V HATTER ONE: NATURE AND THE AMERICAN HERITAGE: THE ETHIC OTADORATION,
< 1< AND THE ETHIC OF EXPLOITATION

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By the verdant lawns o£ stately Mt. Vernon, the home of our nation's founding father, flows the stinking sewage-filled river Potomac. No one today sanely dares to swim in those waters. This ironic coincidence, a national landmark and a polluted river, symbolizes a fateful dilemma facing our society.

We venerate our past, so much of which is rooted in a profound sense for the land, the frontier, and the wilderness. "We were yours before you were ours," Robert Frost said of the land in his poem celebrating the inaugeration of John F. Kennedy. We also drink deeply of the world of nature around us, camping, hiking, sailing, and surfing whenever we can find the time. We are a nation which heads for the rugged life in nature on the we ekend s.

But at the same time we find ourselves living daily in an immensely complex, highly industrialized urban society which again and again despoils our living space. Air unfit to breathe; water not suitable for drinking or even for swimming; open spaces no longer able to support wildlife; milk, fish, and other foodstuffs contaminated by pesticides. That is the legacy of our mass technocratic society. Why is this so? How can we Americans so intensely adore and yet so violently abuse the land of our destiny? And how should we respond to this dilemma?

Many must make their voices heard if we are to answer these questions. We need the sympathetic insight of the historian to help us to understand how deeply in our national life the dilemma is ingrained^. We need the cool perspective of the scientist and the engineer to help us to see the extent to which we have polluted nature, to suggest methods to curtail the pollution, and to show us how to reclaim what we have despoiled. We need, as well, the

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JTtt passion of the conservationist and the preservationist. Without their voices to challenge our society's complacency, we may very well drift so far down the river of pollution that there will be no turning back.(2) We must also listen to our sensitive city planners and our humanistic philosophers, lest we unknowingly continue to build our society into one vast blacktop jungle from sea to sea, with no wilderness places,, no lakes, and few buildings designed to be responsive to our primordial need to hear the pulse of nature where we live and work.(3) Above all we need men of historical vision and political courage to speak in the houses of state and national government and through the mass media, -- men who recognize the drift of our society toward total pollution, who are willing to champion radical programs to change our course, and who are able to withstand the intense political pressures mounted by special interest groups.

Along with all the others, finally, a theological voice must be raised. For, in many respects the deepest roots of America's dilemma before nature are religious, whether they grow in the land nurtured by the nature-piety of the transcendentalists or the work-piety of the Puritans. Those roots must be unearthed and, where necessary, cast aside in favor of more vital systems of theological values.(4) At the same time, a theological voice must be raised for the sake of the life of the Church itself, both with respect to its involvement in society and with regard to its involvement with its own tradition. How should the millions of Church members in this country understand and respond to the general American dilemma before nature and how should they assess and react to the influence of that dilemma on the life of the Church? These essentially religious problems are the point of departure for this study.(5) Our destination will be a new theological interpretation of the material-vital universe in which we live and move and have our being.(6)

I should stress that as we proceed we will be concerned with the whole matrix of man's organic and physical existence. We will not limit our purview to what Emerson referred to as "essences unchanged by man, space, the air, the river, the leaf."(7) For that is just one impressive aspect of the natural world. That is what we may call wild nature. We will also be concerned with what can be described as cultivated nature and fabricated nature, that is, physical-vital reality as it has been changed, transformed, or even created by man.(8)

On our way, accordingly, we will be looking not only at the stand of virgin timber, the pristine lake, or the unmolested mountain peak, although in many respects that is where America's heart has been fixed. We will also have in view grain fields and flower gardens, skyscrapers and computers. If we were to choose to notice only wild nature and not also cultivated and fabricated nature, we would be forced to overlook both the breadth of the American dilemma and the comprehensiveness of the theological response that is required. The problem is not just that the descendents of George Washington can no longer swim in the Potomac. _^krr^rz±im3,*i's much more fundamental. Something serious is awry with our whole attitude to the material and organic universe in which we live.

