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Wilderness: The True Nature of Culture

Summary for "du" 05.02

Things have come to a pretty pass. We've been forced to abandon most of our traditional bulwarks, such as language, social life, memory, individual consciousness. The untamed Other threatens to engulf us, from all directions and across time, and the world is headed back into that monstrous and all-encompassing nature also known as culture, that wilderness where everything is of a piece, and everything has gone to pieces. To quote Paul Valéry: "We are made up of a myriad of things which do not know us." Still, you mustn't fear, any more than you should nourish any false hopes. The world understands you better than you understand yourself. Our May issue heads straight for the very heart of this material darkness to which we are condemned for all time, for all that the entertainment industry tries to tell us otherwise. We're off through the Internet, the Pacific islands and the English country garden, into the big city and the forest of numbers we know as "economics", and even into the viscera of homo sapiens, into our own bodies, which turn out to be multimedia adventure playgrounds for countless uninvited, microscopic guests.

It'll leave you speechless and take your breath away, but there's consolation. In his little hermeneutics of the extreme, Andreas Langenbacher reminds us that we are all Survivors© (even if some of us will have received considerably more than the standard allotment of fifteen minutes of fame). With a grandiose chronicle in the best tradition of the magazine, Carsten Stütz recounts the history of the wilderness in all of its various avatars, from nature to culture and back again, and right into the wilds of the human psyche. Mario Erdheim investigates the (mythico-religious) origins of social and sexual difference in humankind's confrontation with its wilder animal nature, and explains our compulsion to imagine our way back to our primeval roots whenever our present culture threatens to split apart under the pressures of such manifold distinctions. In an effort to determine the precise value of this world we are so grimly bound to preserve for (and from) ourselves, meanwhile, Martin Rasper crunches some very large numbers, while Werner Vontobel recommends a clean economic slate and the choice of some entirely different, indeed revolutionary figures to reckon the welfare of the Earth and its variously equipped personnel. And speaking of which: you can read a report by Jörg Blech from the teeming microcosm just millimeters below our skin, where rival gangs of bacteria fight for mastery over the wilderness we call our bodies, or thrill to an account of the guerilla war being waged on the very orderly wildlife inhabiting some of the main administrative buildings in the allegedly civilized city of Hamburg. There's even a surprise appearance by Mother

Nature herself (translated here below), who has an unexpected view of the turn things have taken in the last few million years. Back on more familiar disciplinary ground, meanwhile, Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs shares with us his *pensées sauvages* on Lévi-Strauss in the "wilds" of an irrevocably cultivated world, Rolf Landua takes us on a physicist's safari among the incredible paradoxes of the quantum universe, and Peter Bichsel explains how he uses his keyboard to impose literate order on an increasingly barbaric reality. We go on an iconographic tour of the wilderness led by Christoph Vitali, and view a portrait gallery of some of its most peculiar settlers, courtesy of Heini Stucki. So pack your steamer trunk, put on your sola topi, and let's go for a walk on the wild side!

Carsten Stütz resorts to the reassuringly bookish gesture of the etymologist as he begins to survey his vast terrain. "A recent edition of the Duden, the standard German dictionary, is laconic in its entry for 'wilderness'," he writes: "From the Middle High German *wiltnisse*, the modern German word *Wildnis*" – from which of course the English term is derived – "means 'an impassable, undeveloped, unsettled area; an untrammelled wilderness; the fauna proper to such a place'." Stütz's researches in earlier German dictionaries have taught him, however, that the word once governed a much broader semantic field: in the Middle Ages it stood for the very phenomenon of wildness, not simply its physical location but the state of being unbounded by human civilization. The opposite trajectory, meanwhile, is traced by the Romance version of the word: from the Latin *silva*, meaning simply forest, the Italians derive *selvaggio*, the French *sauvage* and the English "savage", a word now utterly cut off from its erstwhile spatial connotations to signify precisely that nature "red in tooth and claw" whose howlings strike a chill through the coziest cottages, and which has been forced back into its topographical confines in its Germanic equivalent. Such a confusion between object and quality in this quintessential limit case of human culture is, of course, scarcely surprising, given the actual physical history of toil and struggle that precedes what we today casually take for granted as our spiritual birthright. "In early modern times," Stütz concedes, "nature was defined in accordance with the mechanistic principles of cause and effect, but this only served to paper over the long-held belief that nature was an autarkic process of becoming which contained its own origin and destiny sealed within it. By these lights, nature was sheer overpowering force, against which humankind had only its continuous and stubborn labor as a defense. Our very word culture, in fact, has its etymological origins in the activity of farming: both *cultus*, which gives us cult, and *cultura*, from which we get culture, are derived from *colere*, to dwell, encircle, frequent a certain space – but also to tend, care for, or farm the earth; whence the contemporary sense is abstracted to refer to the care of the virtues, of the arts, of the gods themselves. And such care is by no means an entirely rational pastime. Its object has its own inherent dynamics, to be met with constant striving and nurturance. And where such nurturance is neglected, the *silva*, the wilderness shall return, the barren wastes – in both the figurative and the literal sense."

