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Segreteria di redazione

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INTERARTES n.3

AI: ArtIntelligence

dicembre 2023

Francesco Pigozzo – AI: ArtIntelligence. Créativité artistique et automatisation. Introduction.

ARTICOLI

Daniel Raffini – La ridefinizione dell'autorialità nell'AI novel.

Arnaud Mery - Le regard de l'artiste à l'épreuve des modèles texte-image.

Caterina Bocchi – Insegnare con ChatGPT. Esempi di utilizzo di ChatGPT in laboratori linguistici universitari.

Jacques Demange – IA et cinéma: altérités ludiques et nouveaux enjeux de médialité.

Emmanuelle Stock – Beauté métallique dans la science-fiction: érotisation des corps artificiels féminins dans *L'Eve future* (1886) de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et dans *No Woman born* (1944) de Catherine Lucille Moore.

SEZIONE SPECIALE

“Lingue e linguaggi per la pace”

Elena Liverani – Introduzione.

Stefano Maria Casella – «Yet here is peace for ever new!»: Henry Beston's “philosophy” of peace.

Eloy Martos Núñez, Aitana Martos García – Imaginarios del agua, crisis ambientales y cultura de la paz.

Eduardo Encabo-Fernández – La comunicación literaria como camino para la cultura de la paz. Una aproximación desde la Didáctica de la lengua y la literatura.

Beatriz Durán González, Estíbaliz Barriga Galeano, Alejandro Del Pino Tortonda – La Paz en formas alternativas de Literatura: los paracosmos de Studio Ghibli y sus aplicaciones didácticas.

VARIA

Michela Spacagno – Parler d'une même voix? Étude sur le discours collectif dans les mystères médiévaux

RECENSIONI

Florjër Gjepali – Coscienza, coscienza artificiale e inconscio artificiale (Emanuela PIGA BRUNI, *La macchina fragile. L'inconscio artificiale fra letteratura, cinema e televisione*, Carocci, 2023)

**«Yet here is peace for ever new!»:
Henry Beston's "philosophy" of
peace**

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Abstract:

The American writer Henry Beston (1888-1968) represents an almost unique example of an original way of experiencing and practicing the concept of "peace" towards his fellows, all living beings, the world of Nature, and the Universe. In this sense, fundamental were his direct experiences during first world war: volunteer ambulance driver on the French front, and reporter for the USA Navy in the North Sea, all memorialised in two war-report books. In the early Twenties, he completely changed literary genre writing fairy tales. He then lived a solitary year (1926-1927) in a shack on the Atlantic dunes of Cape Cod, in full contact with the natural environment, and finally retired in an old farm in the Maine countryside. From his continuous, attentive, sympathetic, respectful and affectionate relationship with the world of Nature and all her creatures he deduced a deeply spiritual and religious attitude – characterized by wonder, reverence, and gratitude – focused on an all-round application of the idea of peace, perfectly emblemized in his phrase «peace with the earth is the first peace» (1935).

Keywords:

Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*, *Northern Farm*, Man and Nature, Environmentalism and peace.

1. Introduction

The easily recognizable line which gives the title to this essay, from one of the most famous poems by the most classical of the Victorian poets: «Lines Written in Kensington Gardens» (1852) by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), conveys the poet's certainty that – notwithstanding the growing devastations of the Industrial Revolution (emblemized by another line «In the huge world, which roars hard by») in a secluded recess of Kensington Gardens, in the very heart of London, it is (rather, it was, in the middle of the nineteenth century) still possible to enjoy peace and tranquillity, in the boson of hospitable Nature.

A similar experience may be ascribed to the American writer Henry Beston (1888- 1948); under different circumstances, in a much more complicated/complex and

troubled age (the first half of the XX century) he too succeeded in finding spiritual peace through a vital, respectful, affectionate relationship with the world of Nature.

After witnessing, as voluntary ambulance driver on the French front (Champagne, Lorraine, Moselle, Verdun: fall 1915/spring 1916), episodes of inconceivable atrocity and suffering, Beston devoted himself to writing fairy tales – which represent also a kind of escape in a fabulous world after the brutality of the war. He then retired himself in solitude in the world of Nature at Cape Cod/Massachusetts (1926-27) – this also another kind of “therapeutic” escape. Then, from the mid-Thirties onwards and for the rest of his life, he lived with his family in an old XIX century farm – *Chimney Farm* – on the shores of lake Damariscotta/Maine: once again in the world of Nature, but in this case no more as an escape, rather as a full dedication to it, both as a writer and «as a gentleman farmer» (*OH*: xxxi)¹ as well as a confirmation of the most important experiences of his solitary year at Cape Cod, under the common denominator of life spent in a natural environment, and of deep sympathy for all living beings.

These were, in fact, the two crucial events of his life as regards his relationship with the world of Nature: the lonely period at the *Fo'castle* (the name of his wooden shack on the dunes of Cape Cod) close to the Atlantic Ocean, and the fundamentally peaceful some thirty years at *Chimney Farm*; from the majestic, most powerful, ever changing Atlantic Ocean to the placid rolling fields, woods, and lakes of Maine.

