‘Wilderness’ and the Multiple layers of Environmental Thought

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SUMMARY

‘Wilderness’ has become a widely used term in environmentalist discussion as a symbol for caring about nature. I review first the historical background: the term was adopted by US environmentalists in the 19th century to describe a nostalgic striving to get into contact with pure, unspoiled nature outside of human influence, in a sanctuary of genuineness and originality; this ideal was strengthened by its adoption by American nationalists. The background, however, lies in European Romanticism. Adoration of supposedly untouched nature arose as a counterpart to the depiction of nature as a unified system obeying eternal laws, amenable to human, rational exploitation. This idea of ‘wilderness’ cannot, however, be given any accurate empirical meaning and it rests on an assumption that a boundary can be drawn between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ human activity, but this is impossible; furthermore, all assumed ‘wilderness’ areas have actually been inhabited by aboriginal people for millenia. The idea of ‘wilderness’ thus brings forth one example of how nature has been constituted as the ‘other’ of the western society. In this constitution, ‘nature’ and ‘natural culture’ have always belonged together. As an alternative, I discuss the possibility of recognising an element of ‘wildness’ inside human everyday existence. Henry David Thoreau was a pioneer of this view. Wildness everywhere present is a totally different idea from a wilderness having a concrete reference somewhere ‘outside of’ human influence. Thus, the fact of ecological crisis actually means rediscovery of nature rather than ‘end of nature’ as suggested by the famous slogan of Bill McKibben. I finish by suggesting that Thoreau’s ever-present ‘wildness’ might be used as a building block along the path toward a ‘nature contract’, that is, a changed relationship to nature such that the prevailing attitude of domination and exploitation would be substituted with respect and care. This requires that the radical contextuality of human existence be recognised, and uncontrollable, ‘wild’ elements in this position be respected.

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1. INTRODUCTION

We view 'nature' through metaphors because nothing else is possible. Metaphors about nature operate in the classical Aristotelian sense of meaning shift (Collingwood 1945; Williams 1976; Mirowski 1994). It is through the realm of the familiar that the unfamiliar is envisaged in our imagination. The nature of 'nature' is defined by assuming it is similar to something that can be grasped, for instance, an organism or a clockwork. But nature 'as a whole' remains, nevertheless, unfamiliar; we cannot even say what 'nature as a whole' might mean. Ultimately we only know that nature 'as a whole' is vastly larger than the sphere of human experience. Nature is 'strange' to us, that is, 'natural processes are entirely indifferent to our existence and welfare' (Passmore 1980: 214). Nature does not care about us but we depend on nature, and have to care about nature, whatever 'nature' is.

'Wilderness' has become a widely used term in environmentalist discussion as a symbol for caring about nature. The word by itself is, of course, ancient, but its adoption to environmentalist discourse occurred quite recently, primarily in the United States through the efforts of eloquent and influential preservationists such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold. The term 'wilderness' is another metaphor. My aim in this essay is to expose internal contradictions of this metaphor, with the particular aim of charting ways to get beyond some of the problems inherent in the dominant conception of nature and environmental issues in the modern world.

I see several good reasons to be interested in the discourse on wilderness. First of all, the term relates to living nature and is thus at the center of environmental concerns: after all, it is the disruption of the processes of life on the earth that forms the focus of what we have learned to know as the 'ecological crisis'.[1] For this reason the term 'wilderness' is a prism through which some important features of the conception of nature in modern western society can be viewed. This point has also a genealogical dimension. The very fact that 'wilderness' is an old term and has multiple meanings is, per se, significant as regards the connotation given to the term by modern preservationists. Perhaps 'wilderness' was an attractive term for Muir, Leopold and others exactly because of this legacy? But these tensions of meaning can be exploited, I think, when we try to get further from the modern legacy and develop a new understanding of nature and the human relationship with nature.

2. 'WILDERNESS': HISTORICAL LAYERS OF MEANING

As is the case with all concepts of any cultural depth, several etymological layers can be recognised in the term 'wilderness'. The word 'wild' is derived from early northern European words for 'self-willed', 'uncontrollable', and the word 'wilderness' was adopted into wider usage in the first English translations of the

Bible (Nash 1982). In this religious context the term became a signifier of regions outside of human permanent habitation but, nevertheless, within human influence (at least in a spiritual sense). This spiritual meaning was supplemented with a more earthly one: wilderness was not only outside of permanent settlements but also out of the reach of earthly authorities. 'Mountains' bear a similar connotation in eastern Asia (Snyder 1990: 100-01).

Another type of 'wilderness' tradition originated in northern Europe in the early historical era in association with a subsistence system which combined settled agriculture (albeit predominantly slash-and-burn) with distant hunting grounds allocated according to customary law to different households. This elaborate subsistence system, *erätalous*, formed the backbone of the development of agricultural society in northern Europe from the origin of cultivation up to the 16th century.[2] The original reference of the Finnish word which stands for wilderness, *erämaa*, was the hunting ground within the *erätalous* subsistence system. But the traditional *erämaa* included also aboriginal populations who were subjected to taxation, thus, this early 'wilderness' was clearly a cross-cultural construct, defined from the point of the dominant culture.

