

THIRD PAPER: Suggested Topics

Papers are due by Lecture 26 and should consist of at least 10 typed pages (figure 320 words/page). The following questions and topics are meant to be suggestive. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the object of the discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term and should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text and to the subject-matter of our discussions in class. Whatever topic you chose, remember that *at least one of the texts discussed should be chosen from those readings on the syllabus assigned after the reading in Thoreau.*

The notion that we are fitted to nature, that we have a place therein, and an important place, what's more, this is an energizing idea for Wordsworth and Thoreau, as for many other authors, but particularly marked in the case of these two writers. Darwin changed not only our idea of nature, but also our idea of fitness and of the importance of our place in nature. Comment.

Many writers (e.g., Linnaeus) have insisted that the natural world can be grasped in outline and its general principles understood by human intelligence, but that the system of nature (like the workings of God's providence) is simply too large and complex for human intelligence to follow its workings in detail. (There is a brief statement of this sort in *Walden* on p. 194.) Darwin, too, makes a number of such statements. (You might check out the one about pillow-feathers on p. 64 of the Bantam edition.) What differences and similarities can you see between Darwin and his predecessors in this respect?

How adequately are Wordsworth and/or Thoreau aware of what we might call the Darwinian aspect of Nature? (Some relevant texts in Thoreau are at pp. 92-93, which talk about the "sweet and beneficent society of nature" and the battle of the ants, the squirrels (p. 188.) destroying trees and the passage (p. 211.) about the dead horse and the rebirth of spring.

Discuss the idea of wilderness and its relation to civilization in Faulkner's *The Bear* with the idea of wilderness in any other work. You might compare Faulkner's wilderness with Thoreau's sense of nature and of the values represented by hunting and fishing (Thoreau discusses this in chapter XI, *Higher Laws*) and by the woodchuck and the owl; there is also Faulkner's use of the train—he compares the bear to a locomotive, as representing one sort of power and presents the real locomotive as another sort, in a manner recalling Thoreau's varying allusions to the Iron Horse.

Compare Walden's sense of the stability or instability of Nature, its predations, etc, with Darwin's (or with George Williams's).

It has been said that the passages in Darwin's *Origin* referring to "the balance of nature" are out of place, because the motive-power for evolution in Darwin derives from the fact that nature is perpetually out of balance. Discuss the notion of "the balance of nature" in Darwin (Chapter Three, pp. 61-63 of the Bantam edition might be a good place to start) and in any other work or works read this term and reach some conclusions about the different ways in which the image or metaphor is used in these texts.

Nature is benevolent or good, nature is malevolent or evil, nature is morally or ethically neutral. Find at least one text read this term for each position and discuss the oppositions in viewpoints among them on this issue. It has been said that all three views can be found in or derived from the argument of Darwin's *Origin*. Comment.

Examine the role of islands in creating perspectives on the natural world. We have encountered islands this term in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Island of Dr Moreau* and *The Tempest*; the individual cubicles of "The Machine Stops" might be regarded as islands of a sort. How does the model of the island stand as microcosm for the macrocosm of the human environment, however the phrase "human environment" is to be understood? Discuss at least one text read during the last third of the term in shaping your answer.

Can we destroy nature? Explain with careful and detailed reference to at least two works read this term.

The idea of wilderness tamed and domesticated is the idea of the garden. Discuss the opposition between garden and wilderness in any two texts read this term with careful attention to the values espoused by each author. Elucidate how at least part of Thoreau's book is to overcome or ignore this opposition. Huxley makes the opposition most explicit. If Huxley knew about the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, would he alter his point of view?

Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* seems to accept many elements of Huxley's viewpoint. Mankind has evolved from animal nature by dint of pain (Huxley would say, hardship and struggle); the force behind evolution (Huxley's "cosmic process", Wells's Dr Moreau) is without morality; the creatures thus produced have to create their own morality. Comment on the parallel and how far it can be drawn.