Having consigned the wilderness to its rightful place, and thereby created a space for culture, human beings promptly set about re-installing "nature", now understood in its Barthesian, ideological form, within the newly won boundaries of their own preserve. Stütz draws a line between Pliny's gracious and (literally) cultivated description of his garden and the masterworks of 18th-century English horticulture, both of which in turn owe much of their comforting artifice to Vergil's invention of the bucolic idyll during the golden age of the Roman Empire, when Rome in fact boasted an urban population to be rivaled only by Paris and London almost two millennia later.

With the arrival of the formidable Goths, themselves fleeing the even more formidable Huns, Rome's hegemony (and its delicate balance of rural and urban) was provisionally dissolved, and the spatial notion of the wilderness had been enriched with one of its most enduring human allegories in the aspect of the "barbarian", one of the central figures in the European imaginary, roaming the streets of the Roman capital. "The word 'barbarian,'" notes the etymologist Stütz, "already enjoyed an impressive pedigree in later antiquity. It had been used predominantly to evoke bestiality, savagery, crudity and lack of culture." What had begun as a simple onomatopoeic term for speakers of languages other than Greek, whose tongues all sounded more or less like "*barbarbar*" to the Hellenic ear, had in the course of the Athenian expansion come to stand for all de facto cultural opponents of the experiment in popular rule. The Persians, the Greeks' hereditary enemies, eventually ceded their place to other foes. During the time of Alexander the Great, for instance, the Caucasians (whose name has now come euphemistically to stand, with a delicious irony, for the many-splendored "white race") were legendary for their savage features, their wrathful countenances, their thieving ways and their cannibalistic tendencies. With the Roman inheritance of the democratic-imperialist project, meanwhile, a host of new peoples joined the ranks of the "barbarians" and lent fresh energy to the by now traditional conflation of natural wilderness and human savagery: the Cherusci, the Langobardi, the various Gaulish tribes and, finally, the fateful Visigoths and the eponymous Vandals, whose chief contribution to European history is the (re-) introduction of farmland into the middle of Rome, where cows grazed until the 15th century.

In the meantime, of course, a whole new religious and secular power had risen to prominence in the western world, and with it had come a new conception of the respective values and places of nature and culture. In Stütz's view, Jewish mythology, and through it Christian, is remarkable for its association of the end of the standard Golden Age – in this case, the expulsion from Paradise – with the express commandment to win back the wilderness by dint of physical labor, AKA culture. (One might of course compare the Hesiodic account of the five ages of humanity, culminating in the degraded age of bronze, with its hateful necessities and labors.) But the Hebrew image of the wilderness, Stütz notes, is largely one of barren wastes and waterlessness, as might be expected of a desert people; and the Eden out of which Adam and Eve are expelled is much closer to the English country garden than it is to the heart of darkness. (Indeed, the very name "Paradise" comes from the Persian word for garden.) The desert is also the place of spiritual trials, of the deity's self-revelation to his folk, and the idea of trackless, uncultivated wastes, far from the temptations of human endeavor, will accordingly play a crucial role in the monastic movements of the Middle Ages.

The secular medieval world, meanwhile, at least in its Western European instantiation, offered very different social and natural realities onto which to impose these typologies. It is estimated that in the High Middle Ages, at the time of Charlemagne's coronation, more than 90% of the areas now known as Germany, France and England was forested, and thus the Middle European conception of wilderness, in contrast with the Middle Eastern, was silvan rather than silican. It also boasted its own varieties of imaginary wildlife, some inherited from classical antiquity, some developed from (or against) the Judeo-Christian tradition, some the legacy of entirely different, much more northerly cultures. Men with the heads of dogs, with faces on their posteriors, horse's bodies or fishtails; beings with six hands and multiple toes, bearded women and many-headed beasts: a 13th-century map of the world, the

Ebstorfer Weltkarte, locates these and more such creatures in that all-purpose wilderness known as Africa. Nearer to home, in the woods covering so much of what are now the workaday commercial axes criss-crossing Central and Western Europe, there were all-too-tangible dangers in the form of lurking marauders and bandits, men who were said to have "gone to the wilderness" and thus severed their connections, both practical and ethical, to human society.

