# Writing about Writing about Nature: Beyond Traditional Essentialism and Postmodern Constructivism

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As a means of defining and ordering the world, myths play an important part in any culture. At the same time, however, myth-making inevitably privileges particular viewpoints and perspectives. This aspect of mythologizing becomes particularly striking in stories through which the members of a culture view the Other, that which is not (of) them. One such Other is nature. In the process of challenging and settling the wilderness of the American continent, for instance, the white American male certainly mythologized it, a mythology which served as an extension of the Judeo-Christian ethos that man was created in God's image and thus set to dominate the non-human world; to "have dominion over all living things" is the formulation given in Genesis. By vanquishing the "alien" wilderness and making it into a fruitful and cultivated Christian Garden, man saw himself, as Roderick Nash notes in Wilderness and the American Mind, as serving the forces of civilization, order, and enlightenment.[1] The Puritans and the pioneers that were to follow had little sympathy for wild country; John Winthrop's ideal vision was of a city upon a hill. Thus began a three-century long heroic myth of conquering

1 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind.* (1967; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 1-43.

and subduing the wilderness. Today this particular American myth – along with other hegemonic ones – is seriously challenged. The conquest of the natural world of the American continent has in many contemporary readings come very close to a rape. Americans are therefore revising the meaning of that natural environment which they once had in such abundance, and which they considered – and still consider – so essential to their own identity as nation.

Historically speaking, most "readings" of the natural environment have been essentialist ones, finding nature to reflect what poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida would call logocentric, absolute truths. To the Puritans, for instance, the wilderness was seen to represent evil, chaos, and savagery. To Romantics such as Emerson, nature represented goodness, harmony, and nurture; it was pervaded by the spirit of God and should be viewed with respect and reverence. In both cases nature was seen to embody some absolute meaning in itself.

Today, however – due to the detachment engendered by the passing of time and the shift to a more modern, secularized world view, we are struck by the cultural constructedness of such readings. Indeed, according to postmodernist criticism all discourse – no holds barred – is a matter of linguistic construction. As Stanley Fish argued in *Is There a Text in This Class?* "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing."[2] The postmodernist would argue that what nature "represents" cannot be discussed apart from our valuations; any attempt at description is at the same time a means of interpretation; and what we refer to as "reality" is, semiotically speaking, a product of our own constructions, our own myth-making.

One of the positive effects of postmodern thought is undoubtedly its 'demonstration of the fact that our views of nature are never innocent, never free from human complicity and human interests. In my recent work on American nature writing, however, I have become sceptical of thk constructivist as well as the essentialist position. A postmodern, (de)constructivist approach to nature writing has serious drawbacks because of its failure to take account of nature as *subject,* as something that is *given,* however modified by human intervention – something that

2 Stanley Fish, Is *There a Text* in *This* Class? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 327.

also exists independently of us and, indeed, helps delimit and guide our conception of it. The crux of the matter is that man's *construction* of nature according to his own whims and needs is precisely what has produced the continuous and continued rape of the virgin land of the American continent in the first place. It has been the vision of nature as a mere object, as something *Other,* that has rendered the natural world so readily exploitable. The tragic problem in the history of America and other cultures is that human beings for so long have seen fit to mythologize nature without paying heed to the fact that this non-human subject at the same time has represented a body to be respected and be listened to. In our study of the relationship between human beings and a physical world partly not of their own making, we need to somehow evolve a theory which sees nature as a separate agent that has existence in and by itself. What is called for in today's world, it seems to me, is constructivist restraint: to *resist* mythologizing nature as much as possible.

These reflections do not entail any desire to return to an essentialist stance in which nature is seen to embody some absolute meaning which we simply have to uncover. Instead, I am trying to avoid the dichotomy between a constructivist and essentialist stance and search for an alternative position. Maybe a usable starting point could be to employ a model of communication that goes beyond the merely verbal, a model which incorporates the idea that the world speaks to us in non-verbal ways that fundamentally shape our verbal response to it. The world of nature could for instance be incorporated into our conventional communication model in terms of the concept of "context":

| | CONTEXT | |
|---|---|---|
| SENDER | MESSAGE | RECEIVER |
| WRITER | TEXT | READER |

Here the concept of CONTEXT would include not only the dialogic, intertextual web of speech and text that shapes our communication, but also the natural, phenomenal world which, in an extended sense of the term, speaks to us through our senses. It is an astonishing aspect of our human *hubris* that we have so eagerly engendered models of communica-

tion from which the role of the phenomenal world is excluded. This may be regarded as the product of long Judeo-Christian dualist tradition that so readily separated the mind from the body, the intellect from the senses. Postmodernist criticism represents no exception in this respect. One is, however, tempted to point out the obvious, namely that nature is not (even primarily) a cultural-linguistic construction; it exists in terms of an overwhelming, non-verbal presence and affects us in terms of its heat or cold, rain or sleet, its shifting seasons, its fertility or aridity, which constantly guide our responses to it. To think of verbalization as our predominant way of responding to the world is to radically impoverish the idea of our communication with it.