THE ETHIC OF ADORATION

American history is dominated by two apparently contradictory themes, p/ature versus Civilization and Civilization versus Mature. This, observed Perry Miller, is the "obsessive American drama."(9) Neither act of this drama is peculiar to America as such. Each has deep roots in Western history, extending back to the classical and biblical sources of Western life. But the obsessive form of the drama, both as it pits nature against civilization and civilization against nature, is uniquely a product- of the New World.

The historical roots of the first theme, t/ature versus Civilization, are in evidence in classical times at least as far back as Vergil, who celebrated the virtue and the simplicity of the rustic life in his Eclogues. On -the biblical side they are evident very early, sometimes strongly, in the wilderness motif of ancient Israel.(10) Later they appear in the lives of Christian monks and ascetics who vLeave- the dry- corrupt life of civilization to go out into the wilderness. They also appear, in a unique way, in the person of St. Francis The drama first began to be played with a profound sense of urgency, however, when industrialism began to sap daily life not only of its shiny traditional virtues, but also of some of its fundamental biological resources, such as fresh air. These were the sentiments of the eighteenth century English poet, James Thompson:

> ...Now from the town
> Buried in smoke, and sleep, and noisome damps,
> Oft let me wander o'er the dwwy fields,
> Where freshness breathes, and dash the trembling drops....(11)

The drama took its"obsessive" form, finally, in America, where from the beginning the fundamental and overpowering natural reality was the wilderness. In a variety of ways, writers like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman, and John Muir, came to identify the vitality of American life with nature, and therefore to oppose it to the city, the railroad, and the steamboat.(12) This opposition was expressed most directly perhaps by Thoreau.(13)

Thoreau's philosophy of life typifies that first theme, nature versus Civilization, in its nineteenth century American form. He developed what I will call an ethic of adoration toward nature. Positively, this ethic means that the individual seeks Deity, virtue, and vitality in nature,^and that he strives for personal purity and vitality of soul through communion with wild nature, although sometimes cultivated nature. So intense is the relationship to nature which this ethic occasions that there is usually little psychic energy left for sustained intellectual and moral

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Thoreau's gospel of the wilderness as a vital healing power is frequently identified with the philosophy of his influential Concord neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson.(20) But close study seems to uncover significant differences between the two. Tempermentally Emerson was not inclined to practice the rigorous rustic exercises commanded in Walden. (He once refused to go on a hike with the naturalist John Muir, much to the latter's dismay.) Intellectually, Emerson evidently approached nature more as a teacher for the Divine conscience in man, rather than as a self-contained experience of raw and cleansing mystical ecstacy.(21) He accordingly has been described as "a pious Platonist who went to nature for confirmation and illustration of his a priori ethical system."(22) Nevertheless, what Emerson apparently intended to say was not clearly heard by most of his readers, including many of his modern critical readers. He was widely read as if he were but a more intellectual and more urbane version of Thoreau. For this confusion, if that finally is what it is, Emerson himself was in large measure responsible, especially through the influence of his own famous paeon for nature. His 1836 essay, Nature, was a central document for his tine.(23)

In his writings on nature Emerson describes how he walks out into nature away from the institutions of man. "In the wilderness," he says, "I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages."(24) He finds the enchantments of nature medicinal, healing. Memorably, he .writes: "Standing on bare ground -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."(25) Like Thoreau, Emerson here contrasts that charged kind of experience of Deity in nature with the sterile ways and works of civilization. Sometimes the contrast is sharply etched, as in the following statement about beauty: "These sunset clouds, these delicately emerging stars, with their private and ineffable glances, signify it and proffer it. I am taught the poorness of our invention, the ugliness .

Liberty Hyde Bailey, born in the Midwest in 1858. Bailey was a professor of horticulture and was well-known around the turn of the century and beyond(he died in 1954). He wrote books with ELZXgk titles such as The Outlook to Nature, The Nature-Study Idea, The Country Life Movement. The Holy Earth, a volume of nature poetry, Wind and Weather, and a book responding to the political dissussion arising out of World War I, What is Democracy?, as well as literally dozens of books on agriculture, horticulture, forestry and nature-lore. He was such a prominent figure in New York State that his name was once seriousl^mentioned in the press as a candidate for governor. He also served on a presidential commieiaion.

