

Surrendering Wilderness

The idea of an untouched Arcadia is an illusion
we can no longer afford.

by Marilynne Robinson

Environmentalism poses stark issues of survival, for humankind and for all those other tribes of creatures over which we have exercised our onerous dominion. Even undiscovered species feel the effects of our stewardship. What a thing is man.

The oldest anecdotes from which we know ourselves as human, the stories of Genesis, make it clear that our defects are sufficient to bring the whole world down. An astonishing intuition, an astonishing fact.

One need not have an especially excitable or a particularly gloomy nature to be persuaded that we may be approaching the end of the day. For decades, environmentalists have concerned themselves with this spill and that encroachment, this depletion and that extinction, as if such phenomena were singular and exceptional. Our causes have even jostled for attention, each claiming a special urgency. This is, I think, like quarreling over which shadow brings evening. We are caught up in something much larger than its innumerable manifestations. Their variety and seriousness are proof of this.

I am an American of the kind whose family sought out wilderness generation after generation. My great-grandparents finally settled in Idaho, much of which is wilderness now, in terms of its legal status, and is therefore, theoretically, protected. In the heart of this beloved, empty, mag-

nificent state is the Idaho Nuclear Engineering Laboratory, among other things a vast repository for radioactive waste. Idaho, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, beautiful names for vast and melancholy places. Europeans from time to time remark that Americans have no myth of landscape. In fact we have many such myths. People who cherish New England may find it difficult to imagine that Utah is cherished also. In fact, I started writing fiction at an eastern college, partly in hopes of making my friends there understand how rich and powerful a presence a place can be which, to their eyes, is forbidding and marginal, without population or history, without culture in any form recognizable to them. All love is in great part affliction. My bond with my native landscape was an unnameable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all.

Moses himself would have approved the reverence with which I regarded my elders, who were silent and severe and at their ease with solitude and difficulty. I meant to be like them. Americans from the interior West know what I am describing. For them it is, or is like, religious feeling, being so powerful a reference for all other experience.

Idaho, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico. These names are all notorious among those who know anything at all about



Feather River (1992), by Chuck Forsman

nuclear weapons. Wilderness is where things can be hidden, from foreign enemies, perhaps, but certainly from domestic critics. This effect is enhanced by the fact that wilderness dwellers everywhere are typically rather poor and scattered, not much in the public mind, not significant as voters. Wilderness is where things can be done that would be intolerable in a populous landscape. The relative absence of human populations obscures the nature and effect of programs which have no other object than to be capable of the most profound injury to human populations. Of course, even wilderness can only absorb such insult to the systems of life to a degree, for a while. Nature is very active—aquifers so vast, rivers so tireless, wind so pervading. I have omitted to mention the great Hanford Reservation in Washington State, with its ominous storage tanks, a whole vast landscape made an archaeological history of malign intent, and a great river nearby to spread the secret everywhere.

Russia is much more generously endowed with wilderness than America. Turn the globe, and there is an expanse

that puts our little vastness in perspective. It is my impression that depredations of the kind we have been guilty of have been carried further in Russia and its former territories, at least in proportion to the permission apparently implied by empty spaces. But wilderness can be borrowed, as the coast and interior of Australia and, of course, Nevada have been by the British for their larger nuclear weapons projects, and wilderness can be relative, like the English Lake District and the northwest coast of France. And then there is the sea. We have all behaved as if there were a place where actions would not have consequences.

Wilderness is not a single region, but a condition of being of the natural world. If it is no longer to be found in one place, we assume it exists in other places. So the loss of wilderness always seems only relative, and this somewhat mitigates any specific instance of abuse. Civilization has crept a little farther; humankind has still to learn certain obvious lessons about living in the world. We regret and we repent and we blame, and we assume that things can

be different elsewhere. Again, the very idea of wilderness permits us to evade in some degree a recognition of the real starkness of precisely the kind of abuse most liable to occur outside the reach of political and economic constraints, where those who have isolation at their disposal can do as they will.

Utah is holy land to a considerable number of American people. We all learn as schoolchildren how the Mormons, fleeing intolerance and seeking a place where they could live out their religion, walked into the wilderness, taking their possessions in handcarts, wearing a trail so marked that parts of it are visible to this day. We know they chose barren land by a salt lake, and flourished there.