The 'wilderness' of preservationists is of modern origin. Roderick Nash (1982) charted the outlines of the rise of wilderness to a mythological significance in North America; the following draws upon his work. The origin of the view that nature totally outside of human influence has a particular value as a counterpart of civilisation arose with European romanticism in the second half of the 18th century. This was the idea of 'sublime' of Burke and Kant. The idea was domesticated into North America by a group of East Coast writers in the early 19th century. The symbolic value of the term began to grow when American nationalists started to propagate the wildness of American nature as a particularly valuable feature of the national heritage and also as something distinctive and unique compared with European cultural monuments. Nash cites pejorative remarks by American travellers in the first half of the 19th century on the 'blood-stained associations' and 'despotic superstitions' affiliated with European temples and towers. In the value system of the American nationalism 'wilderness' became a fact and a value, no matter what problems the specification of the notion might meet in actual life. The 19th century 'transcendentalists', Emerson and Thoreau, and toward the end of the century John Muir, carried the idea further, and a virtual 'wilderness cult' was born in the early 20th century (Nash 1982: 141-60). Finally, 'wilderness' was integrated into management policies during the first half of this century through operational definitions in terms of area and distance from roads; Aldo Leopold's first article in this regard was, according to Nash (1982: 186), published in 1921. 'Wilderness Society' was established in the US in 1935 to further the goal of wilderness preservation, and a Wilderness Act was passed in 1964.

The frontier condition and frontier mentality were an important element in the American wilderness mythology from the very beginning. The frontier situation was, of course, not unique to North America but had distinct analogies

in other regions of the world which were subjected to the domination of modern European culture during the modern era, particularly Siberia, several parts of Africa, and Australia. The 'frontier' comprised regions where modern European culture could expand into regions so sparsely inhabited that the original populations did not count. 'Wilderness' and 'frontier' are defined from the position of the dominant culture. It seems to me that these concepts are important ingredients in how nature came to be viewed as the 'other' of European culture. It was against 'wilderness' and 'frontier' that some important features of the modern western culture were moulded.[3] I assume that 'wilderness' as the 'other' of western society is a complement to Edward Said's 'Orientalism' which is a more appropriate description for the relationship of western colonisers to regions with old human civilisations, regions that could not be depicted as 'uninhabited' before the European arrival (Said 1978). The perception of 'emptiness' was possible in North America, Siberia and Australia but not quite as easy in the Near East, India, China or Japan.

Thus, in the American canon 'wilderness' came to crystallise a nostalgic striving to get into contact with pure, unspoiled nature outside of human influence, in a sanctuary of genuineness and originality where cultural chains and ties are shed. Emerson, in his essay 'Nature', wrote as follows: 'At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he takes into these precincts' (Emerson 1965 [1844]).

In Emerson's text nature speaks directly to the man who is ready to listen, and even the 'surprised man of the world' is taken aback by nature's original power. This confidence in the immediate and overwhelming power of nature stems from the transcendentalist conviction that nature and men are of one origin and one essence: 'Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas. ... Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind of natural objects, whether inorganic or organised' (p. 254).

However, while the 'wilderness' idea reached its greatest influence in North America, the adoration of untouched, virgin nature lived further also within European romanticism. Nationalism had a major influence in Europe on how 'nature' came to be viewed in different countries. Different versions of ideas of nature were taken up by nationalistic ideologues of the nation states that were gradually consolidated from the late 18th century onwards. This is very convincingly demonstrated by Kenneth Olwig (1984; 1996) in the case of Denmark, where during the 19th century the Danish heath grew to symbolise the 'original' Danish landscape. 'Suddenly the people of the heathlands came to be seen as natural Arcadian shepherds who expressed, in their culture, the nature of the unspoiled landscapes which they inhabited, and, hence the unspoiled ideal nature of the nation to which they belonged' (Olwig 1996: 25-26).

The romantic movement was important also elsewhere in Europe, but there was significant variation among different countries. For instance, it seems likely

that the difference between Germany and France in prevailing ideals of nature originated with national romanticism (Radkau 1996) – 'high forest' became a national(istic) symbol in Germany but not in France. Radkau's view contrasts with some older interpretations which have derived the difference from a supposedly much more ancient contrast in the relationship to forests between these two countries.[4] In northern Europe, particularly in Norway and Finland which gained their independence as nation states only in the early 20th century, images of the 'national' landscape in paintings and music (Edward Grieg, Jean Sibelius) supported the growth of nationalistic feelings around the turn of the century.

