

# The Wilderness

by  
Lisa Hirmer

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# Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

This thesis is a critical cultural investigation into the meaning of wilderness. It is based on the premise that as a constructed, imaginary landscape wilderness is an expression of cultural impulses. It suggests that the longing for wilderness is a manifestation of cultural malaise, which indicates an uncomfortable relationship between contemporary civilization and its citizens. Poetic reviews of the definitions of nature and wilderness, as well as of Canada, which draw on a collage of sources, are used to explore the meaning of these ideas. Accompanying the text are several series of photographs which confront landscapes that exist around us and explore our relationship with the material environment. The sites include wilderness and conservation areas, the Don Valley, the Lesley Street Spit, suburban construction sites, piles of discarded dirt, various farm fields, and fragments of woodland bordering roads and highways. An extended foreword defines the wider context of this work: An essay regarding topic specifies that though this thesis aims to be sympathetic to environmental or sustainable interests, its main goal is to examine the cultural, affective desire for wilderness as space. An essay regarding place discusses the thesis' connection to a specifically Canadian context. A third essay regarding method reviews the fragmented compositional method and intuitive manner of working used in the thesis, as well as the photographic method used for the images. And finally, an essay on tradition suggests that the thesis work, both in topic and method, engages a continuing tradition of Romanticism, which remains both relevant and meaningful.

The aim of this thesis is to speculate on the value of wilderness in contemporary times, particularly in a Canadian context. The ambition is to gain insight into the forces at work in contemporary culture. The thesis also aspires to offer a fertile, even if ambiguous, vision of wilderness that could suggest how to better respond, as architects, to the impulses that feed the longing for this landscape.

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# Foreword Notes

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## On Content

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This work is composed of two sections: the first, *Foreword Notes*, is a cluster of essays that attempt to position the subsequent work; and the second, entitled *The Wilderness*, I consider the project of the thesis.

The project is a series of photographic essays that explore landscapes around us where one might see the relationship between humanity and nature (whatever that might be) manifest itself materially. These sites include wilderness parks and conservation areas, the Don Valley, the Lesley Street Spit, suburban construction sites, piles of discarded dirt, agricultural fields, and fragments of woodland bordering roads and highways. The photographs are accompanied by collections of poetic fragments that use a collage of sources to review the meaning of nature, wilderness and Canada.

To define the context of this work the first foreword note, *On Topic*, outlines the specific subject of the thesis by discussing contemporary ideas about nature and specifying that though this thesis aims to be sympathetic to environmental or sustainable interests, its main goal is to examine the cultural, affective desire for spaces of nature and wilderness; the next note, *On Place*, discusses the thesis' connection to a specifically Canadian context; A third note, *On Method*, reviews the methods and precedents used in the construction of the thesis; and the final note, *On Tradition*, considers the Romantic tradition that the work engages.

## On Topic

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### *Wilderness and Nature:*

This thesis is about wilderness; or more accurately it is a poetic examination of what we imagine the wilderness to be. Like every landscape, the wilderness is a product of human construction, composed as much out of the stuff of the mind as of vegetation and earth. As Simon Schama explains, “our entire landscape tradition is a product of shared culture, built from a rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions.”<sup>1</sup> The definition of wilderness is not given to us by particular places on the earth, but is a poetic vision that gives form to what we see in those places. It is us who names the wilderness; therefore, our presence there is presupposed.<sup>2</sup> But more than any other landscape, wilderness is usually defined by its very separateness from human artifice, a place outside culture, and a place where nature is left alone. This thesis, therefore, also has to do with nature, an enormous and complex topic for certain, and one that has taken on an increasingly urgent tone in response to the degradation of the planet’s ecological systems. Today the idea of nature is often used as an occasion for evaluating our use of resources, our contributions to a changing global climate and our impact on other forms of life.<sup>3</sup> But it is not in this sense that this thesis uses nature. Environmental concern and ideas about nature are deeply intertwined and the very manner in which we understand our problematic relationship with the environment is shaped by our perceptions of what nature is.<sup>4</sup> But this thesis is not an ecological investigation that looks squarely at the physical matter of the natural world. It is not unsympathetic to the environmental cause but is not directly engaged in it either. It is looking specifically at the layers of imagination woven into the appearance of nature, especially when it appears as wilderness.

1.Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 14. 7.

2.Ibid.,7.

3.Soper, *What is Nature*, 2.

4.See “Reconsidering the Idea of Nature” below.

### *Wilderness and Architecture:*

In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, historian Roderick Nash argues that it was civilization that made wilderness by drawing a boundary and separating inside from out, the realm of civil order from the chaos of nature, and controlled space from the uncontrollable.<sup>5</sup> This relationship was once clearly articulated in space: the city defined and protected by its walled border, perhaps a buffer of outlying agricultural fields, and then the wilderness beyond. But now the space of wilderness is less clear. One popular diagram is that of the wilderness park or preserve where wilderness is found in the few places of unadulterated nature left over after the spread of industrialized civilization across the land, islands protected by invisible boundaries that hold back the powerful forces of development.<sup>6</sup> This implies that when there are no longer any places that have not been affected by human activity, there will no longer be any wilderness left.

I would like to suggest that this may not be so, that wilderness is neither something that must be protected by thwarting the forces of human artifice, nor something that can be irreparably lost; it is instead something that can be created. And just as the first wall that divided city from wilderness was an architectural act, so too would be the construction of new kinds of wilderness – Not in the sense of a designed wilderness landscape but in that it entails the creation of a threshold to negotiate between one type of space and another. The thesis is not, however, a specific design proposal about creating new wilderness. Rather, it is an examination of what wilderness space can be based on the conviction that if our idea of wilderness is considered a cultural construction, or as Schama calls it “a product of culture’s craving,”<sup>7</sup> then a study of the forces that shape our vision of the wilderness can hope to bring insight into the workings of contemporary culture. It also implies that by understanding the impulses that feed the longing for this landscape, we can better respond to those cultural impulses as architects – and perhaps consider how to set about building for new wildernesses.

### *Nature and the Environment:*

How we envision and represent nature greatly effects how we interact with our physical environment and its ecology. Simon Schama argues that though landscapes are first constructs of the imagination that we project onto the physical world, the ideas we have about particular landscapes have a tendency to become a physical presence in that site.<sup>8</sup> Landscapes can be consciously

5.Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xi-xii.

6.Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 69.

7.Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 7.

8.Ibid., 61..

designed to reflect particular ideas about nature.<sup>9</sup> However, ideas about nature and wilderness can also, I would argue, manifest themselves more latently in the physical forms of our landscapes. It is therefore important not to take the idea of nature for granted as an objective reality, but as something that is created by culture and therefore alterable.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, an argument has been put forward by several thinkers to separate what could be called the romantic vision of nature from the discussion of ecological crisis. This argument is generally based on the proposition that romantic ideas about nature ought to be abandoned as detrimental cultural baggage.<sup>11</sup> The contemporary definition of nature, both as a source of resources to be used (or misused) and as something with some kind of intrinsic spiritual value, emerges from the intellectual and technological revolutions that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Western world, when the relationship between humanity and the earth was fundamentally changed. The vision of nature as a haven from the corruptions of civilization, as a curative and liberating force, and as a perfect state of the way things ought to be, belongs to a persistent thread of romantic ideas about nature.<sup>12</sup> The fundamental ideology of many wilderness conservation and protection initiatives, especially those that bind environmental protection with critiques of society, emerge out of this tradition;<sup>13</sup> because once wilderness is defined as a counter to the disquiets and corruptions of the urban realm, it requires a protective boundary that isolates it from the world that it is suppose to deliver people from.<sup>14</sup> It is this idealized vision of nature, and its separation from human culture, that is criticized by this group of critics, who argue that the remediation of the earth's ecology could proceed much better without it.

While I agree that the romantic vision of nature does not adequately serve the needs of the planet's ailing ecosystems, this thesis is based on a small revision to this argument. I would argue that though these ideas about nature should indeed be isolated from environmental concerns, they should then be acknowledged separately as an expression of cultural tensions that will not go away by discarding the image of nature that articulates them. The unhealthy relationship between humanity and the earth and the trouble within the human spirit, which are expressed in the desire to protect wilderness space, are two distinct, though often very sympathetic, concerns. So, by peeling apart and reorganizing the layers of nature I think we can better understand and better respond to the problematic relationship between contemporary civilization and the earth's ecological systems but also to the wary, disquieted relationship that seems to exist between contemporary civilization and its citizens.<sup>15</sup>

9.Rogers, *Landscape Design*, 402-3.

10.Soper, *What is Nature*, 9.

11.See "Reconsidering the Idea of Nature" below.

12.See "The Romantic Conception of Nature" below.

13.Ibid., 5, 29; Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 80.

14.Macy, and Bonnemaïson, *Architecture and Nature*, 29.

15.See "A Constellation of Ideas" below.

### *The Idea of Nature:*

Nature can have a tendency to seem universal and predetermined. In *Uncommon Ground* William Cronon, summarizing the work of several scholars studying the idea of nature, argues that most popular views of nature, particularly those focused on nature preservation and environmental protection, are based on the assumption that nature is a common reality, that its definition is simply innate and therefore unanimously accepted.<sup>16</sup> In *What is Nature* Kate Soper, similarly investigates the idea of nature and notes that it is indeed rare to find questions regarding the definition or representation of nature amidst the cries for its protection and laments for its loss.<sup>17</sup> Yet, both agree nature is not a universal concept; its meaning has varied greatly across history and culture, where it has been given very different qualities by different people.<sup>18</sup> Soper argues that every culture's distinct values and perceptions of the world shape its image of nature, and define what is included in its realm and what is not.<sup>19</sup> Often what is considered part of nature is more a question of perception than an objective measurement of natural versus human processes. As an example, Soper points out that while an agricultural field is generally considered closer to nature than an urban landscape, there is not necessarily less human intervention or technology involved in its creation.

Both Soper and Cronon note that, in spite of its variability, nature has the rather problematic inclination to universalize.<sup>20</sup> As Cronon explains, people tend to “pour into [nature] all their most personal and culturally specific values: the essence of who they think they are, how and where they should live, what they believed to be good and beautiful, why people should act in certain ways,” while supposing that this vision of nature is universal and that these things are therefore “natural”.<sup>21</sup> He argues that because calling the values we project into the world “natural” inherently makes them seem innate, it places them beyond discussion and evaluation; and this, he claims, leads to a lot of very profound disagreement in dialogues about nature.<sup>22</sup>

Cronon and Soper's warning about the tendency of nature to universalize is a critical one. Not only can naïve assumptions about nature thwart debate about environmental issues, but what is considered “natural” can also be – and indeed has been – used oppressively to legitimize what is in truth only established by convention by making it seem indisputable.<sup>23</sup> When nature is given some kind of authority there will always be a critical issue regarding who exactly is able to claim that authority. Using nature as determinant of what is right always has a specific pre-existing implication of what nature is, and this has a very real risk of supporting systems of repression and domination.<sup>24</sup> Soper points out that nature as a source of what is good and normal has been central to

16. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 24-5. Also, Soper, *What is Nature*, 152.

17. Soper, *What is Nature*, 5.

18. Ibid., chap. 2-3. Also, Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*.

19. Soper, *What is Nature*, chap. 2-3.

20. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 36, 51; Soper, *What is Nature*, 6-8.

21. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 51.

22. Ibid., 36, 51-2.

23. Soper, *What is Nature*, 32.

24. Ibid., 32; Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 36.



many systems of prejudice and racism, where what is “natural” is used to justify the condemnation of deviants who do not conform to these supposedly innate norms.<sup>25</sup> The Nazis, for horrific example, full of sentimental ideas about nature and a wholesome “natural” life, systematically exterminated the Jewish people, who they cast as the purveyors of modern corruption. Simon Schama, in his examination of cultural landscapes, recounts how the Nazis committed some of the most horrific crimes against humanity using nature as a source of authority. Schama clarifies that this certainly does not indicate that nature protection initiatives are inherently malicious; but argues that it does show how the myths we embed into our ideas about nature have very real effects, and not only in how we deal with the natural world. It shows how important it is to be conscious that ideas about nature are neither eternal nor predetermined but subjective reflections of ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

Recent cultural criticism can go so far as to suggest that nature does not truly exist, that it is nothing but a mutable cultural construction defined entirely by us. However, Soper argues that “it is one thing to challenge various cultural representations of nature, another to represent nature as if it were a convention of culture.”<sup>27</sup> She suggests that while it is important to remember that ideas about nature are in many ways a construction and that our relationship with nature will always be mediated by history and culture, there is still a tangible physical presence to the thing we call nature, even when its criteria for membership is variable and its edges are indistinct. Soper therefore suggests a moderate approach to its definition: She claims that it is only from a realistic position that we can change our dealings with the ecological realities of the material world.<sup>28</sup> However, because it is impossible for us to separate our understanding of nature from our understanding of ourselves, it is critical to remember that our image of nature does not come from nature but is constructed by us and therefore variable.<sup>29</sup>

### *Reconsidering the Idea of Nature:*

25.Soper, *What is Nature*, 32.

26.Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 118-9. Also, Soper, *What is Nature*, 8.

27.Soper, *What is Nature*, 4.

28.Ibid., 8.

29.Ibid.,8.

Recently, many thinkers coming from different backgrounds have scrutinized our beliefs about nature, particularly as they effect our dealings with environmental issues, and concluded that the predominant vision of nature embraced by environmentalism is hampering efforts to improve our impact on the earth. For instance, economist Bjørn Lomborg, investigating the cost and benefit of various environmental protection projects, concludes that a lot of decisions about environmental action are made emotionally rather than based on scientifically evaluated effectiveness. He argues that because of the



1.1: Parks Canada, promotional image.



1.2: Parks Canada, promotional image.

sentimental way in which we so often approach the search for solutions, we end up spending proportionately large amounts of effort and expense on relatively trivial benefits.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek, similarly criticizing the ineffectiveness of environmentalism, claims that our relationship with nature is shaped by a particular ecological ideology, which is clouding our true environmental issues. He claims that this ideology is founded on the convictions that nature has a perfect harmonious order which is being interrupted by human activity, and that the only way we can hope to restore the earth's balance is by reimmersing ourselves in this order of nature. He argues that this sort of ideology actually impedes the development of effective environmental solutions because the quest to re-identify with this mystical vision of nature distracts from more serious considerations of the problem. Žižek claims that nature is not a harmonious, sacred power that we can trust to provide us with limits, but is a volatile force which proceeds with great violence and explosive, directionless growth – and a system whose equilibrium is deeply woven through with the effects of human activity. Arguing that the only solution to the environmental crisis is a scientific one, he concludes that this ecological ideology ought to be abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

Jennifer Price, in her investigation of nature, *Flight Maps*, argues that by defining nature as a place apart from the operations and troubles of civilization, we allow ourselves to negotiate the paradox of simultaneously enjoying the benefits of a culture that consumes great swaths of natural resources and of coveting a nature that can save us from the excesses of that culture.<sup>32</sup> By placing nature “out there,” she claims that we can forget nature’s profound infiltration into our everyday cultural existence and our complicity in the system that destroys it, while revering the nature outside of our everyday lives – protest and complacency can be simultaneously embraced without compromise. Price argues that in this way we live in this civilization, experience its benefits and use its products, and yet feel that these are not really a part of us.<sup>33</sup>

In *Second Nature* Michael Pollan similarly argues that the problem with the definition of nature as a place apart is that it only ever tells us how to be in nature, and almost nothing about how to act there. It is easy, he says, to gaze reverently at nature as the right kind of pensive visitor but rather more difficult to live there, forced by the necessities of life to infringe on it in some way. It is only those who are already alienated from nature that have the luxury of a sentimentalized view.<sup>34</sup> Much like Price, he argues that though this conception of nature tends to lead to the protection of designated islands of nature, it facilitates environmental destruction everywhere else.<sup>35</sup> He speculates that while believing in a perfectly self-regulating nature is comforting, it is not really a beneficial approach for nature nor for humanity; it simply relieves us from having to make

30.Lomborg, *Cool It*.

31. Žižek, *Ecology Without Nature*.

32.Price, *Flight Maps*, 163.

33. Ibid.,163-204.

34.Pollan, *Second Nature*, 37, 51.