As a consequence, his most famous books deal with Nature in its various aspects and phenomena: *The Outermost House* (1928), *Herbs and the Earth* (1935), and *Northern Farm* (1948). The first is the record of the year Beston spent at Cape Cod on the Great Beach of Eastham/Massachusetts. The second is, according to its subtitle *An Evocative Excursion into the Lore & Legend of our Common Herbs*, therefore dealing with much more than the mere plantation of aromatic and garden herbs at *Chimney Farm*. The third is the record of the yearly cycle of seasons and of rural life and works (not unlike the cyclical and seasonal time pattern of *The Outermost House*) in the Maine

¹ As regards Beston's life in Maine, Roger B. Swan writes: «At Chimney Farm [...] Henry lived by agricultural time. Seasons here were distinguished [...] by oxen ploughing in the spring, the flash of scythes in summer, apple harvesting, a dish of Indian pudding with light cream on a mid-winter night» (*HE*: xvi). The writer himself, concluding and “sealing” the last chapter of *Northern Farm*, stressed his own particular characteristic and choice/vocation when he wrote: «I venture to set down a statement of a *country man's* unchanged belief» (*NF*: 245, emphasis added). Even though in this case he does not use the definition «gentleman-farmer» but “only” «country man», the meaning of the two definitions is almost the same.

countryside.

In other words, the world of Nature in its manifold aspects was Beston's real dwelling place, his human, literary and spiritual vocation, and his *magistra vitae*. He had perceived this inescapable call quite early, evidence the following note in his diary (1926): «La Nature, voilà mon pays. / L'œuvre—célébrer, révéler la mystère, la beauté, / Et la mystique de la Nature, du Monde Visible. / Attacher ce sentiment à mon nom» (*OH*: xv). A sentence (in the native tongue of his mother) which may be considered almost as the formulation, in a nutshell, of his literary programme: the celebration (with wonder, reverence, and gratitude: these being in fact the most recurring words in his 1928 masterpiece) of Nature; the revelation – full of religious spirit – of her mysterious beauty and of her final mystical essence, this latter topic being almost omnipresent in *The Outermost House*.

Beston's general attitude and approach, characterized by a religious-spiritual perspective (even though not strictly confessional or dogmatic) about man, all living beings, Nature, and the Universe seem perfectly mirrored in the following consideration by Thomas Berry:

Every being exists in intimate relation with other beings and in a constant exchange of gifts to each other. But the relationship is something beyond pragmatic use. It is rather a mutual sharing of existence in the grand venture of the universe itself. By indigenous peoples the universe is perceived as a single gorgeous celebration, a cosmic liturgy that humans enter through their ritual dances at those moments of daily and seasonal change, at dawn and sunset, at the equinox and solstice moments.

At such moments the human venture achieves its validation in the universe and the universe receives its validation in the human. The grand expression of wonder, beauty, and intimacy is achieved [...] as humans we awaken to this wonder that stands before us. We must discover our role in this grand spectacle. (Waldau & Patton, 2006: 8)

Worth mentioning also what Beston wrote in a recollection of the year (1912-1913) he spent in France as *Lecteur d'Anglais* at the University of Lyon: in a letter to his wife Elizabeth Coatsworth dating some twenty years later (1931) he remembers that period, stressing how that «was the first place in which I encountered and knew and loved the earth», and that it was in the Lyonnaise countryside that «came [...] the revelation of the earth» (Payne, 2016: 22-23).

Such sense of belonging to a wider dimension (that of Nature and the Universe) was reinforced and confirmed also by a journey to New Mexico of the mid-Twenties of the XX century; there Beston knew and made friends with the natives of a Navajo tribe and

with their medicine man, with whom he then corresponded for long years (Wilding, 2003: 37- 39; Gunn Allen, 1996: 241-263; Casella, 2019a: 121). From a few but extremely meaningful notes dating from that period one clearly infers that he spontaneously shared the same world view with the natives, their deep spirituality and their sense of worship, respect, care, and responsibility for the Earth, the world of Nature, and the whole living Universe – of which man is not the lord but the custodian and servant. As regards this affinity, Beston commented: «we should have a living relationship with nature [...] something that the Indian has» (Wilding, 2003: 37). On the same theme, the eco-critic John Elder aptly stresses: «[...] because of the wounds to nature in our time, we must learn, for the first time or not at all, to become true servants of the earth» (Elder, 1996: 58, emphasis added. And see also Momaday, 2020 all).

In such respect, it is worth considering a brief passage from *Northern Farm* which reveals Beston's indissoluble bond with the world of Nature: in the first chapter of that book the writer, returning by train from Boston to his Maine farm, silently repeats several times the phrase «Home. Going home.» at the end of each paragraph. Such refrain (almost a mantra) beyond its musical origin (Casella, 2023: 223) proves once more his unconditioned love for Nature, the country, the Earth, and all its living inhabitants, as well as his authentic life in harmony with Nature and with himself.

