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THE WILD PLACES

Thomas Merton

Man is a creature of ambiguity. His salvation and his sanity depend on his ability to harmonize the deep conflicts in his thought, his emotions, his personal mythology. Honesty and authenticity do not depend on complete freedom from contradictions—such freedom is impossible—but on recognizing our self-contradictions and not masking them with bad faith. The conflicts in individuals are not entirely of their own making. On the contrary, many of them are imposed, ready made, by an ambivalent culture. This poses a very special problem, because he who accepts the ambiguities of his culture without protest and without criticism is rewarded with a sense of security and moral justification. A certain kind of unanimity satisfies our emotions and easily substitutes for truth. We are content to think like the others, and in order to protect our common psychic security we readily become blind to the contradictions—or even the lies—that we have all decided to accept as "plain truth."

One of the more familiar ambiguities in the American mind operates in our frontier mythology, which has grown in power in proportion as we have ceased to be a frontier or even a rural people. The pioneer, the frontier culture hero, is a product of the wilderness. But at the same time he is a destroyer of the wilderness. His success as pioneer depends on his ability to fight the wilderness and win. Victory consists in reducing the wilderness to something else, a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city—and finally an urban nation. A recent study, *Wilderness and the American Mind** by Roderick Nash is an important addition to an already significant body of literature about this subject. It traces the evolution of the wilderness idea from the first Puritan settlers via Thoreau and Muir to the modern ecologists and preservationists—and to their opponents in big business and politics. The really crucial issues of the present moment in ecology are barely touched. The author is concerned with the wilderness idea and with the "irony of pioneering, [which was] that success necessarily involved the destruction of the primitive setting that made the pioneer possible."

Mr. Nash does not develop the tragic implications of this inner contradiction, but he states them clearly enough for us to recognize their symptomatic importance. We all proclaim our love and respect for wild nature, and in the same breath we confess our firm attachment to values that inexora-

*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

bly demand the destruction of the last remnant of wildness. But when people like Rachel Carson try to suggest that our capacity to poison the nature around us is some indication of a sickness in ourselves, we dismiss them as fanatics.

One of the interesting things about this ambivalence toward nature is that it is rooted in our biblical, Judeo-Christian tradition. We might remark at once that it is neither genuinely biblical nor Jewish nor Christian. Mr. Nash is perhaps a little one-sided in his analysis here. But a certain kind of Christian culture has clearly resulted in a manichean hostility toward created nature. This, of course, we all know well enough. (The word "manichean" has become a cliche of reproof like "Communist" or "racist.") But the very ones who use the cliche most may be the ones who are still unknowingly tainted, on a deep level, with what they condemn. I say on a deep level, an unconscious level. For there is a certain popular, superficial, and one-sided "Christian worldliness" that is, in its hidden implications, profoundly destructive of nature and of "God's good creation" even while it claims to love and extol them.

The Puritans inherited a half-conscious bias against the realm of nature, and the Bible gave them plenty of texts that justified what Mr. Nash calls a "tradition of repugnance" for nature in the wild. In fact, they were able to regard the "hideous and desolate wilderness" of America as though it

were filled with conscious malevolence against them. They hated it as a person, an extension of the Evil One, the Enemy opposed to the spread of the Kingdom of God. And the wild Indian who dwelt in the wilderness was also associated with evil. The wilderness itself was the domain of moral wickedness. It favored spontaneity—therefore sin. The groves (like those condemned in the Bible) suggested wanton and licentious rites to imaginations haunted by repressed drives. To fight the wilderness was not only necessary for physical survival, it was above all a moral and Christian imperative. Victory over the wilderness was an ascetic triumph over the forces of impulse and of lawless appetite. How could one be content to leave any part of nature just as it was, since nature was "fallen" and "corrupt"? The elementary Christian duty of the Puritan settler was to combat, reduce, destroy, and transform the wilderness. This was "God's work." The Puritan, and after him the pioneer, had an opportunity to prove his worth—or indeed his salvation and election—by the single-minded zeal with which he carried on this obsessive crusade against wildness. His reward was prosperity, real estate, money, and ultimately the peaceful "order" of civil and urban life. In a seventeenth-century Puritan book with an intriguing title, Johnson's *Wonder Working Providence* ("The Great Society"?), we read that it was Jesus Himself, working through the Puritans, who "turned one of the most hideous, boundless and unknown wildernesses in

the world . . . to a well-ordered Commonwealth."

