

Good Work.

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Response

Good Work

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DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF Emerson Hall at Harvard University in the late 1800s, the philosopher G. H. Palmer suggested Protagoras' claim, "Man is the measure of all things," serve as the inscription above the new building's entrance. Emerson Hall is the philosophy department at Harvard and is named after one of Harvard's most acclaimed sons, the great American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. But the line of Protagoras never rested on Emerson's brick columns. As the story goes, Charles Eliot, then-president of the college, chose instead a verse from the eighth Psalm: "What is man that thou are mindful of him?" Though Emerson the transcendentalist may have endorsed the verse, it is likely that Palmer did not (Land 1936).

In the previous chapter, Michael Jackson chiefly argues against the idea that "Man is the measure of all things" and makes repeated claims for humility in our understanding of the world. As a scientist in my own training, I appreciate the careful way that Jackson sees nature and culture, implicitly critiquing a strong sense of scientific objectivity. Science often views itself as unique in the business of observing our lives and fashioning tools for improving it. But Jackson's stories are interesting as their vivid descriptions do not exclude the possibility that the observer influences the stories being told.¹ Whether it is consciously restrained or not, one's own life seems to surface in the telling. Observations always seem tempted by autobiography.

Hence when Jackson shares from the journals of Hugo, Wordsworth, and Twain, we see that climbing the Alpine wild was not an objective

1. Among other fields, this insight is discussed at length by the discipline of science studies philosophy, a great example of which is Ziman (1984).

retelling of the landscape, it told us something about the writers themselves. It is as we might expect. The same Hugo who wrote *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is somewhat dark and cosmic, almost undone by the jagged peaks. The same Wordsworth who wrote countless lines of romantic poetry is overflowing with piety. And the same Samuel Clemens who wrote *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is satirical and irreverent. In these stories and in the others Jackson portrays, the narrators' own character affects the characterizations they make. As an anthropologist, Jackson is well-prepared to teach this lesson and it is one that experimental scientists could appreciate more.

This brings me to the several elements of ambivalence in Jackson's essay. In his travels and research among indigenous cultures Jackson sees nature as both the source of life and of death, capable of rousing both deep ecstasies as well as soulful turmoil. The Kuku-Yalanji people, as Jackson observes, constantly search their surroundings for "pregnant meanings" that judge human behavior or foretell future events. Approaching thunderclouds warn of human misdeeds and distant birds herald plentiful fishing. Sights and smells and noises all have vital importance in this world, interpreting them is essential to survival and peace. By comparison, Jackson's own habits were not as serious. Lying in fields of alpine wildflowers Jackson smells his childhood explorations of New Zealand mountain meadows. Bored with a day's work of fishing with the Kuku-Yalanji, Jackson happily escapes to dream of the bays and trees around him. All in all, Jackson's take on his surroundings is far less consequential than of the peoples he studies. As a result, Jackson is deeply conflicted towards work.

Jackson's conclusion of his cultural wanderings is that humans are forced to interpret their surroundings, and however accurate the interpretation, are compelled to act. Certain aspects of the human condition are inescapable—making judgments and acting—but any greater meaning here is up for grabs. This pessimism might become something like Reinhold Niebuhr's: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary" (1944). But Niebuhr's account of sin and his response to it do not influence Jackson. No, Jackson's conclusion is not that sin requires the wisdom of many, like Niebuhr. Rather, Jackson implies that wisdom or justice or sin do not exist. Jackson's take is that any human action is merely of our own making and for our own expressed benefit. In Jackson's view, human actions are

all equally “magical” serving only to calm our anxieties that we must make some difference in the places we are. Jackson sees much work, but he sees no *good* work.

