***Spaceship Earth* by William Bryant**

American concern for the environment has a long pedigree. Historians typically trace its roots through the Romantics, to Thoreau, to the preservationist/conservationist debates embodied in Muir and Pinchot, and on to Aldo Leopold and the ascendancy of the science of ecology. Environmentalism as it is known today began to take shape throughout the 1960s, marked by Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring,* the passage of various federal acts addressing pollution control and wilderness preservation, the birth and growth of a variety of environmental organizations, and ecological incidents such as the Storm King litigation and the Santa Barbara oil spill. From among this nascent swirl of ecological consciousness in the 1960s emerged a dominant discourse on the environment—that is, a set of procedures for communicating that enabled and constrained the definition and presentation of environmental issues, that shaped and legitimated the voice of authority on the environment, and that created the conditions that made possible a certain conception of the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. This discourse was advanced by environmental activists and organizations through media such as Earth Day 1970, which was designed to throw the spotlight on environmental problems, consolidate environmentalist thinking, and galvanize the public into action. Though informed by the long history of American conservationism, the environmental movement as it emerged in the 1960s was of a piece with a host of other calls for radical change. The anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the various demands of the New Left, a new mysticism, a new sociosexual politics all interacted with a budding effort to build a new relationship with the natural world. Some saw in the ecology movement the potential to unify all calls for social justice under one banner: the complex of economic, industrial, bureaucratic, and military systems responsible for racism, poverty, blighted cities, the militarization of the nation, and the war in Indochina were also responsible for making the planet progressively uninhabitable. The environment provided a rationale for everyone, regardless of class, race, or even ideology, to work toward reforming American society. Others saw in the ecology movement a dangerous, even sinister potential to divert the attention and efforts of the radical left away from the busy task of obliterating capitalism toward the more benign work of ridding the streets of trash.

Environmental leaders sought to build a broad-based movement. Their challenge was to reconcile a new and radical ecology movement with a wider segment of America that was more conservative but nonetheless increasingly

concerned about environmental problems. As Earth Day 1970 organizers put it, the goal was to forge a "bizarre alliance that spans the ideological spectrum from campus militants to middle America." The discourse that accomplished this

conciliation—through conceptualizing a beautiful, frail, and vulnerable planet inhabited by a unified humanity—made full use of the image of Earth from outer space. Margaret Mead told an Earth Day crowd in 1970, "I think that the tenderness that lies in seeing the Earth as small and lonely and blue is probably one of the most valuable things that we have now. . ." According to scientist William K. Hartmann, "It is no coincidence that the first 'Earth Day,' in 1970, came soon after these [NASA] pictures became available." Inevitably the image of the Earth and the image of the spaceship that brought

the image of the Earth were conflated. Buckminster Fuller claimed to have invented the metaphor Spaceship Earth in 1951, but Adlai Stevenson may have been the first to use it to good effect publicly, perhaps because, in 1965, his public

was ready for it. In his final address to the Economic and Social Council of the U.N., Stevenson said, "We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserve of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say, the love we give our fragile craft." Subsequently, economist Barbara Ward titled a book, *Spaceship Earth,* in which she stated, "Modern science and technology have created so close a network of communications, transport, economic interdependence—and potential nuclear destruction—that planet Earth, on its journey through infinity, has acquired the intimacy, the fellowship, and the vulnerability of a spaceship." A few years later, Fuller wrote his *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth,* premised on the idea that humankind had taken command of the craft but had no instructions for running it.

The image of the Earth in space, coupled with the metaphor of Earth as a spaceship, became a pervasive and powerful symbol for the early environmental movement. It effectively served the movement's dual, potentially competing

objectives: to maintain the momentum for radical change while avoiding polarization. As an ecological model, Spaceship Earth implied limited resources, limits to growth, and a need to reorder the basic relations of Western civilization—

in effect, a call for radical change. Economist Kenneth Boulding proposed replacing the existing, unsustainable "cowboy economy," destined eventually to destroy the world, with an Earth-friendly "spaceman economy," in which both consumption and production would be considered "bad things" to be minimized. In complement to this radical side of Spaceship Earth was the unifying sense of fragility and tenderness Stevenson and Mead spoke of. At one level, using the spaceship metaphor to make an ecological point during the first full blush of the space age might be seen as an instance of

principled opportunism, as an attempt to turn the goals of the militaristic, technocratic state back upon themselves, or at the minimum to hit upon a familiar cultural chord to which a large audience might resonate. But no one making the

ecological point ever seemed to acknowledge the deep irony in enlisting the help of an image that was itself the product of the very complex of economic, bureaucratie, military, and technological systems they held responsible for the destruction of the environment. The scientist J. Baird Callicott wrote, without irony, "More than any other single phenomenon, those photographs of a soft, lake-blue planet, coyly swirled about with flouncy clouds, floating in empty space—with the utter desolation of the moonscape in the foreground—precipitated the ecological and environmental decade that immediately followed," as though the image itself set off the environmental activism of the 1970s without the help of the environmental havoc left in the wake of all that went into getting a camera on the moon in the first place. In missing the irony inherent in Spaceship Earth, environmentalists rendered the metaphor self-defeating. To make a value judgment about the Earth, based on photographs from space, one had to make an abstraction of it, to dismiss the specifics of history and context. Not visible from space is the evidence of the real human/human and human/nature relationships transpiring on the surface of the planet, including not only the evil works of people perpetrated upon nature and upon themselves, but also the non-nurturing, non-life-supporting earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods that the Earth perpetrates upon people.

Seen from outer space, the Earth "as it truly is" is not a site of human contestation. Spaceship Earth was an abstraction and reduction of the planet, which worked against the promise of a radically reconstituted human/nature

relationship by dissolving context and history and leaving no concrete reality in which to build a politics. As Eric Sevareid said in his Earth Day 1970 broadcast on CBS News, "We are now dealing with final facts, the chemistry and physics

of plant and animal existence, not with the metaphysics of freedom, justice, equality or the other elastic elements in human happiness." By Earth Day 1990 the icon of the globe, which 20 years earlier had adorned posters and T-shirts in

all its photographic detail, had evolved into a primitivistic drawing, a further abstraction. In contrast to its predecessor, Earth Day 1990 was notable for the absence of any call to reformulate the basic economic, technological, scientific, and bureaucratic relations of society. Rather, it commanded the environmentally concerned to "think globally" and "act locally," and so bypass the intermediary web of institutions. In 1990, responsibility for changing the world rested not on the institution but on the individual, who by recycling and planting trees could somehow remedy the damage caused by the unmolested industry, bureaucratic largess, and technological overkill that was the focus of rhetorical attack in 1970.

Apart from the irony behind the spaceship metaphor, there was also the issue of the metaphor itself. In the logic of Spaceship Earth, spaceships seem more Earth-like, perhaps more naturalized and less artificial. At the same time, Earth

becomes more like a spaceship—that is, more like a product of human technology, to be operated and even fixed by humans armed with the proper manual. Further, the main purpose of its existence is to carry humans about and provide

for their needs. Effectively, the Earth is seen as the instrument of humankind.

Questions to Answer:

1. Explain the environmental movement (purpose, goals).
2. To what extent did environmentalists think the environmental movement would be popular/successful?
3. Determine what a “cowboy economy” and a “spaceman economy” are.
   * Differences? Benefits? Reasoning/justification for each?
4. Explain the **metaphor** in the selection.
5. Conclude why the metaphor for environmentalism would be “self-defeating”.
6. Determine what metaphor you would use to describe environmentalism/environmentalists.