Max Weber and others have long since helped us recognize the influence of the Puritan ethos on the growth of capitalism. This is one more example. American capitalist culture is firmly rooted in a secularized Christian myth and mystique of struggle with nature. The basic article of faith in this mystique is that you prove your worth by overcoming and dominating the natural world. You justify your existence and you attain bliss (temporal, eternal, or both) by transforming nature into wealth. This is not only good but self-evident. Until transformed, nature is useless and absurd. Anyone who refuses to see this or acquiesces in it is some kind of half-wit—or, worse, a rebel, an anarchist, a prophet of apocalyptic disorders.

Let us immediately admit that superimposed on this is another mystique: a mystique of America the beautiful—America whose mountains are bigger and better than those of Switzerland; scenic America which is to be seen first, last, and always in preference to foreign parts; America which must be kept lovely, for Lady Bird. (So don't throw that beer can in the river, even though the water is polluted with all kinds of industrial waste. Business can mess up nature, but not you, Jack!) This mystique—this cult of nature—took shape in the nineteenth century.

The romantic love of wild American nature began in the cities and was an import from Europe. It had a profound effect on American civilization. Not

only did poets like William Cullen Bryant proclaim that the "groves were God's first temples," and not only did the nineteenth-century landscape painters make America realize that the woods and mountains were worth looking at; not only did Fenimore Cooper revive the ideal of the Noble Primitive who grew up in the "honesty of the woods" and was better than city people; but also it was now the villain in the story (perhaps a city slicker) who ravished the forest and callously misused the good things of nature.

The Transcendentalists, above all, reversed the Puritan prejudice against nature, and began to teach that in the forests and mountains God was nearer than in the cities. The silence of the woods whispered, to the man who listened, a message of sanity and healing. While the Puritans had assumed that man, being evil, would only revert to the most corrupt condition in the wilderness, the Transcendentalists held that since he was naturally good, and the cities corrupted his goodness, he needed contact with nature in order to recover his true self.

All this quickly turned into cliche. Nevertheless, the prophetic work of Henry Thoreau went deeper than a mere surface enthusiasm for scenery and fresh air. It is true that Walden was not too far from Concord and was hardly a wilderness even in those days. But Thoreau did build himself a house in the woods and did live at peace with the wild things

around the pond. He also proved what he set out to prove: that one could not only survive outside the perimeter of town or farm life but live better and happier there. On the other hand, having explored the Maine woods, he had enough experience of the real wilds to recognize that life there could be savage and dehumanizing. Hence he produced a philosophy of balance which, he thought, was right and necessary for America. He already saw that American capitalism was set on a course that would ultimately ravage all wild nature on the continent—perhaps even in the world—and he warned that some wilderness must be preserved. If it were not, man would destroy himself in destroying nature.

Thoreau realized that civilization was necessary and right, but he believed that an element of wildness was a necessary component in civilized life itself. The American still had a priceless advantage over the European. He could "combine the hardiness of the Indian with the intellectualness of civilized man." For that reason, Thoreau added, "I would not have every part of a man cultivated." To try to subject everything in man to rational and conscious control would be to warp, diminish, and barbarize him. So, too, the reduction of all nature to use for profit would end in the dehumanization of man. The passion and savagery that the Puritan had projected onto nature turned out to be within man himself. And when man turned the green

forests into asphalt jungles the price he paid was that they were precisely that: jungles. The savagery of urban man, untempered by wilderness discipline, was savagery for its own sake.

It has been consistently proved true that what early nature philosophers like Thoreau said, in terms that seemed merely poetic or sentimental, turned out to have realistic and practical implications. Soon a few people began to realize the bad effects of deforestation. As early as 1864 the crucial importance of the Adirondack woods for New York's water supply was recognized. About this time, too, the movement to set up National Parks was begun, though not always for the right reasons. The arguments for and against Yellowstone Park (1872) are instructive. First of all, the area was "no use for business anyway." And then the geysers, hot springs, and other "decorations" were helpful manifestations of scientific truth. Then, of course, the place would provide "a great breathing place for the national lungs." Against this, one representative advanced a typical argument: "I cannot understand the sentiment which favors the retention of a few buffaloes to the development of mining interests amounting to millions of dollars."

John Muir is the great name in the history of American wilderness preservation. Muir's Scotch Calvinist father was the kind of man who believed that only a sinner or a slacker would approach the wilderness without taking an axe to it. To leave

wild nature unattacked or unexploited was, in his eyes, not only foolish but morally reprehensible. It is curious, incidentally, that this attitude has been associated rather consistently with the American myth of virility. To be in the wilderness without fighting it, or at least without killing the animals in it, is regarded as a feminine trait. When a dam was about to be built in a canyon in Yosemite Park in 1913 to provide additional water for San Francisco, those who opposed it were called "short haired women and long haired men." Theodore Roosevelt, though a friend of John Muir, associated camping and hunting in the wilds with his virility cult, and this has remained a constant in the American mystique.