From a northern European perspective the connection between 'wild nature' and the 19th century nationalism seems very important. Within a broader cultural framework it seems, however, that this was a limited connection; for instance, in Benedict Anderson's survey of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1991), there is no reference to 'nature' at all. It was only in some countries such as the US, Germany and the Nordic countries that nationalist ideologues adopted successfully 'nature' in their vocabulary. As regards nationalism as a whole, this happened relatively late and in idiosyncratic ways. In some other countries, for instance, Great Britain (Bramwell 1989) and France (Ferry 1992), the connection was never established with any significant strength. It is worth noticing, however, that 'nature' may still play a role in late 20th century nationalism(s). In Russia, for instance, an important political trend in the 1990s has been the consolidation of an extremely nationalistic 'brown-green' ideological coalition which derives an assumed historical mission of the Russian people from a *blut und boden* argumentation, that is, as a natural fate.[5] In European nationalism the idea of 'nature' has been articulated starting from social and political premises. But so was, of course, the 'wilderness' concept in the US in the late 19th century as well.

3. 'WILDERNESS' AND MODERNITY

There may be a sense in which the wilderness myth is a quite trivial phenomenon, by being a reflection of such criticism of modern civilisation as merely inverts the value assertion inherent in the dominant polarity between culture and nature, between centre and the 'other'. In this value upheaval the previous 'other', with all its shades, comes to be viewed as a positive contrast to everything deemed negative in the dominant culture. Thus, everything 'natural' becomes inherently positive, and everything that can be imagined untouched by modern culture is viewed as 'natural' whether this be mountains, deserts, tundras, forest expanses, heathlands, distant islands, or the unspoiled human beings living in such natural regions (or the 'original soil' from which national cultures are supposed to have germinated).

However, such a judgement on the triviality of the wilderness myth is only partially true, at most. It starts from an assumption that human relationships with nature and views of nature did not have any role in the consolidation of modern self-identity. This seems a priori implausible, thinking of the role nature has had in previous historical epochs and in other cultures (Collingwood 1945; Glacken 1967; Williams 1973; Williams 1980; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1975). Indeed, the idea of 'natural right' brought 'nature' into the center of political thinking in Europe in the early modern era (e.g., Arendt 1958), and natural metaphors lie at the root of modern economic thinking (Mirowski 1994). Furthermore, Romanticism and Nationalism are distinctly modern ideologies. The ways in which 'nature' has been incorporated into their vocabularies also have general implications.

If, in fact, views of nature did and do have a role in connection with the self-image of modernity, then a critical deconstruction of the notion of 'wilderness' has potentiality for unmasking some of the complex issues of the relationship of modern society with nature. So, the question to ask next is, what has been the fate of the term 'nature' in the modern western culture?

Modernity is usually defined through a contrast between modern and traditional society, traditional being characterised by authoritarian, a priori given ties in all spheres of human existence, be they of economic, social, religious, or intellectual type, and modern, in contrast, by the melting of all these ties, one by one and all at the same time (Kolb 1986; Bauman 1987; Giddens 1990; Beck et al. 1994; Lefebvre 1995). This cultural upheaval can be characterised either negatively, as alienation, disenchantment, fragmentation, anomie, or positively as increasing individuality, freedom and rationality. The standard story is schematic and usually told from an ideological position (Kolb 1986), but I use the overall description as a starting point.

What happened to 'nature'? The basic features are familiar, thanks to Raymond Williams (1980), in particular; other works commenting on views of nature at the traditional–modern division line include (Foucault 1980; Merchant 1980; Passmore 1980; Smith 1984; Bauman 1987; and Harrison 1992).[6] The crux of the matter was the gradual depiction of nature as a unified system obeying eternal laws and amenable to rational exploitation by humans once they learn to know those laws. 'Nature' became an object that can be molded by purposeful human activity (and this infinite malleability was thought to apply to human nature as well, see Mandelbaum, 1971). Faced with this externalised natural system was the modern, autonomous subject. A dualistic subject – object relationship was emphasised as a central feature in the self-image of modernity by, for instance, Hegel and Heidegger (Kolb 1986).

The notion of 'wilderness', as propagated by preservationists in North America and elsewhere, lies squarely within this setting. The adoration of original, untamed and wild nature arose as a counterpart to the dominant objectifying trend; 'nature was where industry was not' (Williams, 1980: 80).

However, even within the framework of modernity efforts to build consistent environmentalist thinking on the notion of wilderness come across the following unsurmountable difficulties (see also Callicott 1992). First of all, the notion of 'wilderness' cannot be given any accurate empirical meaning. Wilderness areas ought to be 'natural', but any specific referent of 'naturalness' tends to evaporate whenever it is scrutinised closely. For instance, it has been customary to use big predators such as wolves or brown bears as ecological indicators of a healthy wilderness; the Canadian nature writer J.B. Therberge expressed this view by the aphorism 'wolves and wilderness are inseparable' (cited by Mech 1995). In actual fact, however, big mammalian predators get along very well in densely inhabited areas if only they are allowed to. The big predators are not possessed by an inherent 'call of the wild'. It is systematic persecution that has historically led to their population decline and extirpation from much of the original range. This is demonstrated by the high numbers of wolves and bears in many parts of east-central Europe, and also by the recent increase of the wolf population in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the US, following legal protection and change in public attitudes (Mladenoff et al. 1995; Mech 1995). Similar development has been recorded in northern Europe.[7]

