

## *Lake Solitude: The Individual in Wildness*

AN ENVIRONMENTAL ENCOUNTER    THE LAKE is GUARDED ROUND on every side save one by pathless wilderness, and isolated at this nearest point to community by a hard day afoot. Even that route has been abandoned beyond the North Inlet trail; the healing forces of nature, as though to redress an affront to her privacy, have been erasing the track, reducing the hike in to a scramble over blowdowns and brush. Grass grows in the few fire-pits scattered about, and nothing indicates that others have come earlier this season. The lake surface, calm and reflecting the curve of the valley, mirrors the skies—and evenings, the stars. When still and reflective, man too is a mirror of earth and heaven. If the Inlet current is deep, the flow is silent. Unless we are also quieted, our depth is seldom revealed. Loosed anciently from the Ptarmigan massif, a glacial boulder now rests on the valley floor. Let it symbolize this moment of release from the matrix of community. Let the lake offer place and permission to seek a lone ecstasy, an *ek-stasis*, a standing out from the common.

### I

As those deprived of one sense have another heightened, to forego human company frees us to engage the natural order. If another person were along, it would seem odd to address this environment; the human context would restrain such communion. A companion would convincingly banish the mute creatures to the realm of objects. But to the solitary traveler, they reassert a quality of presence; they become subjects. Chancing yesterday upon a purple lady'slipper, I hailed it by name, *Cypripedium fasciculatum*, and rejoiced unashamedly. Again I spoke, softly so as not to alarm, to greet a three-toed woodpecker. We need to voice such recognitions, though the response is a silent one. The stare of the deer at dusk, the song of the towhee at dawn, nearly persuade us that the Hebrews were right: each has his *nephesh*, his vital psyche. The single camper must even suppress an instinctive apology to the ants who scatter from beneath the rock he moves to realign his hearth; there seems in them an *anima* he ought to reverence. Indeed, he is cautious; sitting too long at a ring of firestones incurs a strange danger: being haunted by myths of the sanctity of place.

Where a man camps for a spell He roots a little, and this rootage seems increasingly less metaphorical. Despite his mobility, man, like the spruce tree, inhabits a place. He locates; he situates. Even in our transience we are provincial; to be healthy is to have a home range—some landscape, some "field" to which for a reason we belong, and which belongs to us. We are proprietary

animals; we require property which extends our presence in the world. We disregard this need at our peril; lostness plagues the urban, mobile world. To know oneself is to know where one resides. And alone, one locates sooner.

Does not my skin resemble this lake surface? Neither lake nor self has independent being: both exist in dynamic interpenetration across a surface designed for passage and exchange, as well as for delimitation and individuation. Inlet waters have crossed this interface and are now embodied within me; the conifers and I "inspire" each other. I think, animated by the sacrifice of trout which yesterday swam these waters; their vitality was in turn that of the dancing insect the day before. And, begrudgingly, I host mosquitoes. Though the bannock I bake is provided me by man's commerce, it originates in this soil, or from soil once just over the divide and now washed away to the plains below; though it comes by a longer route, it is not different in kind from the nourishment that is provided by my immediate surroundings. Escape from town re-establishes these organic roots in their proper soil. To travel into the wilderness is to go to our aboriginal source, though our return is too often unawares; it is by homecoming to enjoy an essential reunion with the earth. The waters of North Inlet are part of my circulatory system; and the more literally we take this truth the more nearly we understand it. I incarnate the solar energies that flow through this lake. No one is free-living in these woods; the root fungi which sustain these tiny twayblade orchids or the pine-drops rising from the roots of that great pine tree are better emblems of life. *Bios* is intrinsically symbiosis.

The continuities are not only corporeal and substantive; they are also reciprocal and psychic. Itself a requisite for mind, nature has both permitted and encouraged this development. The fluid environment, exemplified in this lake, awakened life, but higher differentiation was terrestrial. The forest gave primates an erect posture, prehensile hands and converging eyes to intensify manual capacities and mental focus. That freed the mouth to speak. But the humanizing and language came with a return to the savannas and meadows, like those across the lake. So, every environment I survey has joined to forge my person. In ontology too, as the individual awakens to his own being—not less than in phylogeny, as the evolutionary process reaches the human—nature evokes mind. To her teasing, her relentless stimulus, we respond in a "standing out," an *existence*, where the I is differentiated from the not-I. The environment moves; we are moved. But then reaction is elevated into agentive action. Ecological prodding brings forth the ego. "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness." (Cezanne)

Curiously, with this there is a communion, but of opposites. The medium that man is in and of, he is also over and against. When the person encounters a world different from himself, he faces a centrifugal wildness which, if unresisted, will disintegrate his centripetal self, but which, if withstood, may be incorporated and domesticated. To

travel into the wilderness is to go into what one is not, so that in returning to and turning from its natural complement, mind grasps itself. I encounter an other of which I have the deepest need. Thus journey here is in odyssey of the spirit traveling afar to come to itself.

