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Environmental Aesthetics Beyond the Dialectics of Interest and Disinterest

Deconstructing the Myth of Pristine Nature

Antony Fredriksson

ABSTRACT In this paper I want to scrutinize one of the key ideas within modern Western aesthetics. Beauty is often considered to derive from a virtuous disinterested attitude towards nature. This kind of view has been advocated by thinkers such as Shaftesbury and Kant in the beginning of the so-called aesthetic turn in philosophy. The problem with this view is that it presupposes that nature exists by itself before human intervention in a kind of ideal pristine state. My hypothesis is that this ideal of pristine nature constitutes one of the underlying problems of many contemporary environmental discourses.
KEYWORDS Pristine nature, culture, natural beauty, disinterestedness, sublime, picturesque

> 'Things which have a nature *in themselves*' – a dogmatic idea, which must be absolutely abandoned.[1]
> –Friedrich Nietzsche

In two chalk drawings German artist Jürgen Stollhans expresses a dichotomy in our attitudes toward natural and urban landscapes. In the first drawing we see a forest grove and the caption *Orientierungsphase* (orientation phase). In the second one we see an urban view with a sidewalk, a façade of a house, an iron fence and the caption *Leitsystem* (guiding system). What comes to my mind when thinking about these images and captions is a categorical divide between the natural, un-designed environment and the urban designed and predetermined space. A natural environment is a place where our movement is dependent on orientation. There is no predetermined way in which to move about. For each new place we have to decide how to move forward, which turns we can take, how to cross streams, cliffs or thick groves etc. Our relationship to such an environment is of course also dependent on our experience. Some people have a more thorough knowledge of the natural environment and a more direct contact with it and dependency on it than others. But still, nature is unique in the sense that it is not designed by us. By contrast, a designed environment is in this respect already predetermined. A fence is built in order to hinder our entry and the street-plan of a city is drawn according to a certain logic of movement. In this way we are, at least to

some extent, guided by the cityscape. In nature, a hindrance is not there in order to stop or limit our movement; it is not intentional or rational, or it cannot be understood as intentional and rational in the same way as the planned cityscape. Now this is not necessarily Jürgen Stollhans point; I interpret quite freely what the drawings actually address. But to my mind this interpretation comes quite naturally to our sensibility since this divide between natural and anthropomorphic environment plays, I would claim, a key role in our modern culture.

What struck me with Stollhans work when I first saw it at the Documenta 12 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 2007, was how it made a brief but poignant statement about our modern predicament. It made sense to me as a comment on the domesticating effect that the designed environment of the cityscape sometimes has on us. This comment seems appropriate to me, but when given a second thought, this idea of the divide between the designed and the un-designed also has a backside: What still puzzles me is how this idea of a designed environment mystifies the natural. When nature is juxtaposed to the designed environment that we to a large extent live in, it starts to become un-intelligible. Does the fact that natural environments are not designed by us also entail that they are beyond our desires, our will, our interests and our intentions, that they are somehow un-human? And what could this possibly mean?

This division between nature and culture is a central component of modern aesthetics. The concept of disinterest that announces itself during the 18th century in the philosophy of Lord Shaftesbury and that is later adapted by Kant, signifies exactly this kind of categorical division between culture and civilization, governed by our desires and interests, and the natural realm that is conceived as a counterpoint, as something outside of our human concerns. There is something deeply problematic about this categorical division. In this text I want to articulate this difficulty. If we take this categorical division to be the ontology of environmental aesthetics we end up in a situation in which every intention, interest or expression of our desires in relation to the natural environment signifies domestication and exploitation. What the emphasis on disinterestedness within aesthetics does with our understanding of nature is that it makes us forget the whole history of our natural life-form. As Jakob Meloe points out, the concept of *life-form* appears in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as a replacement for the positivistic idea of *the given*.[2] In this Wittgensteinian view our concept of nature and our relationship with it, is determined by how we live our lives, on our practices and actions, and on how we situate ourselves within it. Nature

Jürgen Stollhans: “Orientierungsphase – Tafeln”, 2007, White chalk on one-coat paint on plywood.