A second difficulty, no less insurmountable than the first one, is the presence of aboriginal cultures in the 'wilderness', a presence that extends thousands of years back (Nabhan 1995). How come such areas that have been inhabited for millenia can be envisaged as being 'outside of human influence'?[8] This obvious contradiction can be, in principle, solved in two alternative ways: either the existence, or at least legitimacy, of the aboriginal cultures must be denied, or their subsistence systems must be depicted as having had no influence on the natural environment.

The former alternative is impossible to accept because it is simply against the historical fact.[9] The Eurocentric misconception that the 'wilderness' areas were empty at the arrival of European colonists is contested all over the world, and open disputes are under legal consideration in, for instance, North America and Australia on this issue.

The latter alternative is difficult because of its close affinity with the myth of the 'noble savage'. Teasing apart 'natural' and 'allowable' habits from 'unnatural' and 'unallowable' ones with respect to how aboriginal cultures actually supported themselves is identical with the task of doing the same with our own productive habits. According to Callicott (1989), there is convincing evidence that the subsistence system of at least some peoples among native North Americans was guided by a 'land wisdom' which resembles in interesting ways the 'land ethics' of Aldo Leopold. Ironically for the 'wilderness' idea, this only underlines the fact that the lands of these peoples were under strong and systematic human influence in the pre-Columbian era – there is no way a sophisticated 'land ethics' could arise without substantial material interaction between people and the surrounding natural world. Another turn of the same

irony is that the impact of native cultures on nature has become also a practical issue in the management of national parks in the US simply because often the typical 'wilderness' features of the parks have been originally created by active management by native peoples (Nabhan 1995; Graber 1995).

But there is one more difficulty inherent in the 'wilderness' myth, namely, the ambiguity inherent in the idea that 'naturalness' is to be found only outside of human activity and influence. What is it that makes humans inherently 'unnatural'? The very capacities, such as reason, which made possible the separation of man from nature which is assumed to be a characteristic of modernity, must be products of nature as well.[10] Maybe the use of artefacts is 'unnatural'? But the use of artefacts – 'artificiality' – is human nature (Grene 1978). Where, then, can a boundary between 'naturalness' and 'artificiality' be erected? There simply is no such boundary. As a matter of fact, assuming that a boundary could be defined, this would instantly give rise to a new ethical problem: with what right does man trespass the realm of the untouched and through this act change the 'natural wilderness' into 'unnatural'?

These points lead toward the conclusion that if we want to operationalise the notion of 'naturalness', it cannot be taken as a state but as a process – or state of a process (Haila 1995). But a closer investigation of this conclusion leads to a second round of the same problem we just went through. The problem is, where to draw boundaries between 'really' natural and 'only apparently' natural processes ('apparently natural' being such processes that resemble natural ones but are in actual fact influenced by human activity)? Ultimately, such a boundary cannot be drawn. We meet everywhere only mixed chains of events in which human influence has played a stronger or weaker part in the past. In the last instance there is no way to draw the critical distinction. (How can I identify those gas molecules in the stream of air that I inhale that have never been in somebody else's lungs?)

It is this 'impure' nature of 'nature' that we have to comprehend and accept. Concerning the modern relationship with nature the question then is, how did something that is inherently 'impure' and mixed grow to an orderly dichotomy?[11] This is, I think, a question about the origin of 'otherness' in western culture.

The origin of 'otherness' is within social and cultural history. I have referred (note 3) to Todorov, who identified the conquest of America as a crucial turning point in the path of the western society to modernity. In Central America in 1492 two entirely different civilisations came across each other without any anticipation of the meeting on either side. The European side won the upper hand in the conflict despite an enormous disparity in numbers and strength. According to Todorov's interpretation this was primarily due to the superiority of the European side in adapting to the terms of communication in the conflict. The Spaniards were backed by a universalising zeal and ethos provided by Christianity. This gave them justification to use any means to reach the ultimate end, total conquest. The Indians, in contrast, were bound to their stable, locally

constructed cultural universes. The whole idea of a total conquest was alien to the Indians. The Spaniards were able to incorporate the existence of an 'other' into their worldview, objectify the 'other', and turn this ability into a purposeful manipulation of the 'other'. This was a modern invention. The Indians, in contrast, lacked this ability to grasp and manipulate the 'other'. They tried to understand the arrival of the Spaniards from within their own traditional culture but this proved tragically impossible.

