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## Wilderness on the Page

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JOHN STEFFLER

## *Wilderness on the Page*

I find myself torn between two ways to approach the relationship between wilderness and the page. These different ways have to do with what we mean by wilderness: how the idea of wilderness is framed. The page, as a forum for communication, in whatever format we think of it—slate, paper, or electronic screen—oddly enough seems to be the stable element in the inquiry. But I have not been able to choose between thinking of wilderness on the one hand in primarily ecological terms as wild natural environment and on the other hand in theoretical terms as a more open concept that might be applied to various areas of our experience. Both approaches seem equally fruitful and each leads to a fascinating question or problem that I'm unable to answer. In the process of wrestling with those questions, however, I find that I arrive at ideas that appear to unite the two approaches or at least lead to an area of common ground.

So, I'm going to follow both approaches, one after the other, and see where they take me.

First, wilderness as wild natural environment: those parts of the planet still significantly unaltered by humans, where the water and land still support many of the species of creatures that have lived there for thousands of years. There is very little of this kind of wilderness left in the farmed and heavily settled areas of Canada, but some does survive in the Canadian Shield and throughout the country's northern boreal forests and Arctic. With its large territory and small human population, Canada retains more wilderness and semi-wilderness than many countries in which a higher proportion of territorial land and water is directly impacted by industrial and urban development.

But having just made this claim about the Canadian landscape, I have to admit that it's difficult to define or find widespread agreement about what physical wilderness is. This is partly because it's not easy to differentiate wild environments from altered ones. Most of what we think of as wilderness has at some time been influenced by human occupation or use. There were once Mayan cities in the jungles of the Yucatan. Controlled burns kept many eastern North American forests open for wildlife and for hunting wildlife. Are the areas in the Middle East and North Africa that were deforested in ancient times now natural desert wilderness or manmade wastelands? In defining wilderness, however, the issue is not whether nature is free from all human taint; it's the degree of biodiversity typical of an environment down through time that survives at present. There has always been more biodiversity in a tropical rainforest than in Arctic tundra; the question in relation to wilderness is how much of a region's *traditional* biodiversity has been destroyed by pollution or other human influences. The urban-

oriented New Conservationists who regard derelict industrial sites as wilderness when a few birds and wild plants begin to reoccupy them risk accommodating environmental destruction and losing sight of the ecological disaster we are facing.

In his book *Half-Earth*, the American biologist Edward O. Wilson argues that the only way to avoid environmental collapse and a catastrophic loss of biodiversity is to set aside roughly half the Earth as unimpaired wilderness.

Wilson is obviously not one of the New Conservationists who see the Anthropocene—the epoch of the human—as a natural outcome of humanity’s evolutionary success and accept it as a new geological epoch in which wilderness will cease to exist and humanity will henceforth treat the whole Earth as its farm, exterminating nuisance species and engineering new life forms to suit human needs (71-79). He instead calls the Anthropocene the Sixth Extinction, likening the epoch of the human to the effect of the Chicxulub asteroid that struck near the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula sixty-five million years ago, ending the age of the dinosaurs and marking the boundary between the Mesozoic and Cenozoic Eras. Wilson explains that the Earth has experienced five catastrophic kill-offs at roughly one-hundred-million-year intervals, the Chicxulub asteroid being the most recent, and that each time it has taken life roughly ten million years to recover (8-9).

The term “Anthropocene,” introduced by Eugene F. Stoermer and popularized by Paul Crutzen, is commonly thought of as a new geological epoch now beginning to replace the Holocene. Wilson uses the term in this sense (9). Although it seems unlikely that Western industrial culture, following its current trajectory, can survive long enough to constitute an epoch similar in length to previous ones, and that the Anthropocene is more likely to prove to be a catastrophic boundary event rather than an epoch, I’ll use the term in the way Wilson and others commonly do while I think about these issues.

Wilson explains that because life on Earth exists in ecosystems, we can’t hope to save a few chosen species in isolation. Removing or extirpating single species can cause a cascade effect of further exterminations and the collapse of a whole ecosystem. Likewise with habitat loss: “when, for example, 90 percent of the area [of a habitat] is removed, the number [of species] that can persist sustainably will descend to about one half,” he writes. “If 10 percent of the remaining natural habitat were then also removed,” he continues, “. . . most or all of the surviving resident species would disappear” (186). And the rate at which well-known species are now becoming extinct, already close to one thousand times the normal rate from pre-human times, is accelerating exponentially. He tells us that “within the century an exponentially rising extinction rate might easily wipe out most of the species still surviving at the present time” (185).

