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Re-reading Silent Spring

by Gary A. Genosko *

Rachel Carson's historic book *Silent Spring*¹, published in 1962, may not have marked the beginning of what we might call modern environmentalism -- although she might have been the mother of such a movement -- but it did make a major contribution to the development of a widespread ecological consciousness and encouraged environmentally sound practices.

The fact that it was a major force does not explain why we should re-read it today. However, many "environmentalists" today are prepared to reproduce moments from their personal experiences of the public furor which the book caused. At their worst, such reminiscences may prove to be plastic enough to generate life-style advertisements based on the late 1980's near ubiquitous theme of nostalgia for the real, which can only be found in "the 1960's." At their best, one might recall that Carson made the idea of the interrelatedness of all living beings the central tenet of all her work and did so in an especially poignant way in *Silent Spring*.² In reflecting upon the life of the theme of interrelatedness, one may inquire into the implications of Carson's understanding of it in causal terms, thus implicating herself in what has been called the crisis of environmentalism.³

These are not so much reasons "why" we should re-read *Silent Spring* as they are expressions of the sense that in environmental thought one is constantly re-reading it, if only in bits, touching lightly upon the ideas (both deep and superficial) which it helped to popularize, and even being touched by the book in the oddest ways -- as one passes a dog-eared copy on the shelf of a used book store, or perusing the re-readings which placed it in a before-after frame: Frank Graham's *Since Silent Spring* (1970) and James Whorton's *Before Silent Spring* (1974).

The re-reading that I will present may be likened to a stone skipping across the surface of a pond: just as the stone makes contact with the water at certain points along its trajectory, my reading touches down upon an apparently disconnected series of images in the text. The

images of men with spray guns, with assorted spraying paraphernalia and the accounts of women who lived with the indiscriminate application of pesticides and herbicides will serve to define the trajectory of this line of flight.

I consider these images because they represent moments of epiphany in my ongoing engagement with Carson's work in the larger context of a concern with the problematic status of military concepts in environmentalism and social science in general. Carson lead us to reconsider a certain kind of soldier: the man with the spray gun. As she put it: "under the philosophy that now seems to guide our destinies, nothing must get in the way of the man with the spray gun" (p. 83). Carson's use of "our" must be seen to refer to the destiny of humankind. However, the revelation that the man with the spray gun is a functionary of a destructive philosophical notion which holds sway over the destiny of humankind, gathers force from the reports and accounts of women. For instance, in *Silent Spring* we find that women wrote in despair about the disappearance of birds (p. 97), about the dread of having beautiful birds dying in the backyard (p. 101), about finding 12 dead robins lying on the lawn (p. 103), about the meaning of elm trees (p. 107), and the destruction of wildflowers (p. 72). It is insofar as women provide striking eyewitness accounts of spraying operations and report changes that have occurred around the home -- from the house-hold to the homeland -- after the "control men" have used their spray guns, that Carson's critique carries an affective force. Women, then, are victims of the spray gun because they stand in between the gun and its target.

In one instance Carson noted that a group of "field men" (United States Forest Service, Bridger National Forest, Wyoming) "considered it hilariously funny that an old lady had opposed the plan [spraying of sagelands] because the wildflowers would be destroyed" (p. 72). Still, women's action seeks to mitigate the "philosophy that seems to guide our destinies." What seems can be exposed, unmasked and debunked, thus opening up the

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possibility of a different destiny.

The noun *sprayer* has come to refer to a device which is used for spreading or diffusing insecticides and herbicides over vegetation. Early instruments for applying spray included the splint-broom which, circa 1885, was used to apply "bouillie Bordelaise," the so-called Bordeaux mixture, against fungal diseases of grapevines.⁴ Indeed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wet arsenical poisons were sprayed by bucket, knapsack and barrel pumps, horse drawn, power and tower sprayers. Further, the noun *spray-er*, derived from the Greek *speirein* (to sow, scatter) retains the idea of spreading something but does so at the expense of what is spread. Ironically, one spreads a poison on what one has sown in order to reap what one has sown. Such is the work of the Reaper.

The question of the relationship between the fluid which moves through the adjustable nozzle and the target of the gun raises an important issue. If we say that the spray gun has a "target," as the "nozzle men" are wont to say, we might mean an area, species, disease, or micro-organism. It is more appropriate to say of a gun that sprays that it has a direction since it is only in virtue of the folly of isolation that a target can be said to be taken down cleanly. Even if one wants to insist that the targets can be and are hit, such "targets" do not have clearly defined boundaries and neither, since we are dealing with a spray, does the ammunition. A central theme of *Silent Spring* is the dark folly of isolation in the light of the basic premise of ecology: the literal interrelatedness of the parts of the ecosystem. The facile, separative logic of the gun club, if you will or, as Carson put it, "the shotgun approach to nature," has outlived its uselessness. Even the man who shapes "our destinies" cannot escape nor protect himself from the vapors which he spreads because he wears them like a shroud.