35.Ibid., 223.

decisions. Nature is not harmonious, nor balanced, nor stable, Pollan explains, but the erratic assembly of multiple competing agendas. It produces both the forest and the hurricane, the flower and the virus and is clawing at us more than we generally acknowledge.<sup>36</sup> Pollan argues that a harmonious reconciliation between nature and human existence is an impossible fantasy. However, he also insists that nature and humanity are not inevitably opposed to one another because human interaction does not inherently damage nature.<sup>37</sup> He suggests that all of our actions have both good and bad consequences for different forms of life, going so far as to suggest that other species manipulate us to their benefit just as we manipulate them.<sup>38</sup> Though it may be more difficult to negotiate this more complex and ambiguous vision of nature, Pollan concludes that because it is impossible for us to live without constantly effecting nature in some way, we should force ourselves to choose how we want to effect it.<sup>39</sup>

This loose group of sympathetic thinkers seem to be in agreement that the predominant definition of nature used by many environmentalists is inadvertently hampering efforts to remediate and change our harmful impact on the earth; and to some degree, they all seem to be suggesting that it should be abandoned. Recently, a reformed kind of environmentalism has called for a similar reconsideration of the ideas about nature that support the principals of the environmental movement. These “bright green” environmentalists are questioning the traditional – or “dark green,” as they call it – vision of a perfect, harmonious nature and its inherent hostility toward technology, industry, capitalism and the idea of progress.<sup>40</sup> The dark green position, as defined by the bright greens, is based on the conviction that environmental destruction is the inevitable consequence of the current social, cultural and political order. The dark greens therefore seek radical change. They maintain that our abuse of nature is sustained by our culture’s abstracting scientific perspective and the hubris that we are somehow above nature. Their solution is therefore based on the development an ecological conscience, an awareness that we have no right to take advantage of other lifeforms, no privileged claim to nature’s resources, which they say can only be achieved by rediscovering our own connectedness with the rest of nature.<sup>41</sup>

This is the premise that the bright greens attack. As one bright green supporter explains, “the irony of their position was that it defined nature in terms that made such a reunion impossible: The natural was all that was untouched by the human; the human, in turn, was nature’s erratic antithesis.”<sup>42</sup> They therefore argue that the dark green position is a dead end, which has already proven itself ineffective. The bright greens abandon this tragic view of nature, arguing for an environmentalism that, instead of trying to subvert the existing industrial capitalist order, takes advantage of the power of capitalism, technology and

36.Pollan, *Second Nature*, 214, 221-3.

37.Ibid.,59, 212.

38.Ibid.,124-30, 219.

39.Ibid.,135-6, 221.

40.Steffen, “Bright Green, Light Green,” in *Worldchanging*.

41.Robertson, “A Brighter Shade of Green,” in *Enlightennext*.

42.Ibid.

industrial manufacturing to design and build a better world in which ecological protection is an integrated feature. As Bruce Sterling, one of the founders of the bright green movement, explains “What is required is not a natural Green, or a spiritual Green, or a primitivist Green, or a blood-and-soil romantic Green...the past’s well-meaning attempts were insufficient, and are now part of the legacy of a dying century. The world needs a new, unnatural, seductive, mediated, glamorous Green. A Viridian Green, if you will.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Utopian Visions and Arcadian Dreams:*

Ceridwen Owen, in her essay on the ideology of sustainable architecture, “Contentious Ground,” offers a similar system of classifying environmental positions. She argues that two distinct positions can be traced within green architecture: one emerges out of a romantic legacy and has what she calls an arcadian objective; and the other, emerging from positivist philosophies about progress, has a utopian objective.<sup>44</sup> Those who aspire to arcadian objectives tend to be sceptical of progress and technology, seeking a return to a more “natural” kind of existence, while those who aspire to an image of Utopia, springing from the belief that we are ever moving toward a better future, put their faith in the power of technology and innovation to remedy our problems. Owen argues that the utopian position accepts the dominant order of society and focuses on specific solutions to tangible problems like diminishing resources and the rising cost of fuel. The arcadian position, however, focuses on bringing about radical change to the problematic relationship between humanity and nature.<sup>45</sup>

I would argue that according to Owen’s classifications the bright green position is a utopian one, a forward looking stance that embraces the idea of progress, while the dark green position is rooted in arcadian objectives that look back to a prior existence that seemed closer to nature. The bright greens argue that the longing to return to nature is nothing but a sentimental longing for a simpler, safer and more familiar world.<sup>46</sup> They are essentially suggesting that it is time to abandon the dream of Arcadia. Their argument that environmentalism will benefit by being relieved of these long standing nature myths and the embedded tension with contemporary civilization seems, to me, rather convincing. And yet, when envisioning the bright green dream for the future, technology and ecology woven into glimmering viridian fields, I question if there is not, perhaps, something rather haunting about an endless hybrid landscape operated like a complex agriculture.

43. Sterling, “Manifesto” in *Viridian*.

44. Owen, Ceridwen, “Contentious Ground,” in Lewis, and Ryan, *Imaging Sustainability*, 27-8.

45. *Ibid.*, 27-8.

46. Robertson, “A Brighter Shade of Green,” in *Enlightennext*.

In his treatise about the pastoral ideal, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx argues that the arcadian image of a perfect natural landscape expresses an urge to withdraw from civilization.<sup>47</sup> He explains that the journey away from the complexity and constraints of the city and into a more natural setting, whether rural or wild, is a symbolic movement away from the power of society.<sup>48</sup> He acknowledges that the use of this arcadian motif is often simple wishful thinking, an escapist flight from the troubles of reality, but he points out that the pattern of moving away from an urban existence and into an idealized natural setting has been well used in literature since antiquity as a device to express cultural tensions.<sup>49</sup> He argues that the romantic notion of nature as a respite from the harsh, draining reality of modern civilized life is simply the reworking of an ancient literary device that expresses a recoil from the difficulties and responsibilities that comes with living in advanced civilization.<sup>50</sup> Marx maintains that contemporary use of the pastoral ideal still takes the form of an idealistic fantasy about an easy life in a beautiful green landscape; but it also takes on more complex forms to express the “political and psychological dissonance associated with the onset of industrialization.”<sup>51</sup> He explains that in its traditional usage the pastoral ideal existed in a distinct space, bordered on one side by the city and on the other by wilderness. After the onset of industrialization this changes. The machine begins to appear in the green landscape as an emissary of the city, invading the tranquility of pastoral life. The city, now mobilized, seeps past its borders and into the landscape once occupied by the arcadian landscape. This dissolution of boundaries is, claims Marx, an expression of anxiety about the newly established human dominion over nature.<sup>52</sup>

According to Marx, the primitive ideal, the veneration of a wilderness state, differs from the pastoral ideal only in that the move is further away, past the middle ground, and into the wild; but both express the same impulse to be free from the constraints of civilized living with a move away from the locus of social order and political power.<sup>53</sup> However, Kate Soper argues that the romantic appreciation of the wilderness could only be the consequence of industrial achievement. It is, she explains, “the aesthetic luxury of a culture that has begun to experience its power over nature as a form of severance from it.”<sup>54</sup> It would seem that it is only after there is no longer any threat of its invasion into human territory that wilderness becomes coveted; in short, it is the disintegration of the wild edge which initiates the anxiety about the city’s encroachment past its former edges. Indeed, Marx argues that it is only around the eighteenth century, with humanity’s new found mastery over nature, that the pastoral ideal begins to be transformed into visionary schemes of arcadian landscapes where nature will balance the effects of human artifice.<sup>55</sup>

47. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 3, 9.

48. *Ibid.*, 9.

49. *Ibid.*, 10.

50. *Ibid.*, 19.

51. *Ibid.*, 30.

52. *Ibid.*, 18, 30.

53. *Ibid.*, 22.

54. Soper, *What is Nature*, 227.

55. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 73, 88.





1.3: Claude Lorrain,  
*Shepherd*, 1655-1660.



1.4: Caspar David Friedrich,  
*Hunter in the Forest*, 1814.

However, Marx concludes that there can be no surrogate for the middle landscape and the attempt to construct it can only be an illusion. He is convinced that it can only be destructive to value the dream of Arcadia over reality. And yet, it seems to him that the old pastoral dream “retains its power to stir the imagination” none the less.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the modern age is filled with instances of green landscapes being constructed as remedies for the ills of the city, under the impression that they were capable of bringing better health, wholesome morality and soothing tranquility to the darkness of urban living.<sup>57</sup> Even today, nature still figures as a vaguely ameliorative force that balances, or at least dilutes, the discontents of contemporary urban life. Patches of green, spread throughout urban and particularly suburban forms, reveal the continued presence of the pastoral dream.<sup>58</sup> Marx argues the power of the pastoral ideal to move us “derives from the magnitude of the protean conflict figured by the machine’s increasing dominion of the visible world.”<sup>59</sup> The dream of Arcadian, of living in on the edge between nature and civilization, is more than a sentimental longing. It is an expression of persistent cultural tension.

I would therefore like to suggest that there is something more at work in the vision of nature inherited from the age of Romanticism, and particularly in the longing for wilderness, than obsolete notions or naïve assumptions that are being needlessly carried along with legitimate ecological concern. Though the bright greens and other like minded environmentalists are calling for a rejection of romantic ideas about nature, I think that in this vision of nature is another force, which has become entangled in the material concerns of environmental protection. I suspect that the urge to protect natural space is carrying a rather heavy load – our problematic material relationship with our environment and its resources, but also a profound trouble in the human spirit and its relationship with nature and contemporary civilization. It may have latched onto environmentalism to gain a voice but the desire for the wilderness is not really about the ecology of the earth. I imagine that these two concerns can be quite sympathetic to each other; but, their deeply tangled state is causing obscurity. Perhaps then, rather than simply discarding this other thread of nature as unnecessary cultural baggage, we can acknowledge it separately and in doing so gain some clarity – about our culture and, in the end, hopefully also about the ecological crisis we face.

56.Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 357, 365.

57.Rogers, *Landscape Design*, 402-3.

58.Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 16. Also, Rogers, *Landscape Design*, chap. 12

59.Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 364..



### *The Romantic Conception of Nature:*

To understand the forces that went into the conception of the contemporary vision of nature, I would like to briefly look at its emergence in history. A fundamental shift occurred with the emergence of Romanticism at the end of the Eighteenth century that transformed nature from something that needed to be restrained and remediated by the virtuous forces of culture into something that could cure the oppressive distortions of a corrupt civilization.<sup>60</sup> This was in part a reaction to the new achievements of humanity which had turned nature into something safe and subdued, something that no longer needed to be feared and so could be imagined as a source of benevolence.<sup>61</sup> But it was not only the soothing beauty and restful tranquility of nature that began to be coveted; the feelings of vitality and incomprehensible limitlessness that nature could inspire in its rougher, fiercer forms were also celebrated.<sup>62</sup> This new found appreciation for nature, and especially wild nature, was also an expression of intense anxiety and regret about the rapid loss of a particular kind of space.<sup>63</sup>

In Jonathan I. Israel's study, *Radical Enlightenment*, he argues that, though the Enlightenment project was started with the intention of improving the circumstances of humanity, it came with some unforeseen and troubling consequences. The systematic scepticism of the Enlightenment, which endeavoured to question everything, did indeed bring about many beneficial developments. It dissolved the authority of repressive institutions, for instance, including that of monarchies and aristocracies, the church, slavery, and men's dominance over women.<sup>64</sup> But Israel argues that these benefits came with some unforeseen consequences. With the dissolution of previously stable sources of authority, a continuous succession of new ideas began to flow, challenging old ideas only to be swiftly challenged themselves. With this, humanity lost the shared foundation of belief that had provided a source of meaning and unified traditional society. Israel claims that the enlightened world quickly became a confusing and fragmented place, permeated with a mood of doubt, which became increasingly difficult to navigate.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile, the development of scientific method during the seventeenth century had instigated a transformation of nature from a place that had included a dense layer of mythical qualities into the mindless matter of scientific study.<sup>66</sup> This diminished the uncertainty and fear that humanity had previously felt in face of the unpredictable and violent forces of nature; it empowered humanity who, with this new capacity to understand the forces at work in the universe, could now confidently set about manipulating the world.<sup>67</sup> But the solidification of nature into quantifiable raw material also left it vulnerable to the exploits of industry. And as industry grew, fuelled by new technology and confidence in

60.Soper, *What is Nature*, 28-9.

61.Ibid., 227.

62.Ibid., 222; Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 44.

63.Soper, *What is Nature*, 197.

64.Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, vi.

65.Ibid., 3-11.

66.Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 95; Harrison, *Forests*, 108, 122; Soper, *What is Nature*, 44.

67. Horkheimer, and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3; Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 105-9.

68. Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 81-5.



1.5: Edward Goodall,  
*Cottonopolis*, 1840.



1.6: Caspar David Friedrich,  
*The Big Enclosure*, 1832.

progress, it began consuming large swaths of resources at an unprecedented rate.<sup>68</sup> And, it is in this atmosphere that the Romantic conception of nature took shape. By the mid Eighteenth Century, a growing number of people, observing the rapid rate of change and the negative effects of industrialization happening around them, started to lament what was being given up in the name of progress. Nature began to acquire a new value, as something to be treasured because it seemed to be becoming increasingly scarce, but also because it seemed to have some value for the newly troubled human spirit.

As the negative qualities that had traditionally been associated with wild nature – feelings of uncertainty and hostility – began to be felt in civilization, nature suddenly became the opposite.<sup>69</sup> No longer a place of terror filled with monsters and savagery, it transformed into a counter to the unbearable world of the city – at least for the educated city dweller who did not have to contend with nature to survive.<sup>70</sup> For these Romantics, Nature became a place to escape the new disappointing order of life, a refuge from a civilization possessed by utility and rationality. They rejected the vapid and exhausting life they found in the city, with its stressful associations of worldly matters and new industry, in favour of natural environments that could provide the solitary, mysterious experiences they now craved.<sup>71</sup> But it was not only feelings of harmony and tranquility that the Romantics sought out in nature. The quality of the sublime, a sense of fierce turmoil and limitlessness, began to be celebrated as the source of a peculiar sensation that hovered between terror and pleasure.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, the association between nature and divinity was strengthened by the slow collapse of religion under the weight of reason and by the suggestion from science that the universe was a perfect, harmonious system. Nature began to be seen as an expression of perfect, divine power, undistorted by human action. It took on a near mystical quality; and as doubts about progress grew, nature became revered as an antidote to the corruption and oppression of a civilization gone wrong.<sup>73</sup>

69. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 143, 157.

70. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 47, 57; Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 99, 110-11.

71. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 46-7, 57-60; Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 99-111.

72. Soper, *What is Nature*, 222.

73. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 45-6, 157.

74. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 24-5.

75. Horkheimer, and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1; Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 85.

### *Enduring Nature:*

Though subsequent advancements in science have disproved the notion of a perfect, harmonious nature, ideas about nature as something inherently good in contrast to the distortion of civilization seem to persist even today.<sup>74</sup> But when considering romantic visions of nature and wilderness, I think it is important to remember exactly how much we have gained through the process of modernization. When we lose sight just how difficult life could be – and still is for many – before our technological and humanitarian achievements, we can fail to acknowledge how much these things contribute to our comfort

and well-being. The goal of mastery over nature came from a desire to end the misery and uncertainty wreaked by nature.<sup>75</sup> Up until only very recently, natural phenomena were regularly a source of an enormous amount of suffering; a small change in the weather could easily lead to crop failure and widespread famine.<sup>76</sup> With beautiful pastoral images in mind, there is little palpability of just how common it was to die of starvation up to even the early modern period in Europe.<sup>77</sup> Because it is now so omnipresent, the force of civilization can sometimes become nearly invisible, causing us to overlook how incredible and precarious the act of civilization is and how much we stand to lose were we to leave it. The early twentieth century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset speaks about a sort of person who, while interested in its products, is indifferent to the principles of civilization – a situation that must be guarded against, he says, for without enthusiasm for the mechanisms of civilization we could very well face the peril of its collapse.<sup>78</sup>

But why then does there seem to be a genuinely problematic relationship between our civilization and so many of the inhabitants who benefit from it? Why do we imagine nature as the good or our bad, and wilderness as a place to escape from the civilization we have made?

Though the desire to get away from civilization is not exclusive to our age, it trickled its way throughout history until it emerges with unprecedented force and conviction during the eighteenth century with the Romantics. And we have been experiencing this recoil from civilization in some form for over two centuries now. The sense that our achievements are part of an uneasy bargain is ubiquitous. A deep ambivalence about our culture, saturated with feelings of scepticism and uncertainty, has become a contemporary mythology. This creates a longing, I think, to live at the edge where one can both belong to civilization and be detached from it.

This desire for detachment, this floating half-participation, is what I think feeds the imaginative formation of a wilderness landscape as a place to get out of civilization. Dissonance can take on different forms for different reasons; so without undermining specific problems and dissatisfactions, I would like to consider the wilderness in relation to this general sense of discontentment that creates a yearning to withdraw. Different thinkers have named this feeling in different ways, E.H. Gombrich, for instance, perceives it in art as “the preference for the primitive”; Wilhelm Worringer identifies something like it in the return to abstraction in art during the modern age; and Friedrich Nietzsche similarly senses a yearning for what he calls the “Dionysian.” Sigmund Freud also notices a strange discomfort in modern civilization and a desire to return to an idealized natural landscape, while Donna Haraway observes a parallel impulse to bring

76. Tuan, *Escapism*, 13.

77. *Ibid.*, 13.

78. Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, 81-90.

the animal into civilization. This loosely related but sympathetic constellation of ideas all suggest, I think, a uneasiness about our civilization and the lure of something that we imagine to be outside of it.

### *A Constellation of Ideas:*

According to art historian E.H. Gombrich in *The Preference for the Primitive*, the rejection of the civilization's accomplishments, what he calls the "lure of regression," has a long history in Western civilization.<sup>79</sup> He traces it back to the Platonic fear of moral corruption from too much capricious pleasure, but goes on to assert that it re-emerges with particular force in Europe during the Eighteenth Century as a recoil from the luxuries and apparent laxity of the age.<sup>80</sup> Gombrich claims that we have a psychological reaction against anything which is too "obviously seductive." Therefore the seeming vitality and sincerity of more "primitive" works of art allured those who had become tired of the pursuit from perfect mimesis and the restrictions of beauty and refinement. The primitive emerged as a sort of "antidote to the corruption of the age." Though what was considered "primitive" shifted considerably – a renewed interest in medieval craftsmen during the early nineteenth century was later replaced by fascination with tribal art in the twentieth – the "myth of primitive art" offered the chance to break away from the linear progression of Western traditions. It was an act of defiance against the restricting governance of reason and the threat of sentimental vapidness, which seemed to hang over the modern world.<sup>81</sup> The crude, rough, and distorted became a more appealing aesthetic than the overly polished and beautiful; and, an instinctual manner of production, one that was immersed in the senses, started to feel more fitting, more genuine and immediate, capable of being "truer than the literal truth."<sup>82</sup>

79. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*

80. Ibid., 15, 49, 203-5.

81. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 73-9, 200-3, 261.

82. Vincent Van Gogh, quoted in Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 212.

83. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 14-15.

84. Ibid., 15-18.

85. Ibid., 23.

86. Ibid., 23.

Wilhelm Worringer's early twentieth century treatise on aesthetic theory, *Abstraction and Empathy*, claims that art is motivated by two antithetical feelings, the urge toward empathy and the urge toward abstraction. While the artistic preference for empathy finds beauty in the organic – that is, it aims to represent the essence of the world as an intact whole – the inclination for abstraction finds beauty in the inorganic, the crystalline representation of objects removed from their seemingly arbitrary context.<sup>83</sup> Worringer claims that the urge toward empathy always comes out of a relationship of confidence between humanity and the external world, while the urge toward abstraction emerges from feelings of uncertainty. Therefore, the urge toward abstraction is strongest in earlier stages of culture where, bewildered by the fortuitousness and instability of the world, humanity had a need for stillness, for "a refuge from appearances." These people feel the inclination to extract the objects of representation from their

context in the outer world and distil them into their eternalized essence.<sup>84</sup> The urge toward abstraction, says Worringer, is an attempt at deliverance from the random meaninglessness of organic existence.<sup>85</sup> As humanity gains confidence and stability in the world, this urge to abstract slowly gives way to the urge to empathy, a self-affirming projection of the self into the external world.<sup>86</sup> Following Worringer's argument, the modern preference for the primitive and abstract, described by Gombrich could be an expression of uncertainty, suggesting the we once again feel lost in the tangled confusion of an unstable and unpredictable world.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Friedrich Nietzsche describes two artist impulses, which he names after the Greek gods Apollo, the god of reason, boundaries and self-control, and Dionysus, the god of collective inebriation, revelry, chaos and excess. The Dionysian impulse was an expression of pure creative energy, a place where individual will collapsed in immersion with the chaotic forces of the universe, while the Apollonian impulse was one of measured restraint, a force that redeemed the chaos and terror of the world with the conscious effort of constructing an illusion of order.<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche believes that these two forces had an inherent need for each other: the dissolution of form, the disintegration of convention, the lifting of the veil of illusion, brought on by Dionysus was a place of vital energy and unity but needed the restraint of Apollo to give form to this chaos and rescue it from contradiction and unintelligibility. To deny Apollo is to disintegrate into mindless chaos, to be caught in destructive primordial excess; but to deny Dionysus is to lose the source of all meaning and energy in life, to be dead to the creative and imaginative spirit.<sup>88</sup> The world Nietzsche saw when writing this work at the end of the nineteenth century, seemed too wholly based on an Apollonian world view, which venerated appearances and measured restraint. Claiming that this undermined the vitality of life, he argues that modern civilization needs to be reacquainted with the regenerative capabilities of the Dionysian spark.<sup>89</sup>

Gombrich, Worringer and Nietzsche all seem to be describing a sense that there is somewhere a truer and more vital way of being. In "Civilization and Its Discontents" Sigmund Freud investigates the yearning to withdraw from civilization and its achievements into an idealised primitive state, something he considers very curious. He notes the many benefits technological advancements have given us. Yet he writes that "it seems certain that we do not feel comfortable in our present-day civilization." He argues that this hostility toward civilization is an expression of frustration with the subjugation of the instincts required by societal existence – a burden that may become heavier in more complex states of society. For Freud, the longing to escape civilization and return to an idealized natural landscape is the expression of a sort of collective neurosis. It

87. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 33-38.

88. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 39-40, 46-7.

89. Ibid., 20-23.

90. Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, 274-87.



is a fantasy that expresses a longing to liberate the instincts, to be free from the privations of morality and responsibility inflicted by society.<sup>90</sup>

Donna Haraway, a contemporary biologist and philosopher, considers the parallel impulse to humanizing nature, studying in particular the endeavour to teach human language to primates. She speculates that this impulse emerges out of a desire to “open the border inherited from the separation of nature and culture,” and that it reveals a profound cultural anxiety about being alone in the universe and separated from the rest of nature.<sup>91</sup> Her conclusion that the humanization of nature is an expression of a psychological desire to lift the burden of being a civilized human is sympathetic, I think, to Freud’s. They both suggest the existence of a desire for exchange or renegotiation between the realm of civilization and the realm of nature we imagine to be outside of it.

### *Conclusions:*

Often the need for wilderness is justified in utilitarian terms, whether as a place of aesthetic or recreational value, a museum of origin conditions, or as a source of resources we do not yet know we need. But, while the expression of regret about disappearing natural areas may borrow logic from other concerns in order to find expression, the insecurity of losing this kind of space and the concern about how we are making our world are, I would argue, very real trepidations. The image of the wilderness expresses a malaise about our culture saturated with a yearning for escape and the feeling that there is somewhere an existence that can be more vital and meaningful. The thesis that follows is a poetic examination of this image of wilderness.

91. Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 132.

## On Place

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### *The Wilderness and Canada:*

The investigations of this project are located in a specifically Canadian context. While we share a lot of common culture and history with other parts the world – which means that many ideas about wilderness can be more broadly sweeping – Canada’s vast landscapes and harsh climate, combined with its unique history, have formed a very strong sense of the wilderness in this country. Many nations use their landscape to define a sense of themselves and in Canada the wilderness is frequently used as a source of national identity. Canadians are often cast as a strong northern people shaped by a fierce, untamed landscapes surrounding us. This is usually depicted as a heroic relationship between the Canadian people and a very specific image of an untouched primal wilderness, cold and austere but also beautiful.

This wilderness myth is ubiquitous in popular representations of Canada – even the images on our coins draw from a heroic sense of nature and landscape. Canonical studies of Canadian art and literature cannot avoid focussing on the relationship between the Canadian imagination and the sense of nature and wilderness here. Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Garden*, for instance, argues that the Canadian psyche was formed by a “garrison mentality,” which by necessity clung to the moral and social values of its community because of the great moral peril that resided in the “huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable” physical setting of the country;<sup>1</sup> in *Survival* Margaret Atwood argues that the Canadian imagination is formed by a schizoid tendency to simultaneously feel both terror and longing for the wild nature that surrounds us;<sup>2</sup> and more recently, art critic Penny Cousineau-Levine has argued that because of the sense that nature here is unknowable the Canadian psyche dwells in state of liminal multiplicity.<sup>3</sup> Because of this profound involvement with wild nature, both as an idea and a physical presence, I think that a critical evaluation of the idea of wilderness within Canada is not only particularly relevant but also a very fertile position from which to consider it.

1.Frye, *Bush Garden*, 227.

2.Atwood, *Survival*, 60-62.

3.Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 116,-121.



2.1: Canadian Coins.



2.2: Frontispieces for Government of Canada Official Web Site.

In *The Bush Garden* Northrop Frye writes that for the early European settlers in Canada, the wilderness was a very tangible, powerful and dangerous force. The wilderness was seen as a sort of “monster of darkness” that one had to struggle against for survival. But Frye argues that it is not only a fear of the physical dangers and discomforts of the wilderness that causes anxiety but also the “shutting out of the whole of moral creation” that happens outside of civilization.<sup>4</sup> He explains that in the loneliness of wild terrain “the human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values.”<sup>5</sup> He claims that in these conditions, community becomes very important because humanity needs the institutions of law and order to thwart the terror of the wild. It leads to what he calls a “garrison mentality” – isolated communities, relying on mutual support for moral values, bounded by a physical or psychological barrier against the vast wilderness outside.<sup>6</sup> This psychological barrier against the wilderness and “the riddle of unconsciousness” it presents, is according to Frye the founding model of the Canadian imagination. Though Canadian literature later develops strong romantic characteristics, Frye argues that in Canadian writing the passions are always “held in check by something meditative.” There is a sense of caution, he suggests, that implies an enduring division between life inside the garrison and what lies beyond.<sup>7</sup>

This sense of opposition, between nature and culture, wilderness and garden, is similarly written about by Margaret Atwood in her study of the Canadian imagination, *Survival*. She argues that the nation was formed with a tension between romantic ideas about a benevolent nature brought here by many European settlers and the harsh conditions they actually encountered here. For Atwood, much like Frye, the Canadian landscape has been a consistently menacing presence against which Canadians have had to struggle for survival.<sup>8</sup> In Canada, she reminds us, one can die simply by stepping off the path during the winter. She goes on to argue that because of this unsympathetic relationship, the Canadian imagination is imbued with a profound distrust for the landscape. She writes that “an often-encountered sentiment is that Nature has betrayed expectation, it was supposed to be different.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore the natural landscapes in Canadian literature tend to be profoundly indifferent to the situation of humanity, claims Atwood, hauntingly cruel wildernesses that swallow human visitors. We are constantly depicting ourselves, she says, as very separate from this indifferent nature, as though the realm of human culture and the realm of the wilderness are two discrete and unrelated entities.<sup>10</sup> But Atwood goes on to argue that Canadian literature also expresses a sense that we feel cut off from something vital and meaningful, as though culture “threatens the animal within.” She suggests that while the division between the realms of wilderness

4.Frye, *Bush Garden*, 227.

5.Ibid., 227.

6.Ibid., 227-8.

7.Ibid., 237, 249.

8.Atwood, *Survival*, 60-2.

9.Ibid., 59.

10.Ibid., 39-42.

and of culture may be necessary, it is also life-denying and draining, leaving us with a longing to reconnect with what is instinctive and animal-like in ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, though there is often a certain amount of terror in representations of Canadian wilderness, there is also a strong sense of allure. The paintings of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, for instance, are tied up in this mysterious appeal of the wilderness landscape. Emerging from a romantic vision of nature, this image of the “north country” is a heroic one, where in the wilderness one can supposedly live a liberated, vital and truthful existence in spiritual communion with the mysteries of nature. From this perspective, the wilderness is a beneficial force, that builds character and strength, and somehow imbues those who visit it with good morals. In some manifestations this enduring mythology energizes the popular flight to cottage country made possible and safe by the conveniences of infrastructure, while in other manifestations a sense of toil and danger is essential to the wilderness experience.<sup>12</sup> But in either form the lure of the wilderness is entrenched with the notion that it is somehow separate from another kind of existence, whether urban living or a larger sense of social life, and that it can act as a counter to it.

Because the lure of the wilderness often derives from anti-urban sentiments or social criticism, it is frequently represented as a pristine place, untouched by the operations of industry and contemporary culture. The implication is that it derives its value from these qualities. The difficulty with this vision of the wilderness, like other romanticised views of nature, is that it allows us to imagine ourselves as a nation of great nature loving people and ignore the complicated reality of our real, always hybrid, landscapes. This wilderness is a mythological landscape, which presents an idealized relationship to the land that does not match up with how we really interact with it. Indeed, as Andrew Hunter points out in his essay on Tom Thomson, the landscapes paintings of Thomson were not of the unspoiled wilderness, as they are often imagined to be. The iconic strands of white birch trees, Hunter points out, are in truth the result of a sun-loving species taking advantage of clear spaces left over after heavy logging.<sup>13</sup> He speculates that Thomson “appears...to have seen the [logging] industry as part of his environment...He appears to have accepted the complexity of the economy and culture, and it is reflected in his work.”<sup>14</sup> And yet for Thomson this north country, though more complicated than “pure” wilderness, still offered an alternative to an existence he found unsatisfying.<sup>15</sup> There is in his work still a sense of division between one world and another.

Penny Cousineau-Levine in her study of the Canadian imagination, *Faking Death*, argues, akin to Atwood, that because of our harsh climate and vast spaces

11. Atwood, *Survival*, 89-95.

12. Hunter, “Mapping Tom,” in Reid, *Tom Thomson*, 20-5.

13. *Ibid.*, 31.

14. *Ibid.*, 32.

15. *Ibid.*, 27-8.



2.3: Tom Thomson, *Northern River*, 1915.



2.4: Lawren S. Harris, *Beaver Pond*, 1921.





2.5: Lawren S. Harris, *Lake Superior*, 1923-1933.



2.6: A.Y. Jackson, *The Red Maple*, 1914.

there is still an impression in Canadian art that nature is unknowable and in tension with civilized consciousness. Like both Frye and Atwood, Cousineau-Levine associates the wilderness with the human imagination or subconscious, and argues that in the Canadian psyche the cultured and conscious is sharply divided from wild and imaginative. She, however, offers an alternative reading to Atwood's bleak view of powerless victims cut off from the instinctive and vital. Cousineau-Levine speculates that this awareness of two distinct realities, the realm of culture and the realm of an unsympathetic wilderness, gives the Canadian psyche a polymorphous identity, which is further reinforced by the diversity of our population.<sup>16</sup> She argues that the persistent expression of multiple realities in Canadian art expresses a deeply-felt reluctance to give up this position of liminal identity in order to embrace a monolithic sense of self. She speculates that we intuitively value this multi-faceted identity. The value of this multiplicity is, says Cousineau-Levine, that it creates an awareness of civilization's conditionality and therefore provides the opportunity of reflectivity; it ensures "that life inside the modern encampment will not 'congeal into a solid fortification.'"<sup>17</sup> Northrop Frye seems to describe a similar posture when he notes that "Canadians seem well adjusted to the new world of technology... Yet in the Canadian imagination there are deep reservations to this world as an end of life in itself."<sup>18</sup> Cousineau-Levine concludes that what lies at the core of these reservations is a longing to make a place of value for the imaginal or wilderness realm within the realm of conscious reality. She speculates that we maintain this split existence because we do not want to give up the reality expressed by the wilderness and yet see no place for it in the reality of rational consciousness. Her suggestion is that there may be a way to reunite these disconnected realities without subduing their potency as different things and to consciously maintain a liminal identity without isolating one sense of ourselves from the other.<sup>19</sup>

Following Cousineau-Levine's speculations, I would like to suggest that it is important for Canada to re-evaluate the idea of wilderness we use to define the nation's identity. But I would also like to suggest that it is an especially good location for doing so. I suspect that we may have a particularly fruitful opportunity in Canada to reconsider the value of wilderness, not only because of our huge swaths of land, but also because we may be a culture that is particularly receptive to it. And in doing so, I suspect that we will move toward a more complex understanding and appreciation of our landscapes as both physical and mythological entities.

16. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 116-123.

17. *Ibid.*, 177-9, 255.

18. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 250.

19. *Ibid.*, 242-5, 255, 266.

## On Method

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### *Compositional Method:*

The body of this thesis is formed by collections of fragments – series of photographs, pieces of writing and gathered quotes – that are layered, one thing on top of the other, and then again into a single larger bundle. This technique of stacking is one that is also used by Anne Carson where, as she explains in her project entitled *Stacks*, things, people and ideas get “stacked and restacked” in different ways creating different relationships between and across them.<sup>1</sup> This is similar, I think, to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of a plateau, which they define as “a multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems.” They give the example of a book that, composed of chapters having culmination and termination points, is unlike a book composed of plateaus that “communicate with each other across microfissures, as in a brain.”<sup>2</sup> I imagine this as an assemblage where the different parts, while not necessarily addressing each other directly, are connected – sometimes unexpectedly – by invisible radiating filaments creating one strangely tentative and quivering entity; and, because those filaments are elastic and yielding, the little pieces of each stack are free to shift a bit, just like objects that can be piled one on top of the other without necessarily keeping the same center. These filaments do not, however, dissolve the gaps between the things they connect; like bridges, they keep the pieces apart through the same action that links them together.<sup>3</sup> Fusion is avoided, because sometimes you can see a thing better by looking at something else.