He emphasizes that human survival is also at risk in a cascade of extinctions. “The ongoing mass extinction of species, and with it the extinction of genes and ecosystems, ranks with pandemics, world wars, and climate change as among the deadliest threats that humanity has imposed on itself” (187). The measure that he proposes to meet this crisis is a paradoxical human intervention: to *withdraw* from half the planet’s surface and *leave it alone*.

Wilson convinces me that, as Thoreau wrote back in 1862, “Wildness is the preservation of the world” (644). That was easy. Like many people, I’ve long believed that the best approach to the environmental crisis is to scale back industrial development and set aside more and much larger ecological reserves of land and water.

And yet Wilson’s Half-Earth idea has its environmentalist critics. It’s pointed out that if half the Earth continues to be heavily industrialized, the biodiversity in the “wilderness” half will still be at risk. This is because the Earth’s biosphere is a borderless mobile continuum; its weather systems and ocean currents are global in scale. For example, plastic microbeads in urban effluent contaminate marine creatures everywhere in the oceans and many pollutants are concentrated in the Arctic, far from their source in industrial centres. And yet, is this a good reason to not attempt to establish wilderness reserves? It’s been shown that marine reserves do allow a range of creatures to survive and partly repopulate surrounding areas. The openness of the biosphere can work in both ways.

And, as it becomes clear that wilderness sanctuaries are threatened by agents or conditions arriving from outside their borders, additional global solutions will have to be enacted to ensure their protection. The establishment of wilderness reserves would be a foundation upon which to build.

But what interests me about Wilson’s Half-Earth proposal is not its practicality but its bold graphic simplicity and its theoretical challenge. It treats a complex tangle of cultural, economic, political, and ecological problems in concrete traditional terms as an issue of geographical territory. The concept is easy to grasp but at the same time so radical, so disruptive, that it fills the mind with wild surmise. How *could* we carry out such an enterprise? What changes would we have to make in our way of thinking to make such a thing possible? This is what I take from Wilson to use as a through-line in my thinking here.

Some of the ideas with which Wilson ends his book, however, do seem to me far from convincing. Wanting, apparently, to leave us with some hope for the future, he closes with a disturbing testament to his faith in the progress of science. He imagines that a massive Google-Earth-style monitoring of the planet is going to allow people to observe every corner of wilderness on their personal computers—watch baby polar bears and rhinos at all hours—without needing to physically intrude. (He doesn’t consider how this system will be put in place and maintained.) He cheerfully predicts the artificial manufacture of human beings and the development of computers to the point of “whole brain emulation”—not just artificial intelligence but artificial consciousness. It’s like a 1950s *Popular Mechanics* fantasy. Is he trying to reassure his readers that he’s not a lefty primitivist kook, that he’s not unpatriotic, that he’s not criticizing the American way of life? He quotes Richard Feynman’s science motto: “What I cannot create, I do not understand” (195). Perhaps this is meant to terrify us, give us a brilliant enactment of what’s deeply wrong with our culture and why we’ve ended up in this mess. But I doubt it.

While the idea of leaving half the Earth as wilderness might seem like a simple solution—it seems to say: do nothing; let nature take care of itself—it’s probably one of the hardest, least

likely things for humans in the developed and developing world to accomplish. This is not just because of the huge economic and legislative problems that would have to be solved; it's because it would require a basic change in the way humans see themselves and their relationship to the natural world. It goes against at least two or three thousand years of Western tradition, against an accelerating and increasingly global cultural momentum obsessed with technological innovation, affluence, consumption, and the mastery of nature and its resources. Nearly all humans are now caught in this momentum.

Many thousands of years ago, as we all know, our human ancestors began to distinguish themselves from other creatures by developing a distinctive technological culture, vastly different from what any other creatures possess. Language was probably the foundational technology—the making of a shared system of spoken symbols, the making of grammar—out of which all our strategies, legends, doctrines, inventions, and shared concepts have grown. Even so, throughout the long Palaeolithic period, despite their sophisticated language and culture, humans shared the natural hunting and gathering economy of their fellow creatures; they were still broadly dependent on what nature provided and they altered their environment on only a minor, local scale.

