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Dear Colleague:

Many radical changes have taken place in the course of our century. One of the most unexpected is the change from pride in human beings and human achievement near the beginning of this period to intense and widespread misanthropy near the end. Directly related to this reversal is the reversal in attitude to nature, from one of fear and awe to one of protective affection. Consider Antarctica. What comes to your mind when that "crystal desert" is mentioned? The ozone hole above it caused by man, the beer cans at the camps left by careless men, the threat to penguins and the wealth of marine life as a consequence of human interference. In short, the image of Antarctica is one of fragility and purity, while that of human beings is one of predation and greed. The only good guys today are the small band of environmentalists and members of the Green party. Green? How is Antarctica green? Isn't the ice plateau practically devoid of the "green fuse" of life? How has white--a symbol of death and sterility--become a symbol of all that is clean and pure?

Near the beginning of this century, the picture was radically different, as Apsley Cherry-Garrard's book The Worst Journey in the World (1922) clearly shows. Cherry-Garrard was a member of the fateful Scott Expedition to the South Pole. The "worst journey" of the book title was not the trip to the Pole but a sidetrip in the depth of winter (!) to pick up a few Emperor penguin eggs. Throughout the book, the author stresses human courage, virtue, and achievement. The expedition itself was inspired by the high vocation of science. Incredible suffering was endured for scientific ends. Human beings were noble. Nature ignoble. Penguins, the authors notes, were successful in the measure that they were also totally selfish, concerned only with the propagation of the species. Human beings, by contrast, were selfless. Scott failed to reach the Pole in part because he and his team refused to eat the dogs despite desperate hunger, and they refused to abandon the weak even when the weak heroically begged to be abandoned so that the remaining team might survive. Nature was either totally amoral (viz. the penguins), or it was inanimate, awesome, and hostile to life. In the midst of the hostility of the universe (of which Antarctica is a tiny part), human beings have created warmth and civility. Throughout the horrendous journey, the team members never lost their temper with one another, never swore, never said "damn," much less "fuck."

Best wishes,

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