Carson's explicit polemic against entomology culminates in her use of a remark made by F.H. Jacobs: "the activities of many so-called economic entomologists would make it appear that they operate in the belief that salvation lies at the end of a spray nozzle" (p. 229). The spray gun is the tool *par excellence* of the overzealous entomologist. Indeed, for Carson, many "outstanding entomologists" were no more than lackeys of the chemical industry. The spray gun has been and is a choice weapon in all environmental warfare. To think of the spray gun, however it has been modified, in the context of environmental warfare is to

foreshadow and gather retrospectively its military applications in anti-plant warfare and area-denial operations. Although Carson did not explicitly investigate environmental warfare in *Silent Spring*, the equally disastrous consequences of non-military spraying programs might have been a revelation for some. That is, if Carson was right about the devastation wrought by spraying, then such spraying may be conducted on enemy territory against "foreign" soil, plants, water, human and non-human populations. By a diabolical subversion, *Silent Spring* could be read as a text for military planners.

In *Silent Spring* women quite literally speak out from under the spray gun: "they sprayed the quarter-acre lots of suburbia, drenching a housewife making a desperate effort to cover her garden" (p. 143). Under the misty veil spread by the spray planes, women and specifically housewives, as Carson was careful to note on several occasions, have been covered with strange airs because they were at home during the daytime sprayings. While it would be incorrect to insist that women are targeted by the "control men" in the spray planes, suffice it to say that the situation of women at home made them part of the target of the daytime aerial bombardments. Throughout *Silent Spring* women who have been sprayed request that the practice of spraying cease (p. 144) and, if they use aerosol sprays in the home, they contract "environmental diseases" (pp. 202-3).

Recall that *Silent Spring* began with reference to the strangest of all "airs," those which suit no one. The "Fable for Tomorrow" stands apart from the text not as a preface or an introduction but as a vision of a spring of the future without non-human (and likely human, as well) life. It is not a legend, although it makes general references to disasters which have happened some-where (and are brought together by the opening phrase, "There was once a town in the heart of America ..."), nor is it strictly fabulous since Carson describes in detail later in the book many of the disasters which loosely shape the fable. We are led to believe that Carson's "Fable" is a likely story if the misuse of certain agents goes unchecked.

When Carson writes that "everywhere was a shadow of death" and describes this shadow as a "strange blight," "evil spell," a "white granular powder" which fell like snow a few weeks earlier, her model is nuclear fallout. The radioactive isotope Strontium-90 "was a tool to help her explain the properties of pesticides."⁵

Strontium-90, which appears before DDT in *Silent Spring*, is her yardstick of pollutants.

A silent spring is a mild nuclear winter.

Remarking upon Carson's attention to "the connotations of words," Carol B. Gartner observes that: "when she writes of a 'world that is urged to beat its plowshares into spray guns', she introduces a sardonic play on words reversing the biblical injunction to beat swords into ploughshares."⁶ Carson's message of peace is clear: let there be no nuclear winters, even "mild" ones.

Concerning the social meaning of spraying paraphernalia, Carson writes:

The mores of suburbia now dictate that crabgrass must go at whatever cost. Sacks containing chemicals designed to rid the lawn of such despised vegetation have become almost a status symbol. These weed-killing chemicals are sold under brand names that never suggest their identity or nature.

The descriptive literature that may be picked up in any hardware - or garden-supply store seldom if ever reveals the true hazard involved in handling and applying the material. Instead, the typical illustration portrays a happy family scene, father and son smilingly preparing to apply the chemical to the lawn, small children tumbling over the grass with a dog. (p. 161)

While much has been said about the uses and effects of pesticides and herbicides, little if anything has been said, in the context of critical environmental thought, about how the chemicals became part of everyday life.

Like hunting and fishing, the application of weed-killer is represented as an activity for father and son. The ability to handle a gun lies with the father and will be passed on to the son; the spray gun is a weapon that is embedded in a patrocetric complex. The chemical lawn tools also acquire value in terms of competitive consumption: the very presence of a sack of chemicals, says Carson, is a conspicuous reminder of the social standing of the family relative, of course, and primarily so, to the block and the neighbourhood, the places where such sacks and their results are visible and open to inspection or display. It is the lawn or "the grounds," as it were, that is a

tangible sign-complex or sign-cluster of social success and control.

The image-fetish of the nuclear family which one finds in the product literature serves to mask the intrinsic features, the physical properties, of the chemicals in question and, in addition, hides the ecological relations into which they enter and out of which they were produced.