The great change occurred, of course, in the Neolithic period, when we began domesticating plants and animals, living in permanent settlements, and thinking of the natural world more and more as material to investigate and reconfigure.

Belief systems, narratives of the world's workings, change more slowly than our technologies and practices. The myths of the Palaeolithic hunting world—which express a reverence for nature as *Magna Mater* (the Great Mother) and a belief in shared bonds of kinship between humans and totemic creatures—those myths seem to have persisted into the Neolithic period and beyond, into the bronze and iron ages. We see this in Europe's oldest myths. The Egyptians, with their technologically sophisticated civilization, worshipped a variety of animal and animal-human gods. The Bronze Age Greeks, fully aware of their human uniqueness, had inherited a pantheon of gods—though by then humanized in form—still animist in spirit, still associated with natural forces and sacred places.

It was only with the spread of Judeo-Christian monotheism that most traces of the ancient Palaeolithic world view disappeared in the West and that nature, instead of being sacred and intricately animate, came to be seen as a backdrop, a theatre for the all-important solo human performance, a fallen realm to be transcended or, in Modern terms—since the Renaissance in Europe—as an abstract system of mechanical laws and a stockpile of resources to be redesigned to meet human needs.

René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton are examples of thinkers and scientists who, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were clearly formulating this view of nature as matter-in-motion and pursuing its logical implications. Bacon proposed that through science and industry, humans could redeem unimproved nature by civilizing it and reconstructing a heaven on Earth.

We are now all heirs of this scientific worldview. It shapes institutions, perceptions, and values in nearly all economically powerful cultures on the planet. It's hard to imagine discarding or curbing it. Up to a point, science seems to have achieved what Bacon predicted, and there's still hope that it can do more. The majority of those lucky enough to live in the First World are enjoying unprecedented luxury and health, and elsewhere, whatever their quality of life, more people than ever inhabit the planet. For now. The problem with scientific-industrial culture, paradoxically, is its short-term success. Wilson describes the Anthropocene as marrying "swift technological progress with the worst of human nature" (9). Even now, nations are vying for control of resources in the South China Sea and in the increasingly ice-free Arctic. We have become too powerful without becoming wise.

And we are learning only now, after all our inventions, that we are as dependent on wilderness as our Palaeolithic ancestors were and, like them, will survive only by sharing the Earth equally with our fellow creatures. How can we curb our desire for power and let wilderness be?

My own response is to turn to the page—the page as a global expression of the human mind. The page offers a growing body of information and thinking on the natural environment and our relationship with it—starting, perhaps, with scientists and nature writers such as Humboldt and running through Darwin, Thoreau, Leopold, Carson, Naess, LaChapelle, Wilson, Merchant, and Oelschlaeger. What is even more interesting to me is that the page also offers a means for exploring customs and beliefs from before and outside our modern industrial culture, ones that might suggest ways to deepen or alter our understanding of ourselves and the natural world. I'm thinking here of recent investigations of the Palaeolithic period through its art and artefacts and its legacy in ancient mythology. I'm thinking of studies and accounts of shamanism; of exploring the customs and beliefs of people who have continued to live as hunter-gatherers up to or close to the present day; of studying the great Eastern cultural traditions of Buddhism and Taoism. Taoism especially, it seems, has always regarded divinity as residing in nature itself rather than in a supernatural realm and has stressed the value of harmonizing with the processes of nature rather than striving to dominate and redesign them.

In a similar vein, over two hundred years ago Wordsworth wrote this sonnet:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not. —Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn. (206)

It's interesting how contemporary the thought here is and how early in the industrial era in England there was this sense of cultural and spiritual damage. In his poem, Wordsworth regrets how divorced from nature and robbed of meaning the modern industrial life of "getting and spending" is and wishes he'd been raised on long-gone pagan beliefs—"suckled in a creed outworn"—so that, gazing forlornly over the sea, he might actually *witness* Proteus rising from the moonlit waves. This implies that creed—tradition, belief—governs our perception of reality. If pagan beliefs caused people to literally see Proteus, scientific materialism has surely cancelled that perceptual and cognitive ability and instead now causes us to see and know only matter in motion. Could a new form of paganism change our perception of the natural world?

In my exploration of the pre-modern and extra-modern page, I'm searching for creeds that might alter my way of seeing wilderness, myself, and humanity.