Jürgen Stollhans: “Leitsystem – Tafeln”, 2007, White chalk on one-coat paint on plywood.

is not something that our culture rests upon, culture is not a human veneer that is applied upon a ready-made, given nature. Meloe also sees a parallel to the Heideggerian concept of *being-in-the-world*. Meloe writes: "The original concept of a thing is that of a *zeug*, a stone to throw, a stick to dig with, a cave to seek shelter in."[3] In this way natural objects are determined by our use of them; their meaning does not reside in the things themselves. In this sense nature is an integral part of our culture, or if you will, culture is a part of nature. The natural environment is and has been the locus of our actions, our dwelling and essentially our home. How then could we relate to it without interest?

It seems we cannot get rid of the concept of pristine nature since it plays an important role in our understanding of environments that are not designed by us, but it is crucial to understand this difference between the designed and the undesigned correctly. The *idea of the natural* has been the fundament for philosophy, science and aesthetics from the 17th century onward, but as philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche have pointed out this idea has also overshadowed essential aspects of our common life. Nietzsche writes: "The world, apart from the fact that we have to live in it – the world, which we have *not* adjusted to our being, our logic and our psychological prejudices – does *not* exist as a world 'in-itself'; it is essentially a world of relations."[4] If we think of nature as an environment where our interests, our cultural and social life, do not come into play, then we position ourselves outside of nature. This kind of positioning has not led to a deeper understanding or appreciation of nature; rather it has entailed an alienation from it. Or, to put it another way this kind of understanding of the natural, of nature as it exists in its pristine state, should be considered as a symptom of a certain historical transformation in our attitudes toward our environment, not as a return to the natural.

In this essay I want to give a brief account of why the idea of pristine nature enters the Western frame of mind in the transition between romanticism and modernity and of how this concept is internally related to the concepts of the sublime and the picturesque within aesthetics. Secondly, I want to find another way of addressing the puzzlement that arises when we think of nature as an "unconditional thing."[5] This puzzlement depends on a preconception that inhabits our understanding of nature. In order to get to grips with this puzzlement I will present Jacob Meloe's account of the life-form of fishermen in Northern Norway. Meloe's example of the concept of a "natural harbour" dissolves the division between nature and culture, object and concept. It calls into ques-

tion the traditional philosophical understanding of nature as a pristine, un-designed, unconditional, nonhuman and sublime entity.

From the Sublime to the Picturesque

In her book *Fiction in the Age of Photography* Nancy Armstrong attends to the development of British realism during the end of the romantic and the beginning of the modern era. She sees the turn between the 18th and 19th century as a rupture in certain aesthetic and economic concepts within English literature and consequently in the English mindset. The pivotal point in this discussion was the ontology of the image, i.e. the relationship between representation (image, description) and the object (nature, the natural).[6] The transformation of the English landscape that occurred during the 18th and 19th century was dependent on a new economic, aesthetic and epistemological order that stemmed from a society that no longer lives directly off the land. Up to a certain point in history the landscape that was formed by agriculture gave the impression of wealth and prosperity, whereas untouched pristine natural sites were considered to be *waste*lands. But in order to be able to consider themselves a purely modern nation, the Victorians took one step further in their attitudes toward the natural. In a society that considered itself more prosperous than the past generations, the wastelands became a sign of transcending the dependency on natural resources. Wastelands became desirable even to the extent that landscaping practices were developed in order to conceal the former rural agricultural landscape. Nature was brought back to its "original" state in order to convey prosperity.[7] During this time the idea of nature as pristine or untouched becomes an aesthetic ideal.

William Cronon attends to this same development in his essay *The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*. He describes how the concept of the sublime enters into the European intellectual culture of the 18th century as a central idea of the romantic mindset. A related but more specific ideological construct that Cronon takes up as part of this development is the myth of the frontier. For American intellectuals like Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister the frontier signified the opposite of civilization. Ironically, this mythology was created by an elite that did not have to face nature on a daily basis or depend on it directly in order to survive. For these people nature was a site for recreation and leisure time activities, not for productive labor. The most tragic consequence that Cronon takes up in order to emphasize the paradox in the myth of the frontier is how the movement that originally strived to

found national parks in which nature was preserved in its "virginal" state, drove the Native American population out of their homes into reservations. The people who actually considered nature to be their home were forcefully moved so that the natural reserves would appear untouched.[8] This venture reveals a form of self-deception in which advocates of a culture that has become alienated from nature destroy another culture's harmonious coexistence with it. In this ideology, nature is given the part of that which is the opposite of civilization; it was considered to be the "unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul."[9] The important point that Cronon makes is that we have to keep in mind that wilderness, pristine nature or the natural, are ideas that belong to a specific cultural development. He writes of wilderness:

