



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Wood, Stephen (2014) Lichens and the cry of the Earth. *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter* 25 (1), ISSN 1083-9194.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12011/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

# Lichens and the Cry of the Earth

Stephen Wood

---

*Wood is an independent researcher in phenomenology and the environment. He studied systematic zoology at the University of Cambridge and has held an honorary fellowship in the Theoretical Physics Research Unit at Birkbeck College, London. This essay was written in 2008, after Wood's return from an Earth Jurisprudence course at Schumacher College in Totnes, England. At the time, he was living in Nîmes in the south of France. [s.w.wood.88@cantab.net](mailto:s.w.wood.88@cantab.net). © 2014 Stephen Wood.*

---

November has been a rainy time here in Nîmes. Being unable to walk far, I was drawn to *Les Jardins de la Fontaine*, the city's public gardens. They are beautiful in any weather and have a particular calm about them. There the sacred spring of Nemausus can still be seen bubbling up from the earth. If you're lucky and the wind is in the right direction, you are protected from the noise of the city's traffic, and the trees of the garden envelop you with their stillness.

Leaving the spring, I started the climb toward the *Tour Magne*, the Gallo-Roman watchtower that presides over Nîmes. After the first flight of steps, I stopped at a stone wall beautifully clothed with lichens. The brilliant orange of *Xanthoria* lichens caught my eye, but after a while, I began to see lots of different shades of green, grey, blue, and white. All the lichens were of the encrusting type, closely hugging the wall, but some had the saucer-shaped cups of fruiting bodies.

As a boy, I was fascinated by this close symbiosis between two organisms, namely an alga and a fungus. Now, as I looked at the way the lichens worked their subtle magic on the stone, my enthusiasm was rekindled. It seemed these humble creatures were the natural growth of the wall, its breath and expansion. They were giving to our human construction a beauty and a harmony, a wisdom and a dignity of the kind that can only be acquired over centuries.

My eyes traced the tapestry of colors along the stone wall, feeling the lichens bringing the wall to life and blending it harmoniously with the landscape. But abruptly the lichens stopped and a message was sprayed in purple paint along the wall. There had also been plenty of snails on the wall, both a low-coiled and

a high-coiled species, but these too were now very much fewer in number.

Why did the lichens stop? The wall had been continued not as stone but as a bland, uniform slab of concrete. The lichens couldn't grow there. I read afterward that the lichens cannot tolerate the greater alkalinity of the concrete. Over time, the pH will change allowing the lichens to colonize. For now, however, I looked at the concrete and felt its pain. The life had gone out of the wall. It was now just filling space. What had happened to its voice, speaking to us of its dignified regard for the passing centuries? In a way, the material seemed dumb in its blandness and uniformity, "a dull, brutish beast." But I felt something else, too, coming from the concrete... It was as if the Earth lay there gagged in a silent scream.

Believing stone to be inert and lifeless, we have created inert and lifeless concrete. But the Earth suffers. Stone has a soul and, in concrete, we have taken it hostage. To me, it was no coincidence that the graffiti artist had vented his pain on the barren stretch of wall. Was he in his own way trying to bring a beauty and color to the wall, since the lichens could not? And isn't his graffiti the very emblem of the considerable alienation we have created through our modern world?

Rejoining the climb to the *Tour Magne*, I stopped at the frog pond. My friends, the three frogs I had seen regularly, had disappeared. The seasons had turned. The water lilies no longer sported their beautiful flowers and the water reeds looked dead. At the top, I sat for a while on the ruined Roman ramparts and contemplated the tower. My gaze shifted to an Aleppo pine, and I was delighted to see lichens sprouting thickly from the branches. I stood up to take a closer look and

spent a good few minutes enraptured by the miniature world created by these leafy lichens.

A few days earlier, I had been reading philosopher David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*. As I walked down from the *Tour Magne* and back to my flat, I remembered how he describes the respect that the Plains Indians have for stones and rocks. When I returned home, I reread this beautiful ritual song of the Omaha (Abram, 1996, p. 71):



unmoved  
from time without  
end  
you rest  
there in the midst of the paths  
in the midst of the winds  
you rest  
covered with the droppings of birds  
grass growing from your feet  
your head decked with the down of birds  
you rest  
in the midst of the winds  
you wait  
Aged one

One can picture the scene. There the rock sits, patient, humble, and wise. The wind whistles and feathers flutter past. Occasionally, a bird alights on the rock but flies off quickly, the stillness of the scene unbroken. As all around changes, the rock endures, a counterpoint, a resting place, a landmark. Let us come to rest and be taken by the rock's gentle rhythm, feeling a reverence for the slow aging ones of the Earth.

How our concrete walls are so robbed of feeling in comparison. Would we have created such a material at all, if we had these feelings of respect and reverence? Abram goes on to reflect on how true artists work with stone, indeed, any natural material. They work in cooperation with the material, to bring out its natural beauty, to enhance what is already there rather than impose their vision from without.

This is exactly the impression I have looking at Barbara Hepworth's sculptures—I come away a great fan of the stones and rocks themselves

and think, Wow! Where did she find such beautiful objects? Londoners have the chance to see the work of a wonderful stone sculptor—Emily Young's majestic, grave and compassionate angels that occupy the courtyard of St Paul's. Her angels emerge from the rock, messengers from the realm of the Earth, bearing their message of pain, of urgency, of dignity, and unity. Looking at her

website, I read how she only gradually became aware of the angels' message, only gradually became conscious of the cry of the Earth to which she was giving voice:

What is it that is happening when I carve stone? Many answers came, none the final one: but the best answer is—I am doing Nature's bidding. I am a part of Nature, and I am a manifestation in human form of her creativity; me carving stone is one of the infinite ways nature expresses itself. I am compelled by everything that I have ever experienced, or was born from, or know about, to do this, here, now... (Young, 2007)

In her latest piece, the Earth howls and unites with our howls of pain and loss, pain that begs to be met with compassion and tenderness:

This is the howl that we all have inside us. It's born of love, and loss. The howl comes with our birthright of experience and love. It was carved with an acknowledgement of human frailty in the face of death and loss and change. It's a monument to those who came and went before us, unmarked and unmourned, and for those in the future, who come after us, who will bear the dreadful repercussions of the profligacy and cruelty of our time.

After the howl, sometimes, there is quiet and peace, the grace even, that comes with the knowledge of how beautiful and complex are the people and places we loved, and lost, and are losing; and sometimes, possibly, gently, a surrender to the sense that we are here to serve the Earth, and the Earth's future... (Young, 2008)

Let us join in bringing the cry of the Earth to the awareness of the wider world!

## References

- Abram, D., 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. NY: Pantheon  
Young, E., 2007. "A Stone Story: Notes on Working with Stone in the 21st Century." <http://www.emilyyoung.com/writings.html> [accessed Nov. 8, 2013].  
Young, E., 2008. "Howl." <http://www.emilyyoung.com/writings.html> [accessed Nov. 8, 2013].