

Wild by Nature: Activating the Wild Psyche

First published in *ECOS* 26 (1) 2005

DAVID RUSSELL

The invitation to write this piece was prompted by a chance remark I made at a Wildland Group Meeting. I said it's not just nature that needs to become wilder, but also the psyche. I hadn't given too much thought to what now looks like a rather glib remark. Now I have been asked to work out what it was I meant.

Wild Nature:

At the time I was feeling how the way that I most often understood wild nature and the way that other people wanted to represent it were two different things. I want more often than not to leave nature to itself. One reason that nature matters to me is because it is simply *there*. Wilding is walking away and accepting and enjoying whatever happens. Why is that so difficult? I guess it is that somewhere behind the idea of such an abandonment lies a different sense of nature. Partly it's this: for me nature has never been in need of protection because nothing can harm it. Nature encompasses everything, mass extinctions, even annihilation if it is in the nature of the universe to collapse back into a singularity at the end of time. How can such a thing ever be harmed? In fact, we always most hurt *ourselves*, our idea of nature, in the way that we relate to the world around us. Maybe we need to know more about that hurt. John Fowles, the novelist, wrote about nature in his short book "The Tree":

*"The subtlest of our alienations from it [nature], the most difficult to comprehend, is our need to use it in some way, to derive some personal yield"*¹

It feels important to be able more often to let go of the need to get something from nature or to do something to it. This might seem impossible, after all we need to sustain global biodiversity and management is surely essential. There are also issues around public accountability. Well, I've tried to suggest elsewhere² that maybe we don't have to assume that, intervening less, giving more space to wild nature, will mean less biodiversity. Yes, I do recognise the immense pleasure and inspiration that people get from working in nature. But giving in to our desire to shape it to our own sense of what wildness should be is an aspect of the alienation that John Fowles describes.

Wild Man:

*"There is something in the nature of nature, in its present-ness, its seeming transience, its creative ferment and hidden potential, that corresponds very closely with the wild, or green man, in our psyches."*³

This is John Fowles, again. I am conscious of the wild man in myself. The Wild man or Green man has been part of the collective psyche from the dawn of consciousness: the close, masculine, correlate of the Great Goddess. He is represented in cave paintings. He seems always to have had a role in the initiation of male children into the world of men. The account of the Iron John legend by Robert Bly⁴, which became a best seller, explores the psychological content of a tale in which a young boy releases the wild man, Iron John, from imprisonment in his father's castle using a key stolen from his mother and is then carried away to the wilderness before going on to come into his inheritance. In the ancient Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, the help of Enkidu, the wild man, is needed to bring the young king Gilgamesh into his maturity. I also think about the bible story of Jesus going into the wilderness and then encountering John, the hairy wild man who baptises (or initiates) him into his new role.

The experience of the correlation John Fowles describes between inner and outer wild nature is always ecstatic. Something happening outside is experienced inside or vice versa. Wonder and terror are forms of ecstasy. We can be moved to tears or jolted out of shape by our experience of nature. If we need our own creative ferment, our own presence, our own transience, our own hidden potential, we need wilderness and perhaps most of all an encounter with its seeming purposelessness. (If there is a purpose it is locked in the mind of God). I have done this now for the past two years on retreat on an island, Bardsey island,⁵ not really wilderness but where time is the rhythm of the sea and the seasons of the farm, where money is not needed, where there are no vehicles and where it is possible for a while to be purposeless too.

The thrust of modern environmental management and policy making largely misses all of this. It seems to me that managers and policy makers (like everyone else in the world) are increasingly preoccupied with standards and performance targets. Those who are caught up in this will tend to see nature not so much as a presence but a resource; managers manage resources so what else should we expect; even people become human resources in this lexicon. The language engenders a particular, and even dehumanising, way of understanding and experiencing nature (and people!). I have to allow that I am particularly averse to standardised practices and regulations, so I need to be careful before I generalise, but I am convinced that we are in danger of seriously eroding the real importance of nature of itself. Can we understand and relate to nature as being of itself? Can we allow wonder to guide our actions at least as often as the standards and good practice guidelines? And, as I have said, I would like to think that it is more often possible to leave nature completely alone. Be that as it may, there's still the human spirit to celebrate so let's remind ourselves that it's through inspiration not regulation that we get the big results.

Finding the Edge:

I remember some years ago reading a paper given by a senior executive of Shell. I think it was in the context of a discussion about the inner city that he suggested that it's not more policemen we need so much as more poets. I liked that then and I still do. Poets (and not just those who are wordsmiths), the modern day wildmen, are the

people that can give us the *impudence* to ignore all the trivial bits of silly authoritarianism, the *insight* to see into the soul and what moves it, and the *inspiration* to celebrate our individual unique human-ness.