Muir traveled on foot through a thousand miles of wild country from Indiana to the Gulf of Mexico. The reason he gave for the journey was that "there is a love of wild nature in everybody, an ancient mother love, showing itself whether recognized or no, and however covered by cares and duties." This was not mere regression, but a recognition of the profoundly ambiguous imbalance in the American mind. Muir saw intuitively that the aggressive, compulsive attitude of the American male toward nature reflected not strength but insecurity and fear. The American cult of success implied a morbid fear of failure and resulted in an overkill mentality so costly not only to nature but to every real or imaginary competitor. A psychological

study of John Muir would reveal some very salutary information for modern America.

An investigation of the wilderness mystique and of the contrary mystique of exploitation and power reveals the tragic depth of the conflict that now exists in the American mind. The ideal of freedom and creativity that has been celebrated with such optimism and self-assurance runs the risk of being turned completely inside out if the natural ecological balance, on which it depends for its vitality, is destroyed. Take away the space, the freshness, the rich spontaneity of a wildly flourishing nature, and what will become of the creative pioneer mystique? A pioneer in a suburb is a sick man tormenting himself with projects of virile conquest. In a ghetto he is a policeman shooting every black man who gives him a dirty look. Obviously, the frontier is a thing of the past, the bison has vanished, and only by some miracle have a few Indians managed to survive. There are still some forests and wilderness areas, but we are firmly established as an urban culture. Nevertheless, the problem of ecology exists in a most acute form. The danger of fallout and atomic waste is only one of the more spectacular ones.

Much of the stupendous ecological damage that has been done in the last fifty years is completely irreversible. Industry and the military, especially in America, are firmly set on policies that make further damage inevitable. There are plenty of people who are aware of the need for "something to

be done"; but consider the enormous struggle that has to be waged, for instance in eastern Kentucky, to keep mining interests from completing the ruin of an area that is already a ghastly monument to human greed. When flash floods pull down the side of a mountain and drown a dozen wretched little towns in mud, everyone will agree that it's too bad the strip-miners peeled off the tops of the mountains with bulldozers. But when a choice has to be made, it is almost invariably made in the way that brings a quick return on somebody's investment—and a permanent disaster for everybody else.

Aldo Leopold, a follower of Muir and one of the great preservationists, understood that the erosion of American land was only part of a more drastic erosion of American freedom—of which it was a symptom. If "freedom" means purely and simply an uncontrolled power to make money in every possible way, regardless of consequences, then freedom becomes synonymous with ruthless, mindless exploitation. Aldo Leopold saw the connection and expressed it in the quiet language of ecology: "Is it not a bit beside the point to be so solicitous about preserving American institutions without giving so much as a thought to preserving the environment which produced them and which may now be one of the effective means of keeping them alive?"

Leopold brought into clear focus one of the most important moral discoveries of our time. This can be called the ecological conscience, which is cen-

tered in an awareness of man's true place as a dependent member of the biotic community. The tragedy that has been revealed in the ecological shambles created by business and war is a tragedy of ambivalence, aggression, and fear cloaked in virtuous ideas and justified by pseudo-Christian cliches. Or rather a tragedy of pseudo-creativity deeply impregnated with hatred, megalomania, and the need for domination. Its psychological root doubtless lies in the profound dehumanization and alienation of modern Western man, who has gradually come to mistake the artificial value of inert objects and abstractions (goods, money, property) for the power of life itself. Against this ethic Aldo Leopold laid down a basic principle of the ecological conscience: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

In the light of this principle, an examination of our social, economic, and political history in the last hundred years would be a moral nightmare, redeemed only by a few gestures of good will on the part of those who obscurely realize that there is a problem. Yet compared to the magnitude of the problem, their efforts are at best pitiful; and what is more, the same gestures are made with great earnestness by the very people who continue to ravage, destroy, and pollute the country. They honor the wilderness myth while they proceed to destroy nature.

Can Aldo Leopold's ecological conscience become effective in America today? The ecological conscience is also essentially a peace-making conscience. A country that seems to be more and more oriented to permanent hot or cold war making does not give much promise of developing either one. But perhaps the very character of the war in Vietnam—with crop poisoning, the defoliation of forest trees, the incineration of villages and their inhabitants with napalm—presents a stark enough example to remind us of this most urgent moral need.

