H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Oates. *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature.* Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003. viii + 285 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87071-553-2.

Reviewed by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (Department of Philosophy, The Colorado College)

Published on H-Nilas (August, 2003)

Weathered Nature: Integrationism and Conceptual History in Environmental Ethics

Weathered Nature: Integrationism and Conceptual History in Environmental Ethics

David Oates's new book, *Paradise Wild*, is a compilation of essays. He conceives of the book as a palimpsest of wilderness acting through him. It is the memory of his relationships with nature. The book's essays span numerous topics. He writes of well-known naturalists such as John Muir, William Bartram, and Henry David Thoreau. He explores the nature of interpretation and how one interprets nature. He reflects on his autobiography as a Baptist gay man with Cherokee roots who used wilderness to escape his problems at an early age and to integrate his identity later. He discusses the fate of the Columbia River, and especially of salmon and the Hanford Reach nuclear area. The book layers topic on topic, drawing connections between them frequently. Addressing the reader directly, Oates frequently uses colloquial expressions. In the tradition of Thoreau, Snyder, and Rothenberg, Oates's book fits a well-known American genre of nature writing.

The book, accordingly, advances numerous claims. Its title thesis concerns how American environmentalists in the tradition of Muir understand nature. Oates contends that many environmentalists today see nature as a paradise lost. He locates this view in the writings of Muir. He also sees the view in the beliefs of environmental activists who push for no-use and extreme protectionist policies. Oates thinks that, for such people, if we touch nature, we corrupt it. So nature must remain forever beyond our reach, a paradise lost. Oates sees the nostalgia this view generates in the mournfulness of those who rue the loss of nature as already gone beyond reach.

Thoreau held the opposite view. So does Oates. Thoreau felt that we are natural and that nature exceeds even our violence to it. Oates believes, in a manner reminiscent of nineteenth-century Romantic vitalism, that life acts through us and nature with such urgency and creativity that it transcends human control. You might say nature, through the vitality in it, always already exceeds our conscious design, even with ourselves. The trick, Oates believes, is to live in a way that works *with* and not against the flow of life in us and in nature. It is to see ourselves integrated with nature.

There are many associated claims in Oates's book. In

this review, I will focus on the two I believe are most interesting. The first is that how we see nature is always a matter of interpretation, an interpretation carried largely in our customs, and so one key to becoming integrated with nature is developing a vital view of interpretation and a vital set of customs concerning nature. The second is that the problem of evil may be answered by nature's vitality. I will argue that the first claim is true and good and that the second claim is false and bad.

Conceptual History

Oates's enemy is what he calls "fundamentalism." Fundamentalism is any view of the meaning of something that thinks there is no room for interpreting it. So that the view is not misunderstood, Oates is *not* saying that claiming a red octagon means "Stop"–and rigidly so–is fundamentalist. Rather, he *is* saying that a red octagon with "STOP" on it can be interpreted in many ways, even if it is neither wise nor intended that we do so. For instance, in a hip-hop song I'm fond of, just such an octagon signifies the terminus of one's dreams.[1] Oates sees fundamentalism in the view of seeing nature as a paradise lost, if only because he thinks many environmental activists today think that such a view of nature is neither open to question nor conceived of as an interpretation.

What interests me about Oates's work around fundamentalism is his–true–insistence that "nature" is a concept and, as such, is one with a conceptual history of interpretation. What cultures take "nature" to be is a matter of largely customary but also mutagenic interpretation. This means we are being true to "nature" when we are open to it being conceptualized otherwise than we take it to be. More importantly, it implies that work on how we relate to nature *must* take seriously how our culture conceptualizes nature in a customary way. The environmental question of what our relation to nature should be must include a hermeneutic question about what we think "nature" means. Likewise, to change our relation to nature will likely involve changing how we understand nature. But changing our understanding of nature involves modifying not just our environmental protection policies or our ethical codes but also our customary language, rituals, imaginations, and so on. For *epistemological* reasons, we need to create environmental *language* and environmental *culture* if we stand any chance of improving our wear on the planet. Such creation begins by acknowledging that how we take nature to be is a result of prior interpretations and so could be otherwise.