> It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it's a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made.[10]

In order for us to understand the difficulties that we have with the notions of wilderness or pristine nature, we have to understand how these concepts entered the aesthetic discourse. Cronon writes: "To gain such a remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred."[11] In contrast to a world and a space that become more and more a product of human design, more and more rationalized and controlled, nature's wildness, its un-veneered appeal, was uplifted to the status of sacred, to an ideal. This is why, at a certain point in history, the sublime became a necessary concept that was used in order to articulate a certain understanding of nature. One important aspect of the idea of the sublime is that it celebrates the un-describable beauty of nature. For the romantic artist nature is unsoiled by cultural values and interpretations. Whereas an image is a result of human design, nature holds a position beyond the anthropomorphic; it is a world prior to design. In this line of thought every effort to mimic natural beauty in images is a futile attempt to domesticate nature and this intention will by itself denigrate natural beauty. William Wordsworth, among others, describes nature as a realm beyond interpretation. According to him all descriptions, poetry and imagery, lend their beauty from the sublime – from the authentic, pristine nature. For Wordsworth, the beauty of an image or poem originates from the sublime experience that nature evokes in the

observer.[12] Nature has the capacity to inspire the artist and in this way influence his works of art, but art cannot reproduce natural beauty. In this way the beauty of nature is not reducible to visual or pictorial content. It does not reside in the picturesque, but in the contemplative attitude that nature evokes in man. Here it is notable that this relationship between nature and the singular man is contrasted to the common, human world of culture and society. Wordsworth writes about how a man "*in monkish times*"[13] became allured to feel at home in places that permit a contemplative attitude.

Cronon points out how this romantic attitude is actually more related to something supernatural than to the natural. For Wordsworth, nature is not only capable of evoking feelings of beauty and pleasure in the observer. It can also arouse awe and dismay. Cronon quotes a passage in which Henry David Thoreau, Wordsworth's 19th century follower, expresses his admiration for Mount Katahdin, as follows: "This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors."[14] In this sense the concept of the sublime is not necessarily determined only by the positive feelings that it evokes, but, rather, by the mystical presence of something that is beyond our comprehension.

At the turn of the 18th century this ideal of the sublime, of the sacred, indescribable beauty of nature, starts to transform into its mirror image. The picturesque becomes the ideal of beauty. The conception of nature as sublime, its power to arouse wonder and contemplation, its beauty beyond utility and interest gives way to a new aesthetic order in which the formal or pictorial beauty of nature becomes paramount. Whereas the aesthetics of the sublime states that the beauty of the image derives from nature, the aesthetics of the picturesque postulates that the image gives value to the object.[15] According to William Gilpin, who can be considered the key figure behind the idea of the picturesque, the value of an image is dependent on its composition and in this way he invites the idea of a standard of taste. Aesthetic value starts to correlate with economic value, and the desirability of a certain image becomes dependent on its design, rather than its subject-matter.[16] In this transition to modernity, natural beauty becomes commoditized. This development has very real consequences, not only for the understanding of landscapes during this time, but also in that it entails a venture in which the natural landscape is transformed according to the ideals of the picturesque. Armstrong writes:

> This change in the poles of the debate over the picturesque marks a change in the status of the visual representation itself. [...] a sketch or painting of the tastefully positioned and appointed country house became something more than a representation of a piece of rural property. That image had been instrumentalized. Rather than simply reproducing the visible surface of a particularly well-textured landscape as Gilpin had proposed, the image began to behave like a plan or model, capable of bringing the landscape in line with a visual standard. [...] At the point when the model precedes its material realization, it is fair to say that the copy has replaced the original. Thus the English landscape began to copy art almost a century before Oscar Wilde called attention to the fact.[17]

It is this change of orientation that gives way to the development that often is perceived as modernity's rationalization and aesthetization of both rural and urban space. The concept of image plays a key role in this transformation since the image is both a way of fixating a certain view, so that it can be scrutinized aesthetically, and a means of making models according to which the natural world can be categorized and re-organized. In the beginning of the 18th century Lord Shaftesbury wrote: "never to admire the *Representative*-Beauty, except for the sake of the *Original*; nor aim at other *Enjoyment* than of the *rational* kind."[18] At the beginning of the 19th century, *representation* had transcended the task of copying the given natural world in order to appreciate the qualities of the original. Representation, in the era of the picturesque, referred to a way of transforming the natural and subjugating it to human design. This way of interfering with nature stands in stark contrast to Wordsworth's contemplative romantic attitude. Modernity signifies a change in the aesthetic order that completely leaves the ideal of contemplation behind.