As already stressed, Beston's two masterpieces, *The Outermost House* and *Northern Farm*, were inspired by his experiences of life amid Nature. They demonstrate an attentive observation of the natural world in its various forms of life (animals², plants, cycle of seasons, atmospheric phenomena of the skies and the ocean, course of the stars and planets) and a deep spontaneous and authentic empathy towards all creatures – which may be defined as both Virgilian and Franciscan at the same time (Casella, 2019b: 228). Beston shares in fact with the great Latin poet the love for peaceful pastoral country life and for agriculture, the refusal of war and violence, and the deep sense of *pietas* (*lacrimae rerum...*) for all living and suffering creatures. This latter spiritual attitude, in its turn, brings him closer to the medieval *poverello di Assisi* in the latter's unbounded

² With the "traditional" word «animal» will be defined, in this essay, all those «non-human-living-beings» or «other-than-human-living-beings» as more precisely (from a scientific, philosophical, ethical, and juridical point of view) called in the majority of the theoretical branch of environmental literature and eco-criticism known as *Animal Studies*. See for example Waldau, 2006: 9, 41, and *passim*; Waldau, 2013: 2, 16-17, 118, and *passim*; Daston & Mitman, 2005: all. Therefore, the reader will also find the alternative definition «non-human-living-beings».

love, care and concern, and deep sympathy for all living beings, Nature, and the Universe as in his most famous *Canticle of the Creatures* – not to mention his adoration and infinite gratitude for the Creator of all things.

Beston's two masterpieces also represent (together with his war recollections *A Volunteer Poilu*, 1916)³ the formulation of a "philosophy" (fundamentally ethical, rather than theoretically systematized) which puts peace – and here we finally come to the point – among men (as opposed to any form of violence, especially but not exclusively war), and between man, Nature and the whole Universe (in opposition to all kinds of selfish exploitation, careless pollution, senseless mechanization, unrestrained materialism) at the core of his whole thinking and acting.

Beston hopes (and operates) for the return to a respectful relationship between man and Nature (in all her forms of life, not merely animals and plants) based on the former's respect and care, in an age in which scientific discoveries and theories, technological implementation, industrial hyper-growth, economic and commercial practices – not to mention human greed for riches and power, uncritical belief in the myth of progress, self-deception of optimism, unrestrained materialism, and a general short-sightedness about the devastating consequences of this behaviour – had gradually deteriorated such relationship to the disadvantage of the world of Nature and the environment and, in the final analysis, also to the disadvantage of man and mankind. (Payne, 2016: xviii-xxv).

As in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's wise reflection about traditional values and virtues VS all the evils of modernity:

These traditional virtues [traditional religion, «contentment with our state of being», «Christian values»] that allowed countless generations to live in equilibrium with the world around them [...] provided the means for living at peace with the environment. They also allowed man to experience what it means to be human and to fulfil his destiny here on earth. (McDonald, 2003: 80)

It is from the world of Nature that Beston learns his lesson and develops his reflections, his "philosophy of life" being a meditated ethical behaviour respectful of all living beings. Also his "religion" is a religion of Nature (Casella, 2019a: 120; Casella, 2020: 83). It is neither a theological/doctrinal system, nor a vague see-sawing mood

³ *A Volunteer Poilu* was published under the Author's name of Henry Sheahan (the real original family name of Beston's father), while *Full Speed Ahead* (his second war report) under the name of Henry B. Beston. It was only in the Twenties that he changed his surname in Beston («the family name of his maternal grandparents on his father's side» Payne, 2016: 15).

based on the fleeting superficial emotions of the moment; on the contrary it is grounded in careful observation and deep meditation on Nature's immutable ancestral rhythms, the ordered perfection of her cycles (succession of the seasons; ocean tides; motions of the skies, planets and stars; phases of the Sun and the Moon) and rich variety of her landscapes: sea, rivers, lakes, hills and mountains, plains and deserts, shores and dunes, geological formations (sands, rocks, etc.) – not to mention all the manifold varieties of animal and vegetable species. Beston always goes beyond the mere scientific approach to phenomena, (see below, footnote n. 8 about Beston as "nature writer") through a deep spiritual perception and recognition of Nature's divine qualities; suffice to quote here his reflection about the night sky on the Ocean: «to see the night sky in all its *divinity* of beauty» (*OH*: 92, emphasis added).

From this religious attitude spontaneously flows the sense of wonder at such richness and variety, of reverence and gratitude, and of responsibility towards the Earth which is a complete, various, and unique living organism teeming with life (see *OH*: 164, and *NF*: 160) and not merely a lifeless surface to be trampled on or to be impiously exploited and pillaged.

His sentence «peace with the earth is the first peace» (*HE*: 17) emblemizes in an exemplary way his spiritual experience and his practical behaviour pursued throughout his whole life, through creative writing, essays, letters, public speeches.

For beside that path [i.e. the path that brings peace with the earth] lie the seasons and the ritual of the year, the vast adventures and journeyings of the sun, the towering of a wave to its breaking, the faithful wheeling of the moon, the sound of rain when there are no more leaves, and the furrow lengthening under the tug of hoofs on a morning in spring. (*HE*: 138)

If the following statement by Wendy Doniger is true (and it *is* true): «famous examples of [...] people who live at peace among animals would include Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh* epic, Francis of Assisi, and the many mythical children who are raised as cubs by packs of animals [...]» (Daston & Mitman, 2006: 33), then no doubt Henry Beston can (rather: must) be included among such people⁴.