Todorov's interpretation of the conquest of America thus puts emphasis on a communicative disposition which, of course, turns into a material force when taken up by acting subjects. In the worldview which made the conquest possible, the whole world, 'nature' included, became an object of appropriation, and all means were considered legitimate to reach this end. The success of the conquest became a proof of the successfulness of the attitude, and thus opened a process which enforced the subjectivity of the appropriating subject. As Nietzsche and others have argued, the appropriating subject arose in the prehistory of European culture in ancient Greece, but appropriating subjectivity became a dominant cultural feature only in European modernity.[12]

Todorov's *The Conquest of America* is mainly concerned with relationships among people, but the same setting became to cover ideas of 'nature' as well. That views of nature and views of society go hand in hand is one of the basic points emphasised by Raymond Williams (1980). I would venture to claim that 'other people' and 'nature' have belonged closely together in the subject-object relationship that gave rise to 'otherness' in modern European culture. The confrontation with the 'other' occurred 'laterally', as it were, in the conquest of the other continents during the 'great explorations' and after: the 'other' was on the other side of a spatial boundary, a frontier. But an analogous confrontation occurred also vertically, as it were, toward ever deepening penetration into the processes of 'nature' through ever intensifying manipulative capacity.[13] Quite early on, this also included 'human nature' – and the sciences of human beings, anthropology and psychology respectively, were born. The close relationship between 'nature' and 'natural culture' is not accidental but belongs to the order of things, to paraphrase Foucault (1980).

4. AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW: 'WILD(ER)NESS' PRESENT EVERYWHERE

From the previous section the conclusion follows that the notion of 'wilderness' is deeply ingrained in the subject – object dichotomy which is a basic determinant of modernity (Kolb 1986) and the modern relationship to nature. It is this dualism that we must address next.

Kolb (1986) presents a detailed discussion of how Hegel and Heidegger in their own ways tried to come to grips with the subject – object dualism which they

both identified as a basic determinant of modern thinking.[14] I doubt whether either of these thinkers can directly be used to resolve the dualism as regards nature, although both have been used in that way.[15] But instead of following the philosophical path I will take a more practical approach. In the previous section it became obvious that it is impossible to draw a line between culture and nature. An obvious alternative then is to stop trying to find such a borderline.

This path was pointed to by Williams (1980: 83) when he wrote: 'The point that really has to be made about the separation between man and nature which is characteristic of so many modern ideas is that – however hard this may be to express – the separation is a function of an increasing real interaction'. This, indeed, is the main internal paradox of the culture–nature dualism: the dependence of culture on nature becomes the stronger the more it is pretended that culture is in control of nature.[16] This deepening dependence of culture on nature becomes manifest within culture as the factuality of the ecological crisis. For this argument it is immaterial whether this 'factuality' is 'real' in the sense of being grounded in material fact, or 'perceived' in the sense of being imagined within the cultural consciousness. The fact remains that human culture is confronted with an ecological crisis. As a matter of fact, some of the most serious environmental problems are literally within culture; for instance, the threat caused by radioactive fallout is both within the human body in the form of radiation-induced disease and within the society in the form of stress of uncertainty (Haila and Heininen 1995). What are perceived as environmental problems are 'internalised' within the society. This is analogous to how constraints set to any ecological system by its environment are 'internalised' by the system (Haila and Levins 1992).

But if the vulnerable nature is actually within the human body and society, then 'wild' nature might be there as well. Many of the 19th century romanticists were faintly aware of this possibility. What else could, after all, be possible if culture is a product of nature? This awareness shows up, for instance, in Emerson's essay 'Nature' that I already cited above: 'There are all degrees of natural influence, from these quarantine powers of nature, up to her dearest and gravest ministrations to the imagination and the soul' (p. 244). But Emerson combined this awareness with a Victorian belief in evolution bringing forth from nature noble elements that are incarnated in the highest achievements of human culture: 'Nature is loved by what is best in us. It is loved as the City of God, although, or rather because, there is no citizen' (p. 247). '...It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides' (p. 248). The symptomatic ambiguity here is that 'nature' all by herself seems to give rise to a dualism between 'low' and 'noble', between lumps of stone and the 'immortality of the soul'.[17]

Henry David Thoreau took the all-pervasive wildness of nature as a major theme of his work more consistently than any other 19th century writer.

According to the interpretation of Jane Bennett, Thoreau pursued an ethical project that consisted of 'the attempt to give the Wild its due, to respect that which resists or exceeds conventional cultural impositions of form, to preserve the element of heterogeneity present in any entity, to imagine institutions and identities that do less violence to heterogeneity, and to engage in exercises that help to actualise that imagination' (Bennett 1994: xxii).

Thoreau's ethical project was based, first of all, on the view that wildness is everywhere. This idea followed from the elementary fact that nothing is completely, to the very end controllable by human beings. Thus, for Thoreau 'Wildness is the unexplored, unexpected, and unexplicable foreign dimension of anything.' (Bennett 1994: 19). It is 'the shadow of humanity's brave but also relentless quest to domesticate life, a quest that Thoreau knows himself to be implicated in. Wildness is the remainder that always escapes taxonomies of flora and fauna or inventories of one's character or conscience; it is the difference of the woods that remains no matter how many times one walks them' (pp. 35-6).