1. Carson, *Stacks*.

2. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 22.

3. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 120.

### *Working Method:*

In contemplating her method for *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson uses two images to describe two different approaches for creating a work: a windowless room and a vast landscape of ideas. The “landscape of science and fact” is the place where academic writing and conversation takes place. But there Carson feels blind. The windowless room, cleared of everything she does not know and full only of immediate experience, is where she often finds herself. But Carson, worried about this room’s unsuitability to academic discourse, fears putting too much of herself into her work. She says she must settle for dashing between the room and the landscape.<sup>4</sup>

I think Carson is addressing a fundamental struggle – one that this thesis also faces and one that is, perhaps, particularly relevant in a Canadian context. It is a question regarding the relative merit of direct personal observation and introspective meditation versus working within a critical discourse, where arguments are carefully built up, using the work of others as bricks on which, only at the end, to perhaps add your own. Both Northrop Frye and Penny Cousineau-Levine, in their studies of the Canadian imagination (*The Bush Garden* and *Faking Death*), note a strong belief within Canadian art and literature in the value of personal experience where, without the contamination of external influence and preconceived ideas, truth is supposedly found.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is due in part to our colonial heritage and a wariness of foreign ideas that do not feel like true reflections of ourselves;<sup>6</sup> but, the long tradition of what Frye calls “a direct imaginative confrontation with the landscape” has certainly been exceptionally fertile to Canadian artists and writers.<sup>7</sup> It is also an approach that this thesis has embraced, as is especially evident in the landscape photography – hopefully also to fruitful results.

The tendency to rely on “sincere feeling and accurate observation” can however be criticised for naiveté or irrelevance when it attempts to take form outside of the traditions of literature or art.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Frye reminds us that it is important for this kind of work to bridge back out to the society it serves and for the experiences, emotional responses and reflections to, in the end, find their place amongst tradition.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Carson, Frye also seems to believe it necessary to at some point leave the windowless room. When we do, we can only hope that the blindness of before has been stripped away. Cousineau-Levine, speaking about seeing a nothingness that I can only assume is caused by a similar affliction as Carson’s blindness, thinks it is the consequence of being unable to see “the content and worth of our own voice.” We are blind because we see nothing in our own work. Because we are so weighted down with borrowed cultural beliefs and preconceptions – what amounts to “cultural

4. Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, vii.

5. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 234; Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 8.

6. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 8.

7. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 209.

8. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 234.

9. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 234-5.

self-abnegation” – Cousineau-Levine suspects that we as Canadians tend to produce much of the content of our work at an unconscious level.<sup>10</sup> Having worked in this evidently Canadian, intuitive manner, I can only hope to have brought enough out into the landscape to avoid the worst of irrelevance and darkest of blindness.

### *Creative Method:*

In her study of Canadian photography, Cousineau-Levine claims to have discovered a particularly Canadian tendency to pry photographic images out of their context and away from the things they supposedly refer to. This is in contradiction to what is otherwise considered the definitive feature of photography – its enduring link with that which was photographed. Cousineau-Levine speculates that many Canadian photographs both are and are not the thing that engendered them; they are representations of two different realities – the physical subject of which the photograph is taken but also a reality of the spirit. Though a documentary style is sometimes borrowed by Canadian photographers, Cousineau-Levine goes on to speculate that this borrowed form is often put to very different use, noting that the Canadian photograph has a strong tendency to move away from document and toward image. The particular physical facts of a specific place and time often seem relatively unimportant in the Canadian photograph, says Cousineau-Levine, because they are not “primarily about what it is they point to.” Rather than depicting a tangible social reality, as do for example many American documentary photographers, Canadian photographs tend to show a symbolic reality that is “beyond or apart from the physical.”<sup>11</sup>

Cousineau-Levine speculates that this peculiar habit emerges from a national conviction that the spirit lives in a world other than the one inhabited by the body, hovering somewhere above it cut off from physical existence.<sup>12</sup> Cousineau-Levine feels that Canadian photographs express this phenomenon, but by using the medium of photography also express a strong desire to infuse the imaginal world into the physical one, as though seeking to reunite these two presently quite disparate realities. She observes that Canadian photographs quite often have within them some kind of “portal into another world,” oftentimes appearing as windows or window-like openings, or somehow establish a split between two planes, between “a reality that is ‘here’ and one that is ‘elsewhere.’”<sup>13</sup> The work of Christos Dikeakos, for example (3.1), superimposes photographs of rather mundane urban landscapes with text etched into the covering glass which describes invisible indigenous history and now-absent natural features.<sup>14</sup> Jeff

10. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 4-5.

11. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 24.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 17, 87.

14. Ibid., 99.

15. Ibid., 64.



3.1: Christos Dikeakos, *sun'aq*, 1992.



3.2: Jeff Wall, *The Flooded Grave*, 1998-2000.

Wall's *The Flooded Grave* (3.2) similarly opens an imaginary dimension into the graveyard landscape, as the open plot transforms into an ocean pool teeming with sea life.<sup>15</sup> In both cases a dialectic is created between the seen and unseen dimensions of the landscape; that is, between the observed and the imagined. And, though not always as clearly apparent as these two examples, this tension is something that Cousineau-Levine feels is repeated over and over again in Canadian photography.<sup>16</sup>

Northrop Frye, speaking specifically about the paintings of Lawren Harris (see 2.4, 2.4), observes a similar phenomena – although he associates it with a romantic tradition rather than a distinctly Canadian one. He states that “for the artist, whatever may be true of the scientist, the real world is not the objective world.”<sup>17</sup> Though the exploration of an inner world in a struggle to detach from objective reality and social conventions can risk degenerating into a solitary and decadent digestion of one’s own spirit,<sup>18</sup> Frye explains that creative consciousness of a successful artist is distinct from this kind of “subjective or introverted consciousness” – a description he thinks more suited to the “psychedelic.”<sup>19</sup> This creative consciousness is not unconcerned with society and it is not fantasy making that it seeks; it is just not wholly interested in the physical, objective world, which seems somehow unreal. Sceptical about our relationship with the material world, the artist tries to transcend it but without evading struggling with it at the same time. He or she is seeking neither photographic realism – which Frye points out is “just as bad in photography as it is in painting” – nor a “reflection of what the [artist] felt and was already determined to impose on whatever he saw.”<sup>20</sup> Rather the artist is “looking for a point at which the created world and the world that is really there become the same thing.”<sup>21</sup>

Whether this bifurcated layering of reality is a particularly Canadian habit, inspired by our geography and history as argued by Cousineau-Levine, or whether its correlation with Canada is more tentative, we can say that it is a particular way of working and one which has a strong Canadian precedent, even if not exclusively so. The photographic form, then, is an especially apt way to work in this manner because it is both a projection of the physical world and a product of consciousness.<sup>22</sup> A photograph is uniquely able to discount its literal aspects and yet be intrinsically related to them at the same time, so that the material realm can simultaneously be both confronted and transcended. The work of photographers Edward Burtynsky (3.3, 3.6) and Geoffrey James (3.4, 3.5), for example, can be considered to follow in this tradition. Indeed, speaking about his quarry photographs, Burtynsky says: “Photographing quarries was a deliberate act of trying to find something in the world that would match the kinds of forms in my imagination. I went in search of it, and when I had it on my ground glass, I knew that I had arrived.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, a critic writing about

16. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 64.

17. Frye, *Bush Garden*, 210.

18. *Ibid.*, 210-11, 234-5.

19. *Ibid.*, 210.

20. *Ibid.*, 210-11

21. *Ibid.*, 211.

22. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 116.

23. Burtynsky, *Manufactured Landscapes*, 22.

24. Fulford, Robert, “On Time,” in Geoffrey James, *Past, Present, Future*, 13.





3.3: Edward Burtynsky,  
*Shipbreaking #1*,  
*Chittagong, Bangladesh*,  
2000.



3.4: Geoffrey James, *The  
Viaduct of the Ohio  
Turnpike Over Cuyahoga  
National Park*, 2005.

James' work claims that he shows places "processed through his imagination... as they have come to exist (after suitable contemplation) in his mind."<sup>24</sup>

The photographs of both artists are undoubtedly rooted in the physical world; the descriptive nature of the photographic medium certifies a certain degree of realism and engagement in observation of the reality in which we live; and yet, the photographs also have a mythic or metaphorical quality, which goes beyond the specific circumstances of their making. Both Burtynsky and James make use an elevated perspective, a sort of hovering viewpoint. Burtynsky explains that this technique, which comes out of the landscape painting tradition, "turns the space into what [he] believe[s] is a mythic space, an archetypal sense of the landscape."<sup>25</sup> Though both photographers embrace a deliberately descriptive approach, neither can really be considered a documentary photographer. Even when their subjects have unmistakable social implications, neither artist creates the images customary of documentary photography: James' *Running Fence* series, for instance, depicting the walled border between Mexico and the United States, does not contain shots "of Mexicans anxiously waiting to cross the border, or sprinting across the desert toward a standing army of American police."<sup>26</sup> Likewise neither photographer's images of environmental devastation, James' *Asbestos Series* or Burtynsky's *Nickel Tailings* for example, plainly present the facts of their creation or the consequences of their effects; there are no "stricken children, gutted buildings [or] craven insurance agents."<sup>27</sup> These works are not authoritative in their approach; judgement about their subjects is suspended from the images and instead hovers tentatively beyond the image inviting speculation from the viewer.<sup>28</sup> Photography is used as an objective, almost indifferent, tool of description that in accurately recording the physical traces of our presence in the landscape alludes to the unseen circumstances of humanity. The photographs are not contrived creations; that is, they do confront the tangible complexity, the uncertainty, even the banality, of the encountered physical landscape. They are accepting of ambiguity and have a willingness to concede to complication and doubt, while at the same time elevating the generic into the mythic. Penny Cousineau-Levine feels that James' photographs – and I think Burtynsky's as well – "[carve] out a relationship between visible and invisible registers of reality."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, another critic writing about James' work states that he evokes "physical presence and metaphorical significance in equal measure."<sup>30</sup> I think both Burtynsky and James use photography as a manner of layering the intricacy and ambiguity of material existence against the symbolic faculty of art, creating mythic landscape images of rich, emblematic complexity.

25. Burtynsky, *Manufactured Landscapes*, 55.

26. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 105.

27. Salvesen, Britt, "Geoffrey James and the Art of Description," in Lori Pauli, *Utopia/Dystopia*, 43.

28. Wylie, Liz, "Responding to Geoffrey James," in Geoffrey James, *Past, Present, Future*, 10.

29. Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 105.

30. Salvesen, Britt, "Geoffrey James and the Art of Description," in Lori Pauli, *Utopia/Dystopia*, 43.



3.5: Geoffrey James, *Black Lake, Asbestos Series*, 1993.



3.6: Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #30, Sudbury, Ontario*, 1996.



*Conclusions:*

Both Burtynsky and James have spoken about accidentally coming across landscapes that have riveted them and subsequently become the subject of their work. I would therefore like to suggest that the intuitive, almost accidental, approach taken in making of the photographs in this thesis has a significant precedent. It is not with a documentary method that the photos in this thesis were created. The sites are not thoroughly recorded; nor are the specific locations or circumstances of the photographs particularly significant. These photographs have been formed out of a search for physical manifestations of the idea of wilderness, for glimpses within the complications of the real world of a landscape that exists in the imagination. There is a layering similar to that described by Frye and Cousineau-Levine. Resonant moments were found and then explored with a medium that allows for an investment in observation but also a certain amount of creation. And it is in this way that I hoped to create images of the Canadian landscape.

It should be mentioned however that all of the photos have been taken in southern Ontario and in that sense represent only a fragment of the country. Though I do have the hope to one day have images that cover a greater geographic area, I hope that these fragments offer a glimpse of the Canadian landscape none the less.

I should also add that a significant amount of learning happened during the progression of photographs, and so will note that they were created more or less in the following order: The Don Valley, The Leslie Street Spit, Portrait, Building Site, Fields, Piles, Roadside Wilderness.

## On Tradition

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### *Romantic Subject and Spirit:*

It is undeniable that the subject of this thesis engages a romantic tradition, and so too does its method or spirit. However, I would argue that this is not a regressive position, but one that is rich and relevant, and one that has a significant contemporary precedent. Martina Weinhart, an art critic investigating contemporary forms of Romanticism, suggests that Romanticism never really came to an end but has persisted in various manifestations well into the present – some that are reductive but others that are still quite meaningful.<sup>1</sup> She argues that “modernity...is indebted to Romanticism for large parts of its conception,” identifying for example ideas about fragmentation and the contingency of meaning.<sup>2</sup> But, Weinhart argues that in addition to being a cultural legacy the romantic is also in part a symptom of living in the kind of world that we do, one that is today, as it was during the age of Romanticism, volatile and uncertain. She speculates that the transitory nature of modern life causes a cultural mood that “oscillates between a certain melancholy, a mourning of loss, and desire or expectation,” and that out of this instability emerges a yearning to transcend everyday life, which can be called romantic.<sup>3</sup> She points, for example, to the particularly persistent romantic motif of “a utopia that transcends the quotidian” and its ubiquitous use in advertising.<sup>4</sup> Max Hollein, a cohort of Weinhart, similarly argues that as the desire for security and intimacy escalates in an increasingly troubled world, “people start hunting for havens of safety – or at least images that could suggest such.” He claims that “the yearning for an intact world and the gaze at an idealized safe haven” have thus become an inescapable part of today’s world.<sup>5</sup> In this sense the romantic is a relevant subject for conscious investigation as a cultural phenomenon that seems to be a consequence of contemporary existence. Certainly, the topics in this thesis, of nature and wilderness, and even of Canada, are deeply embedded with the kind of romantic yearnings identified by Hollein and Weinhart.

1. Weinhart, “The World Must Be Made Romantic,” in Hollein, and Weinhart, *Ideal Worlds*, 37.

2. *Ibid.*, 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 37.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. Hollein, “Preface,” in Hollein, and Weinhart, *Ideal Worlds*, 17.

However, just as these writers go on to argue, I think that the core sensibilities of historic Romanticism have more to offer than idealistic fantasies or reassuring escapes. The romantic can also be considered a potent way of working, which can be used to generate resonant work. Historian Hugh Honour argues that even in its own time much of the criticism against Romanticism was directed at the “trappings popularly associated with the Romantics” rather than the fundamental spirit of the movement itself, which he says, maintained its potency long after it ceased being called “Romantic.”<sup>6</sup> Because of the malleability and openness inherent in the romantic tradition, what exactly one is referring to, then, when using the term romantic depends on how it is being defined. In is difficult to point to Romanticism with aspirations of referring to the period in its entirety, or to qualities that are exclusive to it. For this reason, Weinhart suggests that investigations into contemporary forms of Romanticism should not dwell on what exactly the romantic is, but should instead focus on strategies of appropriating the spirit of the Romantic movement, so as not to lose sight of its fertile qualities.<sup>7</sup> Heading this advice, I would like to discuss the spirit, or method, I am referring to by tracing some relevant qualities that extend from historical Romanticism into its contemporary forms, and also, I think, into my work. The romantic spirit is one that draws on memory, imagination and emotion to invoke images and ideas beyond what resides in the work itself; there is a layer to the work that exists in the viewer. The romantic spirit also expresses a severance between individuals and the world that they find themselves in, which is often implied by hovering viewpoint; there is an insecurity about existing in a reality that seems immeasurably boundless and full of forces far greater than the individual; it asks the question of how to be in the world and is unsure of the answer. The romantic spirit exists in a position of obscurity where all values and all truths are subjective and provisional and the world is inherently incomprehensible. But the romantic spirit also embraces this unfathomable complexity and uncertainty, the endless intricacy and volatility of reality, even celebrates it.