⁴ In relation to St. Francis, it is highly meaningful the subchapter *The Franciscan Alternative* in Jay McDaniel's essay *Practicing the Presence of God. A Christian Approach to Animals* (Waldau & Patton, 2006: 133-145, in part. 138-139): «the Franciscan alternative lies in recognizing the value of all life, human life included, and was evident in the example of Francis himself [...]. The Franciscan alternative [...] lies in recognizing the value of creatures "in and for themselves" as well as "for one another" and "for God" in a "diverse whole" that has "unique value" for God. Certainly human beings possess value "in and for themselves" even as they also possess

But, in a wider anthropological, philosophical, religious, and mythical perspective such condition of peace among human and non-human living beings (i.e. animals and plants) projects towards the archetypal myth of the Golden Age (which Beston recalls in *Herbs and the Earth*: 12), of Earthly Paradise and, in a prophetic vision and eschatological perspective towards a renewed Eden, where/when once more all creatures (once more: humans and non-human living beings) will peacefully live together (*Is*, XI: 6-8).

Even though it might seem a naïve or belittling formula, peace can derive only from the sum of love/respect/compassion for men and mankind (none excluded, as in the compassionate reflections about the "war enemies" in both first and second world wars: see *A Volunteer Poilu* and Payne, 2016: 27-104, 245-294) + love/empathy/care for all non-human living beings + love/sense of reverence, gratitude and wonder for the Earth-Nature, and the Universe.

2. War: "the brutality of the whole awful business"⁵

As it often happens in human experience (both individual and collective), it is from the very painful and tragic contact with its negative – in Beston's case the violence of two world wars – that arises, develops and strengthens the urgent and compelling sense and desire of peace.

The young Beston (slightly more than twenty-five at the outbreak of the first world war), was neither a warmonger nor an interventionist: he simply felt the moral obligation to serve in Europe (France) as voluntary ambulance driver in the Ambulance Service of the Section Sanitaire Americaine both for the general mood of the moment (Payne, 2016: xvii, 58-76), out of his sense of duty, and for his love for France, his mother's birthland;

value "for one another" and "for God." So do animals. And ecosystems possess value as making possible many forms of life, plant and animal». See also Lynn White Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, in Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996: 3-14, in part. the sub-chapter *An Alternative Christian View*: 12-14, dealing with St. Francis' humility, love for animals and humans as well, and suggesting «Francis as a patron saint for ecologists».

⁵ Henry Beston: «In Lyons I saw a sight at once ludicrous and pathetic. Two little dragoons of the class of 1917, stripling boys of eighteen or nineteen at the most, walked across the public square; their uniforms were too large for them, the skirts of their great blue mantles barely hung above the dust of the street, and their enormous warlike helmets and flowing horse-tails were ill-suited to their boyish heads. As I looked at them, I thought of the blue bundles I had seen drying upon the barbed wire, and *felt sick at the brutality of the whole awful business*» (*VP*: 189, emphasis added).

in this sense, he was symbolically rushing to the aid of his mother and of one of his own motherlands as well – the other being Ireland, origin of his father's family branch (Payne, 2016: 13).

In the six months (late summer 1915 to early spring 1916) spent at the French front (La Chappelle/Champagne; Bois-le-Prêtre and Nancy/Lorraine; Dieulouard/valley of the Moselle; Pont-à-Mousson/Verdun) Beston witnessed most painful, tragic, also horrifying scenes.

First of all, it should be stressed that Beston does not give in (and never did) to the *dulce et decorum est* rhetoric of war:

There is nothing romantic about a wounded soldier, for his condition brings a special emphasis on our human relation to ordinary meat. Dirty, exhausted, unshaven, smelling of the trenches, of his wounds, and of the antiseptics on his wounds, the soldier comes from the train a sight for which only the great heart of Francis of Assisi could have adequate pity. (VP: 36)

In this reflection he strikes a chord which proves his sense of piety and human solidarity (and which will implicitly reappear in his two masterpiece *The Outermost House* and *Northern Farm*, even though, in those two works, mainly as regards animals) by referring to one of the greatest saints already mentioned: Francis of Assisi.

This same sense of piety and brotherhood beyond any jingoistic or politico-ideological division may be inferred by his brief description of a group of German prisoners: «All by themselves were about a hundred poor, ragged Germans, wounded prisoners, *brothers* of the French in this terrible *fraternity* of pain» (VP: 39, emphasis added) as well as in his direct experience: «yet I heard no ferocious talk about the Germans, no tales of French cruelty toward German prisoners» (VP: 166). It goes without saying that the terms «brothers» and «fraternity», in that particular historical context, need no further comment.

In a brief reflection about the nature of wars, Beston acutely catches (bitterly and ironically) the difference between those of the past and the modern/contemporary ones: «A future historian may find the war more interesting, when considered as the *supreme achievement of the industrial civilization* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, than as a mere vortex in the age-old ocean of European political strife» (VP: 100, emphasis added).