In various ways, the discourses of Huxley and Wells modify the idea of "perfection", a term used with some insistence by Darwin. As Huxley points out, although the process of natural selection may be said to perfect the members of a species, it does so only in relationship to the particular situation of a given speciesCits particular conditions of life. Under many imaginable conditions, therefore, "perfection" by the standards of natural selection can be "degeneration" by the standards of ethics. As for Wells, his tale of Dr. Moreau raises the question whether the animals, in becoming more human-like, have been "improved", as opposed to merely "altered". Furthermore, it can be claimed that this modification in the use of the notion of "perfection" is already inherent in Darwin. Or is it?

A philosopher once remarked that the presence of hiking trails, trash barrels, picnic areas and the like, convert wilderness into "man-made landscape". In reply, another wrote: "The occasional activity around trails do not convert an area to a 'man-made landscape', anymore than the presence of a wombat trail creates a wombat-made landscape." (Both philosophers, as the mention of wombats indicates, were Australian.) Discuss the position that any two authors read this term would take on this quarrel. Again, you might consider what sense the notion of "wild nature" makes in the light of Darwin's view that every species changes all the rest of nature by its ceaseless change throughout generations of the way in which it exploits its own niche under the stress of competition.

An early text in the contemporary ecological movement was Barry Commoner's "Closing the Circle," which argued that life on earth has survived by finding ways, sometimes unexpected ways, to keep the cycle of nature going. Thus, he says, the first great ecological crisis occurred when early forms of life, (i.e., anaerobes, which thrive in an oxygen-free environment) produced

so much oxygen (a poison to them) that they threatened to extinguish life on earth. But life itself survived by developing forms that could thrive on oxygen, thus “closing the circle” of recycling earth's biologically relevant elements. (A somewhat different but related use of this episode in biological history is made by George Williams on pp. 209-10 of his essay revising Huxley.) Mankind, Commoner urges, has yet to learn obedience to the commandment that nature learned long ago, which I shall phrase (as Commoner does not): Thou Shalt Recycle: that is the Law! How Darwinian is this argument? Does Darwin, rightly understood, forward the notion that we should imitate nature or the notion that we should resist it?

Darwin's vocabulary is full of phrases that sound positive and upbeat: there is grandeur in this view of life, it “ennobles” organisms to say that God didn't create them one kind at a time, natural selection is improving, acting always for the benefit of the organism--and all the rest of it. Is this vocabulary justified by the doctrine? How cautious is Darwin in spelling out the consequences of his view?

Compare Thoreau's view of the regenerative powers of nature in the chapter on Spring with the views of either Darwin or Huxley. Why does Thoreau insist upon the comparison of the internal workings of the earth with excrement and how central is this to his vision of nature?

Dr Moreau claims to be a religious man, and his religious view of things derives from his conviction that “the study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature.” What view of nature, expressed by some other text read this term, does this accord with? Thoreau says that the point of living as he did was to live “as deliberately as Nature”, meaning, as carefully and thoughtfully. Both views project human qualities onto the whole of Nature (and so does Darwin, only he insists that this is just a legitimate metaphor for use in scientific exposition). Discuss.

Take the opening episode of *The Island of Dr Moreau*, the account of the struggle for life in the boat, and show how it relates to the central themes of the story as a whole. Or take the last chapter and compare it with the last paragraph of Darwin's *Origin* in order to estimate how closely Wells was influenced by the Darwinian view of things, if not by the *Origin* itself. Darwin contrasts the eternal regularity of cosmic nature with the complex changefulness of biological history, whereas Prendick, although educated by Huxley, seeks solace in the study of astronomy.

More on the remorselessness of Nature: Different post-Darwinian writers see this remorselessness in different ways. There is Huxley's “morally indifferent” cosmic nature, George Williams's evil nature (which is also short-sighted and stupid), Garrett Hardin's ethical nature, which serves as a model in its ruthlessness for the way in which human beings must learn to made incommensurables commensurate. Compare and comment on these various positions.