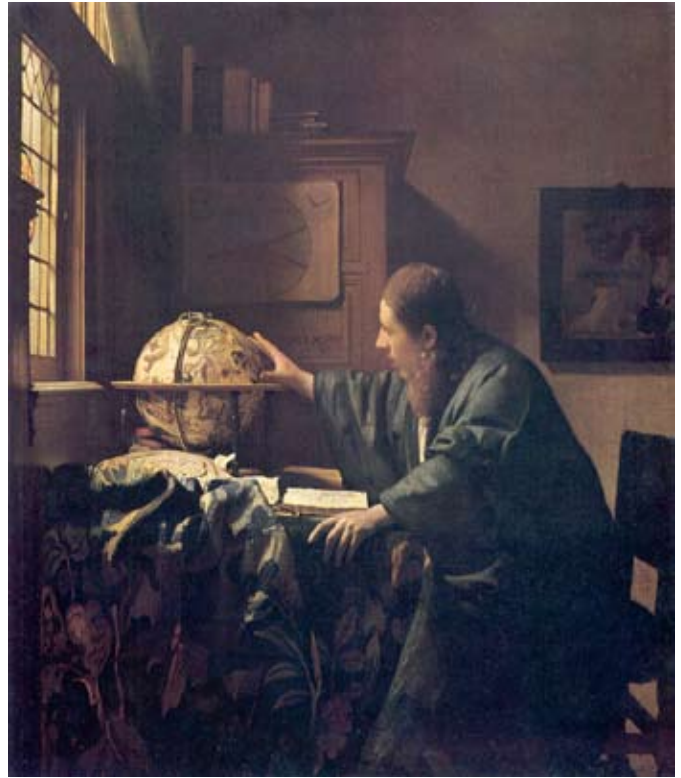
### *Uncertainty:*

The age of Romanticism is a historical period that lasted from the mid-to-late-eighteenth century until about the mid-nineteenth century, which marked a significant intellectual and artistic event in the Western world.<sup>8</sup> Rising out of a profound sense of disappointment and disillusionment after the promises of Enlightenment idealism failed to materialize, Romanticism was tinged with feelings of loss and doubt. Where the Enlightenment had been full of confidence in the power of progress to move toward a better world, to the Romantics this

6. Honour, *Romanticism*, 319-323.

7. Weinhart, “The World Must Be Made Romantic,” in Hollein, and Weinhart, *Ideal Worlds*, 36.

8. Honour, *Romanticism*, 11.



4.1: Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer*, 1668.



4.2: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1809.



4.3: J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam and Speed*, 1844.



4.4: Catherine Opie, *Untitled #10 (The Surfers)*, 2003.

confidence now seem misguided. Looking at the world around them, they saw an abundance of evidence that the world was inherently imperfectable.<sup>9</sup> The overzealous rationality of the Enlightenment had denied large swaths of human experience and failed to contend with all that was empirically unknowable in the world. Turning toward the qualities Enlightenment rationality had ignored – like emotion, subjectivity, intuition, horror, and mystery – Romanticism emerged with an explosive impulse to explore experience beyond the bounds of reason and confidence.<sup>10</sup>

This shift in position can be illustrated by comparing two works created a century and half apart: *The Astronomer* (4.1) by seventeenth century painter Johannes Vermeer and Caspar David Friedrich's early nineteenth century work *The Monk by the Sea* (4.2). The subject of Vermeer's work expresses a sense of confidence, looking down at his globe, a model of the entire earth, the world seems measurable, stable and intelligible in its entirety; knowledge is within the scientist's confident grasp. In Friedrich's work a tiny figure gazes at an enormous incomprehensible vagueness. The figure, seemingly extraneous to the landscape, stands the edge of a chasm that separates the foreground from the distant, looming indefiniteness beyond; there is a contrast between the diminutive human and the massive nonhuman, the fragile known and the overwhelming unknowable. This is no longer a position of confidence; beyond the edge of the cliff the world is tumultuously unstable and fierce. Yet the work is simultaneously filled with a sense of despair and of being enraptured, of doubt and of longing. The human figure, a distinct emissary of human culture, assures that there is still a distinction between the realm of order and the chaos he has some to watch.

Only a few decades later, J. M. W. Turner pushes this sensibility even further in his work *Rain, Steam and Speed* (4.3). The restless haze inhabiting the background of Friedrich's work has taken over the entire canvass; gone is the distinct emissary of human order. Fleeting colors and merging forms dissolve the distinction between the worlds of humanity and nature; these orders have been crossed over each other and back again so one is no longer sure where one ends and the other begins. The machine and nature operate with the same powerful forces. There is no clear ground plane; no clear place for the individual in this turmoil. A sense of disorientation permeates throughout; all one can be sure of is the ferocity at work.<sup>11</sup> The photographs of contemporary artist Catherine Opie *The Surfers* (4.4) have a similar sense of disorientation. Though calmer and more subdued there is the same feeling of floating placelessness, of submersion in an ungraspable, liquid world.

9. Brown, *Romanticism*, 11.

10. Ibid., 9-14; Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 14-20; Pagel, David, "Romanticism's Aftermath," in Sultan, et al. *Damaged Romanticism*, 37.

11. For discussion of a similar sensibility, see Van Ghent, "On Wuthering Heights," in *The English Novel*, 157.



### *Ambiguity:*

Contemporary historian Isaiah Berlin claims that the root of Romanticism was its disruption not only of Enlightenment beliefs but also of one of the founding beliefs of Western civilization. He argues that prior to the romantic revolution Western thought was founded on the idea that absolute knowledge existed, that there was firm universal truth in the world from which it was possible to draw infallible, conclusive knowledge; and, if discovered, this knowledge could be used to avoid errors that caused human suffering.<sup>12</sup> Though there had been disagreements about the method of uncovering this truth, there was a consensus in Western civilization for thousands of years that, even when humanity lacked the strength, intellect or innate capacity to grasp it, it did exist.<sup>13</sup> The revolution in consciousness instigated by the Romantics was then not only an attack on the Enlightenment belief that definite knowledge could be discovered through the application of reason but on the belief that any such knowledge even existed.<sup>14</sup> Berlin explains that prior to this assault, the belief in overarching absolute knowledge carried with it the conviction that all genuine truths would have to be compatible – that is, they could not contradict one another because they were all part of this infallible order. He argues that the fundamental declaration of Romanticism was that there are indeed values which cannot be reconciled and that conflict is, therefore, an unavoidable part of life.<sup>15</sup> With this rejection of universal truth, the Romantics adopted the belief that values could not be discovered, but could only be invented; there were no rules that could be uncovered, no ideal structure of the world against which to verify beliefs; instead, it was the power of creation from nothing that drove everything in the universe.<sup>16</sup>

Berlin claims that the Romantics therefore condemned any position that represented reality as having a fixed form and embraced any sensibility that could disrupt or contradict the apparent seamlessness of the existing order.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the first wave of Romantics turned with interest to the medieval ages, seeing there a sensitivity and vitality that seemed to be lacking in their own age. Nineteenth century romantic philosopher August Wilhelm Schlegel argued that the medieval sensibility embodied an acknowledgement of the disparity between ideals and reality – something that was overlooked by Enlightenment confidence; it aroused “the vague foreboding, which slumbers in every feeling heart, into a distinct consciousness that the happiness for which we are here striving is unattainable; that no external object can ever entirely fill our souls; and that all earthly enjoyment is but a fleeting and momentary illusion.”<sup>18</sup> Later Romantics turned to other historical periods and exotic cultures in search of cultural values different from those of their own. This interest, argues Berlin, was not really a historical one but a search for alternative ways of being that could destabilize the existing one of confidence that felt so false to the Romantics.

12. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 12.

14. *Ibid.*, 118-9.

15. *Ibid.*, 13.

16. *Ibid.*, 119.

17. *Ibid.*, 127, 135.

18. A.W. Schlegel, quoted in Honour, *Romanticism*, 158-161.



### *Complexity:*

Where the neo-classical artists preceding the emergence of Romanticism strove to depict the ideal, universal forms they believed to be beneath the irregular appearance of nature, the Romantics saw no underlying order in nature. For them, it was the powerful and chaotic forces of creation and destruction that drove the universe. And so, they focused on the flickering, mysterious variability of nature's surfaces, revelling in its subjective qualities – the vague and indistinct, the irregular and particular.<sup>19</sup> This intense interest in the materiality of the world was often prompted by the search for glimmers of insight into the mysterious forces of the universe.<sup>20</sup> But according to contemporary historian Onno Oerlemans, it can also be seen as the recognition that nature has a reality quite different from the realm of human discourse, that it is chaotic and unpredictable, and does not match up with the world of beauty and order created in classical art.<sup>21</sup>

Oerlemans writes that there are moments within Romanticism where the relationship between the artist and nature is characterized by a quest to immerse the self in a transcendental experience of the universe where the consciousness becomes united with the rest of nature.<sup>22</sup> Oerlemans acknowledges that this tendency to envision some kind of spirit in nature with which one can connect can be criticized as being a deluded projection of human consciousness, a sentimental and idealizing casting of the viewer's own conviction on to the natural world.<sup>23</sup> However, he argues that there are many instances in Romanticism that defy this pattern, that there are moments where "subject and object are not eradicated, where the intention is to see the object as clearly as possible, and where, in a sense, consciousness and the material remain mysterious to each other."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, while Romanticism explored the landscape for moments of truth in nature, it also contains the acknowledgment that there is none to be found. Oerlemans describes this as a sort of openness to the otherness of material nature, "not just a sense of awe and fear ...but a sudden recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are yet inexplicably rooted in it."<sup>25</sup> Oerlemans concludes that the act of perception, as an end in itself has value, as a careful looking that simply confronts the materiality of the world and reveals the contingency of human meaning in the face of it.<sup>26</sup> This is a sensibility which I think can be seen in John Ruskin's *Study of Gneiss Rock, Glenfinlas* (4.5). It is a careful and precise, meticulously rendered, vision of the intricate uniqueness of this rock. If it has the capacity to trigger the imagination, it rests on the factual specificity of the material. It is a sensitive relishing of the ecstatic detail in the material world as Ruskin finds it, perhaps saying nothing more than that this rock exists.

19.Honour, *Romanticism*, 20-1, 34; Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 26-9.

20.Honour, *Romanticism*, 21.

21.Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, 4.

22.Ibid., 21, 208. See Also, Honour, *Romanticism*, 14, 30-34.

23.Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, 9, 203.

24.Ibid., 203-4.

25.Ibid., 4.

26.Ibid., 28, 209.



4.5: John Ruskin, *Study of Gneiss Rock, Glenfinlass*, 1853. (detail)



4.6: Geoffrey James, *The Ramble, Central Park, New York*, 1991.

In a spirit similar to Oerlemans, mid-twentieth century artist Robert Smithson, writes about the Picturesque and the parks of nineteenth century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead. Smithson claims that the original picturesque tradition, like the work of Olmstead, had the beginnings of something he calls “a dialectic of the landscape.”<sup>27</sup> The idea of the picturesque, says Smithson, was related to the processes of transformation within nature; it was not based on static formalistic abstractions but was rooted in the materiality of the real world. He explains: “The picturesque far from being an inner movement of the mind is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence.”<sup>28</sup> Pointing to the ongoing processes transformation occurring in Olmstead’s parks – as particularly evident in the photographs of its construction – Smithson argues that it is impossible to take a one-sided view of such a landscape; it is not “seen as a thing in itself, but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region.”<sup>29</sup> Because the processes of nature are indifferent to the formal ideas of the artist, they remain a constant source of complication and contradiction. This, clarifies Smithson, does not mean helplessness on the part of the artist in the face of nature, but rather simply an acceptance of a layer of unexpected conditions and incongruities that provide resistance.<sup>30</sup> He goes on to claim that there is a certain authenticity in the admittance of contingency and uncertainty on the part of the artist that embraces this dialectic, a sense of strength that comes out of acknowledging the fallibility of one’s own work.<sup>31</sup>

Nature can no longer really be considered in the manner of the original Romantics as a realm separate from human culture. Not only are we aware of the artificiality of the division between nature and culture, but the human construction and naturally have become inseparably mixed. We are surround by nothing but hybrid landscapes.<sup>32</sup> But with many of the forces that shape our landscape seemingly beyond our control, the complexity and incomprehensibility of this hybrid material existence, like the nature of Smithson’s landscape dialectic, still reveals the possibility of meaninglessness and can be a source of resistance against the work of the artist. An so the contemporary landscape can be considered natural in that the materiality of it simply exists, defying comprehension.<sup>33</sup>

I think, for example, that the work of contemporary photographers Edward Burtynsky (4.10), Richard Billingham (4.7, 4.8), and Florian Maier-Aichen (4.9) confront the landscape in this manner. Though more sober and less forceful than their historical counterparts, they delve into the strangeness of the world in a manner similar to the Romantics’ intense observation of nature. These works are immersions into the messy complexity and banality of material reality. Like the original romantics there is the same sense that the individual is immersed in a world that is too vastly complex, too perplexing, to be grasped; it

27.Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectic of the Landscape,” in *The Collected Writings*, 159.

28.Ibid., 159-60.

29.Ibid., 159-60.

30.Ibid., 160.

31.Ibid., 164.

32.Pagel, David, “Romanticism’s Aftermath,” in Sultan, et al. *Damaged Romanticism*, 65.

33.Ibid., 67.





4.7: Richard Billington,  
*Untitled n.2, Black Country*,  
2003.



4.8: Richard Billington,  
*Untitled n.1, Black  
Country*, 2003.

cannot be expressed whole in any work of art; there can only be fragments. The work of these artists is filled with ambiguity, uncertainty, even contradiction about what they are looking at – toxic streams and derelict suburban spaces are hauntingly beautiful. I do not think that it is coincidence that all these artists are photographers, working in a medium that operates between discovery and creation. Susan Sontag writes that many of the most brilliant photographs “simply invited us to stare at banality...and also to relish it.”<sup>34</sup> If these landscapes are endowed with symbolic qualities, they are tentative, set cautiously on top of the accuracy of material representation. These works of careful conscious looking, accept the potential of unintelligibility.

### *Multiplicity:*

Max Hollein, the curator of a recent exhibition entitled *Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, argues that Romanticism is alive, not only in the sense of works that follow in the legacy Romanticism left to all artists, but in works that deliberately return to the essential spirit of Romanticism.<sup>35</sup> He argues that these contemporary works (see 4.4) seek to create poetic counter-worlds to act as alternatives to the difficult and disappointing realities of our world. However, they take up yearning for the paradisiacal without forgetting the abysmal and uncanny lurking behind it.<sup>36</sup> He explains that these works are not merely creative projections, any more than they are direct documentation; rather, the interest in visions of other worlds oscillates between yearning and discomfort. He writes, “in the dream of unity...we can also discern the nightmare of the unachievable and the incompatible.”<sup>37</sup> He calls them positive creation projects which, unlike art that focuses on social action, create inner landscapes that impact on the world by triggering speculation and imagination.

David Pagel and Terrie Sultan, two critics involved in another exhibition of recent work entitled *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion*, similarly argue that the Romantic spirit is being taken up by several contemporary artists. Pagel argues that these works (see 4.7-4.9), like the work of their predecessors, emerge out of a profound disappointment and seek to interrupt existing reality. They attempt to deliver viewers from “the wretchedness of being trapped in a world over which they have no control.”<sup>38</sup> The fantasies of these contemporary works are, however, grounded by pragmatism and a detailed realism. Sultan explains that, “in the face of today’s political instability, economic insecurity, and social isolation, these artists present slivers of life in all its complexity and complication while offering glimpses of reconciliation.”<sup>39</sup>

34.Sontag, “Photography,” in *At the Same Time*, 127.

35. Hollein, “Preface,” in Hollein, and Weinhart, *Ideal Worlds*, 17

36.Ibid., 17.

37.Ibid., 18-9.

38.Pagel, David, “Romanticism’s Aftermath,” in Sultan, et al. *Damaged Romanticism*, 37.

39.Sultan, *Damaged Romanticism*,11.



4.9: Florian Maier-Aichen,  
*Untitled*, 2004.



4.10: Edward Burtynsky, *Oxford*  
*Tire Piles #5*, Westley,  
California, 1999.

*Conclusions:*

The critics of both exhibitions seem to describe a technique in which a Romantic spirit is used as one layer against other counteracting layers – whether that is, like the works in the Ideal Worlds exhibition, as a conscious reflectivity on the romantic legacy being used, or as the complexity and harshness of realism like the works in the Damaged Romanticism exhibition. This technique of layering the Romantic has the potential to be very rich, I think. The imagination and energy of Romanticism is free to float, yet never ceases being counter-weighted by its deferral to something that pierces it with ambivalence. The counter layers act as a limit to the intensity of a symbolic realm, letting it infuse the work with creative energy but keeping it hesitant, fragile even. My engagement with Romanticism is equally tentative. Romantic subject and method intertwine to oscillate between support and uneasiness. If the works take on the romantic belief in metaphor and the power of the imagination, it is a tentative grasp that rests on a delicate web of contingency.

I am unsure, however about the idea suggested by both Hollein and Sultan that the Romantic acts as a trigger of future remedial action or that it offers “glimpses of reconciliation.” I think that the Romantic position, whether historical or contemporary, is one caught by the difficulty of action arising out of the awareness that all actions can have devastating unforeseen consequences. It is not that I think the romantic succumbs to dejection but I sense a strong unwillingness to abandon the position of ambivalence that emerges from the consciousness of complexity. Instead, I think the openness to the arbitrary and unexpected manifests itself as a tentative layering between an imaginal realm and the material realm in which lies the malleability of the world. It is a moment of contemplation poised just before action, a hovering questioning of out how to be in the world.