It is a very pure replication of the national myth. So how did we make the mistake we made, and choose this place whose very emptiness and difficulty were a powerful proof to the Mormons of the tender providence of God—how could we make Utah the battleground in the most furious and terrified campaigns in our long dream of war? The choice kept casualties to a minimum, which means that if the bombs were dropped in populous places the harm would have been clearly intolerable. The small difference between our fantasies of war and war itself would be manifest. As it is, there are many real casualties, and no doubt there would be far more if all the varieties of injury were known and acknowledged.

This is a potent allegory. It has happened over and over again that promised land or holy land by one reckoning is wasteland by another, and we assert the sovereign privilege of destroying what we would go to any lengths to defend. The pattern repeats itself so insistently that I think it is embedded not merely in rational consciousness but also in human consciousness. Humankind has no enemy but itself, and it is broken and starved and poisoned and harried very nearly to death.

Look at England. They have put a plutonium factory and nuclear waste dump in the Lake District, a region so beautiful that it was set aside, spared most of the marring burdens of population. And what a misfortune that has been. Relatively small populations result in relatively small bases for interpreting public health effects, so emptiness ensures not safety so much as deniability. Wilderness and its analogues seem to invite denial in every form. In Utah and in Cumbria, it was the urgent business of years to produce weapons capable of inflicting every extreme of harm on enemy populations. Do they harm people who live where they are made and tested? If the answers “no,” or “not significantly,” or “it is too difficult to tell” were ever given in good faith, then clearly some mechanism of denial had come into play. The denial was participated in at a grand enough scale to make such answers sufficient for most of the public for a very long time, even though one effect was to permit methods of development and testing that assured widespread public contact with waste or fallout, and that will assure it into any imaginable future.

Denial is clearly a huge factor in history. It seems to me analogous to a fractal, or a virus, in the way it self-replicates, and in the way its varieties are the grand strategy of its persistence. It took, for instance, three decades of the most brilliant and persistent campaign of preachment and information to establish, in the land of liberty, the idea that slavery was intolerable. Strange enough. These antislavery agitators were understandably given to holding up Britain’s ending of slavery in her colonies as the example of enlightened Christian behavior. But at the same time, British slave ships used the old slave routes to transport British convicts to Australia. Every enormity was intact, still suffered by women and children as well as men. Of course the color of the sufferer had changed, and it is always considered more respectable in a government to ravage its

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own population than others'. To this objection, I will reply that the arrival of the British was an unspeakable disaster to the native people of Australia and Tasmania. Slavery and genocide were only rechanneled, translated into other terms, but for the American abolitionists, and for the British abolitionists as well, this was nothing to pause over. It is understandable that Americans should wish to retain all the moral leverage that could be had from the admirable side of the British example. Still, this is another potent allegory, something to unriddle, or at least to be chastened by. After our terrible war, the people who struggled out of bondage, and were won out of bondage, found themselves returned to a condition very much resembling bondage, with the work all before them of awakening public awareness, in the land of the free, to the fact that their situation was intolerable.

Reform-minded Americans still depend on the idea that other countries are in advance of us, and scold and shame us all with scathing comparison. Of course they have no tolerance for information that makes such comparison problematic. The strategy, however generous in impulse, accounts in part for the perdurable indifference of Americans to actual conditions in countries they choose to admire, and often claim to love.

I have begun to consider Edgar Allan Poe the great interpreter of Genesis, or perhaps of Romans. The whole human disaster resides in the fact that, as individuals, families, cities, nations, as a tribe of ingratiating, brilliant, momentarily numerous animals, we are perverse, divided against ourselves, deceiving and defeating ourselves. How many countries in this world have bombed or poisoned their own terrain in the name of protecting it from its enemies? How many more would do so if they could find the means? Do we know that this phenomenon is really different in kind from the Civil War, or from the bloodbaths by which certain regimes have been able to legitimate their power? For a long time we have used dichotomies, good people/bad people, good institutions/bad institutions, capitalist/communist. But the

universality of self-deceptive and self-destructive behavior is what must impress us finally.

