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## **Wilderness in America**

During recent months my reflections on wilderness have been worked and reworked through participation in hearings concerning the disposition of areas and rivers in the Northwest which might still be conceived wild. Attending to the testimony of hundreds, and attempting to formulate my own, I have strained to discern both the actual significance wilderness may hold for us in manifold ways, and more deeply, to ponder anew the potential significance it might yet hold within the shaping of our destiny as a people.

These hearings themselves have brought out a wracking incongruity of relatively recent origin: When Thoreau wrote "that in Wilderness is the preservation of the World," he surely was not thinking of Wilderness as to be yarded and bounded in specified preserves. Yet more and more, of course, we have been forced to conceive wilderness lands under the rubric of conservation.

The deliberateness of Thoreau's Westward walking was not that of an excursion into an area set aside to remain in its natural state. The 'West' he signified did not remain by man's decree, subject to regulations aimed at preserving it from human onslaught, or to quotas of scheduled access. "The unexplored forests and meadows" but for which he thought "our village life would stagnate" still sufficiently abounded matter-of-factly to obviate their holding tenure under the aegis of planning and deliberate disposition. Thus the re-creative tonic of wilderness was not about to be bottled and labeled as a recreational resource. And matter-of-factness in the style of human venturing amidst wild places was not yet massively invaded by self-conscious searching for 'the wilderness experience', even though eulogies of natural beauty and sublimity were popular among the cultivated.

Most widely, in Thoreau's time, the appeal was to venturesomeness; to setting out anew; to a break with conventions in which life might have been constrained if not falsified; to exploration and discovery

rich in promise of new beginnings and firmer foundations; to a testing of mettle in which a man might find himself and inherit a dignity proper to him. Wilderness offered invitation and opportunity for active undertaking on which the person might thrive and even communities might be founded. Its call was that of a rallying of men to enterprise, to work that might befit them, to a life to be instituted in conscious affirmation and not one merely acquiesced in as a matter of course.

Whatever one may say of the significance wilderness thus formerly assumed in this country, or of what came of response to its appeal to active engagement, we may note that its significance lay squarely in the mainstream of men's lives; and if not directly so with many, at least sufficiently so to become widely acknowledged and traditionalized in such a vein.

With the advance of the technological era and of bureaucratic management of human affairs, what is now left of de facto wilderness areas still does present itself to some within the attenuated heritage of the wilderness tradition in America as continuous with human enterprise. The formerly seismic passion seems to linger strongest with those whose life's work is carried out in closest proximity to wilderness lands--'the back country', as it were. Out of their understanding of themselves in their work these people tend to avow as an inalienable right the accessibility of the land to human enterprise and livelihood. And I think that to them the denial of this assumed right goes far deeper than an economic threat. One suspects it seems maddeningly frivolous, an offense to manliness, and a contradiction of the significance which the land assumes at the center of a lived working relationship with it. You will perceive I am not talking about corporate interests or calculating exploitation, but about an attitude to be discerned in the passionate voices raised by individual persons close to the land--against the setting aside of wilderness sanctuaries subject to restrictions. However numerous or few these persons may be, it seems worth pondering the basic question they propound, the dilemma concerning wilderness in our time: If one respects their attestation that the land is to be truly met in the mainstream of life and accordingly warrants unilateral accessibility of the land to human enterprise, one knows full well the attrition of what remains undeveloped to be expected under the ever-mounting demand for diminishing resources. This land too

will be made captive to the dogma of multiple use, and those who cling so fiercely to keeping the land in the ambience of man's work in the world will awaken one day to their own irretrievable loss: the source of their very passion. Yet alternatively, in setting wilderness areas aside as inviolate, does not one inadvertently attenuate their very significance by removing them from the mainstream of life? Already in the very speaking surrounding that alternative, even among its fervent advocates, one may sense contradiction of the matter-of-factness but for which we will fail to "stand right fronting and face to face to a fact" — in Thoreau's sense. As he warns, indeed, "Very few men can speak of Nature . . . with any truth. They overstep her modesty, somehow or other, and confer no favor. They do not speak a good word for her. The surliness with which the woodchopper speaks of his woods, handling them as indifferently as his axe, is better than the mealy-mouthed enthusiasm of the lover of Nature. Better that the primrose by the river's brim be a yellow primrose, and nothing more, than that it be something else." (360)

Yes; discretion in speaking is called for. Perhaps discretion would preclude trying to 'speak a good word for Nature'. Yet wilderness may bear upon the possibility of discretion in speech—even upon the speaking carried on afar, in the far-flung sprawl of cities upon the land. From of old, in traditions vastly antedating that of the enterprising spirit in which our American forebears tended to respond to the land, a more deeply heeding attentiveness in the wilderness found sponsorship therein for a speaking that might yet hold for us commanding resonance. Such speaking as one may hear, for example, in the Voice from the Whirlwind, on which Melville's ear was trained.