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# The Wilderness

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# Introduction

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I will start, reader, by warning you that it isn't entirely clear what type of Canadian I am. In a country bristling with hyphens that tether it to the world, I am weightless and unbound. I don't properly have a hyphen of my own. There was no monumental migration, no old place, and no new one. A little typographic bridge can't pull me in two directions because I've always been in pieces.

I tell you this because it might make a difference.



WE HAVE SCARCELY BEGUN TO SETTLE IN THIS LANDSCAPE OF MINES AND POWER STATIONS. OUR LIFE IN THIS MODERN HOUSE HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN, AND THE HOUSE IS NOT YET EVEN COMPLETE. EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED SO RAPIDLY AROUND US: HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS, WORKING CONDITIONS, SOCIAL CUSTOMS. OUR VERY PSYCHOLOGY HAS BEEN ROCKED ON ITS MOST INTIMATE FOUNDATIONS...

EVERY STEP FORWARD HAS REMOVED US A LITTLE FURTHER FROM HABITS BARELY ACQUIRED; TRULY WE ARE EMIGRANTS, STILL TO FOUND OUR HOMELAND.

**Antoine de Saint Exupéry**, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939)

# Portrait

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5.1: Untitled (Portrait #1)





5.2: Untitled (Portrait #2)



5.3: Untitled (Portrait #3)



5.4: Untitled (Portrait #4)



5.5: Untitled (Portrait #5)





5.6: Untitled (Portrait #6)





AND WHAT HAUNTS ME, IS THAT IN ALL THE FACES OF ALL THE BEARS THAT TREADWELL EVER FILMED, I DISCOVER NO KINSHIP, NO UNDERSTANDING, NO MERCY. I SEE ONLY THE OVERWHELMING INDIFFERENCE OF NATURE.

TO ME, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A SECRET WORLD OF THE BEARS. AND THIS BLANK STARE SPEAKS ONLY OF A HALF-BORED INTEREST IN FOOD.

BUT FOR TIMOTHY TREADWELL, THIS BEAR WAS A FRIEND, A SAVIOR.

\* \* \*

AMIE HUGUENARD WAS SCREAMING...

**Werner Herzog**, *Grizzly Man* (2005)

## The Definition of Nature

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*A Caution:*

In their guide to style Strunk and White caution that,

- (1) nature should be avoided in such vague expressions as ‘a lover of nature,’ ‘poems about nature’. Unless more specific statements follow, the reader cannot tell whether the poems have to do with natural scenery, rural life, the sunset, the untouched wilderness, or the habits of squirrels.

A fair warning for such a word. It is indeed easy to skim across or slip between the definitions of nature.

*Origin:*

The origin of “nature” is the Latin word for birth, *natura*, which also refers to those things that were present at birth: the inherent constitution or character of something, and ‘the course of things’.

- (2) Originally, it was used only in the sense of ‘human nature’ but later it became an opposite to artifice.

- (3) Distinguishing the work of artifice from the work of nature, marks our actions as different. It implies responsibility.

And, responsibility opens the door to guilt – which wavered at the top step before uncurling in a series of crashes to us waiting below.



*Definitions of Nature:*

The world of matter and all of its phenomena.

The disembodied forces acting in the universe, as in 'the laws of nature'.

The natural world and all naturally occurring phenomena excluding humanity and the products of our labour, as in 'the beauty of nature'.

The countryside, especially when picturesque.

A kind or sort, as in 'disputes of this nature can have no resolution'.

The innate disposition or tendencies of a person, as in 'it was not in her nature to be cruel'.

The essential characteristics of something, as in 'such crimes are, by their very nature, difficult to hide' or 'it is the nature of jealousy to burn'.

The biological functions of the body, or the urges to satisfy their wants.

A state of being naked, or without clothes, as in 'she was found in a state of nature'.

Reality, as distinct from the artificial or forced, as in 'the portrait was true to nature'.

A state opposed to one of grace, which in theology is humanity's original condition.

A state of being primitive and uncivilized.

A simple, uncluttered way of life, without the conveniences or troubles of society, as in 'going back to nature'.

(4)

*Receptacle:*

Nature is often used as a receptacle to store the things we are not.

(5)

Different people put different things in there: chaotic heaps, old fridges, horror, sympathy, peeling toboggans, carnality, cruelty, innocence, vacuum cleaners, vitality, obscenity, damaged rubber tires, motherly nurturing, traffic cones, vindication, beauty, buckets collecting cold amber water, asphyxiation, bits of frayed rope, liberation, rot, and old canoes.

*Natural Nature:*

(6)

When we speak of nature, we do not often think of its complexity; we speak of something familiar, something around us, perhaps passing by at the side of the road, perhaps creeping up the side of the house, or churning within.

But, what exactly the thing is remains a little vague. And, nature's vagueness, like dusty fog concealing forms behind it, lets it do little tricks, as is natural.

*Definitions of Natural:*

Produced by nature and not artificial, coal and oil for example, or as in 'a natural disaster'.

In accordance with the usual course of things, as in 'a natural death'.

Conforming with nature, as in neither supernatural or magical.

Related by blood.

A card other than a wild card or joker.

Not manufactured, altered or disguised, but raw and occurring artlessly, as in 'the natural beauty of untreated wood'.

Functioning in a normal way, lacking abnormalities or deficiencies, as in 'natural affection'.

Arising easily and spontaneously as though prompted by instinct and not acquired, as in 'natural reflexes'.

A synonym for life-like and real, as in 'the decoy looks very natural'.

In Mathematics, relating to positive integers, sometimes including zero.

Considered part of humanity's inherent constitution and therefore valid and reasonable, as in 'natural concern'.

(7)

Established by an innate feeling of moral certainty, as in 'natural justice'.

*Net:*

Nature is like an opaque net that gets pulled across the world and tied into a sack, lumpy with the entities caught inside, now hidden. The ease with which it then can be picked up conceals its fickleness: left alone it flops open and the contents tumble out.

(8)

But the weight it conceals gets dragged along with it, following like a shadow, clanking and gouging the earth.

*Indifferent Surface:*

Nature is the kind of person who wakes up in the morning with a hole in her side and packs it with dirt. When the spores come to exploit that soft patch, piercing into it with sharp little wisps, they worm through the tangle that is already there.

It is what English diplomat Harold Nicholson describes in a diary entry written during the Second World War:

Nature. Even when someone dies, one is amazed that the poplars should still be standing quite unaware of one's own disaster, so when I walked down to the lake to bathe, I could scarcely believe that the swans were being sincere in their indifference to the...war.

(9)

*Matter:*

The law of conservation of mass states that matter cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be rearranged.

(10)

All we can do is push or pull.

The unused will never disappear. It always remains, piling up in heaps that nature starts to chew, shuffling.

*Return:*

The excluded inhuman that had once gone off lumbering into a damp green lair, eventually returns. Blinking in the bright light of open space, he finds himself revered as the saviour of failing civilization, unknowingly holding in his brown lined hands the chalice harbouring humanity's missing virtues.

(11)

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- 1 Strunk, and White, *Elements of Style*, 53.
  - 2 Harper, Douglas, "nature," *Online Etymology Dictionary*.  
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nature>.(accessed: April 12, 2009).
  - 3 For a discussion of the work of nature versus the work of artifice, see Soper, *What is Nature*, chap.2.
  - 4 Dictionary.com, "nature," *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*, Random House, Inc.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nature> (accessed: April 12, 2009).  
"nature," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nature> (accessed: April 12, 2009).
  - 5 For a discussion of nature's contradictory characteristics see: Soper, *What is Nature*, esp. 71-2.
  - 6 For further discussion, see Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 51.
  - 7 Dictionary.com, "natural," *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/natural> (accessed: April 12, 2009).  
"natural," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/natural> (accessed: April 12, 2009).  
"natural," *WordNet 3.0*. Princeton University.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/natural> (accessed: April 12, 2009).
  - 8 For different ways in which the idea of nature has been used, see Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*; Soper, *What is Nature*; Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.
  - 9 Harold Nicholson, quoted in Tuan, *Escapism*, 87.
  - 10 "Conservation of mass," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conservation\\_of\\_mass&oldid=283558126](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conservation_of_mass&oldid=283558126) (accessed: April 13, 2009).
  - 11 For discussion of historical inversion of nature, see Soper, *What is Nature*, 78.



‘OH, I’M BURNING! I WISH I WERE OUT OF DOORS – I WISH I WERE A GIRL AGAIN, HALF SAVAGE AND HARDY, AND FREE... AND LAUGHING AT INJURIES, NOT MADDENING UNDER THEM! WHY AM I SO CHANGED? WHY DOES MY BLOOD RUSH INTO A HELL OF TUMULT AT A FEW WORDS? I’M SURE I SHOULD BE MYSELF WERE I ONCE AMONG THE HEATHER ON THOSE HILLS ... OPEN THE WINDOW AGAIN WIDE, FASTEN IT OPEN! QUICK, WHY DON’T YOU MOVE?’

‘BECAUSE I WON’T GIVE YOU YOUR DEATH OF COLD,’ I ANSWERED.

‘YOU WON’T GIVE ME A CHANCE OF LIFE, YOU MEAN.’ SHE SAID SULLENLY.

**Emily Bronte**, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)

# The Don Valley

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6.1: Untitled (The Don Valley #1)





6.2: Untitled (The Don Valley #2)



6.3: Untitled (The Don Valley #3)



6.4: Untitled (The Don Valley #4)



6.5: Untitled (The Don Valley #5)





6.6: Untitled (The Don Valley #6)



6.7: Untitled (The Don Valley #7)



6.8: Untitled (The Don Valley #8)



6.9: Untitled (The Don Valley #9)

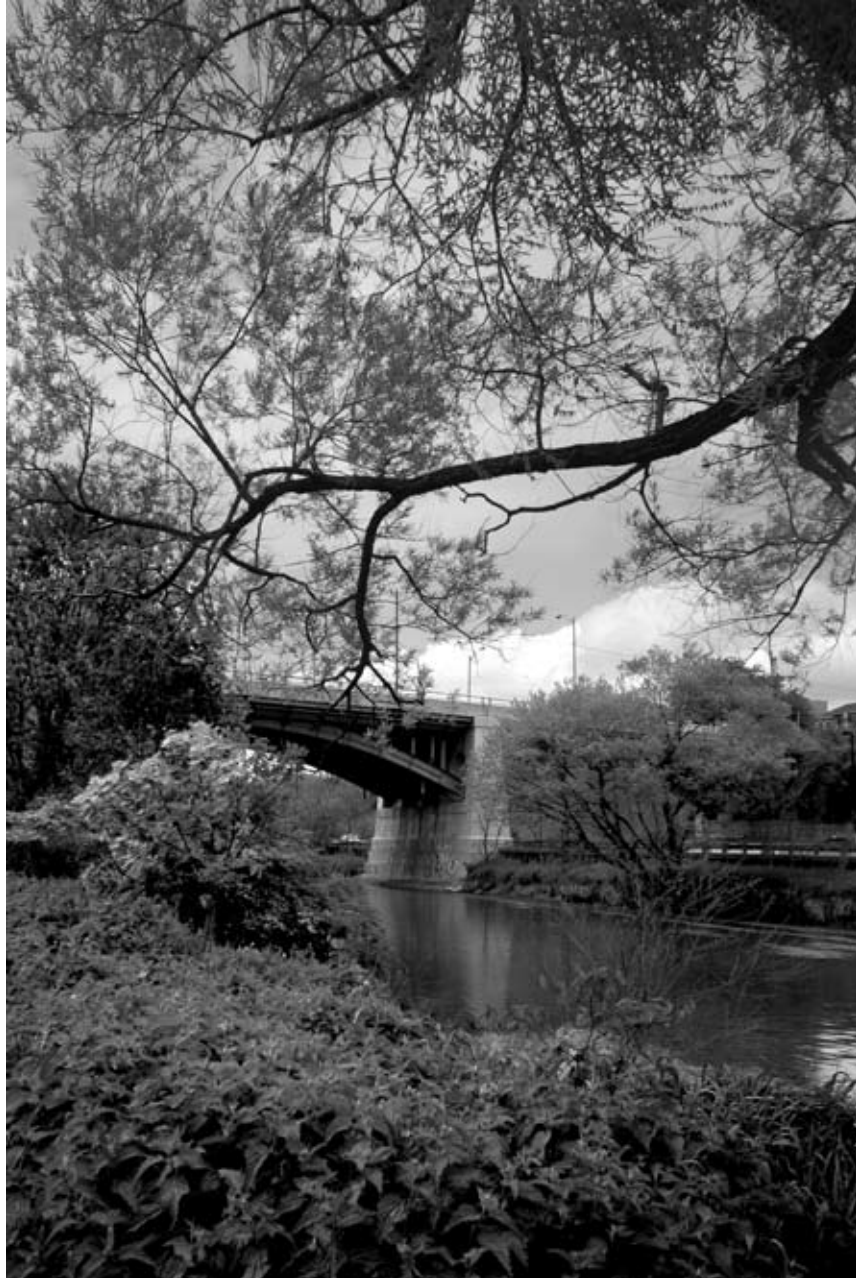




6.10: Untitled (The Don Valley #10)



6.11: Untitled (The Don Valley #11)



6.12: Untitled (The Don Valley #12)



6.13: Untitled (The Don Valley #13)





6.14: Untitled (The Don Valley #14)



6.15: Untitled (The Don Valley #15)



6.16: Untitled (The Don Valley #16)







### ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

I PLACED A JAR IN TENNESSEE,  
AND ROUND IT WAS, UPON A HILL.  
IT MADE THE SLOVENLY WILDERNESS  
SURROUND THAT HILL.  
THE WILDERNESS ROSE UP TO IT,  
AND SPRAWLED AROUND, NO LONGER WILD.  
THE JAR WAS ROUND UPON THE GROUND  
AND TALL AND OF A PORT IN AIR.  
IT TOOK DOMINION EVERY WHERE.  
THE JAR WAS GRAY AND BARE.  
IT DID NOT GIVE OF BIRD OR BUSH,  
LIKE NOTHING ELSE IN TENNESSEE.

Wallace Stevens (1919)

## The Definition of Wilderness

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*What Wilderness is Not:*

(1)

Wilderness is often defined by what it is not. It is a place that is undisturbed, unoccupied, unmodified, untamed, uncultured, unsettled, uninhabited, uncultivated, undeveloped...

*Origin:*

(2)

The word “wilderness” originated from the early Teutonic and Norse root *willed*. To be *willed* was to be full of will, obstinate and unruly. From *willed* came the adjective *wilde* which described a quality of being disordered and out of control, ungoverned by principal or patterns, like the action of boiling water.

*Wilde* was joined with the word *doer*, meaning animal, to set apart those animals, the *wildoer*, that were not domesticated and therefore not under human control but acting from their own will.

The suffix ‘-ness’ creates abstract nouns, qualities and states that drift away from their owners, disembodied.

Adding ‘-ness’ to *wildoer* transformed it into the floating condition of *wildeorness* – a quality like that of an untamed animal. And the landscape across which this quality settled, the place of wild beasts, the place where the quality of being *wilde* was contained, came to be called the wilderness.

(3)

### *What Wilderness Is:*

The property of being extremely abundant.

A large number or vast assemblage of people, animals or things.

A bewildering or unchecked profusion, mass or tangle.

An extensive area that is worthless for cultivation or inhabitation, a wasteland.

The state of being out of favour in politics.

A piece of land set aside or neglected.

A large tract of land in its natural condition.

A maze or labyrinth within a garden or park.

A place of peril.

A place in which one becomes lost or is lonely.

Place one visits but does not remain.

(4)

### *The Creation of Wilderness:*

In a disruptive moment during the normal process of development, the city heaved, regurgitating half-digested fragments of itself into the lake where they petrified into a spongy sort of tumourous barnacle. And Nature took it as its own, as it takes all formless waifs, seeping into its lacey perforations to search for richness out of which to burst with growth.

*The Definition of Feral:*

Having returned to a wild or untamed state from a state of domestication, as in 'a pack of feral dogs'. (Other animals likely to turn feral are goats, cats and camels.)

Suggestive of the ferocity or viciousness seen in wild animals, as in 'a feral grin'.

Causing death, fatal, as in 'feral accidents'.

(5) Bleak and gloomy.

*Fecundity:*

(6) Fecundity refers to the potential to bring forth growth. In biology it is measure by the number of gametes, seed sets or propagules.

Annie Dillard writes on the subject:

(7) I don't know what it is about fecundity that so appals. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives.

*Wilderness Lost:*

(8) Wilderness is a temporal quality. It is always something older, a fragment of a prior age lingering in the present. Perhaps it is something that can only ever be experienced as a loss; a reminder of what used to be, a marker against which to see change, like meadow crawling across fresh earth mounds.

(9) At the end of his life, even Enkidu laments what he lost when he came to the city and cries, "for I too once in the wilderness with my wife had all the treasure I wished."

*The Definition of Haggard:*

An hawk or falcon that was captured from the wild as an adult.