But doesn't this open the door to superstition and a culture of wilful ignorance and religious fundamentalism? We tend to think of scientific rationalism in terms of the Enlightenment model, which embodies the values of free inquiry and clear proofs that support liberal democracy and human rights. But scientific rationalism, or a form of it, has led to the environmental crisis. And it's worth recalling that totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union exalted science and technology in their quest for power. Science does not necessarily equal freedom. I'm not sure that fake druids dancing around Stonehenge pose more of a threat to our future than geneticists working to clone human beings.

But this misses the point. What I have in mind is not welcoming a new Dark Age, but modifying our idea of knowledge, especially concerning how we approach mystery. The standard scientific view of mystery is as a deficiency in our knowledge we are compelled to correct, a puzzle or

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problem that cries out to be solved, a challenge to be met and defeated or, as in a mystery novel, something like a crime that needs to be exposed and explained to preserve our pride and our sense of justice and a rational world order. Popular science writing is full of the word "mystery." The "mystery" of the deep ocean vents is "solved" by way

of video from a robotic submarine. The vents are caused by heated water and gases rising from volcanic openings. But their mystery remains as intact, as untouched, as ever—as mysterious and real as the call of the blue jay I hear as I write this.

A lot of science amounts to little more than explaining things in terms of proximate causes and constituent parts. Matter consists of elements that consist of molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, neutrinos, prions, quarks, dark matter, in ever smaller and more abstract detail: all governed by causal laws. But the fact that this infinity of parts and causes exists at all is as much

a mystery as ever. We still need some kind of relationship with it. We live in it, we're part of it. And the idea of God as final cause cannot put a lid on the mystery because God is subject to the same "why?" and "how?" and "where does it come from?" that preschool children bombard their parents with and only give up when they've learned to accept the dull standard explanations for things.

Rather than deny mystery in our experience of the world, rather than push it away as a yet-to-be-illuminated dark zone or failure of knowledge, can we regard some of the unknown, unpredictable features of the world—and of our personal lives—as entities in themselves, as sources of energy, powerful phenomena with which we have a relationship? With a slight shift in outlook, it should be possible to approach mystery with respectful attention and inquire into it not to break it down and dispel it but to draw meaning and self-understanding from it. We hardly have language to speak of rethinking the nonhuman world in this way. I could say, "re-enchant the world." I could say, "re-sacralize nature." But these words risk sounding superficial or righteous.

An area in which we do accept mystery is in our attitude to our fellow humans. Our culture and language incline us—most of us—unthinkingly, to accord humans personhood, and a key feature of personhood is the right to autonomy, privacy, and mystery. In fact, we welcome and even require an element of mystery in our friends and relatives as a source of delight, a source of memorable incidents and stories. We want our friends to be surprising, up to a point: if they were fully predictable and bound by causal laws, like Newton's clockwork universe, they would be boring, robotic, inhuman.

We still generally regard humans as in some sense sacred: at least it seems to be a universally accepted ideal to do so. It is a normal ethical standard for us to respect people's homes, families, livelihoods, and property. However hypocritical we might be in exploiting people far from our home communities, our laws generally affirm the sanctity of human rights. We accept that we are not entitled to confine, dominate, or harm people or force them to divulge their thoughts or disclose the mysteries of their personal lives—except, of course, if (according to the standards of the dominant culture) people are judged to be criminals or enemies in time of war. Then, like the rest of the natural world, according to the practices of Western culture, they are stripped of personhood and its associated rights.

To imagine extending a degree of personhood to creatures, places, and features in the natural world, to imagine respecting their mystery and otherness, their living character, and feeling a degree of kinship with them is, I think, to have a glimpse of precisely what is involved in the animist world view. Some form of animism—as in pagan pantheism and totemism—was common everywhere prior to the monotheistic-scientific-industrial eras and thus can suggest ways to transform our idea of wilderness and its value to us. Honouring the otherness and mystery of the natural world is no more fraught with ignorance and superstition than honouring the otherness and mystery of our fellow humans. A new appreciation for nature's sacred rights seems to be needed, since scientific data alone are not persuading us to curb our exploitation of the Earth.

If, as Wilson urges us, we could be wise enough to set aside half the Earth as a sacred wilderness, the planet would again seem infinite and there would be little appeal in the idea of colonizing Mars, as some people foolishly dream of doing. (If Western industrial culture has proved to be unsustainable on Earth, where conditions for human life are ideal, how could it hope to establish itself successfully on Mars, where conditions are so hostile?) In the imagination, the presence of unknown territory is the spatial equivalent of unspent time—a future before us, which, to be the future, *must* be unknown. What is fully known has already arrived, and so the future needs to be free and mysterious, a wilderness beyond our knowing and control. To trust that the Earth holds a treasure of undomesticated wilderness is to feel that we have before us an endless store of life.