Just by chance, after I had written that paragraph, I pulled a book off the shelf. Alasdair Maclean (no not that one!) a poet from Ardnamurchan in Scotland, seems to have captured this notion in the opening verse of his collection called: "From the Wilderness"⁶.

I am not bondsman to your least shout,
Nor friend; perhaps, if I choose, more foe.
Only it is my trade to lead you carefully
Astray in lands where no mapmakers go.

It will not serve to whistle then nor pray
Nor quote authority nor put on speed.
What keeps you upright in your shoes, your needle
To the poem's north, is a sort of greed.

I leave the foothills of the images
And climb. What I pursue's not means but ends.
You may come if you've a mind to travelling.
Meet me at the point where the language bends.

Poets can often find an edge, the point where something bends. What happens if we accept the poet's invitation to flirt at the edge of safety, where authority doesn't serve; the point where something gives; to keep alive our ability to challenge our own fears? If we choose to stay within a comfort zone we can find the edge closing in. Somehow life gets smaller; this is the extinction of experience.

Wild City:

It is our wild nature that contains the energy we need if we can dare to maintain our individual unique human-ness. Often images of our wild nature like the green man can seem relatively harmless; a new age symbol of environmental harmony. But, in a quiet garden retreat from seventeenth century Wiltshire we find another manifestation of our wild nature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was fashionable to include a wilderness in the formal garden. Here is the wilderness created at Wilton in Wiltshire in the 1630s⁷. Compared to what we think of as wilderness no doubt it seems pretty tame, but perhaps not so far from our ideas of wilderness as we might at first think. I would say that our own wild nature projects while they contain a core of wildness, are just as hedged around by the neat order of our theories, strategies, expectations, aesthetic preferences and the paraphernalia of funding and public accountability as the core of wild nature at the heart of the wilderness at Wilton. The Wilton Wilderness is still a valid metaphor.