Looking exhausted and worn, showing the effects of overwork, as in 'the haggard faces of workers'.

Wild or anxious in appearance as in 'haggard eyes'.

An enclosure on a farm, especially for stacking grain or hay.

Disposed to break away from duty.

(10)

*The Demon of the Wilderness:*

In Leviticus, Aaron was instructed to cast lots over two goats. One would become an offering to God and the other was sent to Azazel, the demon of the wilderness.

Aaron laid all the iniquities and transgressions of his people on the head of that goat then set it free in a rugged, uninhabited area. And the goat would carry the sins out of civilization and into the wilderness. It would trot into the dusty distance where Azazel dwelled, smelling the wind.

(11)

*Artemis:*

Artemis, the twin sister of Apollo, was a virgin huntress who roamed the wild lands beyond the cities and cultivated fields with her train of beautiful nymphs. She was a goddess of fertility, but not the kind that helped nudge the sprouts of agricultural productivity; Artemis offered only the kind of blind wild fecundity that nourishes every wild thing only to thoughtlessly slaughter it, and that cannot stimulate healing without fueling pestilence in the same breath.

She was dark, cold and cruel, living in the murky green shadows of the most inaccessible places, where she gave sanctuary to fierce beasts and outlaws. She was rarely seen. Those who did see her could no longer hold on their human form, transforming into bears and stags, or torn to pieces, dissolving into the wilderness.

(12) She could only be known by her emissary, Dionysus, a goat-like man who came from the forest to disrupt the order of the city with his mad revelry.

*Deformed:*

(13) When city was first carved out of wilderness, inside and outside had a tense relationship. What was outside was muddled and unruly, impervious to the order of the inside. Its strangeness loomed, menacing, with an animated darkness that seemed to hold grotesque monsters and semi-human wild creatures who stole human babies and replaced them with their own freakish deformed children.

Georges Bataille writes:

A 'freak' in any given fair provokes a positive impression of aggressive incongruity, a little comic, but much more a source of malaise. This malaise is, in an obscure way, tied to a profound seductiveness. And, if one can speak of a dialectic of forms, it is evident that it is essential to take into account deviations for which nature – even if they are most often determined to be against nature – is incontestably responsible.

(14) On a practical level this impression of incongruity is elementary and constant: it is possible to state that it manifests itself to a certain degree in the presence of any given human individual. But it is barely perceptible. That is why it is preferable to refer to monsters in order to determine it.

*Inversion:*

(15) When we broke the ground open, the tension between the wilderness and the city went slack. The resistance against which humanity asserted itself crumpled. The wilderness rolled over, its density opening up like a dying sponge. The weight wicked out and down the sidewalks, while the city seeped in – a landscape of chromatic eddies and terrific delights.

*Luxury:*

The wilderness changed into a landscape for those who could afford the real cost of solitude – by definition a luxury.

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, recalls:

I went to Saint-Germain for some seven or eight days with Therese, and our landlady, a decent woman, and another woman friend of hers. I think of this trip as one of the most pleasant in my life. The weather was very fine; those good women undertook all the trouble and expense...and I, without a care in the world, came in at meal times and was unrestrainedly gay over table. For all the rest of the day, wander deep into the forests, I sought and I found the vision of those primitive times, the history of which I proudly traced. I demolished the petty lies of mankind; I dared to strip man's nature naked, to follow the progress of time, and trace the things which have distorted it; and by comparing man as he has made himself with man as he is by nature I showed him in his pretended perfection the source of his true misery.

(16)

Trouble and expense, it seems, can now be peeled out the wilderness – perhaps to become untamed disembodied suffixes.

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1 “define: wilderness,” Google search. <http://www.google.ca/search?hl=en&q=define%3A+wilderness&btnG=Search&meta=> (accessed: April 12, 2009).

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See also, Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1-7.
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- 8 For a discussion of the temporal qualities of nature, see Soper, *What is Nature*, 187-90. Also, Harrison, *Forests*, 1.
- 9 *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 31.
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- 11 Leviticus 16:8-16:22
- 12 Harrison, *Forests*, 19-29; Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 12-13.
- 13 For a discussion regarding the terror of the wilderness see, Nash, *Wilderness*, 10-13.
- 14 Bataille, “The Deviations of Nature,” in *Visions of Excess*, 55.
- 15 For a nuanced discussion regarding changed relationship with nature, see Soper, *What is Nature*, 92-98.
- 16 Rousseau, *Confessions*, 362.



BEYOND THE FENCE THE FOREST STOOD UP SPECTRALLY IN THE MOONLIGHT, AND THROUGH THAT DIM STIR, THROUGH THE FAINT SOUNDS OF THAT LAMENTABLE COURTYARD, THE SILENCE OF THE LAND WENT HOME TO ONE'S VERY HEART – ITS MYSTERY, ITS GREATNESS, THE AMAZING REALITY OF ITS CONCEALED LIFE.

**Joseph Conrad**, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

FOR BEAUTY IS NOTHING BUT THE BEGINNING OF TERROR, WHICH WE STILL ARE JUST ABLE TO ENDURE, AND WE ARE SO AWED BECAUSE IT SERENELY DISDAINS TO ANNIHILATE US...

**Rainer Maria Rilke**, *Duino Elegies - First Elegy* (1902)

## The Leslie Street Spit

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7.1: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #1)



7.2: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #2)



7.3: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #3)





7.4: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #4)



7.5: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #5)



7.6: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #6)



7.7: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #7)





7.8: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #8)



7.9: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #9)



7.10: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #10)



7.11: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #11)





7.12: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #12)



7.13: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #13)



7.14: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #14)



7.15: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #15)





7.16: Untitled (The Leslie Street Spit #16)





ALSO MY MAIN FEAR, WHICH I MEAN TO CONFRONT.  
WHENEVER I VISIT MY MOTHER  
I FEEL I AM TURNING INTO EMILY BRONTË,

MY LONELY LIFE AROUND ME LIKE A MOOR,  
MY UNGAINLY BODY STUMPING OVER THE MUD FLATS  
WITH A LOOK OF TRANSFORMATION  
THAT DIES WHEN I COME IN THE KITCHEN DOOR.  
WHAT MEAT IS IT, EMILY, WE NEED?

*Anne Carson, The Glass Essay (1994)*

## The Definition of Canada

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*Density:*

- (1) A population of about 33,617,000 in 9,984,670 square kilometres.

*Origin:*

- (2) The name Canada is said to have come from the Iroquoian word, meaning 'village' or 'cluster of huts', that was used to direct Jacques Cartier in the right direction. A second story, claims that the name came from Spanish explorers who, after travelling north in search of more treasure, disappointedly scrawled across their maps *acà nada*, 'here is nothing.'

*Receptacle:*

- (3) Before he dies, Victor Frankenstein watches his monster disappear into a snowy Canadian landscape – a scapegoat for the predicament of progress, chased into an icy desert.

*Absence:*

Anthropologists say that disease travels faster than people. So when the new arrivals looked around and saw a vacant landscape, they could believe it the fresh, raw wilderness they were looking for.

(4)

They saw absence. And seeing absence causes blindness to presence. Things disappear into emptiness.

*Double Nature:*

Susanna Moodie, an early Canadian settler, concludes her memoir about life in her new home with a reflection on its value:

If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property, and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in vain.

(5)

But the same woman also writes:

The location was beautiful and I was greatly consoled by this circumstance. The aspect of Nature ever did and I hope ever will continue, "to shoot marvellous strength into my heart." As long as we remain true to the Divine Mother, so long will she remain faithful to her suffering children.

(6)

*Diagnosis:*

Margaret Atwood says Ms. Moodie split herself in two, that there is a doubleness to her thinking. The split lets nature be many things; it lifts ideas away from each other turning them into sheer floating layers free to contradict each other without consideration.

Atwood diagnoses this schizophrenia as the national mental illness of Canada.

(7)



*Freedom:*

Moodie writes:

The pure beauty of the Canadian water, the sombre but august grandeur of the vast forest that hemmed us in on every side and shut us out from the rest of the world, soon cast a magic spell upon our spirits, and we began to feel charmed with the freedom and solitude around us.

(8)

*Freedom, Part Two:*

With a little trickle of fear leaking out between her words (although she calls it an irk that turn into amusement) Susanna Moodie also writes that,

[servants] no sooner set foot upon the Canadian shores than they become possessed with this ultra-Republican spirit. All respect for their employers, all subordination is at end; the very air of Canada severs the tie of mutual obligation which bound you together...

They would come in without the least ceremony, and, young as they were, ask me a thousand impertinent questions; and when I civilly requested them to leave the room, they would range themselves upon the doorstep, watching my motions, with their black eyes gleaming upon me through their tangled uncombed locks Their company was a great annoyance, for it obliged me to put a painful restraint upon the thoughtfulness in which it was so delightful to me to indulge. Their visits were not visits of love, but of mere idle curiosity, not unmingled with malicious hatred.

(9)

*Valley:*

It slipped through the city, quietly cleaving, like a soggy ink-seeping wound across which the city tried to pull itself closed with neat threads of infrastructure hauled across like sutures trying to prevent time from running over the edge and pooling below.

*Garrisons:*

The complete freedom of the wilderness was too much writes Northrop Frye. He calls it “a terror of the soul.” Pockets had to be carved out from the menacing, unthinking vastness. Walls were built to hold back the darkness of the wilderness.

(10)

*Desert:*

One day, driving along the northern edge of Newmarket, I was surprised by the sudden appearance of what appeared to be a dusty desert stretching out beside me across one of the old farm blocks. After slowing down to look more carefully at the pyramidal forms sprouting out of the horizon, I realized that it was just the routine clearing of land in preparation for the construction of some new houses.

*Floating:*

Barbara Gowdy, a writer from Don Mills, Ontario, says of that landscape:

If you come from nowhere, then you're not really expected to describe it. You can float out into other places. That was an appetite that the landscape gave us.

(11)

*Windows:*

The imagination looked out of the window (it had to turn its head sharply to check if the window was not floating), and asked about the tentative mental occupation below, spread out like tents. I had been having nightmares of dark men keeping human spines in aquariums. Safety from dark places, I explained.

*Tethered:*

Georges Bataille writes:

Emily Bronte, of all women, seems to have been the object of a privileged curse. Her short life was only moderately unhappy. Yet, keeping her moral purity intact, she had a profound experience of the abyss of Evil. Though few people could have been more severe, more courageous or more proper, she fathomed the very depths of Evil.

(12)

Sometimes I wonder if Emily Bronte was the first to consider suburban existence.

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- 1 "Canada," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Canada&oldid=284642681> (accessed April 14, 2009).
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  - 3 Shelly, *Frankenstein*, 9.  
Richler, *This is my Country*, 4.
  - 4 Macy & Bonnemaïson, *Architecture and Nature*, 1.  
Wright, *Short History of Progress*, 112-114.
  - 5 Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*, 454-455.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, 122.
  - 7 Atwood, *Survival*, 60-62.  
Atwood, *Journals of Susanna Moodie*, x-xii.
  - 8 Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*, 257.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 122, 182.
  - 10 Frye, *The Bush Garden*, 227.  
See also, Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 117-121.
  - 11 Barbara Gowdy, interview quoted in, Richler, *This is My Country*, 20.
  - 12 Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 15.



WHY ALL OF A SUDDEN THIS UNREST  
AND CONFUSION. (HOW SOLEMN THE FACES HAVE BECOME).  
WHY ARE THE STREETS AND SQUARES CLEARING QUICKLY,  
AND ALL RETURN TO THEIR HOMES, SO DEEP IN THOUGHT?

BECAUSE NIGHT IS HERE BUT THE BARBARIANS HAVE NOT  
COME.

AND SOME PEOPLE ARRIVED FROM THE BORDERS,  
AND SAID THAT THERE ARE NO LONGER ANY BARBARIANS.

AND NOW WHAT SHALL BECOME OF US WITHOUT ANY  
BARBARIANS?

THOSE PEOPLE WERE SOME KIND OF SOLUTION.

**Constantine P. Cavafy**, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904)

YET IN THE ALERT, WARM ANIMAL THERE LIES THE PAIN AND  
BURDEN OF AN ENORMOUS SADNESS. FOR IT TOO FEELS THE  
PRESENCE OF WHAT OFTEN OVERWHELMS US: A MEMORY, AS IF  
THE ELEMENT WE KEEP PRESSING TOWARD WAS ONCE MORE  
INTIMATE, MORE TRUE, AND OUR COMMUNION INFINITELY  
TENDER.

**Rainer Maria Rilke**, *Duino Elegies - Eighth Elegy* (1922)

# Building Site

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8.1: Untitled (Building Site #1)



8.2: Untitled (Building Site #2)





8.3: Untitled (Building Site #3)



8.4: Untitled (Building Site #4)



8.5: Untitled (Building Site #5)



8.6: Untitled (Building Site #6)





8.7: Untitled (Building Site #7)



8.8: Untitled (Building Site #8)



8.9: Untitled (Building Site #9)



8.10: Untitled (Building Site #10)





8.11: Untitled (Building Site #11)



8.12: Untitled (Building Site #12)



8.13: Untitled (Building Site #13)



8.14: Untitled (Building Site #14)





8.15: Untitled (Building Site #15)





BUT THE WILDERNESS HAD FOUND HIM OUT EARLY, AND HAD TAKEN ON HIM A TERRIBLE VENGEANCE FOR THE FANTASTIC INVASION. I THINK IT HAD WHISPERED TO HIM THINGS ABOUT HIMSELF WHICH HE DID NOT KNOW, THINGS OF WHICH HE HAD NO CONCEPTION TILL HE TOOK COUNSEL WITH THIS GREAT SOLITUDE – AND THE WHISPER HAD PROVED IRRESISTIBLY FASCINATING.

**Joseph Conrad**, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

## Speculations on the Meaning of Wilderness

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*Speculation 1 (Exodus):*

When Jeremiah, the yoke wearing prophet, overwhelmed and frustrated with the world around him wishes,

(1) Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them! for they be all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men,

he is evoking a long tradition of disassociation by escape into the wilderness.

(2) Moses, for example, was a Hebrew son raised by the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh, who encountered God while tending sheep. Shepherds at this time lived passed the margins of civilized settlements, living like nomads and wandering from pasture to pasture with their flock. God told Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and so he did, into a place often called the desert, but also sometimes the wilderness.

(3) This place is given more than one name in Hebrew texts, but none really has the same meaning as our word 'desert'. We got to 'desert' from the Latin Vulgate translation of the bible which uses *desertum* to name this place, referring to solitude not a sandy expanse. Our word 'wilderness' comes closer to the Hebrew words, though is not quite the same. In Hebrew, the place of the Exodus was called *Jeshimon*, meaning a desolate place, a waste space that was unproductive and uncultivated. It is also sometimes called *Midbar*, a name that comes from the root *dabar* meaning to lead in the sense of cattle or sheep to pasture, and was therefore the place where the tracts of pasture lay – a place shared between the nomads with their flocks and the wild beasts.

When Moses brought his people to this place, they faced many hardships, but this is what made a withdrawal from tyranny and persecution possible.

Similarly, when Saturn was overthrown from Olympus, he fled to the forests that would later become Rome, where he reigned over the Golden Age of humanity, an age of content shepherds living untroubled in a green landscape. These same forests offered asylum to Evander, Aeneas, Romulus and Remus – all exiles. For a long time the wildernesses of the world – the waste spaces, and dark patches – offered a home to outcasts, fugitives, criminals, thieves, the insane, the lepers, sorcerers, hermits, heroes, wanderers, lovers and saints; the persecuted, the lost, and the ecstatic.

(4)

### *Exodus, Part 2:*

Douglas Copland tells the tale of contemporary exodus:

In the 1990s, a lot of people I knew - from Ontario, in particular - would sell everything and move to Whistler and start life over again, only when they got there all they found was a lot of other people from Ontario doing exactly the same thing.

(5)

Sprawl happens when edges seep, dissolving more the further they spread. If the inside follows you wherever you go, like a sail stitched to your bones, you can never get to a boundary.

The word sprawl comes from an Old English word that means to writhe. If sprawl is the result of attempting to get away, then is it not indeed a kind of writhing, as if suffocating inside an elastic bottle, unable to get outside?

(6)

### *Restraint:*

Canada's largest urban park is in Vancouver, a peninsular oasis of tall treed forest sitting on the edge of the city. The park's dedication plaque states that it is for the use and enjoyment of all people; and indeed, unlike those distant wilderness parks of the north, it is easy for the urban population to find its way into the tranquil shade of those nearby trees: a pastoral scene of diurnal recreation and relaxation.



But, at night it is hard not to watch the shadows turn menacing, crawling with the possibility of peril, becoming a kind of darkness that wants to pull you in. So close to the pulse of the city, there can be no tranquil forest sleep. The park becomes a hungry, stalking, grasping kind of wilderness.