Or have we been so deeply shaped by technological culture that it's now impossible for us to rethink our relationship with nature, impossible to go so far as to extend personhood and rights to creatures and areas in the natural world and blur the boundary between human and nonhuman? There's no way to predict an answer to this question, but perhaps a good way to think about it is to step back and start the inquiry over again, this time taking a more theoretical approach by beginning with definitions of culture and nature.

There are many ways to define these concepts, but a simple useful one is to say that culture is what we've made and endeavour to control, or believe we should control, and nature is what we haven't made and ultimately can't control. Symphonies, cell phones, cities, and money are clearly our creation; most of the things that occupy us are cultural things: careers, news, history, politics, laws. We can take them apart and put them together again. Obviously, we haven't made the universe with its ongoing motions and changes, let alone the Earth and its creatures.

While it's clear that the making of things and the ability to subsequently control them and their effects do not always coincide, I think it's important to consider the issues of human creation and human control in conjunction when exploring the relationship between culture and nature. This is because so often the motive and intended purpose for a technological creation or an administrative initiative is the control of some aspect of nature. The fact that these creations often fail to exercise their intended control and sometimes produce new uncontrolled problems is all the more reason to link the two issues. This is especially obvious in the areas of healthcare and agriculture. Scientific efforts to control illness, although broadly successful, have

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sometimes led to the creation of things like Thalidomide that have caused unintended harm. The use of agricultural herbicides and pesticides sometimes has the effect of damaging ecosystems upon which agriculture depends. There is now the danger that we will create some catastrophic chain reaction—involving nuclear or biological weapons or the acidifying oceans or the

warming atmosphere—that we will not be able to check. This is all the more reason to pay attention to the interface between our inventions and the natural world. A hallmark of Western culture is a belief in the human ability to devise ways to shape the conditions of our lives: we

continually *try* to control things. But wilderness not only surrounds our culture; it invades it. Where we discover the things we've made are out of control or breaking down is a place where wilderness begins.

Notice that our bodies and our minds, at least our unconscious minds, are also not of our own making. In spite of medicine, nutrition, training, and cosmetics, we cannot control the basic operation and trajectory of our bodies. We are born, grow up, age, and die much like other mammals. Our organs and physical systems—heart beat, digestion, hormones—function on their own, without our knowledge or control. In spite of the ways we have been shaped by culture, by language for example, by education and inherited social customs, our unconscious minds are still at least partly wild. Our creativity, moods, desires, and decisions are all partly beyond our control. We never know what if any dreams will come to us in sleep. Stress and shock can change us unpredictably. In many ways, we are still mysteries to ourselves.

If we are creatures partly domesticated by ourselves, partly still wild inside, can we ask the same questions of our inner ecology that we ask of the environment? Is our humanity at risk of too much exploitation, too much technological control?

The gods that people believe in or accept in their myths are often an indication of how they see themselves or conceive of human identity. People whose gods are animals or part-human-part-animal probably do not see themselves as essentially or entirely distinct from other creatures. In the West, for the last two or three thousand years, the supreme gods have been given human form. In Judeo-Christianity, the doctrine has been that God created man in His likeness, but it's clearly the other way around: man has deified his own self-image, especially those powers he most longs to attain—omnipotence, omniscience, immortality, infinite inventiveness, and the ability to mete out judgement and devastating punishment from afar. Since the Renaissance, we've set out to attain these abilities in real practical terms through technology and industry.

The role of the church in Western culture has been complex and ambiguous. It has promoted human exceptionalism and pride but also counselled humility and an acceptance of natural limits. In any case, the church has now largely been swept aside by triumphant scientific humanism.

The merging of humans with their technologies is becoming so intricate and intimate that it's hard to say what will be left of the natural human or if we will become really our own creation, indistinguishable from machines. Science fiction and philosophy have been exploring this issue for a few generations. Genetic engineering, cloning, the merging of the body and mind with devices designed to extend life and to enhance perception, knowledge, and communication suggest that, as with the biosphere, before long we will be self-reflective products of human design and artifice with little direct connection to wilderness either inside or out.

