

States of the Union

THE GOSPELS OF ECOLOGY

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

"People are trees in a forest; no botanist would study every individual birch tree."

—BAZAROV, IN TURGENEV'S
Fathers and Sons (1861)

"If you've seen one redwood you've seen 'em all."

—GOVERNOR RONALD REAGAN
(1969)

WHAT AM I to make of the latest crop of ecological books piled high on my desk? And why do I keep returning to Turgenev? Bear with me.

Turgenev coined the word "nihilist" and created its archetype in Bazarov—a young man who preferred science to poetry, logic to love, and revolution to reform. Bazarov thought he lived in Sodom. He challenged his elders to find "just one institution in our contemporary existence . . . which doesn't deserve complete and merciless annihilation." ("How bombastic young people are today!" sighed one of the elders.)

That was the revolutionary Bazarov. The *empirical* Bazarov was in some respects more dangerous, because he insisted that "Nature is not a temple but a workshop. . . ." His

view has since grown fashionable, though with variations. Someone like Governor Ronald Reagan, or the president of Consolidated Edison, or your average strip miner, might say, "Nature is not a temple but a technological opportunity." What's good for Con Ed is good for nature.

So it was empiricism—the handmaiden of nihilism—with its faith in hard data and its contempt for the spirit, that smoothed technology's way; and it was technology that polluted our lakes and befouled our air. We have been victims of our (Western) logic.

How bad have we allowed things to get? Well, here is Barry Commoner, one of a dozen or so *Philosophers of the Earth* (Dutton, 201 pp., \$8.95), warning of an "ecological time bomb" in our midst; and here is William O. Douglas, our constant judge, sentencing us *ex post facto* to *The Three Hundred Year War: A Chronicle of Ecological Disaster* (Random House, 215 pp., \$5.95). In search of more testimony, I randomly open a book of readings on *Economics of the Environment* (Norton, 426 pp., \$10.00), edited by Robert and Nan-

cy S. Dorfman, and come upon the following grim passage in E. J. Mishan's essay on "Growthmania":

"Such is the expanding power of modern technology, such the opportunism of man's enterprise, that the disposal of the waste products of industry . . . has broken all ecological bounds. And the general public, its attention continually distracted by technological wonders, has simply no notion of the extent or gravity of the situation. . . ."

One hesitates to dismiss gloomy prophets too hastily; Cassandra may not have been good company, but she was usually right. Nevertheless, nearly all these worthies seem to suffer from *The Doomsday Syndrome* (McGraw-Hill, 293 pp., \$6.95), a term the sensible English scientist John Maddox has invented to describe unreasonable ecological melancholia. "Is catastrophe coming?" he asks, quickly answering in effect, *not if we keep our courage*. "The most serious worry about the doomsday syndrome," Maddox points out, "is that it will undermine our spirit."

I like that. Every time some wide-eyed coed takes the Pop Zero pledge, condemning herself to a

Whole-Earth lifetime of sterility, my spirits are dampened. Maddox is a good antidote. He dares to imply that the ecology vogue may be a cop-out:

"In all this gloomy speculation about potential calamity, the puzzle is why so much is made of remote and improbable happenings when much less emotional energy is lavished on other threats to human life and happiness—poverty, injustice and avoidable death. . . . Is it possible that the attractiveness of preoccupation with distant calamity is that it usually suggests policies of inaction?"

Indeed, I have seldom observed among ecological crusaders anything other than a careless indifference to the sufferings of poor people. A few months ago, for instance, a kind of Mediterranean Sierra Club known as Italia Nostra toured the United States with a photographic exhibition dramatizing Italy's conservation problems. The pictures showed new skyscrapers eclipsing old churches and modern highways bisecting peasant villages. The caption-writers lamented the blemishes on the once-beautiful landscape, but forgot to mention that they also reflected prosperity. "Fortunately," Mussolini once rejoiced, "the Italian people is not yet accustomed to eating several times per day." Now the people are eating better, and the ecologists are complaining.

Another example: Some years back, as a minor consultant to the Conservation Foundation, I learned of its program to educate land developers about how to protect the Everglades waterways from ecological damage while building expensive subdivisions for northern retirees. Now there happened to be many poor people in that area—Seminoles, blacks and chicanos—who lived in shacks and could not afford houses in the new subdivisions. So I asked a foundation official what plans had been made for those families. "You needn't worry about the shacks," he assured me.

"The developers will buy the land and tear them down."

IT is probably true that ecology writers, more than most mortals, exhibit their religions, and thus start one musing about Ultimate Meanings—a giddy pastime. Douglas, in fact, asks us to "make a religion out of conservation. Without it, laws will be wholly inadequate." And he commends to our keeping the mystique of the Sioux Indians, their belief in "the goodness and the beauty and the strangeness of the greening earth, the only mother."

But then we must reckon with David Loth and Morris L. Ernst, whose *The Taming of Technology* (Simon & Schuster, 250 pp., \$6.95) contends that our true mother is the "Law": "Generally she checks reckless plunges into the future by the strong hand of the past, countering tomorrow's technology with yesterday's instruments."

Yet it is precisely "tomorrow's technology," some of these authors seem to be saying, that can save us from ecological disaster. In *Energy, Ecology and Economy* (Norton, 235 pp., \$8.95), Gerald Garvey tells us to seek solutions in "a mix of technological and policy adjustments." Though he presents his own "mix" in a language unintelligible to laymen, his scorn for "eco-

theology"—by which I take him to mean the outdoorsy, apocalyptic beliefs of Commoner, Douglas, et al.—comes through loud and clear.

Finally, there is the gospel of politics. It is preached, rather appealingly, by Allan R. Talbot in *Power Along the Hudson* (Dutton, 244 pp., \$7.95), a straightforward account of the conservationists' fight to prevent Consolidated Edison from building a hydroelectric plant at Storm King Mountain. Talbot credits the dispute with "the birth of environmentalism," a dubious claim considering all those earlier years of worry over fallout and Strontium 90. Still, Storm King was the first local conservation fight to be turned into a national crusade, attracting not only the ubiquitous Pete Seeger but such unlikelyies as Aaron Copland and James Cagney.

Talbot is an optimist. He thinks the Hudson "can be made fit for swimming"—a possibility I have never before seen in print—and he is encouraged by all the ecology-minded young people he meets. The politicians, he reasons, will eventually have to listen. But will they? And will young people continue to speak out?

Not if they follow Mark Kramer, a young man who found a measure of ecological salvation by escaping rather than embracing politics. In *Mother Walter and the Pig Tragedy* (Knopf, 194 pp., \$5.95), he tells how he abandoned the satisfactions of New Left activism for those of farming in western Massachusetts.

If Kramer is not an ecologist, he writes well, thereby striking a blow against pollution of the literary environment. "I am happier," he concludes, comparing his new life of organic gardening to his old life of manic marching, "and therefore do more that I will and less that I must than in my former existence, and I hope I am kinder to other people." This modest wish, rarely expressed in ecological works, is strikingly similar to what Turgenev described as "the sensuous joy of magnanimity."

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