



Beyond Today's Thinking : Victor Kelleher's *Parkland*

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It is commonplace to say that literature for young people is usually written to prepare them for the personal, social, and ethical demands of the culture into which they are being initiated. Maureen Nimon goes further, arguing that such literature should help young readers 'to think beyond the point today's society has reached' (Nimon & Foster 1997, p.57). As many societies across the globe struggle with the need to balance the requirements of burgeoning populations and of hard-pressed environments, it is becoming clear that young people especially face the acute ethical problem of reconciling competing claims of human and other life forms. In his speculative novel *Parkland* Victor Kelleher explores that problem and others related to it, especially that of distinguishing between human beings and other living things. The following discussion focuses primarily on the philosophical issues that Kelleher's novel raises; the novel would repay detailed literary analysis as well (of subject position; of discourses of nature and culture; of intertextual reference, such as that to Shakespeare's and Huxley's 'brave new world', (Kelleher 1994 p.43) for instance) but in the space available there is room here only for passing comment on literary matters.

Parkland (1994) is one of a loosely-related series of three books in which Kelleher examines some fundamental questions of interpersonal and environmental ethics: the other two are *Earthsong* (1995) and *Fire Dancer* (1996). Kelleher raises vital ethical concerns in all three novels, and also explores alternatives to the Judaeo-Christian ethic that has underpinned most Western thinking about human relations with the environment—and that still underlies all the law involved in such relations. All three narratives provide a vivid commentary on the current debate about the way human beings should relate to other living things in settings in the remote future and the remote past that both distance the discussion from the controversies of the moment and allow Kelleher to develop situations that test ethical questions in what Ursula Le Guin calls a 'thought experiment. ... In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, ... thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed', and the purpose is 'to describe reality, the present world' (Le Guin 1976).

Parkland begins with a depiction of life in a combined zoo and research station in which non-humans keep humans and human-ape hybrids under restraint as part of a program that replicates current human dominance of the environment, but does so for a very different reason. The masters of *Parkland* are 'cosmic gardeners' whose 'task is to keep each planet in balance. For us it is a sacred duty, a way of honouring the diversity of life which is the greatest treasure in the universe' (Kelleher 1994, p.231). The narrative follows the struggle of human and human-ape hybrids against the cosmic gardeners, in the process considering the grounds on which humans might be distinguished from other forms of life. It depicts a 'natural' human way of life that exemplifies Hobbes's characterization of such a life as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1962, p.100) before reaching a resolution establishing a social contract for mutual benefit and pursuit of happiness. *Parkland* explores ideas that might be attractive to people increasingly conscious of human effects on the environment, but the novel also opens up some of the less desirable implications of such ideas.

Kelleher's narrative of a revolution against 'cosmic gardeners' who treat humans and great apes as breeding stock is compelling, because it shows humans and part-humans struggling successfully against great technological odds and against manifest injustice. The focalizer of the narrative is Cassie, a young adult female human, who is positioned from the beginning as a leader and as a mediator. As the novel opens she and two hybrids, Boxer and Ralph, are in the process of escaping from the enclosure by using her skill at throwing; as the narrative develops, she becomes not only a mediator between hybrids, apes, and humans, but also occupies a position between the intellectual dominance of Boxer (especially after he is crippled by their keepers) and the physical dominance of Ralph. Cassie is also seen in the conventional female role of nurturer (of Ralph and of hybrid children especially). She is partly feral in ancestry and is therefore more assertive and mentally and physically superior in the eyes of the keepers as 'best breeding stock' (Kelleher 1994, p.80). She defies the Parents, who are characterized as politically impotent - in keeping with their 'withered' and 'old and placid' appearance (Kelleher 1994, p.17). Above all, Cassie proclaims from the beginning of the narrative (Kelleher 1994, p.6) that all the primates and hybrids are 'one people', a statement of a central ethical

consideration in the novel. But the ethical issues at stake in the novel are, on philosophical investigation, more complex than Cassie's statement suggests.