We made ourselves human by rebelling against nature—by taking more for ourselves than nature offers our fellow creatures—but now it seems we can retain our humanity only by accepting nature—accepting limits to what we make of ourselves. Perhaps the essence of the

human was always in the tension between our limitless longing and our mortality, in our need to come to terms with this mystery. Perhaps the *difficult, necessary* practice of reconciling our desires and imaginations with the natural limiting conditions of our lives gives us a dignity and a kind of majesty that our celebrated gods with their easy immortality can never match.

Our culture is a shared thing, inherited, supported by many people. We live in it as a kind of aggregate, meta-body. What would this body look like if it had physical form? My first thought was that it would look something like Humpty Dumpty. We occupy a thin cultural shell with wilderness as the space around us and inside us. But the outer and inner wildernesses are continuous and flow into each other; so we're more like a sleeve, open at the ends: I picture a translucent, luminous sleeve-shaped jellyfish in a vast dark ocean. A more useful way of picturing culture is as a house containing a labyrinth of inner rooms and with exterior walls of varying thickness with windows and doors giving views and access to the outside. For some, this house is a fortress, even a prison; for others, more open to the forces we don't control, it's a light pavilion or tent.

As cultural beings, then, having more correspondence with wilderness requires a thinning of our cultural walls, opening windows and doors, accepting nature as inherent in our bodies and inner selves as well as being part of—likely the major part of—our extended community.

So, looking back over the path of these thoughts: approaching wilderness as environment led to the questions:

*"How can we leave wilderness alone?"*

*"How can we accord creatures and areas of the natural world the rights and respect associated with personhood?"*

*"How can we be familiar with mystery without needing to conquer or deny it?"*

And having approached wilderness as concept, in opposition to culture, we come to similar questions:

*"How can we accept nature as a defining feature of our selves—accept mortality and our limited powers as essentially human, precious human?"*

*"How can we make our culture more porous, more inclusive of nature?"*

*"How can we free ourselves from the need to either deny or try to 'solve' and dominate what we don't control?"*

Although I see no clear, immediate answer to any of these, my impulse is to continue to explore them through language and the page. The page as a structural component in culture's house, of course, reflects the whole range of human interests and perspectives. Some pages thicken culture's walls and some offer windows or turn to open doorways into otherness. The page can open culture's walls in many ways. Writing on nature is an obvious start. And astronomy, religion, philosophy, anthropology, palaeontology, geology, and biology, along with other branches of science, explore the reaches of time and space and the suppositions inherent in

human inventions. Much art and literature also looks outward or leads us to see ourselves in relation to forces greater than ourselves.

The opening in culture's house that draws me the most is poetry. It's true that some poetry—political satire, occasional verse, panegyrics, nation-building heroic hymns—thickens culture's walls and ricochets inward. But I think the deep inclination in poetry is to *confront* wilderness in one form or another.

This is so partly because poetry—as I think of it—is properly the most honest speech possible. This is one of the things we look for in poetry: the sense of barriers between people being broken down, the heart opened, truth told, trusting that what we each hold most deeply we all share. And radical truthfulness always leads to the borderland between self and otherness, where we face our limits, our fears, failures, compulsions, loves, and the mystery of the shape our lives have taken.

*The deep inclination in poetry is to confront wilderness in one form or another.*

I sometimes think of poetry as being not so much a type of speech or a certain arrangement of words on a page, but as a state of awareness that can be induced by language and in which we feel engaged and perhaps reconciled with what is natural to the world and larger than the self. Other arts and practices also can bring us to poetry in this sense.

In the act of naming phenomena and fitting them into the template of grammar, all writing plants the human flag on nature, categorizes and evaluates it, and in the human mind domesticates it, annexes it into the empire of culture. But poetry attempts to loosen this way of knowing the world. It's as though instead of killing and stuffing an animal and bringing it back to decorate a hall, poetry attempts—or pretends—to go out into the field to be amongst the animals and know them *in* the wild. Questioning discrete facts, poetry explores ambiguities, layered meanings, hints, uncertainties, paradoxes, mixtures, and transitions. It revives a sense of the freshness and newness of experience just *before* we have categorized it and filed it away.