My main point in this connection is quite simply that, in viewing writing about nature as a response to the environment, we include nature as part of a communication situation. Speaking or writing about nature thus becomes, at one and the same time, an act of representation and an act of construction. Of course a person's reaction to an environment may in fact be more or less responsive to the character of that environment, just as an act of reading a text may be more or less responsive to its texture. The idea of responsiveness is, however, involved in both cases. In the terms of a reader-response critic like Wolfgang Iser, one's literary interpretations should always pay attention to, and be guided by, instructions imbedded in the text itself.[3] The same principles are involved in writing that attempts to describe of the natural environment.

In her dissertation in philosophy on the idea of "place" Anniken Greve works with two concepts that she calls sensitivity to place (her Norwegian term is *omverdenømfintlighet*) and place-making ability (*steds*-skapende evne). Her main point in this connection is that people's sense of place results from two types of processes, responsiveness and creativeness, and that people's place-making ability is indeed an imaginative realization of their sensitivity to the particular character of a given place.[4]

These terms may be applied to the study of nature writing as well. An insistence on the interplay of responsiveness and creativeness is for instance what we find in William Carlos Williams' poem "A Sort of a Song" when he speaks of the importance

3 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic* Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

– through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent![5]

Critics as well as students tend to focus on the statement, "No ideas but in things," but equally important is of course the idea that immediately follows, "Invent!" It is the complexity of insisting on both representation and creation that is the key to much of Williams's poetics, and which made him such an important influence on contemporary poetry, to a greater degree than either Eliot or Stevens. What Williams is paradoxically arguing is that one can be genuinely representational only through invention, and one can be genuinely inventive only through representation. This alternative to pure constructivism and pure essentialism I am tempted to denominate – in philosophical terms – the *naturalist* position, according to which interpretation, an inescapable part of perception, should nonetheless be based on being as attentive as possible to the complex web – the "text" – of our phenomenal experience.

Such a naturalist position is certainly central in most contemporary American writing on nature, whether we call this an art of representational creation or creative representation. One of the earliest examples of the emergence of such a naturalist frame of mind in America is a short essay by Aldo Leopold, one of the first ecologists in the United States, entitled "Thinking Like a Mountain." In this essay he speaks of a wolf he once participated in killing in his youth, when everybody believed that the extermination of wolves would create a hunters' paradise. What he found, as state after state extirpated its wolves, were instead devastated mountain slopes with mazes of new deer trails and starving deer and browsed-to-death landscapes where every bush and edible tree had been "defoliated to the height of a saddlehorn." As he puts it, "I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer."[6] According to Leopold, then,

4 See Anniken Greve, "Kort om stedsfilosofi," *Vinduet* 50.4 (1996), pp. 20-23.

5 William Carlos Williams, "A Sort of a Song," in Charles Tomlinson, ed., *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 145.

6 Aldo Leopold, "Thinking Like a Mountain," in *A Sand County Almaizac and Sketches **Here** and There* (1949; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 131-32.

human beings must learn to think like a mountain. They need to evolve a consciousness sufficiently responsive to the complexities of the natural environment itself. And in order to do so, they must divest themselves of the supreme prerogative of constructing nature as they see fit; they must divest themselves of the role of the conqueror and instead become a plain member among many different members of the natural world. This, in Leopold's view, is the prerequisite for people's ability to listen to the land.

Denouncing past constructions of nature into some voiceless "Other," contemporary American nature writing has frequently accentuated the idea of communicating (in the extended sense of the term) with the land. As the American poet Gary Snyder observes in his volume of poetry and prose entitled *Turtle Island:* "At the root of the problem where our civilization goes wrong is the mistaken belief that nature is something less than authentic, that nature is not as alive as man is, or as intelligent, that in a sense it is dead ..."[7] In *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* Barry Lopez sees the tale of humanity as "a story of ageless conversation, not only conversation among ourselves about what we mean and wish to do, but a conversation held with the land ..."[8] He goes on to speak of the writer's duty to listen to the land, and hence to come as close as possible to bringing out its indigenous meaning. Lopez even writes of "a rhythm indigenous to this land, not one imposed on it. The imposed view, however innocent, always obscures.... [T]o understand why a region is different, to show an initial deference toward its mysteries, is to guard against a kind of provincialism that vitiates the imagination, that stifles the capacity to envision what is different"(158). A marked trend in much contemporary nature writing is its attempts to 'evoke what is different about the non-human world without violating it, without making it into an object. The idea of respecting nature as a subject must in Lopez' view spring from a willingness to *converse* with it.