The situation of the humans, apes, and hybrids is itself one that could arise from the application of a superficially attractive ethical position, that of asserting the rights of all living things, not just animals and humans. There are also real difficulties implicit in the view that Cassie, a privileged speaker, asserts for much of *Parkland*: that human beings and the great apes at least are equal partners in the community of living things. Kelleher takes the notion of equal partnership even further in *Earthsong*, asserting that the earth is 'all one mind' (Kelleher 1995, p.170), an expression, it seems to me, of Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and of plain old-fashioned pantheism. Nevertheless, although *Parkland* starts too many ethical hares to be able to catch all of them, and fails to deal with the crucial problem of different treatment for different species, it explores in emotional as well as logical terms a surprisingly large number of implications of choices in environmental ethics, some of which are set out below.

Behind most Western environmental thinking and law lies a Judaeo-Christian view that regards human beings as rulers having dominion over all living creatures (Genesis 1: 26, 28). Even when the term 'ruler' is softened to 'vice regent, or steward, or manager, or trustee' (Peacocke 1979, p.283) the world-view and the law based upon it remain human-centred. All action in environmental law, even at the end of the millennium, stems from human interests or needs (Farrier 1993, pp.9-10), and there has been little work done on the thorny problem of giving the natural environment independent legal status. Alternatives to the Judaeo-Christian view of human relations to the environment, by contrast, tend to see human beings as equal members of a biotic community rather than as stewards or owners of it. There are two common expressions of this position in discussions of the place of humans in the biotic community.

The first is Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which also ranks *Homo sapiens* as one group among many living things in an environment, and proposes that an action is 'right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1966 p.240). The second is Paul Taylor's 'life-centred' ethic. In an article called 'The

ethics of respect for nature' Paul Taylor contends that there are 'prima facie moral obligations that are owed to wild plants and animals' and that the well-being of these living things 'is something to be realized *as an end in itself*' (Taylor 1981, p.198). There are, however, serious difficulties underlying such apparently simple ethical statements, and they appear in the novel.

Although the action of *Parkland* sets the human and hybrid characters against the aliens, the aliens are actually following Leopold's land ethic to the letter. They have cleared the earth of all but a remnant of human beings because they 'made the same mistake as the dinosaurs. They dominated the planet.' (Kelleher 1994, p.233). Even the few humans left have been hunted down because their numbers have needed to be controlled (Kelleher 1994, p.234). The ideal of preserving the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community seems strong in Kelleher's narrative; he depicts the restored earth as a place of great beauty and diversity (Kelleher 1994, p.125). But maintaining that stable and diverse biotic community also entails the destruction or control of any species that threatens it, including humankind. In the absence of the aliens at the end of the narrative, humans and hybrids are the only beings that can make a conscious decision to avoid the problems that led to the alien intervention in the first place. We are back to human beings (and in this novel, human-ape hybrids) as stewards of the biotic community, since they alone can make such moral and practical choices. Following the land ethic, however, they have to control their own dominance primarily by controlling their own numbers and their use of the earth's resources.

One can see why an advocate of Leopold's ethic, J. Baird Callicott, notes that it 'is most popular among professional conservationists and least popular among professional philosophers' (Callicott 1999, p.1). As early as 1984 William Aiken pointed out that if we were to accept the land ethic 'massive human diebacks would be good. It is our duty to cause them' (Aiken 1984, p.269). Frederick Ferre goes further in 1996: 'Taken as a guide to human culture, the land ethic—despite the best intentions of its supporters—would lead toward classical fascism, the submergence of the individual person in the glorification of the collectivity, race, tribe, or nation.' (Ferre 1996, p.18). Callicott and others argue hard and persuasively to find a way around that objection, but there is insufficient

space here to examine their ideas. Right from the start, however, *Parkland* opens up a potentially very intense ethical and practical debate for its readers.

It is possible to step back from Leopold's broad statement of ethics to Paul Taylor's view that humans owe some kind of moral obligation to wild plants and animals. At the close of *Parkland* Kelleher seems to be advocating a similar position, at least with respect to primates such as apes and monkeys. If we are to accept a prima facie moral obligation to other living things, however, we need to establish the grounds for such an obligation and to distinguish those beings to which we have a duty and those to which we have none. Even in the case of animals there is heated debate about the extent of human obligations; what our relations to other living things such as plants might be is even more difficult to determine. In *Parkland* Kelleher focuses attention on the relations of humans and animals proclaimed in the statement that humans and apes are 'all one people'. But why should humans have an obligation to animals—or even to some animals only, such as primates?

