot be argued that language both connects and divides us and is found in every aspect of human life, from education and politics to love and war. Perhaps then language is as much a part of nature as anything else. It grows and develops, and can be used for purposes both positive and negative. If this is accepted as true, then we as humans have a duty to not only protect and preserve all forms of nature in a responsible way, but to responsibly use words in order to convey the importance of the world we live in and protect it for generations to come.

Works Cited

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