A key poetic device that thins our culture's conceptual walls and opens us to new experience is metaphor. Metaphor involves making new verbal connections that could be thought of as corresponding to new synaptic circuits in the brain, new ways of understanding relationships in the world and in ourselves. It involves a "carrying across," a "transfer" as the original Greek μεταφέρω (*metaphero*) implies: a transfer as though across a bridge from the familiar *here* or *inside* to the newly discovered *beyond*. What I find equally interesting is a kind of balked or refracted (or perplexed) metaphor that occurs in paradox and contradiction where the transfer or carrying across of understanding begins but is then suspended as though halfway over a gulf at the edge of a broken bridge. This suspension of transfer might occur in a word-package such as an oxymoron, but is often produced when the train of thought or sequence of perceptions in a poem circles around and produces an implicit contradiction or paradox. The effect of this is to reveal the limits of logic and language themselves in apprehending reality.

The poetry of John Donne and George Herbert—for example, poems such as Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14” and Herbert’s “The Collar”—abound in paradox and perplexed metaphors.

What poetry tends to aim for is not so much a dualistic knowledge of facts—the possessor satisfied in the possession of useful information—as the unified sense of being *in* an experience, involved in *happening*. It could be said that poetry treats *being as knowledge*. This is often explained as an active passivity or potent acceptance or an oceanic sense of oneness with the world. This tendency in poetry, by definition, leads outside culture because it involves a capitulation to, a going over to what we haven’t made and can’t control.

As Don McKay suggests in his poem “Sometimes a Voice (1),” there seems to be a nostalgia in words themselves, and in our voices, for their pre-linguistic roots—the way a domesticated animal might long to be wild again or a tool long to revert to the raw material it’s made from—and poetry is as close as language can get to its roots (3).<sup>1</sup> Language wants to not just serve as symbols for things but to actually be those things again, join the things it masquerades as. This is what poetry tries to do: push language as far as possible into an enactment of the things it speaks of. It does this by using words not just for their denotations (their dictionary meanings), but for their layered associations and as physical matter, for their ear- and mouth-feel and mimetic ability. Poetry sculpts and dances with language and plays it like a musical instrument.

It is descended from the practice of casting spells, making time sacred and conjuring spirits. It has the power to introduce the poet and listener/reader to heightened states of awareness. It draws on pre-linguistic modes of expression and communication common to the natural world: calls, gestures, images of smell, taste, and touch. Through shifts in tone, pace and style, a poem can signal what it’s about to say before it says it, as though telepathically through a kind of pressure wave preceding the words themselves. An understanding is conveyed that is somehow essentially intuitive and silent: deeply human and broadly animal at the same time. In this way poetry brings wilderness indoors and leads us into the wider natural world.

This is paradoxical. Poetry is a quintessentially cultural practice, its use of language is the most refined, perhaps the most skilled possible, and yet it has a solvent effect on culture. It breaks down the familiar and alters our understanding. In this way, its effect is similar to what we think of as wisdom: which involves regarding knowledge as making changes in (or acquiring adaptations in) the self—reconfiguring the self—in response to the world’s resistance rather than reconfiguring the world to suit our wishes. Poetry changes the world not by physical force, but by changing our understanding and awareness.

The wildernesses explored in poetry are varied. Don McKay and Gary Snyder write about outdoor wilderness, the actual land, and in Snyder’s case, the possibility of living locally in harmony with it. Tomas Tranströmer and Emily Dickinson make us aware of an uncanny other dimension—the past, the future, the spirit world, some surrounding consciousness—shadowing our domestic lives like an aura. Rilke, a bit like Keats, experiences beyond culture a realm of eternal aesthetic transcendence. Paul Celan experiences wilderness as irremediable grief, which

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<sup>1</sup> See also McKay’s essay “Baler Twine” in *Vis à Vis*, Gaspereau Press, 2001, p. 21.

he tries to see as austere beauty but is unable to. The situation is similar for César Vallejo, although his grief and longing are very different, profusely passionate and surrealistic.

Another enlargement, perhaps, of the idea of wilderness is in the poetry of Matsuo Basho, who in the last years of his life gave up his home and, like a wandering monk, devoted himself to travelling the countryside of Japan. In a sense, he had renounced security for wilderness, but his wilderness is not of the kind we usually picture in Canada, a landscape scarcely marked by humans; in fact, Basho's wilderness is entirely saturated with human history. Every mountain, headland, and offshore island recalls a traditional song or a poem by a long-dead poet or a legendary battle or some event in the life of a legendary court lady or emperor. He toils along in rain and snow to visit tombs and ruined shrines where hermits once lived. He has not left his culture for nature; he has abandoned himself to his culture as a physical terrain constantly dissolving before his eyes.