The reception of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* seems to indicate that the community feels that we should recognize such obligation, and helps explain the unease people feel with traditional formulations of Judaeo-Christian thinking. Not only do such formulations assert that it is natural for humans to kill and eat animals but even that it is acceptable to treat animals harshly because human beings owe them no moral consideration. Aquinas taught that we owe a duty to God, to ourselves, and to other human beings, but not that we owe any duty to animals, primarily because they have 'no fellowship with man in the rational life' (*Summa Theologica* II, II, Q. 25, Art. 3). He suggested that people who treat animals kindly are less likely to treat other human beings cruelly (*Summa Theologica* II, I, Q 102, Art. 6), argues that the plants were made for animals and the animals for humankind, and he goes on (II, II Q. 65 Art. 3) to say that human beings can 'love irrational creatures out of charity' because God loves them. But he never seems to assert an *obligation* to treat them kindly. Descartes argued that animals do not have souls and so do not have consciousness and so do not suffer even though they might appear to react with obvious pain. Kant argued that we have no direct duties to animals because they are not self-conscious, and are a

means to the end of serving and feeding humankind. For all these philosophers, then, only human beings have rights and deserve equality of consideration in determining those rights. John Passmore would agree.

Once Darwin took the step of arguing that human beings evolved from primates, however, it became possible and perhaps necessary to alter the basis of the argument. If humans are animals and have evolved from the so-called 'lower animals', only the possession of rationality seems to distinguish us. *Parkland* raises the Darwinian and Humean positions that have always sat uncomfortably with the Judaeo-Christian view, especially in its older formulations, and that might offer a way around some of the problems of Leopold's land ethic too. Simply put, the basis of ethics for Hume is sentiment—what we feel to be right—and the bulk of the narrative of *Parkland* as focalized through Cassie manifestly supports the argument for 'one people'. But our feelings depend on our situation. Because we have the technological skill to survive relatively easily, we have the luxury to think about extending consideration to other animals: a fact that Cassie explains to Boxer (p.214). In the history of Western thought ethical consideration has moved outward to include non-citizens, slaves, women, children, and the unborn, and animals might come next. James Rachels sees the current situation as transitional; as we face the implications of seeing ourselves as animals among the animals, we are moving, he says, toward a time when 'a new equilibrium is found in which our morality can once again comfortably co-exist with our understanding of the world and our place in it' (Rachels 1989, p.103). Crucial to that understanding has been the distinction between those beings that have rights and deserve equality of consideration, and those that do not. Until relatively recently we have never felt it necessary to extend ethical consideration beyond humans; in *Parkland* Kelleher pushes the consideration to include at least the primates.

Most theorists have argued that equality of consideration ought only to be extended to human persons, and that requires a definition of what being a person entails. There are two main ways of looking at the question 'What is a person?'—a descriptive way and a normative way—and in *Parkland* Kelleher tackles both. A descriptive definition of personhood usually involves contrasting human beings and other living things and is purely factual: something

like 'possessing 46 chromosomes (or 47 or 45 in certain pathological conditions)'. A normative definition, on the other hand, involves statements of how one ought to treat persons as distinct from beings we would not call persons. Commonly, normative definitions are cast in the form of rights that should not be infringed. In order to determine which beings should and should not have rights, though, we require a descriptive definition as a starting point: we need some grounds on which to make a distinction so that we can apply the rights we might ascribe to some beings and not to others. There are roughly six criteria, which are not mutually exclusive. A person:

1. is a member of the genus *Homo sapiens* or has a genome for *Homo sapiens*
2. is a self-determining agent (Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Morals*, ch XVI; *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ch III; *Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, sec 2)
3. is capable of speech and intelligent thought (Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding* Book 2 Ch XI, secs 8, 11)
4. is capable of self-consciousness (Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch 3 'Individuality'; Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding* Book 2, Ch XXVII, sec 9)
5. is an individual subject with rational capacity (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 3, R.2; I, 18 R. 1; II, 1.1; Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding* Book 2 ch. XI, secs 8, 11)
6. is capable of feeling pain (Bentham in J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (eds) *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford, Clarendon Press).