Out of this realisation Thoreau developed what Bennett called 'techniques of the self', that is, a set of habits and dispositions that Thoreau adopted in his own life to better become aware of the implications of the fact of ever-present 'wildness'. These habits, described in *Walden* and other works by Thoreau, have often been taken as formal exercises in asceticism, but the purpose was completely different. Where asceticism strives to loosen ties to the world, Thoreau aimed at building ties to the world such that the 'self-generating nature of wildness' (p. 45, note 33) would become manifest in his own daily activity. 'Nature' was regarded not as an external barrier to be subjected to domination, nor as a transcendental and unreachable realm to be adored from the distance, but as an integral part of our everyday existence.

This also entailed a rejection of a totalising conception of nature. In his writing Thoreau used the term 'universe', but as Bennett (1994: 53) notes, '*Heteroverse* might be a better word, suggesting both how heterogeneous elements intersect or influence one another and how this ensemble of intersections does not form a unified or self-sufficient whole. It may also, through the idea of verse, convey the sublime character of this dissonant combination' (emphasis in the original). This particular conception of 'heteroverse' implies that nature is full of possibilities out of which only one is realised at any given moment. 'Pure Nature is a realm of chance, uncertainty, and heterogeneity – of possibilities. Nature, as it is at any particular time, enacts only a subset of these possibilities' (p. 61). This terminology sounds transcendental, but Thoreau's view of nature's possibilities emphasised the potentiality for active creation, for moulding new realities from the materials at hand, both through poetic work and through material daily life.

It was through the combination of practical life and writing that Thoreau's ethical project was articulated. Bennett notes that Thoreau turned his 'desire for the Wild' to 'a careful tale' which adores the world of difference in nature (p. 72).

The word 'tale' is appropriate in this context. In Thoreau's view the 'Wild' does not speak out and enforce its influence on human beings all by itself (note the contrast with Emerson here!) Rather, the 'Wild' needs to be made effective by letting it appear in various guises in the most mundane situations and thus, through the active attention by human subjects, to claim an integral role in human existence.

Thoreau's idea of 'wildness' is in sharp contrast with the standard notion of 'wilderness'. Wildness everywhere present is something totally different from an idea of wilderness as having a concrete referent in some area(s), supposed to be completely outside of human influence. This fixed notion of 'wilderness' gives way to an amorphous mixture of wild, uncontrollable processes which are everywhere present and weave together with human activity which everywhere springs from the same 'wild' processes.

This idea of ever-present wildness implies a firm disagreement with Bill McKibben's thesis (1989) of the 'end of nature', that is, the view that because all life systems of the earth nowadays bear traces of human influence, 'nature' no longer exists. This thesis lies squarely within the culture–nature dualism of the modern tradition. Rather than an 'end of nature', we are witnessing an 'end' of the dualism. The beginning of nature, or the (re)discovery of nature would be a more adequate expression for what the global environmental problems force us to grasp. It has become unavoidably clear that 'nature', whatever it is, is not and has never been outside of the sphere of human influence, but rather 'nature' is everywhere, predominantly inside us.

Another implication is that borderlines between different categories and entities, be they within 'nature' or 'culture' become ambiguous and permeable. In particular, the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' which sometimes looked so clearly definable – 'culture' inside, 'nature' outside – is getting more and more problematic (Canguilhem 1991; Lefebvre 1995; Levins 1997). This is one of the ways in which the unproblematic views of modernity have become questionable; what is important is 'internalised' by processes themselves (Haila and Levins 1992).

In a word, it seems to me that Thoreau's 'Wild' has critical potential relative to the problem of 'otherness' which I claimed to be at the core of the culture-nature relationship in the modern world. In a crucial respect Thoreau's project stopped halfway, however, as pointed out by Bennett (1994). Because of his strong abhorrence of everything political, Thoreau could not formulate any clear idea about how the 'Wild' could gain influence in cultural life except through personal example. It is, of course, impossible to make the principle of 'wildness' a starting point of an ordinary political programme, this would be a *contradictio in adjecto*. Nietzsche, already, struggled with the problem that nature ('life', in his terminology) cannot be a norm – when it is made into a norm, it is not 'natural' any more (see Conway 1995). The task is much more demanding than merely making up a new political programme.

On the other hand, if a change in the perception of 'wilderness' is, indeed, desirable, then it is clearly desirable that we are able to do something to further this aim. The challenge can be defined more strictly as follows: to grasp the natural conditions of human existence in such a way that the wild, heterogeneous, autonomous, spontaneous, uncontrolled and uncontrollable element in the culture–nature relationship becomes respected through and through.

5. 'WILD(ER)NESS' AND 'NATURE CONTRACT'?