Although my ethos in this text is anti-romantic, my aim is not to defend modernity. The way in which the ideal of the picturesque stands as a mirror image to the ideal of the sublime reveals how both of these concepts are inhabited by a similar problem in that they both point out an ideal position from which nature can be *looked upon*. In the first case of the sublime, the spectator looks upon the nonhuman realm in contemplation, in the second case of the picturesque the spectator looks upon the nonhuman realm, through preconceived models. Both of these attitudes hold an ideal distance to nature. Whether we talk about nature as sublime, untouched or sacred, or whether we conceive it as a playground for economic and purely formal aesthetic interests, the moral question concerning our place in nature is not addressed. Our involvement and

relationship with nature goes beyond the generic dualism of a contemplative attitude in which nature is inhabited by a sublime beauty and a modern venture of commoditization and exploitation. Our life-form is by necessity adjusted to nature; it is conditioned by it. Therefore the dialectics of the sublime and the picturesque, of interest as opposed to disinterest, does not convey our predicament properly.

The examples above show how the idealization of the contemplative attitude is dependent on a development that suppresses the possibility of contemplation. Likewise, the idealization of nature as it exists in its pristine state stems from an acceleration of the development in which the natural environment is being domesticated by utilitarian and economic interests. When the world seems to develop into an environment where everything is designed according to the desires of man, a longing for the world in its pristine state is awakened.

Interest and Disinterest

It is against this historical backdrop that we should understand the emergence of the so-called aesthetic turn within philosophy. This turn is commonly understood as the point when the use of the word "aesthetics" as a moniker for an independent field of study within philosophy is coined by Baumgarten in the middle of the 18th century. This is often considered the starting point of modern aesthetics. However, one of the key concepts that is pivotal for modern aesthetics precedes Baumgarten's doctrine. Jerome Stolnitz writes about Lord Shaftesbury: "For he sets into motion the idea which more than any other, marks off modern from traditional aesthetics and around which a great deal of the dialectic of modern thought has revolved, viz., the concept of 'aesthetic disinterestedness'."[19] This concept of disinterestedness is not only related to a certain current within philosophy, it is a reaction to a transformation within a whole culture. Preben Mortensen points out how the legacy of Shaftesbury, who can be considered one of the last advocates of the classical aesthetic tradition,[20] should be understood as a reaction against the development of a certain economical order in which moral virtue and aesthetic beauty are reduced to utility and desirability. Beauty for Shaftesbury, and, later on, for Kant, is beyond the realm of desire. When they emphasize the importance of the disinterested attitude both scholars express a quite real concern. They asses the dangers of an aesthetic understanding in which the moral components are excluded. In order to understand this view correctly it has to be taken into account that Shaftesbury, when he introduces the idea that beauty resides in the disinterested attitude, is

actually concerned with a moral question concerning the relationship between moral good and aesthetic beauty. As Mortensen points out, Shaftesbury "distinguishes between admiring something for its beauty and the desire to possess or own it."[21] In this sense beauty cannot be a purely aesthetic concept as it is always entwined with moral judgment. But peculiarly, moral judgment is defined negatively as being obtainable through the lack of interest and intention. In order for something to be purely beautiful, one has to regard it without a desire to possess it. From this distinction Shaftesbury infers a significant difference between natural beauty and the beauty of man-made design. Shaftesbury is adamant on the point that man-made structures and artifacts lack the beauty and sublimity of natural structures and environments. He writes:

> Your *Genius*, the *Genius* of the Place, and the GREAT GENIUS have at last, I think, prevail'd. I shall no longer resist the passion growing in me for Things of a natural kind, where neither Art, nor Conceit or Caprice of Man has spoil'd the genuine Order, by altering any thing in their primitive State. Even the rude Rocks, the mossy Caverns, the irregular unwrought Grotto's, and broken Falls of Waters, with all the horrid Graces of the Wilderness it self, as representing Nature more, will be the more engaging, and appear with a Magnificence beyond the formal Mockery of Princely Gardens.[22]