He stresses the fundamentally economic and business-like character of modern

wars:

This stationary character has made the war a daily battle [...] and has turned it into the national *business*. I dislike to use the word "business," with its usual atmosphere of *orderly bargaining* [...] The war of to-day is a *business*, the people are the *stockholders*, and the object of the *organization* is the *wisest application of violence* to the enemy. (VP: 101, emphasis added)

As with Ezra Pound's quotation in his *Pisan Cantos* (and, before, in his economic and socio-political writings), war is the inauspicious fruit of economic injustice: «and the economic war has begun» (LXXVIII/491) + «The cannibals of Europe are eating one another again» (XXXII/159)⁶.

However, beyond these ironclad considerations and recollections, the most appalling one is the atrocious scene of the "crucified/impaled heart", the last remains of a blown apart soldier:

Just after this attack [from the Germans] a doctor of the army service was walking through the trenches in which the French had made their stand. He noticed something oddly skewered to a tree. He knocked it down with a stone, and a human heart fell at his feet. (VP: 133)

Beston's experience of war might be concluded with this declaration: «After having been face to face with death for two years, a man learns something about the true values of human life» (VP: 165). A lesson not unlike the teaching of the already mentioned Ezra Pound as formulated in one of the most memorable lines at the end of his poem *The Cantos*: «To be men not destroyers» (Notes for CXVII et seq./817).

After the brief but extremely crucial period as volunteer ambulance driver, Beston returned to the USA, but about a year later, thanks also to his writing skill as a reporter, he was appointed official press representative with the U.S. Navy and the British Grand Fleet (Payne, 2016: 68-76). From that further – and final – phase (end of 1917 to summer 1918) of direct experience of the conflict (however, in that second occurrence, from a privileged and less cruel perspective and point of view) another book was born, *Full Speed Ahead* (1919). Also in this work (indeed, more than in *A Volunteer Poilu*) prevail the sense of duty and a certain chivalric *esprit de corps* typical of seafaring in general, and of Beston in particular, as a young American of European origins (Irish-French), but never an aggressive-belligerent smugness.

⁶ See also the famous Canto XLV, generally defined as "The Usura Canto" after its first line and topic: «With Usura» (XLV/229-30).

To his direct and painful experience of first world war, one should add that indirect – but not less painful – during the second one. In the early Forties, Beston was peacefully living with his family in his Maine farm, but was however personally concerned and informed through the media of the time and from many of his friends (Payne, 2016: 245- 267). Also in that second world tragedy, what stands out is his piety (once more “Virgilian”) and sympathy for “the enemy” (which does not imply the slightest kind of approval for the regimes and dictators of the Axis nations), in particular for the civilians, from time immemorial the innocent victims of any conflict and its irrational senseless violence and devastations.

He was inflexible in his condemnation of the Allies’ bombings on German cities (Payne, 2016: 258), a «*diabolical* massacre» (Payne, 2016: 261, emphasis added), «the single most appallingly wicked act in all our savage human history» (Payne, 2016: 256), for which «there is no apology possible for cruelty. Its use and the justification of its use are *diabolism*» (Payne, 2016: 265, emphasis added).

Worth stressing is his reading of the historical events of that time: Beston did not limit himself to a historically materialistic analysis and interpretation of the facts, but recognized their (hidden) metaphysical side: «it is a thing of evil in itself: for once I shall be a Manichee!» (Payne, 2016: 258), which accounts for his repeated mentioning (all but merely lexical) of the words «diabolical», «diabolism», and «Devil/devil».

The acme of his moral indignation and censure was caused by the releasing of the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and, before that, by the devising and preparation of the *Manhattan project* of the atomic scientists at Alamogordo. He courageously and explicitly declared in public:

I irritated a group of the scientifically minded [...] I said yes, that I had seen the photograph of the leading designers and scientificos of the Atomic bomb, and was always a little troubled not to see included the most distinguished scientist of all those connected with the exploit. Chorus: Who? Henry: the *Devil*. (Payne, 2016: 265, emphasis added)

His morally infallible judgement about those tragic events was that «the *devil* has taken over the nations, and only the last ramparts of the divine awareness stand between him and the conquest of the human spirit itself» (Payne, 2016: 254, emphasis added). His “philosophy of history” might be summarized in the following consideration about, and precise distinction between, the different ways and causes of destruction:

There is a destruction that is of *God*, and that is the destruction inherent in the renewal of life [...] Opposed to this is another destruction which is of the *Devil*; a destruction without necessity and without a creative future, a destruction only conceivable in [an] age of the emptiness of the human spirit, and working itself out in brutality and the ruin of the heritage of men. (Payne, 2016: 254, emphasis added)

To return to the end of first world war and to the chronological order of the events of his life, it is worth stressing that, following the appalling experience at the front and its painful scars, came the parenthesis – apparently so unusual for a man and a writer returnee from the brutal violence of the war – of the writing of fairy-tales: *The Firelight Fairy Book* (1919) and *The Starlight Wonder Book* (1923) (Payne, 2016: xix, 84-88, 100-102), which are a complete antithesis (from the thematic and literary point of view) to the cruel world of the war through the enchanted atmosphere of fables aimed at children and adults as well, characterized by a moral-didactic purpose, and representing a form of therapy (from the psychological point of view) to the trauma of war and violence (Payne, 2016: 88, 102).