The park's strange popular history is full of stores about bodies that are buried there: an ancient native burial ground, a mass grave for the unfortunate victims of the small pox epidemic, the site of numerous uninvestigated and forgotten murders. Next to the glimmering towers of the city, the urban forest grows out of writhing earth. If the wilderness offers freedom, it is an indifferent freedom. Not only can terrible things happen, but they can happen without seeming to have occurred at all; away from context, horror is swallowed in the apathy of nature. And bodies, hidden or lost, in the spongy forest floor, quietly feed the green foliage above.

(7)

*Speculation 2 (Perspective):*

In Chrétien de Troyes medieval epic about Yvain, the heartbroken knight departs civilization to live in the wilderness:

He wished to flee to some wild land  
alone, where no one knew him and  
could know where they could seek him out;  
where nobody who knew about  
him, man or woman, could obtain  
a word of news about Yvain, ...  
They let him go alone, and he  
walked on and on until he went  
far past each canopy and tent.  
A whirlwind broke loose in his brain,  
so violent that he went insane,  
and clawed himself, tore off his clothes,  
and fled across the fields and rows.  
He left his servants lost behind.  
Astonished, they tried hard to find  
Yvain and sought him left and right,  
in orchards, houses where at night  
the warriors in the town would stay,  
and hedgerows, but he ran away...  
Once in the wood, he lay in wait

for animals, killed them, and ate  
their flesh uncooked, completely raw,  
like a wild man...

(8)

Yvain's madness is eventually overcome; he regains his faculty of reason and returns to civilization more valiant and virtuous than ever before.

But Yvain is not alone in this experience; there are many medieval stories of knights who, going mad in the wilderness, live there for some time as wild animals, before returning to civilization as revitalized champions of social order. These knights take themselves apart to learn how it is they were put together. And, having seen the outside, and in fact become the outside, they return to the order of the inside, fiercely defending it from the threats they now understand.

(9)

It is a regeneration of what Joseph Conrad would call deliberate belief.

As Conrad explains, with a narrator who, much like the Knights, has travelled to the heart of darkness and back:

Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags – rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want deliberate belief.

He goes on to clarify to his listeners why this is so essential:

With solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These things make all the difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness...the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in – your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure back-breaking business.

(10)

*Edges:*

(11) For a long time there were edges where one could actually live. Old words for witch usually mean something like “hedge-rider” or “she who straddles the hedge.” One can imagine that the hedges were once walls of shrubbery that marked the threshold between a place and what was beyond. And lingering around this place were all those of double identity – like the witches but also the bastards, the mongrels, the troublesome, the miscreants, the deformed and the unmanageable – all those who did not fully belong to the order inside. It seems that borders are of special importance to the subjugated members of a society – often women and slaves – the half participants. But the edge-dwellers could also play an important role for those on the inside. They understood limits because they lived on them, constantly passing back and forth. By sitting on the edge, one foot already on the outside, they could easily slip over and view what was impossible to see clearly from the inside. Edge-dwellers, like knights, could get perspective.

*Perspective, Part 2:*

(12) Margaret Atwood says that in the stories we tell, those who step into the wilderness end up dead; or, if they survive, they return unchanged with no special knowledge, no victory, no transformation, nothing but “gratitude for having escaped with [their] life.”

*Speculation 3 (Solidarity):*

(13) Shakespeare puts Lear, no longer a king, in a barren heath landscape under the assault of a horrible storm to ask the question “is man no more than this?” There, stripped of his wealth and power, abandoned and without comfort, Lear sees a vision of his own solitude reflected in the cold, wet, naked madman, Tom. Wandering in that wilderness, sight obscured by the downpour and surrounded by the indifference of howling nature, Lear has the experience of being nothing but “the thing itself,” and this suddenly awakens his empathy.

Emily Bronte puts a pair of her characters out on the heath as well, two children, Cathy and Heathcliff, with a near inhuman compassion for

each other – an empathy so strong that Cathy claims to be Heathcliff. Wandering across the heath one night, sharing the same cloak for warmth, Cathy and Heathcliff creep through a broken hedge to peer into the windows of the neighbouring house. Inside, in a shimmering crimson room, they see two unhappy children fighting over a small pet dog, which they have nearly torn apart in disagreement. Cathy and Heathcliff laugh at this selfish pettiness. The children of that comfortable interior world, left in the absence of their parents, acting out of unmixed self-interest, slip easily into nearly ferocious brutality. Perhaps ironically, the children with a nearly feral life spent in a lonely landscape of “gaunt thorns” and “atmospheric tumult” understand solidarity; although capable of fierce hatreds, they are also capable of forging deep empathetic bonds with each other, while selfishness of the children in the comfortable interior world is restrained only by the authority of their parents.

(14)

Recalling his first night flight Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writes:

It was a dark night, with only occasional scattered lights glittering like stars on the plain. Each one, in that ocean of shadows, was a sign of the miracle of consciousness.

(15)

Years later, Gabrielle Roy, contemplating Saint-Exupéry, asks,

if he was moved that night to the point that he actually counted those scattered lights on the plain confirming man's presence in the great solitude all around, was it not because, he himself...felt perhaps as never before the sense of being very much alone?

In truth, being made aware of our own solitude can give us insight into the solitude of others. It can even cause us to gravitate towards one another as if to lessen our distress. Without this inevitable solitude, would there be any fusion at all, any tenderness between human beings?

(16)

### *Solidarity, Part 2:*

The 18th century philosopher Giambattista Vico theorized that when citizens became too sceptical of their own civilization, they would begin to live in “a deep solitude of spirit and will” – with each person seeking their own advantage in a decadent and covertly savage kind of barbarism. He

predicted that at this point the cities would turn into forests and the forests into lairs of humans.

(17)

But, once those dark forests had crept over the city and turned it to vegetation covered ruin, He speculated that the survivors, finding themselves alone and vulnerable in the darkness, would seek each other out and find compassion again.

#### *Speculation 4 (Renewal):*

(18)

Freud called the feeling of connectedness with the external world “the oceanic.” He speculated that this feeling was the residue of an earlier mental state from a time when the concept of the self was more inclusive of the world around us. The pursuit of this state, the desire to unite with the whole of nature, was he argued, really a wish to return to a womb-like state where one could escape the difficulties of life.

If identity is formed through a process of excluding what is not the self from what is, then the wilderness could be considered the analogous spatial condition to more inclusive states of identity. It is easy to suppose that the wilderness, with its blurred edges and dense textures, could offer an escape from self-consciousness in a momentary vision of pure sensation, all color and light.

Octavio Paz, for example, writes that,

when the self is lost, when identity is lost...the empty pit, the hole that we are fills to overflowing, and becomes a well-spring once gain. When the drought is most severe, water gushes forth...

(19)

The visible entrails, the reverse side of presence, chaos is the primordial stuff, the original disorder, and also the universal womb...The vision of chaos is a sort of ritual bath, a regeneration through immersion in the original fountain, a return to the “life before.”

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte writes about those who live inside this kind of raw natural energy, a place of wild power but also incredibly cruelty. It is attractive but also destructive. Heathcliff and Cathy long for this place where their identities can include each other, but their resolute quest to

get back there, to tear down the boundaries between them, inevitably kills them. For them there can be no end but a dissolution into the landscape.

This is why unmediated access to the world cannot last for long in the human mind. The conscious comes quickly back, throwing a veil of order over the vision of chaos. But in that moment there can, perhaps, be a glinting of conditionality, an unfixing of values – a triggering of the imagination that renews.

### *Speculation 5*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry claims that there would always come a time when his tamed gazelles would begin a strange habit, that inevitably one day even the tamest creature would be found, head lowered, pressing her horns against the trellised fences that kept her safe. These sheltered creatures, still eating from the owner's hand, still caressing with soft muzzles, would stand there pushing – but only gently and without exertion – staring out towards a distant landscape they had never known. And, unless someone intervened, there they would stand, starrng and holding their strange vigil, until they died.

What is it that they were looking at? And what were they yearning for? Saint-Exupéry asks.

A space that will fulfil them, he speculates.

(20)

And us, what is our fascination with gazing at limitlessness, with staring out into unknowable landscapes?

What do we see in scenes that would have been terrifying to our ancestors? Are we like those tamed gazelles, pressing gently against some invisible fence with no intention of escape, backs to our homes, looking out at something dark and mysterious, something ungraspably enormous? Do we too hold vigil for something we cannot name? Do we yearn indifferent (or ignorant?) of the lions lurking out there ready to tear us open, or is part of the pull we feel the malignancy that lies in wait just beyond the fence? Is the sensation of that fence pushing back against our soft noses a feeling of comfort, or is it a disappointment?

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- 1 Jeremiah 9:2
  - 2 Exodus 1-20.  
See also, Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 49.
  - 3 Howlett, James, "Desert (in the Bible)." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appleton Company. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04749a.htm> (accessed December 3, 2008).
  - 4 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 5-6.  
See also, Harrison, *Forests*, 49-50, 247.
  - 5 Douglas Copland, interview quoted in, Richler, *This is My Country*, 35.
  - 6 "sprawl," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sprawl> (accessed: December 3, 2008).
  - 7 "Stanley Park," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Stanley\\_Park&oldid=284263722](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Stanley_Park&oldid=284263722) (accessed December 3, 2008).  
See Also, Richler, *This is My Country*, 152-68.
  - 8 Troyes, *Yvain*, 78-9.
  - 9 Harrison, *Forests*, 66-68.  
Duerr, *Dreamtime*, 65.
  - 10 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 44, 60.
  - 11 Duerr, *Dreamtime*, esp. 46-7, 64-5.  
See Also, Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death*, 221-30.
  - 12 Atwood, *Survival*, 42.
  - 13 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.2-3.4.
  - 14 Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, esp. 25, 48.
  - 15 Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, 3.
  - 16 Roy, "The Theme unfolded by Gabrielle Roy."
  - 17 Vico, *New Science*, 488-9.
  - 18 Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *Civilization, Society, and Religion*, 251-55.
  - 19 Paz, *Alternating Current*, 82-83.  
See also, Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.
  - 20 Saint-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, 108-9.





## GRASS

PILE THE BODIES HIGH AT AUSTERLITZ AND WATERLOO.  
SHOVEL THEM UNDER AND LET ME WORK -

I AM THE GRASS; I COVER ALL.

AND PILE THEM HIGH AT GETTYSBURG  
AND PILE THEM HIGH AT YPRES AND VERDUN.  
SHOVEL THEM UNDER AND LET ME WORK.

TWO YEARS, TEN YEARS, AND PASSENGERS ASK THE  
CONDUCTOR:

WHAT PLACE IS THIS?

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

I AM THE GRASS.

LET ME WORK.

**Carl Sandburg** (1918)

# Piles

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9.1: Untitled (Piles #1)

















9.5: Untitled (Piles #5)







9.7: Untitled (Piles #7)













9.10: Untitled (Piles #10)



9.11: Untitled (Piles #11)



9.12: Untitled (Piles #12)











I HAD THOUGHT TO LIVE BY THE SIDE OF THE CREEK IN ORDER TO SHAPE MY LIFE TO ITS FREE FLOW. BUT I SEEM TO HAVE REACHED A POINT WHERE I MUST DRAW THE LINE. IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THE CREEK IS NOT BUOYING ME UP BUT DRAGGING ME DOWN. LOOK: COCK ROBIN MAY DIE THE MOST GRUESOME OF SLOW DEATHS, AND NATURE IS NO LESS PLEASED; THE SUN COMES UP, THE CREEK ROLLS ON, THE SURVIVORS STILL SING. I CANNOT FEEL THAT WAY ABOUT YOUR DEATH, NOR YOU ABOUT MINE, NOR EITHER OF US ABOUT THE ROBIN'S – OR EVEN THE BARNACLES'. WE VALUE THE INDIVIDUAL SUPREMELY, AND NATURE VALES HIM NOT A WHIT. IT LOOKS FOR THE MOMENT AS THOUGH I MIGHT HAVE TO REJECT THIS CREEK LIFE UNLESS I WANT TO BE UTTERLY BRUTALIZED. IS HUMAN CULTURE WITH ITS VALUES MY ONLY REAL HOME AFTER ALL? CAN IT BE POSSIBLE THAT I SHOULD MOVE MY ANCHOR-HOLD TO THE SIDE OF A LIBRARY? THIS DIRECTION OF THOUGHT BRINGS ME ABRUPTLY TO A FORK IN THE ROAD WHERE I STAND PARALYZED, UNWILLING TO GO ON, FOR BOTH WAYS LEAD TO MADNESS.

*Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1974)*

# Fields

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10.1: Untitled (Fields #1)



























10.7: Untitled (Fields #7)















I USED TO LOVE THAT IRONIC GRASS IN PARAGUAY, PUSHING ITS NOSE UP BETWEEN THE COBBLESTONES OF THE CAPITAL TO SEE, ON BEHALF OF THE INVISIBLE YET ALWAYS PRESENT VIRGIN FOREST, WHETHER MEN STILL HOLD THE CITY, WHETHER PERHAPS THE HOUR HAS COME TO SHOVE ALL THESE STONES ASIDE.

**Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939)**

## Conclusions

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*Conclusion 1 (Nymphs):*

The nymphs were minor classical deities inhabiting the features of nature, particularly springs and trees, and sometimes light, wind and rain. The Greek myths are full of heroes and kings born from nymph mothers. A nymph can also be the larva of certain insects, resembling the adult form but smaller and lacking fully developed wings, and swelling rose buds – all things at the precipice of bursting.

(1)

*River Nymph:*

She was old and tired now, aching, deep in her dense muck, watching the slimy water rush over. I know the world by the taste of the water, she said, but when they come, I still leak slowly into their ears and eyes, with gentle tendrils of green. Then, lost, their thoughts dissolve becoming mine and immaterial. And, in this way I come to know them and all of them, knowing me, forget.

Lately they smell of plastic, as if their dry bones soaked it up, like she has soaked it up. And bodies, confused, turned on themselves, feeding strange pockets of swelling. These ones fall apart easily, almost willingly, as cold water tumbles by, not watching.

### *Rain Nymph:*

It was early in the evening, but clouds were making it darker than it otherwise should have been. The city was lit with a dull purplish and seemingly omniscient glow, dismissing the shadows from their usual tendencies, and further distorting the hues of the city already made strange by the moisture. In its brackish wetness, the world was flat, thin, and peculiarly foreign.

That light soaked into the air, making it heavy and grey. It was the greyness of that luminous-air that made it so itchy as it sunk into the lungs, becoming unbearable. That is when they start to look for the glints of swirling water signaling that the air might be cooler below.

### *Ground Nymph:*

At first it was just small bits of squishy ground. But, the thing with unreliable topography is that it churns quietly unseen for some time. People usually assume that if they walk long enough in one direction they have to come out at an edge. But these sorts of boggy landscapes easily can slip.

### *Green Nymph:*

She crept up the buildings, slowly at first – a thin coating of damp slickness, a barely perceptible shimmer – but putting a hand to it, you could feel the crawling hidden to sight. Up close, a scraping revealed thousands of fantastical creatures, all tendrils and flailing strands of legs, undulating amoebas, trashing pink worms, scaled plates clashing against each other. The seething ferocity of life started dripping off buildings.

### *Indifferent Nymph:*

The cruel indifference of it all was a comfort. Yes, nature's cruelty is also her comfort. Here, for a moment was freedom – her indifference meant my indifference and the surprise of that indifference was filled with kindness.

*Conclusion 2 (Sylphs):*

(2)

A Sylph is an imaginary being inhabiting the air, first proposed by the medieval physician Paracelsus. They are mortal, but have no soul.

*Conclusion 3:*

With an ear to the ground, they listened for cracks. When cracks appear on an infinite surface, they change it from two dimensions to three. It brings up stuff from below, like lava, or from above like lightning. The other thing about cracks is they tend to catch the dirt that is floating in the air.

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1 Dictionary.com, "nymph," *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nymph> (accessed: April 14, 2009).

"nymph," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nymph> (accessed: April 14, 2009).

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2 "Sylph," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.* <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Sylph> (accessed: April 14, 2009).



TRUE, HE HAD MADE THAT LAST STRIDE, HE HAD STEPPED OVER THE EDGE, WHILE I HAD BEEN PERMITTED TO DRAW BACK MY HESITATING FOOT. AND PERHAPS IN THIS IS THE WHOLE DIFFERENCE; PERHAPS ALL THE WISDOM, AND ALL TRUTH, AND ALL SINCERITY, ARE JUST COMPRESSED INTO THAT INAPPRECIABLE MOMENT OF TIME IN WHICH WE STEP OVER THE THRESHOLD OF THE INVISIBLE. PERHAPS!

**Joseph Conrad**, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

# Roadside Wilderness

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11.1: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #1)





11.2: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #2)



11.3: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #3)



11.4: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #4)



11.5: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #5)





11.6: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #6)



11.7: Untitled (Roadside Wilderness #7)





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