Speaking is potentiated in a listening through which we find ourselves addressed. From of old, genuinely destinate speech, awakening speech, seems to have come forth bred of the address, in which wilderness played no small or accidental part. The very silence, the solitude and the infinite manifestness of the place being germane to the speaking that might be called for—especially in those junctures of the lives of peoples from which men were singled out in withdrawing to that distance on the mainstream of life from which they might recollect themselves and submit to being placed in radical question. There, in turn, they knew themselves to receive life anew —as given them.

With all this, which no man made, given in foreverness—the measure of our hours, of the generations of mankind—in ancestral memory and progeniture.

Wilderness, it would seem, may lie closer to the whence of speaking than to the thematization of a speaking about. And deeper, then, than enterprise may fathom, the significance thereof. For it would be in the abeyance of enterprise that one might find, might heed, the primordial address of the place in which the potential of speech may be tried and renewed.

If wilderness may yet speak to us and place us as respondents in the ambience of respect for the wild—for Nature as primordial, it must be liberated from ultimate subsumption to human enterprise. That is, its voice will be heard anew only as we come in decisive forbearance into its presence. Attentive listening, active receptivity, candor of spirit are the mood of the place. Or--as Kant might say: disinterested interest. I suggest wilderness is not to be understood as a place appropriated to human interests or to a special human interest. Its fundamental gift lies in a qualification of disinterestedness with which human interest requires to be informed. But for such qualification we tend to lapse into a wallow of anthropocentricity and suppose ourselves to be titular on the face of the Earth. Such was the supposition our Indian forebears simply could not understand: How could we assume a proprietary right over the land? What, indeed, could that mean? How could that which bears sacred power to man be obliterated in that capacity by an absolutized claim to exert a power of disposition over it?

Even for the Indian, when he lived so unobtrusively upon the land which owned him, wilderness seems to have afforded a measure of dialectical interplay with daily life—as an ultimate place of withdrawal, of purification, of fasting, of vigil, and of prayer. There if anywhere he might find himself addressed in a manner decisive at once for his own life and that of his people. His withdrawal, his removal from others into solitude, marked by a suspension of normal pursuits and a bringing of the manifold of his cares into closer proximity with that sovereign spirit to which he felt himself to belong: gatherer of the world of fellow creatures)and sustainer of the ancestral voices which might speak to him again; source of those promptings from which his whole life might take on

direction more appropriate to it and which his own intentions and daily endeavors might have tended to dissipate, to inhibit or misconstrue. The dialectical interplay between such wilderness placement and the mainstream placement of everyday life was implicitly appreciated as something fundamental and not to be intruded upon by other members of the community. Correspondingly there was nothing ostentatious about either the withdrawal or the return. Others could understand what such a thing might mean and the discretion it would presuppose. The community carried wilderness in its heart and wilderness spoke to men in their solitude as bearers of the community as well. Even for the Indian, living in the immediacy and constancy of wilderness, it seems to have called for some measure of placement in withdrawal from everyday life. One might speak of this as a kind of sabbatical placement relative to the currency of everyday pursuits. Of course in everyday life, too, and seasonally as well, rituals of mindfulness, of acknowledgment, kept faith with the deliverances of solitude.

In the Indian cultures of former times, most salient for our consideration is the tradition of reverence and respect in which the land was received and acknowledged. Can it be that this is the vein in which wilderness requires of us that it be understood? And may it be that even the wilderness left to us is itself our vestigial hope of being instructed in such a vein? If so, by inverse proportion, the need of the instruction increases as the opportunity for it decreases. And the opportunity decreases by reason of the want of instruction. To the extent that we may be far down the road of such a progression, it would follow that the potential significance of wilderness in American life may be as critical as obliviousness to it may be prevalent.

The pervasive culture seems to be in dialectical contrariety to a wilderness ethos. Technology may be the mechanical embodiment—the vehicle—of that culture, seemingly endowed with overwhelming autonomy. Yet the language of the culture betrays the underlying human stance: the claimant's stance, speaking in terms of want and use, resources at our disposal, the exertion of control, the projection of goals, and the humanly conferred status of 'values'. The language itself is programmed and consumerized, accomplishing a packaging and marketing of meaning in banalized form. A processing of meaning has tended to supplant responsibility for meaning, and human

communication has become a problem to which techniques of solution are sought. Feeling, having become subjectivized, is one thing, and thought, having become objectivized, is another—rendering thoughtful commitment an anomaly hardly to be recognized, let alone carried out. Yet everywhere rights are asserted and demands are pressed, and accountability has become a watchword of the day. Responsibility is chiefly what one insists upon from others and quantitative measurement of how they are measuring up would get us down to brass tacks. For oneself there is the central possibility of a life of one's own to do with as one pleases in exchange for an abstract concession that others are like-minded about this and will expect not to be interfered with in the right they likewise claim to jurisdiction over their own lives. And isn't property, too, the embodiment of that claim? Indeed it is a proprietary claim, through and through.