Bailey was interested both in securing the stability and the quality of life on the farm, and in conveying to the city dweller the benefits of a life close to nature. Along the way he was able to see a number of positive virtues in the life of the city-dweller.(40) He also took a positive attitude toward political institutions, and defined democracy not only as a form of government for the individual, but also as a form of government for the welfare and development of all individuals.(41) Behind all this lay his conviction that the gospel of nature encourages social reform: "If nature is the norm, then the necessity for correcting and ammending the abuses that accompany civilization becomes badly apparent by verycontrast."(43)

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I But., substantially further than that expression of belief in nature as an impetus and a norm for social refnrm,I?.----------g-------- apart from his Xleconctendations for good gardens and his service on K-LZLZEIZLXIK President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission. The one exception was his book on democracy, written!in 1918. Generally speaking, he simply was not concerned to develop or>. support political and cultural programs for the immediate betterment of urban life. This is not to fault an intensely busy man for not doing something he had no time to do. It is rather

to describe a certain mind-set which he evinced, not uncommon in the circles of those interested so intensely in cultivated nature. His support of the Country Life Movement is typical of his interests. This was a program designed to undergird life on the farm for the farmers. As it was conceived, it was not a program for society as a whole(pertaining chiefly to the farmers); the needs of the city did not come into the picture in any noticeable way.

More to the point, Bailey frequently painted an idyllic picture of the farm and contrasted the farm favorably, again and again, with the town. "I preach the open country," he wrote, "because it is natural and without affectation." "I preach the steadiness of country life, its freedom from speculativeness and from great temptation to evil doing."(44) With several generations of American educators, moreover, he agreed that HH&ESE2E53E8Siss--^>— wild or cultivated nature is the best context for formal training for the young in truth and virtue: "Not the noise and glare and rush of inane city streets, but the majestic calm and beauty of the face of nature is the proper place for the spiritual nurture of young men and maidens during the few years devoted to higher education."(45) "I am conscious," he confessed, "that there is no soil in the city, but only dirt; the ground must be covered until it is blotted out."(46) He was convinced that all men keep young and true by knowing nature. In this spirit he cited one of the "New Sayings of Jesus," — "Raise the stone, and there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood, and there I am. "(47) Cultivated and wild nature, for Bailey, was the very reality of God and the fount of Divine gifts. "I preach the things that we did not make," he explained, "for we are all idolaters, — the things of our hands we worship. I preach... the sky in rain and sun; the bird on its ne§t.., the smell of the ground; the sweet wind.... Wisdom flows from these as it can never flow from libraries and laboratories."(48)

Theoretically, then, Bailey's efforts have a place somewhat apart from

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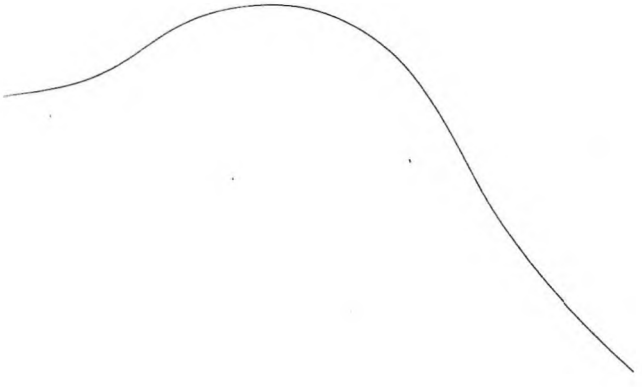
[Aa^the Bible, like so many recipes read from a cookbook. The traditions of biblical faith present us with an often arduous task of interpretation.

But I do want to suggest that there are resources in She traditions of biblical faith which are worth being considered today by any reflective individual who is looking for a way beyond our American dilemma with nature. Whether these resources are precisely the ones that our present situation requires, or whether we should perhaps decide to turn to other traditions, that is up to the reader to decide. One thing is certain, however, the situation is urgent. The American dilimma is no merely academic matter, if it ever was. It is affecting the life-blood of the nation. It is polluting the life-blood of bijs=ija4ss?e^i' So we cannot take the challenge before us lightly.

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