The backpack which allows my stay differentiates me. Without it, modern man cannot come into the wilderness either in comfort or in safety; this fact measures the distance that separates him from the elements. The pack concentrates the arts and sciences of the whole human epoch: shelter, clothing, leather, metals, axe and saw, fire, medicines, plastics, chart and compass—products and skills by which we have covered our nakedness and turned to our advantage the spontaneous activity of nature. Rest as we may upon the bedrock of earth, we also live by industry: our very designs separate us from the artless, virgin earth, even as they involve us more deeply in its possibilities. He who seeks his natural origins discovers that encounter veiled and mediated by an intervening culture which he cannot abdicate.

As is nothing else in sight, this pack is intentional. Elephantellas and monkshoods simply appear and result, but I did not just happen here. Before me all is driven, like the snow; the scene unfolds. Only I premeditate, observe, and prepare. True, the beaver builds his lodge, the marmot burrows, the hare makes his form, and the cony cuts hay for winter. The swallow hollows the aspen in order to nest. To delete all purposive component from their functional behavior seems to impoverish them hopelessly. Yet we can fall into the opposite error, for their rudimentary mind is cryptically preconscious. Awareness is not yet consciousness. Their instinct is not intention. Beast and flower simply describe the wilderness law. I obey it too, but mine is a singular, considered obedience: that by obeying nature I may command her. Thus I prescribe—and speak a word of separation.

All this life rises in a counter-current, paradoxically driven by entropy's constant threat. But in man, for all his continuities with that life, a divide is reached and he flows elsewhere. In this forest I am the lone exhibitor of what nature could not achieve in these paintbrushes and columbines, pipers and porcupines. Transcending these embodiments of herself, she has gifted this human son with what she could not attain elsewhere: self-conscious reflection. The beaver knows I am here, and slaps his tail—but I know that I know I am here. The chickaree notices me, and chatters, but I notice that I notice him. The doe halts to think by what route she may avoid my camp and yet reach the meadow. But I think about her thinking so. If in the pre-human mind, causes are already being supplanted by reasons, the conclusion of that replacement is a mental incandescence: this novel iteration of knowing, and seeing, and thinking. The loneliness here exceeds the absence of a companion; what is wanting is the intentional, the fashioned, the cognitive. The lake surface has an analog in my skin.



but the lake has an "antilog" in my pondering mind. *Co-gito, ergo sum solus.*

Ought I not to respect this radical otherness? How obviously independent of man's transient and latecoming presence are these violets and bishop's caps! Tomorrow, unobserved, they will be, in their diminutive way, as lovely as ever. The human presence may be the ultimate reach of nature, but here it is superfluous; therefore let it be gentle. It would be rude to sin against these forest folk by disturbing them with that very crowding from which I seek relief. Who deserves a privilege he will not grant? The *Kalmia* and the *Sphagnum* need solitude too. The root of "wilderness," *wild-deor-ness*, is that in it the beasts are without the hand of man.

Myriads of larvae infest the lake. At first this annoyed, for it forced a regular walk to the Inlet for fresher water. But now it refreshes, as each walk prompts a moment of

truth. This teeming aquatic life reveals an inexhaustible vigor, and I myself flourish, seeing the spontaneous vitality of the earth. When I leave, the thrush will still spill its song into the forest, yet I will somehow be richer for the beauty that escapes my hearing. Spruce should rot where they fall, repay the elements, recombine in *Sedums* and *Calthas* appropriated from the humus—and so teach of death and life. If he rises to his name, *Homo sapiens* will leave this place unmutated. There is a fragile fullness here which, oddly, can be shared only when it is honored. We gain what we give: to be whole, I must leave the earth whole. Who troubles these waters, troubles himself.