"The end of the Middle Ages is signaled by a sporting event," writes Stütz, reflecting on the change in relations between culture and nature that came with the classical revivals and pre-modern innovations of the Renaissance. "In April of 1336, Petrarch climbs to the top of Mount Ventoux. According to his own account of the ascent, the poet was driven by the curiosity to behold the prospect afforded by such an elevation. Upon reaching the summit, he is overcome by a feeling of exaltation. To the East he spies the Rhône river flowing toward Marseilles, to the South he can see the Mediterranean coast. He thinks of Italy, and of his beloved. Then, however, he removes from his baggage the copy of Augustine's *Confessions* that is never far from his side, and opens it at random. What he reads is deeply troubling: the Church Father condemns all natural distraction; indeed, and most fatally for Petrarch, he reckons those who ascend the mountaintops in admiration of the view to have lost their very selves. For the beauties of the world, Augustine preaches, merely serve to divert humanity from its true vocation, the salvation of its soul. The poet embarks upon his descent in far more subdued spirits. And yet it is the first time that nature has been apprehended as something autonomous – as a beautiful prospect, a landscape – and thus set in tacit competition with God." The difference is, of course, that nature, unlike God, can be assessed, evaluated, and exploited, in tangible and immensely profitable ways. In his logbook entries almost two centuries later, Christopher Columbus will pair Petrarch's sense for the sheer beauty of nature with the developer's shrewd eye on the main chance. The quest for gold drives him on, from island to edenic island, and his admiration for the docility of the aboriginals is that of the entrepreneur recognizing a cheap and ready labor force – and a source of exotic prestige back in the metropolis. For, as Stütz points out, "with the discovery of the New World, the stage has been set for the entry of the uncivilized human in a new costume. Just as the idea of the heathen had determined the medieval attitude to the other, now it was the idea of the savage that determined the West's encounter with its latest set of aliens. The salient feature of the savage now appeared to be childishness: gullible and without material needs, he is also unpredictable, as Columbus had had occasion to observe. Friendship could turn suddenly into enmity, aggression into fear, fear into mischief. Like the heathen, the savage is unbaptized; unlike the heathen, however, the savage has no religion of his own. He does not know letters, he goes entirely unclothed, he has no contract law, no profession, no hierarchy. He is willing to trade his riches for gewgaws merely because they strike him as pretty. He does not know the true worth of things." Most importantly, concludes Stütz, the idea of the savage does not merely involve a notion of the otherness of the other, his utter difference: rather, it clearly classifies him as inferior, indeed, as inhuman. In his *Systema naturae* of 1722, Linnaeus is still assigning the Patagonians, the Hottentots and the Chinese to the category of monsters.

With the Enlightenment and the great Rousseuvian nature cult of the eighteenth century, of course, this same savage was to be redrawn once more, now in pastel shades of Puritanism, primitive virtue and, most famously, nobility. There may have been those who took a slightly more jaundiced view

of the general enthusiasm for all things pastoral and bucolic – Voltaire responded to the receipt of *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* by inviting his Genevan colleague to his estate for a lovely graze – but the ramifications of Rousseau's nostalgia for an earlier state of humanity, according to Stütz, include such institutions of modernity as the Romantic movement, the sentimental novel and the serious consideration of emotion by the social sciences. "Paradise has been regained – as wilderness."

And yet, just as the original Paradise had notoriously failed to slake the human thirst for knowledge and adventure, so too did the early modern era's new-found respect for the noble savage do nothing to halt the progress of the second age of discovery, albeit a far better prepared and more "humanist" venture for all concerned. But Captain Cook's explicit brief to do everything in his power to coexist peacefully with the natives did not prevent his death at the hands of those very folk, and when Joseph Conrad visited the Belgian Congo in the nineteenth century he was so demoralized by what he witnessed of the colonizer's treatment of the Africans that he considered suicide. The product of this voyage into King Leopold's purloined treasurehouse, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, has become emblematic of the postcolonial age's highly ambivalent relationship with the wilderness, and has furnished allegorical ammunition to the critique of such neo-colonial adventures as the Vietnam War. Its enduring power is the unsettling aperçu that true wilderness will continue to thrive as long as there are human hearts and minds to contain and nourish it. Stütz formulates it elegantly: "'Wild' nature exists in our habitat today only in the form of the museum, in the reservation, and with all the attendant paradoxes: for the museum is predicated upon the notion of public accessibility, while nature can only survive if it is shielded from contact with humans. Its 'wildness' is therefore necessarily artificial: it exists for humanity, although this actually cannot be so. In whatever fashion we speak of the wilderness, it is a humanized wilderness we mean: the swamp is in our heads and in our bellies."

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