Wells claimed to be a disciple of Huxley. He has Prendick doing research with Huxley “as a relief from the dullness” of his leisured existence. In a book one of whose central terms is “aimlessness”, this is a significant qualification. He also has Prendick refer (on p. 98.) to the aimlessness of things on the island and to the fact that Moreau has wrenched from their condition as beasts (this is Prendick's usual word), in which their instincts were fitted to their surroundings and made into something unfitted for any natural existence. What are the implications of “bestiality” and “mark of the beast”? Why not refer just to “animal nature”? Is this idea of fitness in accord with Huxley's? With Darwin? Are the beasts on the island apt models for human beings? In what way? Prendick regards with horror the notion that humans would be turned into beasts, but is somewhat pacified to begin with by the notion that beasts are being turned into humans. Does the course of the story alter this view? What does the story say as a whole about the relation of humanity to nature (in any relevant sense of the word “nature”)?

At the end of a chapter of his *Descent of Man* (Xerox distribution in class), Darwin argues that just as overpopulation in relation to food supply and the consequent severity of the struggle for scarce goods has driven every species upon a unique path adapting its environment, so human intelligence, the distinguishing adaptive trait of our species, is the result of severe struggle and the future improvement of human adaptation must continue to depend upon it. He points out, however, a paradox inherent in the premium placed upon intelligence in the matter of human adaptation, namely, that the intelligent tend to have few children (for various good reasons), while those of lesser intelligence, unhampered by thoughtfulness, are checked by no inhibitions and therefore tend to have many. As a result, unintelligence as a trait will have increasingly more representation in future populations than intelligence, leading to regression (the unintelligent swamping the intelligent) and undoing the possibility of human advancement. Hence, the intelligent should be encouraged to propagate. But even further: since the struggle for existence has hitherto prompted selection for intelligence and daring, so well-meaning attempts by the intelligent to relieve the distresses of the poor consequent upon overpopulation must be inhibited if mankind is to continue to advance along its evolutionary path. Discuss any of the essays by Huxley, Williams, or Garrett Hardin as responses to this argument.

Outline the argument of George Williams as a response to Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* and determine how sharply the case that Williams makes agrees or disagrees with it. Huxley speaks of nature's moral indifference. How well does Huxley's view of nature accord with the portrait painted by H.G. Wells of Moreau and his biological engineering laboratory on his island? How justified is Williams in claiming that Huxley should have spoken of nature as evil rather than morally indifferent? (This matter is not a simple one: we usually think that evil has something to do with human selfishness exercised in opposition to human altruism, but Williams's nature does not care about what we would usually call human selfishness, since it is interested in the survival of genetic traits through a cycle of reproduction and not otherwise interested in either selfishness or altruism.)

Compare Huxley's garden or colony in Tasmania with Aldo Leopold's notion of a land-community (figured in the image of a pyramid). Like Huxley, Leopold calls upon mankind for resistance to traits that natural selection has developed in us and for sacrifice, but the ethical community to be served by resistance and sacrifice is a very different one from Huxley's. What difference does this make to their ethical viewpoints? Are these differences founded in science?

A more general version of the last question: some of our readings this term seem to ask us to live up to responsibilities which are different from our responsibilities to the rights and interests of other human beings and which might even conflict with our responsibilities to some of them. But they do not all recommend the same courses of action or address the same concerns--neither is it clear that they hold the same values. Indeed, you might be able to set the arguments of one of these writers to work attack the arguments of another. Choose any two, and exposit the views of each in a generous fashion.