The mockery that Shaftesbury refers to derives from the futility of the attempt to copy natural beauty - the point being that human attempts to copy the splendor of nature will always fall short: They can never grasp the beauty of the original, since they are inhabited by human desire, will, intention and interest. The effort to succumb the view of a landscape to one's interest is morally corrupt even on the level of sense perception. Only the disinterested observer can grasp nature as it truly is in its pristine state. Here is the inherent tension in the ideal of the disinterested observer, since although it is described as a lack of desire and intention, it is still an attitude. It is something that the observer is morally accountable for.

Also for Kant, desire and beauty, economy and aesthetics are fundamental opposites. In his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* Kant formulates this as follows: "We call that *good for something* (useful) which only pleases as a means; but that which pleases on its own account we call *good in itself*."[23] In this sense our experience of beauty differs from mere desire. In the specific case of experience of beauty, we are in a disinterested state, without desire, without goals and without agency. He writes:

> All one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the real existence of the object of this representation. It is quite plain that in order to say that the object *is beautiful*, and to show that I have taste, everything turns on the meaning which I can give to this representation, and not on any factor which makes me dependent on the real existence of the object. Every one must allow that a judgment on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste.[24]

Pure beauty resides in the *purely aesthetic* or a *pure judgment of taste*: no desires or interest should be involved, since these depend on the actual thing in the world. Here, Kant is concerned with exactly the same issue as Shaftesbury, however, one of his conclusions is the exact opposite. Whereas Shaftesbury accepts representation only for its power to remind us of the original, Kant disqualifies this comparison on the grounds that the longing for the original thing in the world reveals our desire to possess and utilize it. Both are rightfully concerned about a development in which beauty is reduced to desirability and utility. Neither of them accepts the idea that the experience of beauty can be described in economic or utilitarian terms. But there is still something about Kant's categorical claim about the purity of aesthetic judgment that, I think, leads us astray. What bothers me is the idea that we could make these categorical divisions without losing something in the process. When we try to imagine what kind of person this disinterested Shaftesburian or Kantian observer would be like, it becomes clear that such a person could not feel particularly at home in nature, since, as Cronon points out: "Calling a place home inevitably means that we will use the nature we find in it [...]."[25] If this *sense of home* is what gets sidestepped or lost in the aesthetic theory of disinterestedness, that is, if the concept of disinterest simply is a symptom of alienation from nature, then it is hard to understand how this concept could have any merit in philosophy.

The problem with this view held by Shaftesbury and Kant is that in their reluctance toward human will and interest, they make up a categorical division which fails to describe how our desires and interests actually manifest themselves. The natural environment is and has been the locus of our actions, our dwelling and essentially our home. It is defined by our relation to it and this definition is never a one-sided affair.

One of the most successful critiques of the idea of disinterestedness can be found in Nietzsche's anti-essentialism. According to Nietzsche, Kant's distinction between *our understanding of things* and the *things as they are*

in themselves depends on a fundamental mistake. Even if things could be said to exist by themselves prior to our understanding of them and beyond our desires, then they could by necessity not be known. He writes:

> Something unconditioned cannot be known: otherwise it would not be unconditioned! [...] Knowing means: "to place one's self in relation with something", to feel one's self conditioned by something and one's self conditioning it – under all circumstances, then, it is a process of *making stable or fixed*, of *defining*, of *making conditions conscious* (not a process of *sounding* things, creatures or objects "in-themselves".[26]

What Nietzsche discovers is not only the incomprehensibility of the notion of "the-thing-in-itself." Furthermore, Nietzsche points out how knowledge is in the becoming, it is a result of a certain action and dependent on relation, not a fulfillment of a predetermined intention driven by desire. In this way our knowledge is dependent on interactions with the world, be it a natural or a manmade environment. Our knowledge of nature is not a contact with a given truth, it is dependent on how we position ourselves. Merleau-Ponty develops a similar line of argument when he writes:

> The physics of relativity confirms that absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream showing how each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation; it also rejects the notion of an absolute observer. We can no longer flatter ourselves with the idea that, in science, the exercise of a pure and unsituated intellect can allow us to gain access to an object free of all human traces, just as God would see it.[27]