His purpose in writing about the sights and experiences along the road is not to preserve them against the ravages of time but rather to record the ravages themselves, the inexplicable, dignified (sometimes comical) human experience of loving things, building them into a cherished community and seeing them gradually washed away in the weather, seasons, and years. His wilderness is the action of time, the process of natural change whereby all things break down and merge and other things emerge. And paradoxically, he captures his experience of this process on the page. He illustrates his culture's history subsiding into the natural world and his own life's journey following the same trajectory, but more rapidly and with his deliberate awareness and intent, all of which he reflects in his masterful art. So the page can dissolve both our culture's and our personality's enclosures and scatter their contents (memories, histories, narratives) across a landscape into which they merge and beautifully, naturally sink.

And yet.

And yet, while the page can turn our attention to the great universe surrounding and pervading our culture and personal lives, while language can conjure a *taste* of wilderness, an ecstasy, a disorientation, a sense of oneness, is the page itself able to evoke in us a full equivalent to the *experience* of wilderness? Can we really get lost on the page? Can language act upon our emotions, our senses and intuitions—can it open us to discoveries and change us—the way raw nature can? Is the page as powerful and vast as the physical world?

I don't think so, even though I live so much of my life on the page and believe I know so much of the world through the page.

I think there is a wilderness to be found on the page, and that wilderness can lead us to an encounter with natural wilderness that lies beyond the page and is of an entirely different order. A problem with language is that the new opening, the discovery or freedom it offers, quickly becomes a familiar pathway, a routine, an enclosed convention. It's possible that wilderness on the page might actually be a misdirection, false knowledge, an obstruction to the

real thing. I want to keep my mind open to this because I suspect that any settled notions about wilderness are likely to be counterproductive.

No words, however beautiful, terrifying, surprising, or disorienting, can serve as a substitute for the unmediated experience of the real world any more than the virtual reality of the computer monitor or TV can substitute for raw reality. Language shapes our experience of reality but can't replace it. We evolved in the natural world over millions of years. The energies and unconscious meaning we draw from being alive on the Earth are different from and more powerful than anything we get from an artificial symbolic system, however intimately our minds are aligned with it.

This seems to be the idea in the opening of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*: "The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way" (57). We cannot capture the full reality of the natural world in words. This is also why so many spiritual practices recommend silent awareness without verbal intervention, without naming or categorizing experience.

No doubt it's just as well that wilderness can't be forged on the page nor life in a test tube, or we'd dismiss nature and biodiversity as obsolete.

But doesn't this bring us to an impasse? To survive physically we need to preserve wilderness—fifty percent of the Earth, according to Edward O. Wilson—we need to leave it alone. And to preserve our humanity, we need to accept nature, have a relationship with it, absorb its energies; but if we can't do that on the page—culturally—what are we to do? Wilderness is far away and we have to leave it alone, and how many of us in the cities can ever get there anyway? How can we bring nature into our lives and yet leave it alone, far away?

Part of the answer, if there will be one, is that it's not a purist question of either-or. Between culture and nature, there is a spectrum of many gradations. At one end there is artifice, abstraction, plans for machines; in the middle, a zone of managed nature and porous culture; at the other end, undisturbed wilderness. The page ranges from mechanical blueprints to the Zen koan and lyric poem: words into silent awareness.

There is a mission for the page. Though it cannot *be* wilderness, it can bring nature into our lives in other ways—for example, through poetry. Should we say that we need to devote fifty percent of the aggregate worldwide page to poetry in ecological parallel to Wilson's Half-Earth reserve? That's never going to happen. But could we think of that differently? Could we say that we need to thin our cultural walls to the same degree, open more awareness to our fellowship with the nonhuman world? Can we shift from fearing and denying so many things we don't control and instead approach them as sources of meaning and energy?

Perhaps what the page can do is remove something that stands between us and wilderness, between us and a sense of nature—a sense of mystery—alive in our immediate world, indoors, in the city, wherever we are. Perhaps it's not about the world we live in *on* the page but the one we find *around* us when we turn the page and close it. What momentum of understanding does

the page leave us with? What perspective on our lives? Perhaps this is the page's linkage with wilderness.

The page can be a threshold from which we see how vast and unexpected our experience is.

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