The metaphor of conversation brings me back to where I started, the view of nature writing as a response to, and result of, a communication

7 Gary Snyder, "The Wilderness," in *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 107.

8 Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imaginatioiz and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Bantam, 1986), p. xxvi.

situation. The idea of listening and responding to nature represents an alternative position to both constructivism and essentialism; to the idea, on the one hand, of being the only talker (and thus free to define the world in one's own image) and to the idea, on the other hand, of being merely a passive receptacle of objective truths projected by the natural world. Contemporary nature writers, then, often try to do something other than replacing one myth with another. Precisely because no myth is innocent, they attempt to resist mythologizing as far as possible.

One of the main advantages of what I have termed a "naturalist" perspective is that it makes us, as textual interpreters, acutely sensitive to both constructivist and essentialist strategies. In our analysis of nature writing we do not usually have the recourse to using nature itself as a yard-stick for our judgment, but we may talk of constructivist and essentialist *discourses* at work in the texts themselves. In particular, the practice of naturalist restraint makes us highly conscious of textual-linguistic strategies of anthropocentrism (of placing man in the center of creation) and anthropomorphism (of seeing the natural world in the likeness of human experience). It could be argued that anthropomorphism is an inescapable consequence of being human, but one can nonetheless speak of different degrees to which writers anthropomorphize nature. The more unrestrained a writer is in his anthropomorphic strategies, the less responsive he may appear to his natural environment. Such a writer's sensitivity to place – his *omverdenømfintlighet* – may turn our to be weakly developed indeed.

The American Romantic period is a good example of a period which includes both essentialist and more naturalist-oriented forms of writing, the former represented for instance by Emerson's *Nature* and the latter by Thoreau's *Walden.* Although Emerson signals a radical ideological change by way of his vision of nature as our spiritual home, he is quite unrestrained in his anthropomorphism. Although he speaks of "an occult relation between man and the vegetable[vg], he is, when all is said and done, not much interested in the vegetable as such. Instead he transposes the natural environment into spirituality at the drop of an idea: "A lamb is

9 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures,* Alfred R. Ferguson and Robert E. Spiller, eds.; vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 10.

innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections" (18), as he puts it in his chapter on "Language." Combining his essentialist Platonism with a flair of unlimited constructivism, he goes on to declare: "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (21). These latter reflections help explain why anthropomorphism so easily merges into anthropocentrism in Emerson, as when he suggests that nature is "made to serve" and "receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode" (25). Emerson furthermore argues: "The instincts of the ant are very unimportant considered as the ant's; but the moment a ray of relation is seen to extend from it to man ... then all its habits ... become sublime" (19). In particular the last four chapters of Nature leave the reader with the impression that Emerson gets much more excited by his own Platonic idealism than by his actual relationship to material experience, the mere refuse ("scoriae") of "the substantial thoughts of the Creator" (23).

Thoreau's Walden and Whitman's "Song of Myself" pay far greater attention to the presence of the physical, phenomenal world; their texts paradoxically combine a representational sensitivity to nature with an imaginative construction of it. For instance, although Thoreau anthropomorphizes natural phenomena such as the war of the ants, his descriptions of the colors, temperatures, depths, and fish species of the pond are those of a meticulous, responsive observer. Almost devoid of anthropocentrism, Thoreau's Walden ends up asserting that our planet is "not a mere fragment of dead history" but "living poetry like the leaves of a tree," a "living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic."[10]

And Whitman, whose idealistic transcendentalism at times rivals Emerson's own, evinces an extreme sensitivity and responsiveness to the phenomenal world. His relationship to nature is fundamentally a physical and sensuous one; nature is not only around him but inside him and crowds in on him by way of his intense experiences of touch, sight, sound, and smell. Whitman's conception of the relationship between his soul and his body is itself the embodiment of a naturalist alternative to

10 *Henry David Thoreau, Walden*, J. *Lyndon Shanley, ed. (Princeton:*Princeton *University Press,* 1971), p. 309.

both traditional essentialism and postmodern constructivism. After having delivered his Emersonian climactic dictum that "a kelson of the creation is love," he ends with the following lines:

And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and pokeweed.[11]

To Whitman, meaning – the inevitability of interpretation – must be grounded in the phenomenal world itself. Emerson's ant has now come back into nature and is once again important in itself. So are moss on the fence, weeds, and heaped stones. This is nature writing at its most sublime. No ideas but in things, indeed. Invent!

11 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in Leaves of *Grass,* Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 33.