Such collections mark the beginning of the permanent turning point, which progressively took shape in the mid-Twenties through the experience that would forever change Beston's life and give it a steady course. Such turn begun with the year (September 1926-August 1927) he spent in solitude on the dunes of Cape Cod, in a full immersion in the world of Nature⁷. There he discovered with wonder and sense of gratitude the real dimension of human life, the true source of peace, as well as his vocation as nature writer⁸. Such therapeutic effect of the world of Nature is perfectly illustrated by the following consideration by John Elder: «There is a redemption offered to human cycles within the order of natural cycles, an equilibrium as precise and comprehensive as an ecosystem» (Elder, 1996: 82) and, still more by Thomas Berry in the following excerpt, splendid and elegiac, about the miraculous effect of Nature on man's spiritual sickness – which aptly mirrors also Henry Beston's whole experience both in that particularly

⁷ Beston himself, however, downsizes his own state of loneliness when he recognizes: «I lived as a solitary, yes, but I made no pretence of acting the conventional hermit of the pious tract and the Eighteenth Century romance. With my weekly visits to Orleans to buy fresh bread and butter, my frequent visits to the Overlook, and my conversations with the men on night patrol, a mediæval anchorite would have probably regarded me as a dweller in the market place» (*OH*: 94).

⁸ However the definition of Henry Beston as merely a "nature writer" is too limiting; he has been much more than that (see Payne, 2016: 156, and Casella, 2019 a: 119, 122). See also Robert Finch: «[...] nor was he [Beston] ... a trained scientist or even an expert field-naturalist. He preferred poetic impressions to scientific accuracy [...] Many of his observations and interpretations, in fact, seem to spring more from imagination than from nature» (*OH*: xviii).

dramatic moment of his life after the war, and as regards his "philosophy" of Nature in general:

Even with all our technological accomplishments and urban sophistication, we consider ourselves blessed, healed in some manner, forgiven and for a moment transported into some other world, when we catch a passing glimpse of an animal in the wild: a deer in some woodland, a fox crossing a field, a butterfly in its dancing flight southward to its wintering region, a hawk soaring in the distant sky, a hummingbird come into our garden, fireflies signaling to each other in the evening. So we might describe the thousandfold moments when we experience our meetings with the animals in their unrestrained and undomesticated status. Such incidents as these remind us that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not of objects to be exploited. (Waldau & Patton, 2006: 7-8)

3. «*La Nature, voilà mon pays*» (between the Ocean shore and the woodlands)

During the year spent at the "Fo'castle", Beston lived in direct contact with a natural environment still scarcely touched by human presence and activities (though in the coastal villages/small towns and in the hinterland there were several businesses: navigation, fishing and fishery, agriculture, service industry etc.). His lonely – lonely, but not "empty" – days and nights were beaten by the cycle of seasons, the succession of various atmospheric phenomena throughout the course of the year, the life of birds, fish, mammals (in the sea, on the coast, shore, marshes, groves etc.). In other words a continuous comparison and exposure to the wilderness, or what remained of the original New World wilderness at the beginning of the XX century (Payne, 2016: xx; Casella, 2020 and 2023: passim) typical of the American tradition:

though written when Beston was middle-aged, *The Outermost House* is very much a young man's book, passionate and indulgent, full of a sense of discovery and self-discovery. Ever since *Walden*, American readers have been infatuated with romances of isolation, with solitary truth-seekers in the wilderness. (*OH*: xvii)

However, what is relevant for the concept of *peace* in that phase of Beston's life is the lesson he learnt from the world of Nature. The teaching fundamentally consists in a deep respect, spontaneous sympathy/empathy, and loving care for all creatures. As already remarked, this attitude recalls that of the American natives and their sense of brotherhood with all living beings. Worth mentioning also the fact that Beston opposed vivisection and other forms of medical experimentation on living animals, and still more fiercely any form of hunting (*OH*: 35-36, 100; Payne, 2016: 7). There is a really touching

episode recalled by his biographer Daniel Payne; during a car trip, Beston happened to see «hanging from a tree, a huge black bear that had recently been killed by trappers: 'poor hairy man of the woods, I felt sorry for him, and wished he were back alive in the forest, happy with his stolen honey, his roots and berries'» (Payne, 2016: 282)

The first memorable consideration is that about the relationship human/non-human living beings:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicate artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken a form far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners in the splendour and travail of the earth. (*OH*: 24-25)

This statement, placed almost at the beginning of *The Outermost House*, is at the base of Beston's whole "philosophy": it is an *ante litteram* formulation of his (still in a nutshell) environmentalism in general, and in particular of his anti-speciesism, anti-exceptionalism, and biocentrism. From this belief that Beston faithfully followed during his whole life, derive all his thought and praxis. In *The Outermost House* the focus is mainly on the world of Nature, the landscape, and animals – for the obvious reason that in that period the writer lived quite separate from mankind; in *Northern Farm* and *Herbs and the Earth* more room is dedicated also to human beings, since in the meanwhile Beston had returned from his hermitage to the contact with the human society in a rural environment.