What, then, of lands not owned by private and corporate interests? They come under public ownership and the mediation of government jurisdiction. In the aspect of property, nonetheless, they are subsumed under right of use. One has the right to use public land as he pleases so long as his exercise of that right does not conflict with that of other users. The values for the sake of which a person uses such land remain his own business; let him use it for what he gets out of it. Some get aesthetic values. Some get economic values. Some get recreational values. Some get religious values. Some get wilderness values. That's the package. And the public buys it so long as human uses and value-profits are kept equitably distributed, and the resources made use of are not getting scarce. While the uses and corresponding values remain the business of those concerned in them, the disposition of the public land requires a neutral managerial stance in arbitrating to accommodate competing uses and values. The weighting of uses and values is to be adjudicated according to the numbers of their respective adherents and advocates. And what if a comparatively few were to claim large tracts as appropriate to their peculiar use and values at the expense of excluding a host of others with their uses and values? Where interest confers status on the land, what a high-handed lock-out that would be. In such terms the keeping of wilderness would seem tantamount to an arbitrary transfer of public property to the status of the private

property of a very few—even if unspecified—persons. A selfish, self-appointed elite, no doubt, who want the land all to themselves. In an age when the very resources on which our way of life depends are in shrinking supply and increasing demand, is someone going to have the temerity to pose wilderness as a scarce resource? Why, the very category of resource commits one by implication to development of it, and to pose wilderness as a resource implying the contrary would carry contradiction to the point of perversity indeed. Such is the embarrassment of the Forest Service when called to manage land by leaving it alone; a *reductio ad absurdum* and emasculation, it would seem, of this managerial agency. No, it would be difficult for this agency of ours to represent us in a capacity other than that of handmaiden of development. Even to enforce a measure of restraint in this capacity has often placed it at odds with the thrust of a 'culture of values', for which economic development is the underlying and the dominant carrier of our orientation and destiny, setting the very categories of our thought and speech,

Of what significance, then, can wilderness be in dialectical contrariety with such a culture? Well, it can give the lie to it. It can extend, now and then, its elemental emissaries to shores, to suburbs, to the folks downriver, to throngs in airports, to the passengers of balked transports, to the breadbasket of America^ to swaying buildings and empty streets. In pelting downpours, the reach of sky, the weathering willy-nilly impartial to all, the crawling of ants, the cry of gulls and caw of crows, the rankness of weeds, the silence of snow. Perhaps too in occasional revels Dionysus comes, and the wild is revived in the human frame, the fibres of life plucked to the wild strain. The stirring of barnyard fowl to their migrating kin. God save us, then, 'ere there be life in us yet. May we struggle the birth of tongues of our own and derive our words as we use them from the wild stock. And we may yet believe "that a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip, if he should ever harbor it in his mind." Our very dreams might suggest the hidden bulk of the wild which is immolated by our day. And the culture contrary to the wild may prove after all, though cloying, to be made of feeble stuff; able to pass itself off only in our waking sleep; some pantomime of life, a common dream,

mumbled in unison by an endless crowd.

Need the awakening be rude? Or might it be graced by some gentleness and simplicity? That would seem to depend on each one, who must determine in his heart whether he will be party to claiming ownership of life, thus to remain the slave of consumption, rigidified in the conflicts of control, anxiously demanding, stultified in imagination, and ungenerous toward life itself. Not just in getting and spending, but in passing time, too, there is fostered the sense of the world running out, tending into vacuousness, a deathly trend. Apocalyptic visions only dramatize the sense of the affair.

A more radical reckoning and a more thoughtful way seem to be gaining upon us, if even in spite of ourselves. The revulsions of younger people are telling signs. They clearly do not subscribe to the propertied life. They seem prepared to do with less without feeling deprived. The quality of lived relationships concerns them far more than the setting and achieving goals of accomplishment. And it is above all among the young that a new sense of the land seems to be gathering force. They can understand what it might mean to renounce the titular stance in relation with the land. When they speak at these wilderness hearings, as so many of them have, they speak almost univocally of places and creatures having claim upon us to be recognized in their own right. Their plea is, not to appropriate a few pristine places to themselves, but, here and there, to acknowledge what is thus given us in a manner appropriate to it, with gratitude, with forbearance, with respect, in a more liberal frame of mind akin to sacrifice. For them wilderness is the stronghold of a new ethos upon the land, working in dialectical complementarity with the full range of the relationships and activities in which we may stand.