The Environment as Home

If we think of nature as authentic, pristine or untouched we easily end up mystifying our relationship to our environment. The fixation on disinterestedness, the sublime, beauty and taste, and on the pure and authentic during the 18th century is a very particular way of understanding nature. In the following I will try to draw an outline of a different understanding of our relationship to nature that calls into question the ideal of the disinterested observer. Merleu-Ponty writes:

> They [empiricists] hide from us in the first place 'the cultural world' or 'human world' in which nevertheless almost our whole life is led. For most of us, Nature is no more than a vague and remote entity, overlaid by cities, roads, houses and above all by the presence of other people.[28]

And:

> In the footsteps of science and painting, philosophy and above all, psychology seem to have woken up to the fact that our relationship to space is not that of a pure disembodied subject to a distant object but rather that of a being which dwells in space relating to its natural habitat.[29]

What these quotations by Merleau-Ponty aim at is that our relation to our environment, be it urban or rural, is in our everyday experience a relation of being embodied and at home in the world. We do not look at the world, but in the world; we are not detached from it. One way of articulating this kind of relationship can be found in Jakob Meloe's essay *The Two Landscapes of Northern Norway* on the concept of a "natural harbour" and in the significance this concept has for seafaring people. Meloe is a Norwegian philosopher who has lived in the rural northern part of Norway most of his life among traditional cultures of reindeer-herders and fishermen. He has dedicated much of his philosophy to the problems concerning preservation of traditional forms of life in northern Norway.

When we ask; "what is a natural harbour?" and "how do we determine that a place is suitable as a natural harbour?" we are engaged in a certain philosophical tension between concept and object. Is it our concept of a harbour projected on to a natural landscape? Or is it a natural landscape that creates our concept of the harbour? Meloe's point is that neither of these alternatives is philosophically accurate. To understand and to be able to recognize a natural harbour, we have to understand what part it plays within a certain culture. The significance of an expression or a concept in language cannot be understood as idle. The meaning of a certain place is formed through ways of living, through action, strife, intentions, choices etc. If we are at a loss with the concept of a natural harbour then we are probably not part of a seafaring culture. We could not then discern such a place in nature, as for us the place would probably only signify wilderness. This would mean that we could not then feel confident at sea during heavy weather. This does not however imply that we could not understand the importance of the concept. We can understand what it would mean to be in need of a safe haven at sea during heavy weather and we can understand that achieving this goal would require a certain skill of being able to identify a place as suitable for anchoring up, a place that offers shelter from winds etc. We are not at a loss with understanding the predicament of a culture that earns its living at sea etc., since we are not at a loss with what it means to struggle, to seek safety or to secure a living. Then we have something to start from, if we want to understand the concept of a natural harbour. Meloe writes: "The method of

investigating the concept of a harbour, therefore, is this: Situate yourself within the practice that this object belongs to, and then investigate the object and its contribution to that practice."[30]

In order for something to be a natural harbour, it has to have certain qualities. Our perception or our concepts cannot create these qualities in a material landscape. In order to recognize such a place, one has to understand a culture of seafaring and its relation to certain aspects of the landscape and in order to do so one has to be acquainted with the practice of sailing, fishing, etc. For example, a natural harbour is: "at least 4 metres deep, at low tide, its bottom should be of a material that will hold an anchor even if the wind is pressing against the boat with the force of a storm, and its surroundings of skerries or islands should be such as to make it possible to approach it in most sorts of weather."[31] To be able to see this requires a certain life-form, a certain kind of experience and understanding of what exactly is required of these qualities of the geographical structure of a certain place. The natural harbour does not exist there *a priori* in nature. Without the activity and life form of the fisherman, Meloe writes, "there are no such formations to be seen, since there are then no eyes to see them. [...] If there are no fishermen, or other seafaring people, seeking refuge from foul weather, then there are no havens."[32] In order to understand a certain place and landscape, we have to be in contact with those cultures and societies who can appreciate this landscape, for which this place has a purpose, for which a certain place, perhaps foreign in our eyes, is a home. It requires that we understand what certain words, concepts and sentences mean in a lived life, in another person's experience.