Robinson Crusoe speaks of himself as "reduced to the state of nature". The phrase implies an opposite to the state of nature, but this opposite, and hence the meaning of the phrase "state of nature" is different in different texts. Huxley took "the garden" as an opposite to "the state of nature", and thought this warranted by Darwin's arguments in the *Origin*. Can you be "outside" nature, in the Darwinian sense? To what extent does the Darwinian or post-Darwinian idea of being "outside" nature imply any rethinking of the ethical priorities implicit in accepting the opposition between nature and civilization in any of its earlier forms? Discuss.

Or you can tackle a simpler version of this question: Take any texts, including at least one from our readings during the last third of the term, and compare and contrast the ways in which characters can be cut off from nature in some important sense.

Compare the general viewpoint underlying the sense communicated by Faulkner's novella that we need wilderness experience and we must learn to practice "relinquishment" with the view of any other writer read this term on the importance of gaining some critical distance from the demands--even the ethical demands--of civilization.

What is wilderness, as Faulkner describes it in *The Bear*? How can a mere 100 square miles cut through by a railroad be called a wilderness? Explain as best you can what is lost when the wilderness is sold for logging at the end of the story. Elucidate the values that are represented by wilderness in the story and contrast these with the values represented by the commissary, the place where Ike and McCaslin have their long discussion on Ike's twenty-first birthday.

Critics of *The Bear* have argued that the long passage on the history of the family, written in so-called "stream of consciousness" style is an interruption of an otherwise nearly perfect text, and editions exist which eliminate that passage (virtually one-half the text) entirely. When Faulkner, in fact, originally published the story in magazine form, he omitted that section. Defend or attack the critical opinion just cited by an analysis of the text.

As in some Greek tragedies, the characters in Faulkner's *The Bear* labor under a curse. What is the nature of the curse in this text? Is it fulfilled? Lifted? Expiated? There are three deaths in the text and they take place as a result of the same action. How are these deaths related? Can any of them be regarded as tragic? Why do Sam Fathers and Ike McCaslin want to kill the bear? Why did they hesitate to do it earlier, when they had the chance?

Analyze the third paragraph of *The Bear*, fetching out themes from it that are developed throughout the story and show their importance to the text as a whole. And/or analyze the last section of the story (section 5) with its predominant moment--the treeing of a bear, the encounter with a snake, the hysteria of Boon in connection with the frantic squirrels--in the same way.

Part of the argument that sprang up in the long century after the publication of *The Origin of Species* turned on whether our relationship to nature could possibly be conceived as one in which nature fosters our awareness in some all-important, beneficial way, and that, in consequence, we have to emulate nature in our dealings with ourselves and each other and also live in gratitude to the natural world for the benefits that it confers. Some part of this view survives into the present (as in Faulkner's story) but by the end of the nineteenth century, it could be argued that we would be wrong to emulate nature, that we have nothing to learn from nature's ways so far as the fostering of our humanity is concerned, and that we have no debt of gratitude to repay. Those who took this latter view, however, often believed that although we have no debt of gratitude to nature, we may have obligations of other kinds. Three of our readings after Darwin (Aldo Leopold, Mary Midgley, Baird Callicot) have to do with ethical obligations to things that cannot themselves assume responsibility for anything such things as trees, landscapes, islands, forms of life without a central nervous system (and hence without pain), and also sensible things that can feel but not act upon principle, as human beings can. The views of these three writers differ, but they all believe that our ethical relation to nature should not be governed simply by our ethical relationship to other human beings. Choose any two, outline their arguments and discuss the differences and similarities between them in any way that you believe will be illuminating.

Ursula Le Guin's story, *Vaster than Empires and More Slow*, is about the capacity of human beings to enter into ethical relationships in a way that does not depend upon making connections between one central nervous system and another. In this way, it bears upon the subject matter of the three essays just mentioned, as well as upon other readings in our syllabus. Analyze the elements of the story—the explorers are each, in their way, maladjusted, they move among alien forms of life, their mission is, like science itself, not meant to produce immediate practical benefit—and compare its point of view with any of the three essays or with any other work read this term.