Meanwhile some of us are wearing the little yellow and red button "Celebrate Life!" and bearing witness as best we can to these tidings.

The following is quoted from "Ecology Wars?" by Donald Snow. Nuclear Times, Spring 1990, p. 43:

> As data on climate change, declining agricultural productivity, deforestation, and the ubiquitous contamination of fresh air and water continue to emerge, the old shibboleths of what constitutes national security lose meaning. Some defense analysts now argue that the deterioration of the natural environment must be numbered among the gravest security threats facing all nations, for it holds the potential to erode the biological foundations of human life, thus threatening economic stability, homelands, and peace across much of the planet.

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We won't err by betting on conservation

David Orr

FOX — Pascal was no fool. Weighing his choices between atheism and belief in God, he concluded that if he chose not to believe and it turned out that God did exist, he'd have hell to pay. On the other hand if God did not exist and he had lived a life of faith he would have sacrificed only a few fleeting pleasures. His argument for faith, then, rested on the sturdy foundation of prudence aimed to minimize risk. There are worse reasons for faith.

George Bush now confronts a similar choice. On one side a large number of scientists are telling him that the planet is warming rapidly. If we continue to spew out heat trapping gasses like CO2, methane, and chlorofluorocarbons (CFC's), they say, we will warm the planet intolerably within the next 20-50 years. The consequences of dereliction and procrastination may include killer heat waves and drought, rising sea levels, massive costs of diking coasts, superstorms, vast and probably unpredictable changes in forests and biota, considerable economic dislocation and increased disease.

On the other side, a small group of advisers are telling him that too many unknowns exist to make any choice yet, and all that is needed is more research.

If Bush does not act soon and if subsequent decades prove the first group correct, the devil will collect. If they are wrong and we have acted to minimize emission of heat trapping gasses and have taken measures like planting trees to keep carbon out of the atmosphere, we will pay the costs for surplus virtue, that is of being better than we had to be at the minimum.

Like Pascal's choice between dull piety with eternal bliss versus riotous good fun plus hell, the choice before Bush at first appears to be a dilemma: a stagnant economy but longevity versus the continuation of the present growth economy at the risk of future catastrophe.

On closer examination, however, what appears to be a dilemma may be no dilemma at all. All things considered, a life of dissolution may not be all that much fun and a life of creative faith may not be all that dull. As Pascal put it, "If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing." More pertinent for George Bush, however, is the fact that an economy that spews out carbon among other things is not likely to be very competitive, while one that minimizes emission of heat trapping gasses may not be a stagnant economy at all. If he needs any evidence he would do well to consider the Japanese economy which is twice as energy efficient as our own and as a result has an average 5-8 percent cost advantage over U.S. companies.

The steps President Bush must take to make the U.S. economy competitive, to restore a decent trade balance and to retire the debt, as well as to minimize the risk of global warming, include a strong emphasis on energy efficiency. In this case long-term virtue and short-term self-interest coincide.

As a case in point, the 13-watt light bulb over my desk replaced a 75-watt bulb. Over its lifetime the 62-watt difference will keep 300 pounds of coal in the ground that otherwise would have been burned to generate electricity. My desk is as well lit as before. I will save $30-40 on electric bills over the lifetime of the bulb. And not the least I will have reduced CO2 emissions. In this case it makes little difference whether I acted out of ethical or economic reasons. Both lead to the same choice.

Nor does it necessarily make much difference whether George Bush chooses energy efficiency because it is the ecologically prudent thing to do, or because it is essential if we are to compete in world markets. But there is a hell to pay for indecision and vacillation.

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Commonweal

J. Bryan Hehir

12 January 1990

INTERDEPENDENCE FOR ALL

A DECADE TO REMAKE THE WORLD

It is clear that we face an enormous but positive challenge in the 1990s. The coming decade will be transitional not only in the sense that it takes us into the next century, but in the deeper sense that fundamental adjustments must be made in the international order. The foreign policy questions facing the United States, conceptually and operationally, will be as profound and as potentially fruitful as in any period since the end of World War II.

