

William Manson

**Biophilia: Toward
Re-Humanization**

2003

As techno-urbanism extends its dominion, imposing mechanized regimentation on all modes of experience, human nature with-ers for want of living sustenance. Deprived of the life-enhancing conditions for expressive self- development, humans in the megamachine become self-alienated rather than self-actualized. The world as mechanized market-place: calculable “market-values” almost entirely replace experiential values (revering, loving, wonder-ing, feeling). The individual increasingly perceives herself as a commodity to be trained and sold to the highest bidder.

The dehumanized “cheerful robot,” whose stunted sensibility is an adaptive advantage in competi-tive commerce, may thrive — but the unique, all-round, developed human being is threatened with extinction.¹ The whole individ-ual, uniquely autonomous, is fully formed, and cannot be conformed to the increas-ingly standardized and overspecialized regime of technical expertise. The rela-tively unformed, generic inmate of the technocratic system, by contrast, can more readily be reformed (and farther deformed). Those per-sons most susceptible to dehumanization are therefore most “adaptable” to techno-urbanism.

With the progressive atrophy of fragile modes of feeling and relat-ing, rhomme machine increasingly exhibits an affectless, calculating, “technomorphic” mental-ity. The year 2000, Erich Fromm prophe-sied in 1968, might be “the begin-ning of a period in which man ceases to be human and becomes transformed into an unthinking and unfeeling machine.”² In the context of a prevailing dehuman syndrome³, spontaneous human expression becomes pathologized: “Being open in speech; being unashamed of one’s body; relating to nature; hugging, touching, feeling and making love to other people; refusing to serve in the army and kill; and becoming less dependent on machines are generally considered ‘disturbed behavior’ by a society of robopaths.”⁴ Of course, behavioral “modification” is facil-itated through ideological training, expanding law enforcement, and emotion-al anesthesia (psychopharmacology).

¹ “. . . will (here come to prevail, or even to flourish, what may be called the Cheerful Robot? . . . In our time, must we not face the possibility that the human mind as a social fact might be deteriorating in quality and cultural level, and yet not many would notice it because of the overwhelming accumulation of technological gadgets?” C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 171,175.

² Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (Harper & Row, 1968), p. 29. A versatile, radical humanist and psychoanalyst, Fromm could also be described as a libertarian socialist. See also his important books *Marx’s Concept of Man* (Continuum, 1966), *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), and *To Have or to Be?* (Harper & Row, 1976).

³ Ashley Montagu and Floyd Matson, *The Dehumanization of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. xi

⁴ Lewis Yablonsky, *Robopaths: People as Machines* (Penguin, 1972), p. 43.

In my view, revitalization of one's desiccated human-ness first and foremost requires a renewed contact with the web of evolved life, with Walt Whitman's "primal sanity" of nature. Transcending the blinkered, bourgeois-utilitarian (mechanistic-industrial) world-view, one can embark on a purification of consciousness, a purging of the detritus of cultural pollution (and a recovery of emotional innocence). Withdrawing from the world of urban commerce (and its mind-numbing "messages"), one severs the flow of media propaganda and ceaseless "information" (relating to the ubiquitous "buy-ing" and "selling"). Compulsive "having" is the pathology of deficient "being." Aesthetic simplicity means disconnecting from repulsive superfluity.

Seeking sanctuary in wilder-ness surroundings, one rediscovers the gentler rhythms of low-cost rural living: walking instead of driving, and prevention of disease through a style of living consonant with ecological wisdom. Moreover, "information-process-ing" is largely replaced by an unmediated, sensuous experience of forest, landscape, and isouciant creatures. The graceful, animated flight of a single bird, when perceived by the newly-innocent eye, discloses the "expressive language of the living"⁵

Withdrawing from the brutaliz-ing techno-marketplace (and its ideological delusions), one begins to move more freely as a vital being connected to an infinitely greater, evolved whole. Deficiency-based, culturally programmed "desires" give way to a more unified flow of consciousness — what psychologist Abraham Maslow termed "being-cognition."⁶ This transcendent level of consciousness, an intimation of the evolved unity of all things, is the true religiosity discernible in animistic creeds and pantheistic cosmologies. From the perspective of such heightened awareness of meaning, the senseless follies (and horrors) of modernity are simply transient aberrations.

Joyful alive-ness is renewed when one feels exuberantly free from societal constraints and yet intimately connected with the world of living nature. Biophilia, the affinity and reverence for life, has been emphasized as an innate human predisposition by the biologist Edward O. Wilson, as well as by countless artists and philosophers.⁷ Drawn to contact with living nature, healthy human beings

⁵ Wilhelm Reich, *Character Analysis*, third edition (Fairrar, Straus & Giroux, 1949), p. 357.

⁶ Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, second edition (Van Nostrand, 1968). I might add that intense aesthetic experiences of great music, as diverse as Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony or Copland's anarchically exuberant Third Symphony, awaken and cultivate "modes of being" otherwise degraded and stunted in contemporary society.

⁷ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Harvard University Press, 1984). See also, E. O. Wilson and Stephen Kellert (eds.), *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Island Press, 1993). It should be noted that Erich Fromm first introduced the term, and out-lined the optimal conditions conducive to a love of life, in *The Heart of Man* (Harper & Row, 1964). Theologian and doctor Albert Schweitzer emphasized "reverence for

in turn avoid the life-less, sterile, pre-programmed techno-system. One's own spontaneous experience is enlivened by the expressive insouciance of kindred creatures, including of course children and "unarmored" adults. Indeed, such healing communion with nature should be complemented with the shared human affections of cooperative living (sociability which, sadly, has been virtually crushed by the competitive narcissism of hyper-capitalist society).

To be sure, such a life of natural reverence and aesthetic simplicity will still include an unswerving commitment to social and environmental activism. Such "conscientious non-participation," in itself a comprehensive form of protest and resistance, is also a model for sane, ecologically responsible living. A renewed reverence for the interdependent web of life, sustained by daily contact with wild nature, is a (partial) anti-dote to the despair afflicting sensitive, aware individuals longing to escape from "pathopolis"⁸ At the gates of a great city, an embittered citizen warns Zarathustra: "Here you have nothing to seek and everything to lose . . . Here all great emotions decay." The life-loving Zarathustra, angered by the spiritually infected critic, was quick to retort: "Why did you not go into the forest?"⁹

life"; and the biologist Konrad Lorenz, in *The Waning of Humaneness* (Little, Brown, 1987), stressed the importance of human contact with wild, living nature as an authentic source of spiritual meaning in an alienated, urbanized world.

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

⁹ F. Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. R. Hollingdale. (Penguin, 1969), pp. 195–198.

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