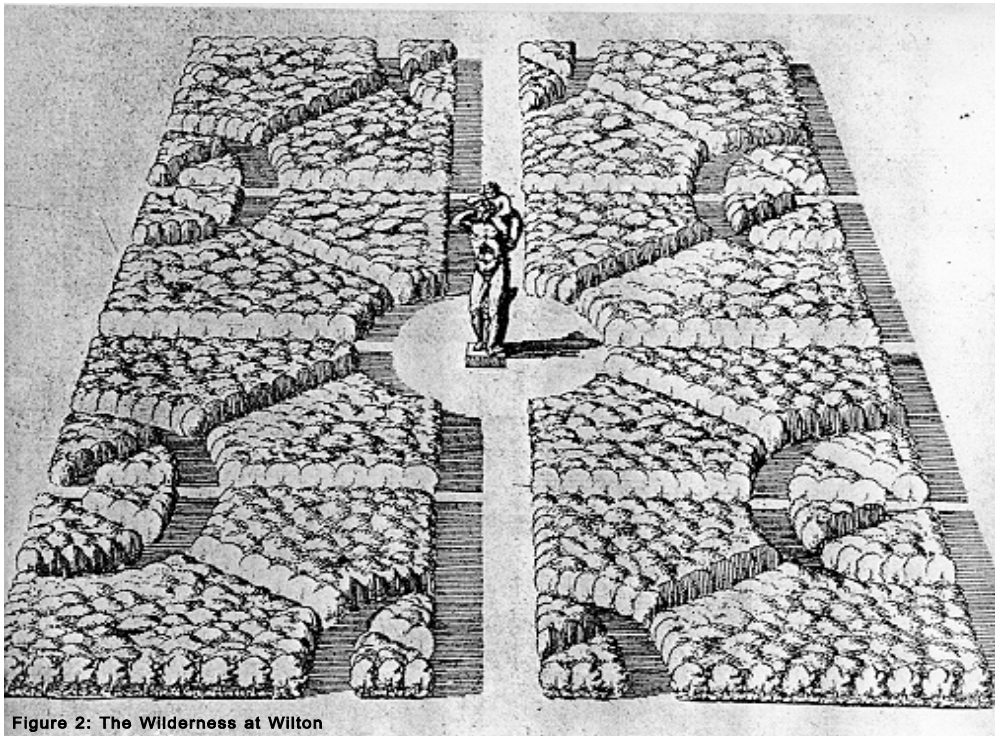


Figure 2: The Wilderness at Wilton

The core of wild nature, the figure at the centre of the wilderness, is Zeus bearing the infant Dionysus or Bacchus the god of ecstatic or wild nature; both inner and outer wild nature. He was a principal deity of late classical Greece, a relative late comer. He was one of a wave of new Gods who arrived when the cities were already well established. While many cities allowed the cult and gave space to occasional wild festivals, several cities resisted the cult. One was Thebes. The stories tell of Pentheus, ruler of Thebes refusing to give entry to Dionysus. Pentheus insisted on the rule of reason and the need for security. In Ted Hughes' translation⁸ Pentheus is the ruler whose "two eyes ... so sharply supervise everything and see nothing" Dionysus rewarded well the rulers who allowed him entry but sought vengeance when he was denied. When Dionysus entered Thebes to punish the ruler Pentheus, he drove the population to frenzy, binge drinking, gluttony and drugs. His followers, mostly women, ran out into the countryside in violent frenzy, eventually tearing Pentheus apart with their bare hands because they mistook him for a lion.

Myths can be understood at different levels but they often have something to say which is of deep significance for our collective and personal psyches. Oedipus and Narcissus are more familiar examples. In this case we hear that if we allow wild nature in to our collective psyche (and personal psyches) we will be rewarded; the hidden potential, the creative ferment will be ours; if we deny it something which is in the way will be torn apart. But we can also see that however it happens a new equilibrium is restored; since before the time of Christ Dionysus was known as Saviour.

I could argue that there is a great deal in life which can challenge the sense of individual unique human-ness. I don't want to give the impression that we're all going under, far from it, but not everyone can keep their head above the rising tide of

regulatory systems and the turbulence of ever changing strategies overseen by new watchdogs and other official regulators in Europe and at home. Add to this the tumultuous nature of often spuriously urgent social change, the demands of technology, or the pressures for conformity. As the sociologist Richard Sennett puts it:

*How can we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned?*⁹

In the story it is the controlling influence of Pentheus' that has to be torn apart. This allowed the creative and positive space needed for an expression of people's unique human-ness. If we continue to build a highly regulated social order that makes it hard to sustain our individuality we may need either to take dire measures to express it for ourselves in extreme risk or violence or abandon it altogether in the oblivion produced by addictive substances, the denial of experience. Addiction begins with a yearning to belong; to be a real person in a real situation. The moral of Dionysus is that it really is not more controls that society needs but more freedom for the individuality of its members to be realised.

And there are those who insist on the glory of their individual-ness. Free-running is an extraordinary example, athletic, gymnastic and wild. If like me, as a child, you explored the ways to circumnavigate your house without touching the ground, you have been an embryonic free-runner, add a touch of Spiderman and you've got it. It has been elevated to the roof tops. The free-runners move across the city on the wild surfaces; they claim the wilderness of the rooftops, walls and railings. They flirt at the edge of fear. The only rule seems to be never to show off; the only discipline always to know where the edge really is and to respect it. While being part of a group, each free-runner moves and dances in his or her own way. It is an assertion, an act of liberation, a celebration of the individual in him or herself; the Dionysian dance at the edge, a lust to be really alive. It would still be exhilarating but something would change if for example, the roof tops were designed for free-running, or if courses were laid out with marshals or if formal risk assessments were required.

Wild by Nature:

The inspiration I get from free-runners comes from the way that the freedom is *claimed*, and individuality is exuberantly celebrated. The wild psyche needs to get us to the places which are not regulated, where we have to be ourselves, where everything depends on knowing the edge and respecting our own capacity as an individual. Not wild by design, but wild by nature.

Notes and References

¹ The Tree by John Fowles, 1992, The Sumach Press, St Albans p 43

² Forestry and the Art of Frying Small Fish by David Russell 1998, Environmental Values Vol 7 No 3 pp281 - 9

³ The Tree by John Fowles as above p 55

⁴ Iron John, Men and Masculinity by Robert Bly 1990. The Latest available edition published by Rider: London

⁵ The retreat on Bardsey Island is run by the Carreg Trust. A Nature and Spirit retreat is currently planned for July, I shall be one of the leaders contact me on 01452 812991 for further information

⁶ From the Wilderness by Alasdair Maclean 1973 Gollancz, London

⁷ Engraving from Isaac de Caus, Le Jardin de Wilton, c 1645

⁸ Tales from Ovid by Ted Hughes 1997 Faber and Faber: London

⁹ The Corrosion of Character: the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism. Richard Sennett 1998 WW Norton New York