Meloe's example shows how the question concerning design does not address the fundamental issue. Even a completely natural place like the natural harbour is not beyond human interest. To somebody this place might be pristine, virginal or meaningless. To a fisherman it is a haven, something that is required for his way of living. Neither of these attitudes is determined solely by the place itself. It becomes a harbour through a way of relating to it and it becomes wilderness through another way of relating to it. But beyond these relations this place is nothing. As Nietzsche points out, the distinction does not run between a world of appearance and a real world, but between a world and nonentity.[33]

The usual way of describing problems concerning our contemporary attitudes toward nature still relies on the classical aesthetic discussion. The romantic view holds that our involvement with nature, our conceptualization of the natural and our ordering of the natural landscape according to our economical, utilitarian interests, is always a way of domesticating

the wilderness. In a moral sense, in this view, the interference with nature is always a form of exploitation. The core idea of the romantic view is that human beings must respect the natural and succumb to this order. When the common belief in a divine natural order gives way to modernity, the original idea of nature as it exists for itself becomes superfluous. Still, the question of power and domestication remains, but in a different sense. Evidently we have altered the state of nature and the consequences have been horrific. The most pressing issue is that the most fundamental consequences are yet to come. In this sense the idea that we have to stop exploiting nature is still valid. However there is no return to an original state.

My main goal in this text is to point out another way of addressing the problem. Despite our efforts to control, transform or domesticate nature, we are still part of this ecosystem. Whether we consider ourselves to be at home in nature or alienated from it, we cannot transcend it. We cannot domesticate something which is already domestic and consequently we cannot consider our involvement in nature exploitative by definition since it is impossible for us to act without this involvement. As in Meloe's example of the natural harbour, we have to adapt to ways of living which enable us to, not only survive, but to feel at home in our environment. What this would entail cannot be answered in any uniform way. This is not my aim. The point is that we have to agree at least on one matter: that there is no pre-anthropomorphic natural state, or, rather, whether there is one or not, we cannot access it without our human understanding of things. There might exist ideals, fantasies and metaphysical systems of thought that build upon such a concept of nature-within-itself, and we might say that these kinds of ideals have been the core of our Western life-form. But it is precisely this ideal that we have to rid ourselves of. This is the legacy of Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein and Heidegger and it is a sound reaction to a romantic ideal that sprung from a thorough reorganization of our culture.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Thing-in-Itself and Appearance, and The Metaphysical Need," in *Immanuel Kant Critical Assessments*, ed. Ruth F. Chadwick (London: Routledge, 1992), 82.

2. Jakob Meloe, "Remaking a Form of Life," in *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, ed. Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinämaa and Thomas Wallgren (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1997), 441.

3. Ibid., 442.

4. Nietzsche, 85.

5. Ibid., 81.

6. Nancy Armstrong, *Photography in the Age of Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 32–33.

7. Ibid., 57–58.

8. William Cronon, "The Trouble of Wilderness, or, getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1995), 9.

9. Ibid., 1.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Armstrong, 41.

13. Wordsworth as quoted in Armstrong, 42.

14. Thoreau as quoted in Cronon, 5.

15. Armstrong, 46.

16. Ibid., 47.

17. Ibid., 56.

18. Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, *The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody* (London: John Wyatt 1709), 207.

19. Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Significance of lord Shaftesbury in Modern Aesthetic Theory", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 11, no 43 (1961), 98.

20. Chronologically this is evident if we take into account that Shaftesbury made his contributions prior to Baumgarten who commonly is considered to be the father of modern aesthetics. However this issue is more complex if we look at the philosophical concepts involved. Shaftesbury can also be considered to be the first modern aesthetician due to the fact that he introduced the concept of disinterestedness into philosophy. It is this idea that later will be refined by Kant and Shopenhauer and it is the questions concerning the disinterested attitude that finally will pave the way for a purely aesthetic discipline within philosophy. For a discussion on this issue, see Preben Mortensen, "Shaftesbury and the morality of Art Appreciation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 4 (1994), 632–633.

21. Ibid., 636.

22. Shaftesbury, 205.

23. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46.

24. Ibid., 43.

25. Cronon, 19.

26. Nietzsche, 81.

27. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 43.

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.

29. Merleau-Ponty 2005, 55.

30. Jacob Meloe, "The Two Landscapes of Northern Norway," *Inquiry*, Vol. 31 (1988): 387–401.

31. Ibid., 393.

32. Ibid.

33. Nietzsche, 85.

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