Editorial

Environmental Junkpicking and the American Garden

One of my favorite historical characters is an obscure Italian carpenter and handyman named Luigi Tarisio. Tarisio lived during the latter part of the 18th and early 19th century, at the time when the great age of violin making was coming to an end in Italy. The great violin makers—the members of the Stradivari and Guarneri families, the Amati, and the other violin makers now regarded as masters of a lost craft—were all dead. Their violins, valued by popes and kings just a few generations earlier, had come to be regarded as old-fashioned, and the musical importance of the violin itself had declined somewhat as a new instrument—the modern piano—had gained importance.

In other words, the great violins of the golden age, instruments that now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars and are regarded as a priceless (and some believe an irreplaceable) cultural and technical heritage, had reached that stage that seems all but inevitable in the history of all things made or used by human beings: they had become junk.

The wonderful thing about Tarisio was that, despite this widespread attitude, he realized that the old violins were immensely, *really* valuable.

Becoming familiar with these instruments at some point in his life, he simply fell in love with them. He began ransacking churches and monasteries all over northern Italy, hunting up old violins, often acquiring whole sets of instruments, often in disrepair, in exchange for doing repair work or other odd jobs.

Over the years he accumulated the finest collection of great violins ever brought together. Eventually, he began bringing them to instrument dealers in Paris and London, hiking over the Alps carrying sacks filled with priceless Stradivaris, Guarneris, Guadagninis—all junk in the eyes of most of his contemporaries. In this way, Tarisio played a key role in the renewal of interest in the old Italian violins, introducing them to musicians in northern Europe and bringing about a revival in the value placed on them which has continued to increase ever since.

When he died, he died alone, a recluse—and perhaps even a bit crazy—in a room crammed with violins he had collected over the years but had been unable to part with. Among them were many of the finest stringed instruments ever made, all rescued from the junkpile of history.

It is the special gift and the special ecstasy of the junkpicker to practice a sort of transcendent connoisseurship, to see value where others do not; and of course Tarisio lived in a junkpicker's paradise—he *knew* the value of those old fiddles, at a time when *no one else did*.

I love the story of Tarisio because I love junkpickers. I love the junkpicker's gift for looking beyond what is obvious, the wisdom of the day—the fashion—to see the real

value of a thing, and perhaps going beyond even that, to perceive its *possibilities*.

And this, I think, is one of the things that I find so appealing about environmental restoration and junkpicking, not that it promises perfectly faithful replicas of "natural" or historic ecological communities (since after all, in so many cases it fails to achieve this goal)—but that it really is a form of environmental junkpicking, with all the wisdom and insight that implies.

This is also one of the reasons why I think restoration has a critical contribution to make to what the poet and philosopher Frederick Turner has called the cultivation of the American garden, and so to the development of American culture in general.

In an essay on "the American garden" (*Harpers* magazine, August, 1985), Turner argued that gardening is a model for a healthy relationship between a society and nature, and that for this reason its style of "gardening" (taken both literally and figuratively to represent the way we deal with nature in general) is an essential element of any culture.

The question, Turner says, is what will the American Garden be like? Not just like the English garden, or the French or the Japanese, of course. Though, as a nation of immigrants, we might legitimately borrow from any and all of these gardening traditions, what Turner is looking for is something distinctively and characteristically American.

In my view, environmental restoration will ultimately prove to be a major component of the American Garden, of the distinctively American relationship with nature, for several reasons.

For one thing restoration reflects our culture's recent experience of the wilderness. (In England, for example, where there is virtually no cultural memory, scarcely even any record, of the wilderness or the "native" landscape, the business of restoration has quite a different flavor.) At the same time it reflects our characteristic technical ingenuity and spirit of enterprise.

And finally, and perhaps best of all, restoration reflects our democratic tradition as a nation of people plucked, like Tarisio's violins, from the junkpiles of an older civilization.

A nation made up of the huddled masses of Europe and Africa and Asia, based on the belief that, so far as life is concerned, there is no such thing as junk, no such thing as a lost cause.

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