The spray gun targets dandelion, clover, creeping charlie, chickweed and other types of undesirable vegetation in a sign system in which keeping one's grass "clean and cut" is a desirable social goal and practice. Further, the aforementioned plants have been transformed into weeds and thus are exiled from the lawn in virtue of their difference from certain highly engineered species of grasses. The place for weeds is other than the lawn in relation to an image of what a lawn should be -- a set of arbitrary inclusions and exclusions. The possession and use of the spray gun marks one's ongoing battle against wildness, and wild plants, which threaten the tranquil domesticity of the home front. Weeds cause rifts in the home's green apron.

In contemporary advertising material for C-I-L Inc. ("Guide To The Perfect Lawn" and "How To Protect Your Garden Against Insects And Disease"), there is a readymade semiotics of the yard. We are told that there are: i) problems; ii) places where problems occur; iii) symptoms of problems; iv) the answer or solution; v) a time when one should solve the problem. For instance, if one's problem is aphid at the tips of branches and on the undersides of the leaves of fruits, vegetables and ornamentals, and one reads the symptoms as sticky deposits and the curling of leaves, the solution includes Fruit and Garden Insect Killer (Diazinon), Ornamental Insect Killer (Malathion) and Tree and Shrub Insect Killer (DUTOX), which should be applied when the aphid are first noticed -- "repeat as necessary." This set of procedures gives one a clear cut way of decoding one's yard and assigning meaning to insects in relation to plants. What is important is that one acquires the competence to communicate about the yard and how to treat it with the knowledge and language provided by the chemical industries and their advertising agencies.

There has not been a significant negative investment at the level of chemicals themselves. A defetishization of the product literature and the chemical-based logic of yard care might produce the widespread understanding that: if

brand "x" or product "x" contains a certain substance "y," or even appears to be connected with "y" and "y" is known to kill certain animals, or can be shown to be found in certain animals in "unusual" amounts, then brand "x" signifies "kills animals" in a system of meaning in which weed killers contain deadly poisons and kill more than crabgrass. One needs to learn how to reverse the meaning of "blemishes" in one's yard so as to attribute their appearance to the very things which purport to correct them.

A visit to a garden-supply store reveals that at present women are a target group in the marketing of spray guns. While the target audience has expanded, we still find that it is the man who uses the leisure tools ("no more digging or pulling") of the chemical industry. The fact that women have become part of the target audience perhaps seeks to undermine the lessons of *Silent Spring* as we have read them to the extent that women have testified against the man with the spray gun in what might be called a nascent eco-feminism.

The notion of a "problem" in the yard that has a chemical solution which may be delivered by the spray gun does not and cannot overcome the folly of isolation since the solution, insofar as pesticides have led to the destruction of non-targeted, non-problems, is itself a problem. The solution to the multiplication of problems (identifiable and at present or for a time unidentifiable) cannot be found within the logic of the "care" of the yard and garden because problems and targets may only be isolated in an abstract sense which is contrary to the literal, material and living interrelatedness of the ecosystem. The logic of the problem-symptom-solution does not -- and this should come as no surprise -- take into account the valuative insights and scientific evidence presented in *Silent Spring*.

Can one reinvent the lawn? Carson does not ask us to do so, but points, however unwittingly, to the dangers associated with taking chemical solutions to lawn problems for granted, as natural decoding practices. The idea of the lawn: of color, length, vegetative monotony, flatness, etc., is so rarely challenged. The thorough domestication of the yard -- through grafting, cutting, pulling, dividing, spraying, fencing -- will not give way easily to a new encoding in the form, perhaps, of a woodlot-like area or a meadow. But the possibility of a radicalization of the lawn, of the emergence of a relatively undisciplined space, one which does not stew in its own

stupefying juices, is blocked by the fence: frontyard and backyard. The fence, like the bar of the sign, no matter if it is thin as paper or as difficult to cross as some borders, separates and must be overgrown.

The operations of the strange soldier of ecological fortune which Carson identified, the man with the spray gun, amount to an ongoing war against enemy insects. Certain maggots, worms and moths "tunnel" into fruits; beetles "invade" tomatoes and corn; caterpillars conduct "defoliation" operations on ornamental trees. In response to these enemy incursions, the man with the spray gun chooses the Garden Insect Killer "Ambush," for instance, and gives his veggies "a fighting chance," as C-I-L teaches him to say. The field of battle is the yard: lawn and garden.

With a final skip to no other, the audible landscape of our adventure falls silent. All quiet, except on the home front.

Notes

1. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Ballentine, 1962). The page numbers of all citations from this edition are given in the body of the paper.
2. See Kevin P. Shea, "A Celebration of *Silent Spring*," *Environment*, 15:1 (1973), p. 5.
3. See Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 7-8.
4. L.H. Bailey, *The Standard Encyclopedia of Horticulture*, Vol. II (New York: MacMillan, 1922), pp. 1058-59.
5. Ralph H. Lutts, "Chemical Fallout: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement," *Environmental Review*, 9:3 (1985), p. 221.
6. Carol B. Gartner, *Rachel Carson* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 94.