Yet how strange that in the quest to find his limits, man should rise to a higher nobility! This spectator, this pensioner, is transformed into a protector. The forest is overtaken and baptized by intent. I keep it, and am kept by it. It has at least this need of me: my resolve not to trespass. The Inlet which ran of itself for a million years must of

late run by act of Congress. It flows by my leave. These *Potentillas* grow by mysteries I scarcely suspect, but today their life is circumscribed by a critical new phenomenon—my deliberate restraint. All that grows and creeps and runs is impelled by predatory and reproductive desire, limited only by collision with the needs of fellow creatures. Without external constraint, each would possess the globe. But now, in man, that drive for life pauses in charity. They would have the earth but cannot; I can, but will not. Paradoxically, in that very act of will and grace I do possess it—not in conquest but in preservation, not in assertion but in tolerance, not in lust but in love. Beyond the plow, the axe, the machine, the brass instrument, there is a virile humility that loves enough to let alone. The meek inherit the earth.

Like the ice that floats on this lake in spring, thawing by day to re-freeze at night, the separation between me and the folk of this lake country dissolves, only to re-crystallize. There is intercourse, but, lingering, I am isolated and distinguished by even the gentlest dominion. With power comes an apartness from which there is no reprieve. I am lord of this earth, and how lonely that is! *Praesum. ergo sum solus.*

## II

Yet the transcendent aristocracy of man only reveals itself in the individual as he represents his kind. The same culture which differentiates me from the natural order integrates me into a community. There is no private crossing of the human boundary. The luckless feral children, denied society, have thereby been denied humanity. Indeed, the distance that separates me from this Inlet wildness is the measure of my nearness to civilization. My solitude is communal; my existence, co-existence.

There can be no single self, for consciousness is social. For all his rooting in the earth, the thinking subject differentiates himself from it, knowing himself reflexively from what he is not. Yet this negation, though necessary, is not sufficient to define the person. We are humanized as we are met and answered by a fellow human presence. When in the field of my address I find a response which goes beyond mere reaction, I attend to this *thou*—only to find afterwards that this enables me to turn around and attend to myself. The self becomes its own object, and the centered subject appears. The mediation of a companion, communion with another mind, thus lifts pre-consciousness into self-consciousness. To know thyself, know thy brother.

To come alone to this lakeside is to travel into an isolation that no one could support if he did not bring with him, like a carapace, the whole weight of his culture. I but apparently escape and am trailed by memories and public education. Man's flight to nature is always artificial, for his specific essence is indissolubly a corporate humaneness. He may withdraw into the wilderness, but physical distances do not break these mental and inter-subjective ties. Subtly,

even solitary contemplation is a form of social conversation. Like the logs of my campfire, which only burn together, thought achieves its incandescence only in a gathering of minds. *Cogito, ergo non sum solus.*

Of all life forms, the infant man arrives least finished and most educable. The patriarch of earth is longest juvenile, so that proportionately as instinct operates the less, society may count the more. His genetic coding does not suffice to humanize him; he is personalized by his heritage of language. He does not mature by the unfolding of an organic inheritance, as do so largely the coyotes and badgers, but is bequeathed the *logos* of his fathers. In him, nature provides for her own transformation. He is a work of art. Mechanism and mutation yield to history and culture. The social context permits ideational heredity. Its medium is novel, for now, breaking a previously stifling solitude, the achievements of an individual need not perish with him but may be transmitted in history to successive generations.

I walk in a wilderness which has been circumscribed, in a measure, by human inheritance. For I understand the landscape, its structures and successions, its fauna and flora—partially and incompletely—but sufficiently to be competent here, though now alone. It remains wild and has its hazards and unknowns. But every knowing is a kind of taming, and I enter a gentler wilderness than did my fathers. As a life form is named and understood, it passes increasingly into a man's power and—unless his knowledge miscarries—into his love. The Shoshonni besought strength from the bear, the wolf, the eagle; now these are justly wary of the strength of man. I come boldly, freed to love what others have delimited and ordered, each increment of their possession accumulating in my behalf.

I may come alone, but I understand with the genius of a multitude of minds, all multiplying and amplifying my solitary enjoyment. I celebrate a primrose by the Inlet; while nothing substitutes for immediate experience, I deceive myself if I forget that my familiarity with Parry's primrose is mediated by the minds of Asa Gray and C. C. Parry, for Gray named it from Parry's collection. The waxflower has grown here since Oligocene times, but James found it, with Long's expedition in 1820, and *Jamesia* was described for me. To let Rydbergia and the Englemann spruce recall other pioneers is to realize that one borrows the vastest part of what he knows, and cannot even confront the natural order independent of botanists—or philosophers, or poets. *We* see this place, for though alone, I see nothing except as it has passed through a host of minds. To grasp its meaning and perceive its beauty, I integrate wildness into a vast cultural whole. Only bare awareness is immediate; every natural fact enters at once into a conceptual and attitudinal fabric which, though my own, is the sophisticated logic of a civilization.