These all seem acceptable until we push them a little. The first is the narrowest, and these days some people might feel uneasy about human needs taking precedence over, say, the needs of a rare species of animal. The last is widest, but is so wide that we have to be vegetarians if we take it seriously. The fourth is almost as wide, depending on how you define self-consciousness, but it implies that embryos and perhaps fetuses and certainly permanently comatose humans are not persons. Kelleher, it seems to me, plumps for numbers three and six, and in so doing ranges himself with preference utilitarians such as Peter Singer and Michael Tooley. Nevertheless, Kelleher looks at all six approaches in *Parkland*.

The inhabitants of Parkland are ideally 'one people'

(Kelleher 1994, p.6), but they are certainly not all human. Boxer is half chimpanzee and Ralph half gorilla, and within Parkland the contention that humans, hybrids, and even apes are to be considered as persons seems plausible, even though not all are members of the genus *Homo sapiens*. The human 'parents', whose genetic material is the source of all the human and semi-human life in the enclosure, deny that hybrids are human, despite Cassie's protests, her loving view of hybrid children (Kelleher 1994, pp.22, 90) and her friendship with and dependence upon the two hybrids, Boxer and Ralph. Boxer is highly articulate and physically adept before being physically crippled by the aliens; Ralph is loyally devoted to Cassie even to the extent of foregoing his close kinship with the gorillas. Each of these hybrid characters fits descriptive criteria two to five, but does not fit criterion one. As Cassie's comment on self-preservation implies (Kelleher 1994, p.214), she can only extend to other animals the consideration of being 'one people' in the safety and plenty of Parkland.

The capture of Leon, a wild human, precipitates the escape and hunt that constitute the main plot of the novel and also test the ways in which humans and hybrids interact. Like the humans inside Parkland, Leon is not disposed to regard Boxer and Ralph as anything but animals at least on the basis of descriptive criteria. To Cassie, Leon is 'wolfish' from first acquaintance (p.70) and the other wild humans, who agree with that view, are like baboons (p.133) and are dirty, primitive, and superstitious, have little of the skill and none of the learning of Boxer and none of the sensory acuteness and physical strength of Ralph (pp.135-142). They also, seemingly, have little of the dignity on which humans pride themselves. Altruism for them is dangerous: hunted by leopogs, a cross between leopards and dogs that the alien masters of Parkland use as a means of control, the wild humans practise a relentless triage, abandoning the old, very young, and wounded in order to survive. Yet as Cassie notices, they have strong family ties (p.146), show impressive courage and powers of organization, and despite their apparent callousness they feel grief (p.158). Clearly, too, they have the capacity to choose and to make moral decisions. These humans satisfy all six of our descriptive criteria, as do Leon and Cassie, but they have no abilities that they do not share with Ralph and Boxer, who meet only five. The feral humans' precarious

existence, however, offers them little opportunity to consider any other creature as deserving ethical consideration—or even to maintain more than the most rudimentary civilization.

Kelleher also explores the issue of ethical consideration in normative terms. Life in Parkland denies its inhabitants the rights we would usually regard as essential to persons: the rights not to be killed, to form associations, to participate in decisions affecting them, and to live in a manner conducive to their well-being. Outside Parkland, the remaining human population is living in extreme conditions designed to force selection and to provide new blood for breeding stock. The parallel with possible implications of Leopold's land ethic is nice. Leon, however, makes a pact with the other three escapees, and that raises the matter of contract; in treating the members of the pact as equally able to limit behaviour for the good of the group he makes no distinction between humans and hybrids, and so on normative grounds might be said to extend ethical consideration to them. Leon and Boxer also wish to treat one of the aliens, Edwards, as a person, partly because he understands the technology that they could re-develop with his aid. At this point the argument that humans and primates are 'one people' collapses. With technology, humans and primates can co-exist and share in equal ethical consideration, but only humans and some hybrids, such as Boxer, can manage technology (Kelleher 1994, p.237). Too late in the novel to develop it or to deal with it, Kelleher runs into a crucial idea that we have to contend with if we are to widen ethical consideration to include animals. A Darwinian view of nature, as Rachels points out, requires consideration of different treatment for different species (Rachels 1989, p.103). As Mary Midgely puts it, 'It is never true that, in order to know how to treat a human being, you must first find out what race he belongs to.... But with an animal, to know the species is absolutely essential.' (Midgely 1983, p.98). Therefore the challenge facing the human and hybrid stewards who remain in Parkland—and for people today who wish to alter the basis of consideration of other living things—is an enormous one that the alien, Edwards, expresses as the need 'to build a different kind of society' (Kelleher 1994, p.237).