What then of the so-called ecological crisis? More than 16,000 kinds of plants and animals in this world are threatened with extinction and require human conservation efforts for their survival (IUCN 2007). Are human efforts here just some psychological salve to make us feel better about ourselves? Are ethics merely some sort of fiction? Focusing on many of the same themes as Jackson—culture, local life, work—Wendell Berry has argued for some time that conservation rests on the practice of good work.² For Berry, conservation “keeps work within the reach of love” (1992: 24). He continues:

The name for our *proper* connection to the Earth is “good work,” for good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing. Good work is always modestly scaled, for it cannot ignore either the nature of the individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known. (1992: 35)

Because of his observations of work, Jackson’s drawing inspiration from a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem is ironic. Hopkins was a figure of astounding literary gift but was tormented by inner conflict. He lived in the second half of the nineteenth century and died early from typhoid before his poetry was either published or appreciated. Hopkins’ turmoil was his perceived conflict between his literary talent and his vocation to become a Jesuit priest. Hopkins viewed the enterprise of writing as self-absorbed vainglory, something to reject in the Society of Jesus. This denial was a

2. Berry is not alone in arguing that modernity has stripped rural communities of the goodness of work. Schumacher (1979) previously articulated this idea in several influential articles appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Schlosser (2001) and Scully (2002) more recently wrote that the entire process of animal agriculture has become intentionally industrialized and impersonal to keep costs low and labor uneducated and unorganized. What was once an artisan’s vocation is now filled by disconnected foreign laborers. This change has chiefly abetted the demise of rural farming communities across the American prairies. The new labor force, however, has blossomed. This group, largely from Mexico and Central America, itself becomes an industrial cog, where workers are separated from their families and stripped of their emotional and physical health. Like Schumacher and Berry, Scully and Schlosser emphasize that good work is linked to health of people and their communities and environs.

discipline in which Hopkins painfully toiled, climaxing with his renunciation of poetry altogether and the ceremonial burning of his poems. But when Hopkins learns of a shipwreck of nuns exiled by the German Chancellor Bismarck, he is deeply moved and writes poetry anew. It is in writing *The Wreck of the Deutschland* where Hopkins seems to glimpse that his avowed life of prayer and his poetry are not at loggerheads, but that the working out of his poetry is itself a form of prayer (Hansen 2008).³ In essence, it is the very good work he seeks. From the *Deutschland* forward Hopkins continues to write pouring into it all his honesty, capturing the grandeur of nature even when it is hard pressed by the industrialization of the British Empire. It is his work where Hopkins situates his turmoil and is healed from it.⁴

What I take from this story of Hopkins' life is that we seem unable to shed our own skin, to be free of being the creatures that we are. By contrast this seems not a choice, as Jackson offers, between a human union with and complete submission to nature or a duality and mastery over nature—two classically flawed environmental positions. Nor does it seem a meaningless journey undone by our misdeeds or by life's uncertainty—Jackson's strongest suggestion. When confronted with the world's despair Hopkins did something interesting. Hopkins did not avoid the world's wounds and he did not ignore his own. He worked through uncertainty, anxiety, tragedy, and death and found meaning and beauty and joy. Hopkins encountered, captured so clearly by Buechner, that good work is where "our deep gladness meets the world's deep needs" (2006). In this way Hopkins became a psalmist.

This is what makes the story of Emerson Hall intriguing. We can only speculate as to why Charles Eliot chose from the eighth Psalm for his new philosophy building. Adding to the legend is that Eliot was not a philosopher himself, nor even a theologian, but a former professor of chemistry and mathematics. Eliot seemed humbled that the work of the

3. Hauerwas's *Prayers Plainly Spoken* (1999) further develops the idea that prayers can indeed confront the realities of this world with honesty, conviction, and peaceableness.

4. Since, Hopkins' work serves as a guide to others in their work to heal the world's wounds. Conservationists in particular draw inspiration from Hopkins' poetry. One example is Peter Harris, founder of the Christian conservation non-profit A Rocha. Harris details the influence of Hopkins on his own work in two books titled from Hopkins' verse; *Under the Bright Wings* (2000) and *Kingfisher's fire* (2008). Hansen (2008) also discusses Hopkins' poetry becoming prayerful inspiration for others.

DIVERSITY AND DOMINION

university—whether it be in humanities or in the sciences, in research or education—was good work to serve society. This is wisdom for us today.

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