Those who are concerned about the world environment are, in my view, the abolitionists of this era, struggling to make an unenlightened public aware that environmental depredation is an ax at the root of every culture, every freedom, every value. There is no group in history I admire more than the abolitionists, but from their example I conclude that there are two questions we must always ask ourselves—what do we choose not to know, and what do we fail to anticipate? The ultimate success of the abolitionists so very much resembled failure that it requires charity, even more than discernment, to discover the difference. We must do better. Much more is at stake.

I have heard well-meaning people advocate an environmental policing system, presided over by the member governments of the United Nations Security Council. I think we should pause to consider the environmental practices and histories of those same governments. Perhaps under the aegis of the United Nations they do ascend to a higher plane of selflessness and rationality and, in this instance, the cowl will make the monk. Then again, maybe it will not. Rich countries that dominate global media look very fine and civilized, but, after all, they have fairly ransacked the world for these ornaments and privileges and we all know it. This is not to say that they are worse than other nations, merely that they are more successful, for the moment, in sustaining wealth and prestige. This does not mean they are well suited for the role of missionary or schoolmaster. When we imagine they are, we put out of mind their own very grave problems—abandoning their populations, and the biosphere, in the very great degree it is damaged by them, to secure moral leverage against whomever they choose to designate an evildoer. I would myself be willing to give up the hope of minor local benefits in order to be spared the cant and hypocrisy, since I have no hope that the world will survive in any case if the countries represented on the Security Council

do not reform their own governments and industries very rigorously, and very soon.

I think it is an indulgence to emphasize to the extent we do the environmental issues that photograph well. I think the peril of the whole world is very extreme, and that the dolphins and koalas are finally threatened by the same potentialities that threaten everything that creeps on the face of the earth. At this time, we are seeing, in many, many places, a decline in the wealth, morale, and ethos whose persistence was assumed when certain features of modern society were put in place, for example, nuclear reactors and chemical plants. If these things are not maintained, or if they are put to cynical uses by their operators or by terrorists, we can look forward to disaster after disaster. The collapse of national communities and economies very much enhances the likelihood that such things will happen.

We have, increasingly, the unsystematic use of medicine in the face of growing populations of those who are malnourished and unsheltered and grossly vulnerable to disease. Consider the spread of tuberculosis in New York City. Under less than ideal circumstances, modern medicine will have produced an array of intractable illnesses. In the absence of stability and wealth, not to mention a modicum of social justice, medicine is liable to prove a curse and an affliction. There are those who think it might be a good thing if we let ourselves slip into extinction and left the world to less destructive species. Into any imaginable future, there must be people to maintain what we have made, for example, nuclear waste storage sites, and there must be human civilizations rich and sophisticated enough to know how this is done and to have the means to do it. Every day this seems less likely.

And only consider how weapons and weapons materials have spread under cover of this new desperation, and how

probable truly nihilistic warfare now appears. These are environmental problems, fully as much as any other kind.

Unless we can re-establish peace and order as values, and learn to see our own well-being in our neighbor's prosperity, we can do nothing at all for the rain forests and the koala bears. To pretend we can is only to turn our backs on more painful and more essential problems. It is deception and self-deception. It stirs a sad suspicion in me that we are of the Devil's party, without knowing it.

I think we are desperately in need of a new, chastened, self-distrusting vision of the world, an austere vision that can postpone the outdoor pleasures of cherishing exotica, and the first-world pleasures of assuming we exist to teach reasonableness to the less fortunate, and the debilitating pleasures of imagining that our own impulses are reliably good. I am bold enough to suggest this because, to this point, environmental successes quite exactly resemble failure. What have we done for the whale, if we lose the sea? If we lose the sea, how do we mend the atmosphere? What can we rescue out of this accelerating desperation to sell—forests and weapons, even children—and the profound deterioration of community all this indicates? Every environmental problem is a human problem. Civilization is the ecology being lost. We can do nothing that matters if we cannot encourage its rehabilitation. Wilderness has for a long time figured as an escape from civilization, and a judgment upon it. I think we must surrender the idea of wilderness, accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable, and invest our care and hope in civilization, since to do otherwise risks repeating the terrible pattern of enmity against ourselves, which is truly the epitome and paradigm of all the living world's most grievous sorrows.