The Problem of Evil

Oates links up the interpretability of nature with a genetic thesis about the nature of life itself. In a pseudo-Darwinian manner indebted to the Romantic vitalists of the nineteenth century, Oates thinks that "life" is a force acting out in us and in nature in such a way as to perpetually create new forms that handle obstacles to them. His image is of salmon, mutating to go up new rivers when their ancestral ones are blocked by dams. He also thinks that human sexuality is such a force, as Freud also did. For Oates, the very polysemy of "nature" in the face of fundamentalism is one expression of how "life"–or as he often says, "wildness"–acts out in us to shatter fixation. His view, while speculative, is interesting and has been shared by many over the past two centuries.[2] What is disturbing, however, is how he relates his view to the problem of evil.

The problem of evil is an ancient and recurring problem going back at least to the Book of Job, but which can be found in some form in almost all religions and in many philosophies. The problem most simply stated is: There is suffering in the world. How can we deal with it? Put in this form, the question sounds political. However, it has traditionally been addressed through theological and psychological means. People can't deal with the worst of the world's suffering. It traumatizes us with its senselessness. Over many centuries in the West, the search to answer the problem of evil has been a search to *rationalize* senseless suffering. However, since the time of Rousseau, a modern advance has been to insist that senseless suffering should not be rationalized but rather stopped, often politically and perhaps technologically.[3]

There remains, though, suffering that we cannot avoid, such as the death of loved ones at some point in life or accidents that take our loved ones from us. Here one might search for some rationalization still. This is what Oates does and so easily as to make one cringe. Oates thinks that the vitalism of nature compensates for our worst losses. Even though our loved ones may tragically perish, nature still flows wildly forth into new life. This is a bad response.

I believe a good response to senseless loss is to refuse to rationalize it or compensate for it. Indeed, successful mourning never compensates us for our loss. Rather, it allows us to preserve our love for the lost. That nature makes more life is looking in the wrong direction. At best, what is "more life" in us is our love, a love braided thick around memory. But then it is to memory we must turn and not to nature's productions. It is true that seeing life around you when you mourn may at some key

point late in the mourning act as grace on you. But the grace is the levity of some other life that someone, somewhere may love as you did, or the honoring of the dead who always loved the trees far up in the wind. There is no compensation but an association made around love. To see Oates so easily dissolving the problem of evil in the flow of life is upsetting.

But here we see what I believe is the deepest problem of Oates's work, a problem not simply of tone, mood, or feeling, but of context or roots. Oates's work is decontextualized from the scene of human striving. It rides too easy over the pain of life and the irreducible, unsubstitutable singularity of love. I believe this comes from a lingering narcissism in the authorial voice that makes others never entirely present in the text, in spite of its direct address. Armchair psychologizing aside, what can be said is that when Oates speaks for "us," as he is wont to do, he has the author's burden of capturing the depth and meaning of human experience, and he fails at a crucial point. But has he then understood why, really, people might long for a paradise lost?

A Story

Nature is a beautiful place, and also a pretty dangerous one. A girl walking down by the river was caught in a mudslide as the bank gave way and was carried out into the torrent of the brown river. She was pulled under, and died. Later, her family placed a tire swing by the place she fell, hanging high from the poplar trees and over the river itself. They set up a plaque in the tree, and called the place "Theresa's Sound World," for their lost daughter Theresa loved the river so, where she heard the sounds of birds, wind, water, and the far-off hum of cars along the overpass. The plaque says, "If it is raining hard and the river is brown, turn back. If the river is lazy and green, stay and swing out high into the water."

Notes

[1]. Malik Usef, "My City," on Common, *One Day It'll All Make Sense* (Chicago: Relativity, 1997).

[2]. For the sake of space, I will not go into my concerns about the speculativeness of his claim and some objections I have to the view.

[3]. See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas

Citation: Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. Review of Oates, David, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature.* H-Nilas, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8078

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.