Cassie's refusal to accept technology and the difference it entails between humans and hybrids on the one hand,

and animals on the other, causes her to leave Parkland, but she can only do so safely by emotionally manipulating Ralph, thereby limiting his happiness and right to decide his own fate. At this point also, Cassie's focalizing role alters somewhat. The narrative shows Cassie, the focalizer, not noticing what is happening: Ralph says he wants to stay in Parkland, but she fails to hear him (p.240), and as they leave she is 'too upset to notice Ralph's soft whimpers of distress' (p.241). She also seems to have forgotten the implication of her comment to Boxer that one can only extend to other animals the consideration of being 'one people' in a situation free from a compelling struggle for mere survival. Cassie's attempt to return to a primitive state by moving outside Parkland, even with Ralph's protection, is a failure.

Much of the final section of the novel is Cassie's reflection on the effects of her decision to leave Parkland expressed in terms of the 'primitive' and 'savage' (p.246), and her realization that she fears becoming an animal, and that even Ralph, the more animal-like of the two hybrids, is suffering from the imposition of her will and wishes to return to Parkland. On their return, the guards at the gate of Parkland, former classmates of Cassie, do not recognize her; obediently, she gives up the weapons that have been the mark of her leadership throughout the novel. In the process of reaching this resolution, Cassie is placed in a position that contradicts her earlier status as a leader willing to argue from her point of view and to risk physical and mental danger to claim freedom for all the inhabitants of Parklands and the land surrounding it, and is left at the end of the novel in a conventionally limited female role. To enter Parkland she must behave 'obediently' (p.252), and admit as 'she wave[s] one hand disdainfully at the machines' (p.253) that she might have no place in a world of technology whose images do not mean anything to her. Faced with Boxer's enthusiasm and joy, she does not contest his opinion and remains silent (p.254). The reader is encouraged to approve, however: as Cassie looks at Leon's face, it has 'never seemed less wolflike, less predatory', and Ralph is 'curled up and secure among his chosen people' (p.256) within the enclosure of Parkland. Cassie's role as a nurturer seems to have overridden all the others.

In the end, Kelleher presents us with a world in which humans and hybrids use technology to afford them the

leisure and security to broaden the extent of ethical consideration to include at least other primates. But ultimately he cannot resolve a serious problem: if we and the apes are 'one people', do we treat them in the same way as we treat other human beings? Kelleher barely replies to Cassie's insistent 'one people' with Leon's explanation that in the new Parkland the inhabitants who have remained are 'sort of together, but not in the way you wanted', even though 'no one is really separate; no one has to see themselves as either a human or an ape' (p.255). After the insistent 'one people' of the bulk of the novel, all that Kelleher does to resolve the problem is to provide a rather lame statement that literally reads as 'not to worry ... be happy' (p.256). *Parkland* undeniably offers young readers the chance 'to think beyond the point today's society has reached', but the complexity of the arguments he opens up is greater than might at first appear to be the case, leading to a resolution that in philosophical and literary terms is somewhat forced. For all that, the novel opens up an extraordinary range of ideas. The main difficulty I have found in dealing with it is to limit the proliferation of ethical arguments it sets in train. And there are two more novels in the set to analyze, both of them, especially *Earthsong*, raising even more complex issues for young readers to ponder.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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