The Ghosts in the Forest

There has been a considerable amount of discussion during the past few years, here in R&MN and elsewhere, about the value of the restored ecosystem. Often this discussion concerns the issue of accuracy—how closely the restored system resembles its natural or historic counterpart in a purely technical sense. But behind this there is always the deeper question of authenticity—of the value of the system in a broader sense, of how "real" it is, of what philosophers call its ontological status or value.

Typically, I find, restorationists more or less take it for granted that the value of the systems they create is in this sense less than that of its natural counterpart—that, however skillfully restored and lovingly maintained, the artificial natural system is not and can never be fully authentic, or quite as real or valuable in some fundamental sense as its natural counterpart.

The assumption seems to be that the really real—or sacred—is a given, that it is to be found or discovered in nature, and that the effect of human influence is to diminish it—to desacralize the world. From this point of view, of course, the restored ecosystem, being in a sense artificial, or actually made by people, necessarily has less value than its natural counterpart, if indeed it has any at all in this higher, spiritual sense.

British naturalist Chris Baines put the point quite neatly several years ago when, summing up his views on this matter at a conference on land rehabilitation at Wye, England, he said "We may make the forest look as good as the original. But it won't sound as good, and it won't smell as good, and it won't have the ghosts in it"—by which, I assume, he means the associations, the history and perhaps most important the sense of otherness and of higher meaning that imbues an ecosystem such as an ancient or old-growth forest.

Baines' audience seemed willing to accept this formulation. But to me it raises some questions. Specifically, what do we mean by real—or authentic? How can one thing be any more real than another—and how does it get that way? And what, after all, do most of us know about ghosts, "what" they are, or how they get "into" things?

Are we right in assuming that our restored ecosystems lack ghosts, or that we couldn't put them there—or entice them back in—if only we wanted to or knew how?

One source of answers to these questions is religious tradition, especially, perhaps that of the earth-based religions of indigenous people, which are at least most obviously related to the work of restoration.

In his classic book, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, 1974), religious historian Mircea Eliade explores in some detail what he calls "archaic ontology," or ideas of being and reality that he believes to be characteristic of premodern or traditional cultures. If I understand correctly what Eliade is saying, these traditional ideas about value in nature and how it is acquired are, understandably, quite different from what most of us seem to take for granted.

To begin with, he asserts that, for what he calls "archaic" people, "neither the objects of the external world, nor human acts, properly speaking, have any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in doing so become real, because they participate ... in a reality that transcends them."

In particular, he writes, an object such as a stone "becomes sacred—and hence instantly becomes saturated with being—because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act ..."

Similarly, the value of human acts such as eating and procreation acquire meaning and value not in and of themselves but only because and to the extent that they reproduce a primordial act such as the creation, or repeat a mythical event.

Thus, Eliade writes, "The crude product of nature, the object fashioned by the industry of man, acquire their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a transcendent reality." In particular, he notes, contradicting the widespread notion that indigenous peoples have no idea of wilderness, that to the archaic mind areas such as deserts, unexplored areas and uncultivated lands are not merely "wild" areas in the modern sense, but actually in a condition of "pre-creation." They are, in fact *chaos*, and remain so until brought within the world, so to speak, and made real, or *cosmos*, through rites that repeat—and so in this view actually effect—the act of creation.

Thus the settlement of a new territory or a territorial conquest is conceived as the repetition of the primordial act of creation, the transformation of chaos into cosmos, through the repetition of primordial acts such as agriculture or ritual acts of possession which are themselves regarded as a repetition of the creation.

All this, it seems to me, has a good deal to do with our question about the ghosts in the forest, the ontological value of the restored ecosystem. I find several things in Eliade's interpretation of archaic conceptions of realness that are strikingly relevant.

The first is the idea that things—including places or landscapes--are not real in this view until they come to participate in a transcendent reality. In other words, things are not merely found or discovered to be real or sacred, but rather are made so by—the second point—human acts, which—a third point—repeat the act of creation.

What is striking here—and it seems to me deeply relevant to the work of restoration—is the idea that the realness, the ontologic value of nature, is seen not as given, and certainly not as compromised by human influence, but as actually *dependent on deliberate human acts*.

In other words, the ghosts don't just happen. People put them there, or, perhaps, invite them to take up residence.

Adopting this view, then, we might suppose that it is precisely through a process like restoration, that form of agriculture that most clearly and explicitly repeats and participates in the act of creation, that the ecosystem or the landscape is made real or sacred—or perhaps, we might say, more real, and more sacred than its natural counterpart, unredeemed from chaos.

Indeed, it seems to me the act of restoration provides a most striking parallel to the rituals by which archaic peoples, in Eliade's interpretation, sacralize the world. Like them, it is a deliberate human act. Like them, it repeats the creation, and in a sense derives its value and authority from this fact. And like them it is experienced as a way of renewing the vitality and spiritual energy of the world.

What the archaic culture does ritually to renew and sacralize the world in figurative terms, the restorationist attempts to do literally—actually remaking the world, or a bit of it. If the resulting system lacks ghosts, perhaps this is simply because, preoccupied with the technical or secular aspects of our work, we forgot to summon them. (See, for example, the discussion of Native American writer James Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood* in Chris Norden's article in this issue.) What remains is to recognize—and to develop—this work as a modern counterpart of the classic rituals of world-renewal, making of it a sacrament, and a way of making the world sacred in this classic or archaic sense.

Actually, it seems to me that the validity of this conception is suggested by the commonplace experience of restorationists. Whatever its value in some abstract sense, it is surely true that the restored landscape is more highly *valued* by those who helped restore it than the landscape that was merely found or discovered, and perhaps to some extent taken for granted as a given.

This is what happens when the process of restoration, or world-making, is undertaken in a spirit of love and sacrament. This is why the true restorationist is skeptical about mitigation, which is in this view a kind of simony, turning what should be a spiritual transaction—an infusion of spirit—into a merely secular and financial one.

Eventually I think we will find that the forest *is* restorable—the trees and the sounds and the smells—and the ghosts, too. Forests without ghosts have simply been incompletely restored. I think that we will find that, when properly restored, the forest is full of ghosts—the old ghosts, and perhaps some new ones, too.

William R. Jordan III