I suggested in the preceding section that as a borderline between nature and culture cannot be defined, we should stop trying to find such a line. But maybe this is still an inadequate formulation of the situation? Maybe the point is that we cannot draw a border-line between nature and culture because we are located at the border? After all, on some level of resolution the distinction between nature and culture is a commonplace, as Grene (1978) argued: we can easily distinguish between, say, a house and a block of granite and conclude that the former is a product of 'culture' and the latter a product of 'nature'. But the point is that on the level of generative processes 'nature' and 'culture' cannot be told apart. Furthermore, these generative processes are going on all the time as continuous reproduction of all natural and cultural elements (Haila 1995). When repairing a house we resort to nature in search of suitable materials and use natural processes in completing the job.

Balancing on the border between nature and culture is a major feature of native mythologies all around the world, if the analyses of Mary Douglas (1966; 1975) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) are correct at all. The situation of modern culture is no different. Both nature and culture are everywhere present but in a shape that does not allow either one to be teased apart from the other. 'Nature' cannot be purified because it exists as a category in our thought, that is, as a cultural construct.[18] On the other hand, 'culture' is continuously being reproduced from a source inside, a source that we cannot control. Baconian science has, in a sense, been a long and ultimately futile effort to hide this fact from the modern consiousness (Keller 1985; 1992).

The French philosopher Michel Serres recently published a book called *Le Contrat Naturel* (1990). The book begins with a description of a fight between two enemies armed with spears who face each other in an eye of quicksand in which they gradually sink down while continuing fighting (this is with an explicit reference to a painting by Goya). The metaphoric reference of the opening picture is clear: human society is completely occupied by internal conflicts and struggles while simultaneously 'sinking down' because of the accelerating deterioration of nature in which these struggles take place. All rules and procedures adopted within the society serve the purpose of internal struggles; the 'highest' rule, the 'social contract', is a product of war. Instead of being occupied

only with internal struggles the human society ought to supplement the social contract with a symbiotic and mutual contract with nature. Through such a contract, the prevailing human attitude toward nature based on domination and appropriation should be substituted with one of respect and care.

Serres' book is a long, metaphoric argument in favour of a 'nature contract'. On a superficial level the idea is simple – just as the idea of a 'social contract' is superficially simple. But an actual 'social contract' has never been made. The same with a 'nature contract': in a literal sense such a contract is, of course, impossible to make. The 'nature contract' is rather a metaphor to serve the purpose of making the inevitable interpenetration of nature and culture understandable to us as a natural fact. In an analogous way the 'social contract' was a metaphor that made it possible to think of society as a natural product but nevertheless as something distinct from nature.

The idea of a 'nature contract' might help us to acknowledge the fact of contextuality and positionality of human existence. The interpenetration of culture and nature implies radical contextuality: we live in a context produced by (natural) history, and outside of this context nothing exists that would be of consequence for our existence. The modernist ideal which has its roots in classical culture has been to strive for a position allowing absolute neutrality and, thus, absolute knowledge and absolute domination of the surrounding world. Getting rid of this heritage, and understanding human positionality is no easy task. The idea of a 'nature contract' is easily spelled out, but understanding what it means requires metaphoric imagination.

Radical contextuality is, in a sense, located midway between realism and constructivism. N. Kathrine Hayles (1995) used the notion of 'constrained constructivism' to emphasises human positionality. The attribute 'constrained' refers to the idea that we can reliably know through our material interactions with the world the existence of constraints which exist in the material world, for instance, gravitation. However, what happens within the bounds of these constraints originates through spontaneous cultural processes which are genuinely historical in the sense that what happens next builds upon what happened in the past. This is construction that builds upon previous history, and the constraints are internalised in the process, they do not determine uniquely the details of the process.[19]

The constructedness of culture within its contraints is what makes human positionality 'radical': there are no external points of reference against which elements of culture could be compared and evaluated. Culture, within its contraints, is sui generis.

Understanding the radical positionality of human existence is a political challenge for environmental thinking. I take 'environmental thinking' to mean such a comprehension of the culture – nature relationship that changes in human social practices made compulsory by the deepening conflict of culture against its natural contraints can be achieved. One requirement is to reject positivist

illusions: 'nature' does not tell us in detail how society should be shaped (e.g., Haila and Levins 1992). But a companion requirement is to reject the lure of absolute constructionism: the constraints are real, and their location is not up to human wishes and decisions (e.g., Hayles 1995).

Thoreau's 'Wild' can play a role here. The point is to recognise the radical positionality of human existence not merely as a grand 'historical destiny' but rather as a fact that is felt in human existence through and through. The 'Wild' is present in all human activities. This also includes politics and technology. But the 'Wild' is not automatically present, it must be consciously searched for and invited to the surface – if for no other reason than because the powerful modernist tradition is continuously trying to push it to the background.

As the 'nature contract' cannot be made as a single act, it will necessarily consist of heterogeneous elements which, however, serve the same purpose of changing the attitude of modern culture to nature. I feel that to acknowledge the presence of Thoreau's 'Wild' as a participant in human culture is one building block for this contract.