To seek an absolute solitude is therefore suicidal, for the exiled self disintegrates. But there is a relative solitude

which is essential for personal integration—a separateness complementary to human community, its polar opposite. Nature does not define man in order that he may be cultured, but neither can man depend upon society wholly to make him human. Each must finish himself. As an eminently political animal, man has the curious capacity to individualize personal worth. But distance is essential for this individualization. So, paradoxically, unless one can come by a lakeside such as this, and let physical distance loosen the hold of society upon him, he cannot find space and sanity within which to establish and maintain the boundaries of the self. Without such spaces there is no togetherness—merely fusion and homogeneity. Alone we cannot be human. Yet we cannot be human until we are alone.

A shy solitaire sings his territorial call. Even gregarious man bruises with constant contact, and suffocates without the openness of wind and sky. Like the ravens here, my flight distance is greater than most, and in this I betray my own Appalachian heritage. Yet, though tolerances differ, each has a threshold of crowding beyond which he is crippled, for he has not that space to himself which is emblematic of his person. Aye, the truth is bolder and more literal: the self is territorial. Space does not simply represent individuality; it is a constituent of the psyche. He who reserves no privacy and posts no field of his own violates himself in his charity. Mental health today, say some, is increasingly dependent on the capacity to conform and adjust, replacing outdated, more individualistic virtues. Only a half truth, surely! Maturity is bred in solitude, and tested in its own domain.

Who knows himself merely as he is seen by others knows only an image. Conforming, we become actors filling roles; we react, ceasing to act. To whatever extent the personality may be formed by social reflection, the person is realized in those moments of integrity when he lays aside his social masks, his *persona*. One cannot masquerade in the forest; every back-country stride is a return to the self. The elevation gained on the hike in is not simply topographical. I climb against the gravity that pulls down into social conformity. The autonomy thus gained must soon be tried in human commerce, but this will be but the retesting of skills learned through detachment. He who thinks, confronting wind and rain, night and the passing seasons, searches a way into wholeness. If this is in a lofty, montane climate, so much the richer is the being found. Thoughts while climbing have a special authenticity.

With these grasses and herbs, to know genus and species is to know the individual. The alders that line the Inlet are always, if never, the same. Particulars submerge into types less well in vertebrate forms, but accidents, however interesting, are never essential. In man, individuality is his essence. The hominoid family does not radiate, as do birds and insects, but individuates within a single species. If we could not differentiate between men, we should be reluctant to call them persons. No man is ever simply synonymous

with his neighbors. We live collectively, but each of us must distinguish himself—not over against his fellows, but among them. When rightly reciprocal with society, the creative individual is its growing edge. Therefore, that community stagnates which suppresses solitude. Hence the wilderness is as important as the university. All real living is on a frontier.

My presence here violates the admonition not to travel alone. That is a caution to respect, and sometimes, to obey. Where hazards are high, the life we jeopardize is not simply our own; we owe it to those for whom we are responsible, and those who are responsible for us, to balance the risks against the rewards of solitary travel. But a fellow hiker can be at once a bulwark and a barrier against the unknown, social insurance that one need not genuinely face the mountains. This refuge frees man to be himself, but the single packer knows how urgently it insists upon personal accountability. This forest is for recreation, regeneration—but it is radically more than a place of leisure. Wilderness plays for keeps. It permits and requires an advance into full-blooded manhood. Society is crucial for one aspect of man, wilderness for another. Never to plunge into wilderness, never to expose oneself to it, is never to know either forest or self. The fledgling eagle must solo. This month, for a hundred miles afoot, I think what may be the last of every step, and warily concentrate my being.

Though the existential naturalist recalls terrain already secured, he lives for an untried trail, an open present, and strives, and hopes, and fears. He who loves a whole wilderness can cherish its challenges, its howls, its disciplines, its insecurities, even its taciturn indifference; this is the mood which the loner knows best. Here order is proportioned to chaos, uncertainty tempers certainty, warmth alternates with cold, there is majesty and struggle; and the private encounter educates values which culture cannot accumulate nor transmit. There is a chary strength to be had by facing alone the north wind. Even the raw ordeals one shudders to recall—exhaustion, cold, wet, hunger, injury, lostness—are, oddly enough, intense moments of truth. He who has camped alone knows that what is preserved here is not only martens and bighorns, but a stalwart self. Nor is the wilderness dangerous, though it is terribly unforgiving of mistakes.