Yet, how could it be that a place might hold such force? Only, it would seem, in some radical way; positioning us, as it were, with respect to our involvement in reality, as a matter to be resolved. No doubt our situation is always implicitly a metaphysical affair. But wilderness, to the extent that it will not permit one to take one's surroundings for granted, is a place which will not let one off the metaphysical hook. At the same time it establishes us in such decisively lived



relationship with our surroundings that it precludes subsumption of the lived relationship to any depictive representation of how we are situated In relation to our surroundings, for example in ecological terms. We are not there as seen by ourselves, as parts within a whole. No, we are there as on the spot with respect to the meaning of what we behold. How does nature speak to our concern? That is the question. And the relationship is one of participation in what occurs, the presencing of heaven-and-earth and of all that abounds therein. One is brought to realize one is held within the embrace of what is proffered in its being proffered. No behind or beyond the things themselves. Therefore no understanding of their presencing in the mode of a comprehension of it. From within the lived relationship in which the presencing occurs must arise the sense of the occurrent, if at all. The givens of life are laid down. The foundations of the world are laid. Things are in place and stand firm. Beings stand forth on their own. They do not ask our leave. They invite mutuality. That measure of trust. If one agrees to live with them, rather than summarily to reduce them to the service of intention. In contrast with the subordination of attention to intention, to be intent in attending is to give heed, and therein the perceived may work evocatively, to cumulative effect. Together, the perceived and the perceiver enter into the working of the world: things in their meaning as responded to, taking shape. In wilderness the partnership of man and nature dawns on our surmise—prior to all undertaking and use to which nature may lend. The partnership seems to be a dialogic affair, in which we are charged with responsibility in the way things come to mean, having been placed in that way. Even as the things of the place command attention in the presencing of the world they are discovered to us from within the depth of responsiveness in confirmation of our mutuality with them. Reflexively we acknowledge ourselves in promissory relation with the given, even as the given warrants our full attention. A two-fold authorization, or sponsorship, of the pledging of ourselves in the relationship seems to obtain: At once, salient in attention there is the initiative of the reach of nature as given—primordially given; yet given at the same time in a receiving of the given reflexively sponsored from within a depth underlying our own ability to respond. Thus

nature jumps with the responsive soul on the strength of a power imparted in unison to both. Its grace is twofold and affords the foundation of respect, which is in turn at once respect for beings as given in attention and—reflexively—self-respect. In this fashion we are ordained in responsible relationship with beings given into our keeping in the very presencing of the world. The mystery of this, it would seem, can only deepen, and with its deepening enhance the sense the world might make. But one is charged to make good on that sense, and in the mainstream of human destiny within which its implications require to be worked out—within the full gamut of ambiguities, of perplexities, and of anguish that prevail in the received world. Primordial placement again and again requires to be worked out in the flux of our historical and communal placement, in our shared participation in the lived world. But what has been found meaningful asks to be shared in the lived world, in a bringing forth in consciousness, in a speaking it both sponsors and calls for, in a finding of embodiment. True solitude is as a wellspring of communal life; its return affords measure of what has become of communal life, perhaps most closely in the dissipation of one's own resolutions, the forgetting of one's whence and hitherto. For wilderness puts our standard of living to the test. What can stand to the mutuality of man and nature can be affirmed in the relations between men. What cannot stand to exposure as scurf. And without respect for nature man cannot stand, not even in the mutual regard of men. For it is in coming to know fellow creatures as such that respect for them can obtain as warranted and upheld. One's fellow men as well come to one in solitude, for how else should one come forth to greet them, knowingly, and by way of confirmation of that in which we share?

Neither the proportion of time one may spend there nor the numbers for whom it figures in direct encounter would seem indicative of the potential significance of wilderness for the quality of human life. If its instruction goes deep its implications are lifelong, and only with long discipline it seems does one commence to fathom the instruction received. That discipline may well be as intensely an affair of embodiment as it can become one of reflection. The sea and the land we walk are prolongations of the task. Again and again it is as if one first gets the feel of the matter simply in

movement and the coursing of breath and blood, the working of a frame of mind, a disposition sent in quest of forms appropriate to its explicitation and the realization of what is asking to be born.

Incipient gestures are fledged in fumbling speech, fragile winged and fleeting. But permission is granted to participate in the world, and nature invites it. To breathe, to walk, to sleep, to rise, to eat and to drink; to talk. In all these, of our daily doing, the style of nature may qualify our life—with some measure of primordial simplicity, so unobtrusively withal as to escape notice quite. That nature is with us more surely than we know, seems sure. Out of a very piety of the body some places might be kept sacred to us. They will bless the lands in which we dwell. But nothing can bless us apart from being acknowledged in its own right.

—*Henry Bugbee*