NOTES

[1] This term is another metaphor; I take it to mean the sum total of all possible kinds of specific indications of ecological and environmental disruption (Haila and Levins 1992); what makes this a 'crisis' is nicely caught by a phrase in the title of Odum (1989): 'endangered life-support systems'.

[2] Being an important socio-economic formation, the traditional *erätalous* system has been subject to numerous studies, but these are mainly in Finnish (see Taavitsainen, 1987).

[3] This interpretation of 'otherness' and the formation of modern identity draws heavily upon Todorov (1984) and Kolb (1986); see also Haila (1996).

[4] The supposedly peculiar German affinity to tall trees was propagated, for instance, by Bismarck (Radkau 1996: 73) who, however, was no historian of ideas. Let it also be noted that Glacken's passage on 'custom and use', concerning forests in the Middle Ages does not indicate any difference between the regions that later came to be France and Germany (1967: 322-30). The divergent development in the 19th century may have had a material background, too: in France forests were turned into coppices because of a more acute firewood famine (see Radkau, 1996).

[5] This connection I owe to Dr. Ilmari Susiluoto who works for the Finnish Foreign Ministry (see Susiluoto 1995).

[6] The point has often been made that nature and the environment were not adequately conceptualised by the classics of social theory (this is reviewed by, e.g., Buttel 1986). This kind of criticism is contentious, particularly in the case of Marx (Dickens 1992) and leads easily to an anachronism: the classics could not conceptualise problems that have only arisen in the 20th century. However, there certainly is a gap leading back to the classics in our understanding of the role of ideas of nature in social life. The material that will fill this gap is likely to originate from the most diverse sources.

[7] The example of big predators shows in an interesting way that wildlife ecologists have

been vulnerable to the same type of reification of wilderness as environmentalists.

[8] As Jimmie Durham wryly comments in his piece 'Mr Catlin and Mr Rockefeller tame the wilderness' (included in Durham 1993): 'When the Europeans first came to North America they found an untamed wilderness inhabited only by a few primitive but noble savages. Those savages, called Indians, lived in nature almost like animals. They melted away when confronted by civilisation, technology, and progress'.

[9] This fact, however, has not always been acknowledged by preservationists. John Muir was not able at all to grasp that his cherished Yosemite 'wilderness' was actually the home of the Miwok people who lived by a highly organised subsistence economy (Nabhan 1995). According to Callicott (1992), even Aldo Leopold was oblivious to the native American cultures and made occasional pejorative remarks. Similar misconceptions are still strongly alive; Nabhan (1995: 92) cites a remark a prominent US ecologist uttered in 1990 to the effect that the 17th century in North America represented time 'before human intervention'.

[10] Nevanlinna (1995: 224) expressed the dilemma as follows: 'if the notion of man rising above nature is an illusion, how can this create any 'real' damage? Only if nature, already and in itself, contains all the evils which go out of hand in civilisation. There must exist an original lack in nature which manifests itself as the perverse insatiability of its own product, Man.'

[11] There has certainly been a tension between culture and nature in all cultures of the world, and the tension has played a significant role among the organising principles of societies (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1969, Douglas 1975), but a systematic dualism such as characterises the modern western society is not universal.

[12] Nietzsche's notes on this point are scattered throughout his works; for an overview see, e.g., Conway (1995). Appropriating and objectifying relationships are certainly found within most, if not all human cultures, but again, dualism as a systematic organising principle is not universal.

[13] Francis Bacon made ample use of the metaphor of 'penetration' in his view of science, as shown for instance by Evelyn Fox Keller (1985). The significance of the European conquest for the development of the life sciences, in particular, is a commonplace on a superficial 'phenomenological' level (the connection between explorations and evolutionary theory, for instance) but it seems to me that systematic analyses are largely lacking.

[14] As emphasised by Kolb (1986) throughout his book, modernity is not such a unified epoch as it is sometimes presented. This, however, does not render insignificant the dominant ways of thinking of the modern period: 'Even if the beliefs that moderns have held about themselves are mistaken, it is significant that they have held them. Modernity's self-description may be inadequate, but giving that self-description has been much of what modernity has been about' (p. 260).

[15] 'The Dialectics of Nature' by Engels is the most famous work in the Hegelian tradition; works building upon Heidegger are being published at an increasing pace, but their evaluation is outside the scope of this essay.

[16] This is another way of saying that efforts to control the ecological crisis through technological means alone lead to deepening of the crisis. Nevanlinna (1995: 226) puts this contradiction as follows: 'The self-reflection of modernity finds itself in a situation where the conditions of its possibility are at the same time the conditions of its impossibility'.

[17] A similar ambivalence was characteristic of European Romanticism (Lovejoy 1948).

[18] This is what made Nietzsche ridicule the striving of the Stoics to live 'according to nature'; see Conway (1995).
[19] This general argument can be supported also on thermodynamic grounds; see Dyke (1992).

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