Several are the unforgettable episodes occurred to the «vagabond of the dunes» – as he was called by the inhabitants of Eastham and other coastal villages (Wilding, 2001: 3-4, 31-32) – in his meetings with the wild fauna of the Atlantic coast: he is fascinated by the various species of birds, observes their migrations and nidification, and feels a spontaneous sympathy for such creatures. He affectionately calls them «*my* wild ducks» and «*my* beloved birds» (*OH*: 211, 217, emphasis added); addresses to them with familiarity: «I wonder now if you were... Cape Cod sandpipers, little birds!» (*OH*: 99); takes care of oil-polluted «auckies» by cleaning their feathers (*OH*: 103-106); admires with wonder the flight of great swans (*OH*: 37); anxiously suffers for «a flock of least

terns» whose nests have been swept away by a furious summer storm, and for a female of song sparrow that has courageously resisted to the same storm hatching her eggs in her nest (*OH*: 207-208); follows with concern the rescue of a «young doe» entrapped in a channel flooded by a winter tide (*OH*: 77-80); praises with gratitude the inimitable «great symphony» of the various insects «in midsummer on a moonlight night» (*OH*: 65).

The synthesis of his unique experience is expressed in the last pages of *The Outermost House*, where Beston once more stresses the necessary attitude of «reverence and gratitude» (*OH*: 216); the sense that «the creation is still going on [...] *Creation is here and now*» (*OH*: 216, 217, italics of the Author); reminds that «it is impossible to live without reverence as it is without joy» (*OH*: 217); recognizes that Nature, notwithstanding her «grim arrangements», her «ethic of its own» and her «non-human rhythm» (*OH*: 217) «has its unexpected and unappreciated mercies» (*OH*: 218). But, above all, the final message and teaching is that of deep respect and love for the Earth:

Do not dishonor the earth lest you dishonor the spirit of man. Hold your hands out over the earth as over a flame [...] Touch the earth, love the earth, honour the earth, her plains, her valleys, her hills, and her seas; rest your spirit in her solitary places. For the gifts of life are the earth's and they are given to all [...]. (*OH*: 218)⁹

This finale is almost a hymn to the Earth, evidence of Beston's religiosity and spirituality; in a sense it seems to foreshadow and pave the way to his second masterpiece, *Northern Farm*, where the Earth (and the soil) and her cultivation take the place of the sea (the Atlantic Ocean, protagonist of *The Outermost House*). The Earth, a way of life in close contact with her, the praise of agriculture, the recovery of tradition, the defence of Nature as the only ways to regain peace are, in fact, the main themes of *Northern Farm*.

It is the very concept – rather, art – and practice of “agri-culture” which is pointed

⁹ As regards the exhortative «Touch the earth», Beston returns on the same theme in another brief consideration in *Northern Farm*: «[...] it has always seemed to me that a normal range of physical sensation, a sense, for instance, of the fabric of the earth *underfoot*, and the sudden cold of a change of the wind, is not only a part of the discipline of life but also of its reward» (*NF*: 71, emphasis added). This urgency of the physical contact with our “Mother Earth” recalls the famous verses «Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; / And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can *foot* feel, being shod» (emphasis added), the second part of the octave of Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet “God's Grandeur”, where the Jesuit poet stresses the damages caused by man, the Industrial Revolution, and trade, and regrets the lack of direct contact between man and the Earth.

at as the source of peace:

agriculture is an art of peace which requires a peaceful time, and...agricultural populations, as seen in history, are not by nature aggressively military. A population of planters and farmers, moreover, can not leave its crops to shift for themselves and gather themselves into the barns [...] I think history would agree that though spears may be beaten into pruning hooks, pruning hooks are less frequently beaten into spears. (*NF*: 179)

This ideal of life in harmony with the earth and in peace with all other men echoes the eschatological vision of the prophet Isaiah, about the coming of the Lord's kingdom, when

[...] he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths [...] And he shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (*Is*: II, 3-4)

In any case, as also history teaches – it is within and from a correct relationship between man and the Earth – this latter considered in/from a religious perspective, that can come peace:

How wise were the ancients who never lost sight of the religious significance of the earth! They used the land to the full, draining, ploughing, and manuring every inch, but their use was not an attack on its nature, nor was the ancient motherhood of earth ever forgotten in the breaking and preparing of the soil.

They knew, as all honest people know in their bones, that in any true sense there is no such thing as ownership of the earth and that the shadow of any man is but for a time cast upon the grass of any field. What remains is the earth, the mother of life as the ancients personified the mystery, the ancient mother in her robes of green or harvest gold and the sickle in hand. (*NF*: 44-5)

As regards the selfish and exploitative wrong concept and practice of man's «ownership of the earth», Beston once more emphasizes the age-long ethics of the natives: «if we are to live and have something to live for, let us remember [...] that we are the servants as well as the masters of our fields» (*NF*: 45). He also reminds that «when we begin to consider Nature as something to be robbed greedily like an unguarded treasure, or used as an enemy, we put ourselves in thought outside of Nature of which we are inescapably a part» (*NF*: 36).