To pack for a solo trip is a therapeutic experience, paring life to its boundaries. It is a kind of sacramental enactment of how we each must appropriate and individuate a culture in order to face a primitive ontological solitude. As the gear is weighed against its contribution to survival, comfort and frugal pleasures, the packer makes not so much a rejection of culture as a shakedown of what in culture is truly essential. To portion adequate physical provisions is to nourish oneself spiritually as well. Then, at the trailhead, to shoulder this pack is to know that culture but prepares us for the single life, and that finally we each must close with it and walk alone. The hiker recalls the cry of the newborn from the womb. He is weaned; he remembers

leaving parents to come of age. He projects the day he must receive the viaticum for his journey into a last unknown. In reckoning with solitariness, a man touches the quick of his being. *Cogito solus, ergo sum.*

### III

To sit by this lake is to risk becoming a parable of contemporary man, increasingly forlorn in his universe. Paradoxically, his brilliance has at once reduced him to materiality and divorced him from it. He boldly hails an ever-encroaching naturalism, only to find himself disconsolate in his time of deepest need. Mornings, he delights in earthiness; evenings, he finds wildness as indifferent as it is necessary. Ordered and lovely, and he may homestead in it, yet may not the whole of it be chaos? It is not always safe to stare into the midnight sky, lest its darkness and void plunge us into a disastrous *anomie*. Yesterday, losing my bearings, I wandered for half a day. The forest takes on a different mood when one does not know the way out. Am I lost by this lake, midst these stars? What if all our taming of the labyrinthine wilds be but a clearing in the forest, as ephemeral as this shallow lake which even now is being reclaimed by the elements? What if all man's noetic edifice be but a campfire pushing back the night? Do I walk home to discover myself homeless? Alas, must I breathe the thin air of nothingness?

But how bizarre this surrounding nothingness, which breeds me to slay me, yet slays me to breed me! This fair earth abandons me to longings she refuses to fulfill. In an anxious solitude, I am separated into self-conscious agency. But with that gift comes this dreaded loneliness, as though her ultimate values can be given only as she withdraws from me. She deserts me, lest I be her object, and thereby promises me a dynamism of my own. It is the cougar that keeps the deer, not less than the browse; and for conscious life this encroaching nothingness is my predator. Is this wildness only unfeeling and unloving? Has it not also granted me life, surrounded me with beauty, and, even when wolveren, does not its howling threat stimulate me into a higher competence? Wildness is the pressing night, but it is wildness too that with me kindles fires against the night. This is an awful wildness, yet inescapably I find myself, though crying in it, unable to curse it, aye, rather grateful for it. Na-

ture thrust me into an immense solitude, but that is her grandest gift, for this very environmental resistance frees me for and impels me toward centered personality.

Like the Hindu god Shiva, wildness ever destroys yet only to recompose, to purge, to evolve. It is as this wildness besets me that there emerges, from within, the existent self, as though I float on the element that both supports and dissolves me. Midst darkness, there is light. I appear from nothing. *Ex tenebris lux. Ex nihilo sum.* But what enigmatic wildness is this, in confrontation with which my life is ennobled! If I live, an encapsulated ego, in unrelieved oppression by this annihilating wildness, then life is quite absurd. Surely it is nearer the truth to believe that this liveness, like the other solitudes I know, however real, is not absolute but relative: that earth is not a prison for my solitary confinement, but offers a home where I indeed belong in a natural embrace.

How lovely is this crystal lake beneath Mt. Alice! And this aesthetic experience is neither my invention nor simply my discovery; it emerges in relational encounter. With every climb of a peak such as Long's, the self is rallied against its opponent, but on the summit, exhausted, the mountaineer's primitive emotion is not conquest or estrangement, but embrace and communion. Man is for himself, yet not by himself. Lone though he is, to locate worth in himself and deny it to the encompassing wildness is surely to tumble into the fallacy of misplacing values. He who tarries must humbly acknowledge, even in the midst of environmental opposition, that he is respondent and recipient. In his spiritual, not less than his physical life, the energies of these mountains flow through him. Before this lake country, there is both loneliness and complementarity. Never is the individual in wildness more responsible than in his gratitude.

This is a silent place, but it is a poignant silence. Unawares, my soliloquy has become a dialogue—as though there were a veiled presence. Could there be some symmetries in these solitudes I sense? As I, guardian of its integrity, lay upon this Inlet refuge a gentle solitude that it may be secure and whole, can it be that there is laid upon me, in turn, a liveness requisite for my integrity too, and that it is, like my recession before these dippers and gentians, the gift of love.

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