On this point there is little dissent. The daily news from Berlin, Budapest, and Bratislava convince even the most skeptical that the structure and substance of the cold war are rapidly being transformed. This is the conclusion most commonly drawn from the Malta summit. There is room for much debate, however, about the nature, complexity, and range of choices facing the West in the decade ahead. Reshaping an international order which has been in place for four decades is not a task with clear lines of demarcation. The riveting spectacle of thousands of East Germans flowing into West Berlin has understandably focused Western attention on "the German question," "the European house," and the changing shape of the Soviet Union. But events at the end of 1989 point toward the need for a broader framework for assessing the political and moral problems of the coming decade of transition in world affairs.

While Eastern Europe is peacefully passing through revolution, other regions are mired in mortal conflict. The very week that Lech Walesa was recounting to rapt American audiences how the transition from communism to pluralism was being accomplished without breaking a windowpane, news came that six Jesuits had been brutally massacred in San Salvador. Within a week the newly elected president of Lebanon, Rene Moawad, was assassinated in Beirut. El Salvador and Lebanon forcefully reminded the world that peaceful change is not the inevitable pattern of world politics. For some places the future promises neither peace nor change.

It is this conjunction of stunning peaceful possibilities in the traditional theater of the cold war and starkly murderous realities in the micropolitics of national and regional conflict that poses a basic political-moral challenge for the coming decade of transition. Unless there is a dramatic and disastrous change of course in East-West politics, it is reasonable to predict a decade which will be intellectually, politically, and economically complicated but also a time of hope, expectation, and constructive cooperation. Such cooperation would be a political and moral good of a high order and should be pursued and encouraged by all parties. A decisive move away from cold-war politics cannot but enhance the quality of international life. But the conditions of local, national, and regional politics which have produced the Lebanese and Central American conflicts will not yield quickly even to the most optimistic developments in superpower and/or European relations. At Malta it was clear that Central America was the one divisive issue of the summit.

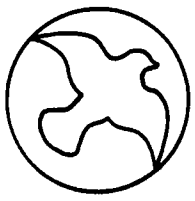
How should this relationship of the new possibilities at the macrolevel of East-West relations and continuing chaos and conflict at the microlevel of intrastate and regional conflicts be conceived? First, the good news: throughout the cold war superpower competition has usually intensified and complicated local conflicts. The engagement of one or both powers in third-world countries has escalated the military capacities of local actors, engaged the prestige of the big powers, and made diplomatic resolution of issues more difficult. The dangerous and dreary pattern has reached from Vietnam to Afghanistan to Central America and the Horn of Africa. A new chapter in East-West relations at least holds out the possibility that in the future the superpowers can be restrained from aggravating local conflicts.

Second, a troubling possibility: the potential for change in the superpower relationship, in the European theater, and in the German question is so broad and historically significant that these issues may simply absorb the interest, energy, and resources of international politics in the coming decade. The prospect envisioned here is a split-level international order: planned and controlled change in East-West relations and chaos and conflict in vast sectors of the Southern hemisphere. If the major powers—principally but not exclusively the superpowers—no longer see competitive advantage in the developing countries, the troubling possibility is that they will simply disengage: isolate the poverty, the debt, the violent struggles of the third world and insulate "northern politics" (of East or West) from "southern connections." It is true that disengagement is better for the South than a continued pattern of superpower intervention and manipulation, but the question which needs to be pressed is whether these alternatives are the only options for the future.

In response to this question, a proposal: the change in East-West relations requires nothing less than refashioniong the international system, politically, economically, and strategically. Anything short of this goal will fail to grasp the potential of the moment. But the conception of a new order will have to include specific attention focused on the immediate needs and the future development of "the Lebanons and El Salvadors" of the world. To shape a system that simply ignores or isolates these problems is both morally and politically unacceptable.

There is no expectation here that the reshaping of the international system will begin with local or regional conflicts. The promise of the future works the other way: better relations at the top of the international system open the way for a changed relationship to other levels of the system. To argue against big-power disengagement from smaller nations is to call for a quite different style of engagement than we have known in the last forty years. The Western powers clearly have more resources to offer the South than do the Soviets. But a different relationship to the Soviets calls for redefining Western concepts of interest and responsibility in the developing world.

A new pattern of order which combines nonintervention with engagement is needed. Such a conception can be described in terms of its goals but not yet in terms of its means. It will require diplomatic interest by the big powers of the East and West but not military forces. It will require Western plans to relieve the debt of developing countries, but not to forsake future lending for development. The new order should not be a world in which the East and West are so fixated on their possibilities for engagement with each other that they define the future only in terms of those legitimate but limited interests. The shared conception of interdependence that lies at the root of changing East-West relations needs to be extended to the Lebanons and El Salvadors of the international system. Human life, human dignity, and human rights must flourish there also. □



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