Such attitudes and behaviours are among the many negative aspects and phenomena of modern civilization, of overcrowded life in the great cities, of the

abandonment of the country and the change of modalities of life (from agriculture to industry). Beston offers a synthetic but undeniably true analysis of contemporary violence and its causes:

In a world so convenient and artificial that there is scarcely day or night, and one is bulwarked against the seasons and the year, time, so to speak, having no natural landmarks, tends to stand still. The consequence is that life and time and history become unnaturally a part of some endless and unnatural present, and violence becomes for some the only remedy. (*NF*: 7)

Obviously, he is neither endorsing nor justifying violence, rather he demonstrates to lucidly understand its causes, as also the following considerations prove: «part of the confused violence of our time represents, I think, the unconscious search of man for his own natural happiness» (*NF*: 31), and «has it occurred to any one that as civilization has become more urbanized and city populations greater than those who live by agriculture, there has been a parallel increase in war and violence? Apparently some relation exists which is not entirely economic» (*NF*: 179). It goes without saying that, even though Beston is neither a sociologist nor a psychologist, he unerringly understands and reveals the often uncheckable phenomenon which increasingly plagues contemporary "civilization"¹⁰.

The modern/contemporary malaise is both individual and collective, and these are its effects since: «torn from the earth and unaware, having neither the inheritance and awareness of man nor the other sureness and integrity of the animal, we have become vagrants in space, desperate for the meaninglessness which has closed about us» (*NF*: 245). In another reflection, he warns: «for the city governs us now as never before, it tells us what to love and what to hate, what to believe and what not to believe, and even what to make of human nature» (*NF*: 112), and suggests «we had better begin considering not what our governments want but what the earth imposes» (*NF*: 238). On the contrary, man[kind] should understand that «there is an order established against whose laws only fools will struggle, an order whose acceptance is the very cornerstone of life and peace» (*NF*: 225). Once more here returns the concept of peace, the fruit of the positive relationship with Nature and the Earth, the latter being the original source of a "natural legislation".

¹⁰ Especially in *Northern Farm*, Beston declares several times his distrust about contemporary "civilization", especially in his native country, the United States of the economic boom after second world war, and warns with prophetic foresight about the risks of "modernity".

The remedies he suggests are «an alliance» with Nature (*NF*: 36) and a renewed sense of “community”:

Under today's disorders there is something at work among the nations whose great importance has not yet been adequately realized—the need of men for a community to live in and live with [...] I suspect that if this open wound is to heal, it will have to heal like all wounds from the bottom, and that we shall have to begin at the beginning with the family and its obligations, with the village and its responsibilities, and with our universal and neglected duty to the earth. (*NF*: 134–5)

The conclusion of *Northern Farm*, focused as it is on the right respectful relationship between man and the Earth seems to echo, on the one hand, the finale of *The Outermost House* and, on the other hand, to repeat *verbatim* the beginning of *Herbs and the Earth*, in a seamless thematic, conceptual, and philosophical continuity, which is a kind of *Leitmotiv* of Beston's whole work and thought:

It is this earth which is the true inheritance of man, his link with his human past, the source of his religion, ritual and song, the kingdom without whose splendor he lapses from his mysterious estate of man to a baser world which is without the other virtue and the other integrity of the animal. True humanity is no inherent right but an achievement; and only through the earth may we be as one with all who have been and all who are yet to be, sharers and partakers of the mystery of living, reaching to the full of *human peace* and the full of human joy. (*NF*: 245–246 and *HE*: 4–5, emphasis added)

Herbs and the Earth, though apparently a “minor” work in comparison to Beston's two great masterpieces already mentioned and illustrated, is nonetheless rich in meditations about the Earth (as its title promises) and on the theme of peace:

in making a garden there is something to be sought, and something to be found. To be sought is a sense of the lovely and assured, of garden permanence and order, of human association and human meaning; to be found is beauty and that unfolding content and occupation which is one of the lamps of *peace*. (*HE*: 6–7, emphasis added)

Even though that here mentioned is a relative form of peace, it is so important for its author's unceasing research of this spiritual and social condition. It is really meaningful and emblematic that the term and concept of «peace» is (explicitly) repeated more times in this booklet than in the other major works of the American writer: «a garden of herbs is something [...] which is of *earth* and of time and of magic and of *peace*» (*HE*: 11, emphasis added); the gardener's care and effort will be rewarded by «something of the *peace* of gardens» (*HE*: 53, emphasis added); the rich variety of the several different herbs, their leaves, colours, their «fragrance and potency and beauty» will be «a

gift of the gardener's *peace* which none shall have who have not a deep *peace* with the *earth*» (*HE*: 138, emphasis added), to conclude with the already mentioned memorable sentence: «*peace* with the earth is the first *peace*» (*HE*: 17, emphasis added) obtained by man through a «ritual accord with Nature» (*NF*: 137).

For Henry Beston, "peace" is not merely a word or a concept, a political, social, national or international "status" or "pact" (ever changing, never fixed), the absence of conflict, strife, violence, war. Rather, it derives from a spiritual condition, an attitude of the soul, a deep and positive relationship within oneself, and with one's fellow humans, with all creatures (human and non-human living beings) of Nature, the Earth, and the whole Universe. It is not the product of science, technology, politics, treatises, alliances, but the fruit – and gift – of the Spirit, within a sacred and religious perspective and worldview.

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