

## The Rediscovery of Paradise

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*A man consists of what I may call an Old World of personal consciousness and, beyond a dividing sea, a series of New Worlds — the not too distant Virginias and Carolinas of the personal subconscious and the vegetative soul; the Far West of the collective unconscious, with its flora of symbols, its tribes of aboriginal archetypes; and, across another, vaster ocean, at the antipodes of everyday consciousness, the world of Visionary Experience.*

*Aldous Huxley<sup>1</sup>*

In the first part of what is now to be a four-part exploration of some aspects of the concept of paradise and its expression<sup>2</sup> I made the suggestion that, following centuries of intellectual and imaginative stagnation and repression, during which the myth was monopolised by the mediaeval Christian church, the European discovery of the American continent in 1492 acted as a powerful, though sometimes unacknowledged stimulus on the Western mythopoeic imagination. Obviously, this is a vast and complex field of study which lends itself to almost infinite subdivision and specialisation. In this second paper, however, I shall confine myself to attempting to trace the development of just one mythic strand, that of the view of man's relationship to the natural world, in as far as it is connected to the idea of paradise, from its pre-Columbian form through to what I believe to be its modern manifestations, the environmentalist and New Age movements. Apart from this immediacy, my reasons for having chosen to focus on the paradise myth are several but interrelated: this complex, ancient construct of the human imagination simultaneously exhibits virtual geographical and cultural

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<sup>1</sup>Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p.74.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Harris, "The Spiritual Ecology of Paradise", *Chukyo Keiei Kenkyu* (Nagoya, Japan), Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 1993). Originally conceived as the first of three parts, this paper has retroactively become the introduction to a tetralogy.

ubiquity together with an astonishing degree of symbolic consistency.<sup>3</sup> To attempt to understand the development of the paradise myth is to examine the very nature of human existence, individual and social; in as much as our dreams, aspirations and ambitions are based on concepts of perfection, to a large extent our ideas of paradise determine what we are.

The Dark Ages which followed the dissolution of the Roman Empire had, according to one writer, "bequeathed to medieval man a kind of amnesiac void. He neglected to investigate his roots."<sup>4</sup> The knowledge of antiquity was lost, and intellectual speculation was rigidly suppressed by the church, which took full advantage of the secular authority it had gained by its crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE. Popular traditions, myths and superstitions inevitably survived, but often either in a disordered, debased form, ceasing to be a central element of human existence, or in many instances the older myths themselves were adapted to the purposes of Christianity, which then imposed its own version of the myths with all the force of a conscious ideology, including its view of man's relation to the natural world. In a 1967 essay of crucial importance to the ecology movement of today,<sup>5</sup> the American historian Lynn White blamed the anthropomorphism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition as exemplified by the mediaeval church for all the subsequent horrors of environmental pollution,<sup>6</sup> and although this view has been challenged,<sup>7</sup> there is no doubt that to the mediaeval mind (as, unfortunately, to many since), the world was created by God for human use; its resources, animal, vegetable and mineral, existed in order to be exploited.

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<sup>3</sup>These features will be discussed in the fourth part of this study.

<sup>4</sup>Barnet Litvinoff, *Fourteen Ninety Two: The Year and the Era* (London: Constable, 1991), pp. 22-3.

<sup>5</sup>One measure of its influence is that, in 1980, Pope John-Paul II followed the suggestion made in the essay to make Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology.

<sup>6</sup>Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", *Science* 155 (March 1967). In spite of its celebrity, this was not an original insight; as early as the 1680s the English sectary Thomas Tryon had contrasted the sensitive land-use of North American Indians with the rapacious destructiveness of the European invaders. Arthur Schopenhauer, Wilfred Scawen Blunt and Aldous Huxley similarly preceded Professor White in condemning the ruthlessly domineering Judaeo-Christian attitude towards nature.

<sup>7</sup>Many cultures, for instance, have proved themselves capable of destroying their environments without the aid of Christianity.

Scholars are still debating the manifold causes and effects of the break-up of the mediaeval world by the intellectual and perceptual revolution known as the Renaissance, but emphasis in most studies is usually placed on the advances in (or approaches to) learning, on expanding geographical knowledge and on political changes, all of which are supposed to have combined to lead to a new cosmological paradigm. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to changes at a deeper, less consciously intellectual level, largely no doubt because they are less susceptible to quantitative analysis and chronologically demonstrable causal relationships. (Also, perhaps, such shifts tend to be easiest to detect in cultural artifacts to which academic historians have traditionally paid little attention — literature and fine art.) However, it is precisely these elusive, almost intuitive shifts in perception which, in my view, are significantly responsible for creating what Edward Said has recently termed the “structures of attitude and reference”<sup>8</sup> with which Renaissance thinkers came to imaginative terms with the new scientific and geographical discoveries. (Indeed, the very use of the term ‘discovery’ along with its contemporary Romance analogues — *descubrimiento*, *scoperta*, *descobrimento*, *découverte* — suggests perhaps a new awareness that traditional cosmographies had failed. All these terms derive from the late ecclesiastical Latin ‘disco-operio’, meaning to uncover or reveal; few (though some) contemporary writers use the term derived from classical Latin ‘inventio’ to speak of the ‘invention’ of the Americas, inferring perhaps that what has been found has also, to a certain extent, been created by the discoverer, or ‘inventor’.) In many respects, of course, these perceptual shifts were retrogressive, a kind of reversion to earlier modes of thought (hence the term Renaissance), but there was an effective rediscovery of not only an intellectual past, but a mythological one. Thomas Huxley, writing from the intellectual’s point of view, once asserted that no more tragic event could be imagined than the collision of a beautiful theory with an inconvenient fact. The discovery of the Americas was just such a fact, and the challenge it posed to the narrow, book-determined rigidity of the mediaeval world view could not be faced entirely on the rational level. In my previous discussion of this theme I used a terminology developed in the paper to suggest that: “A Hesperides had been discovered, and its example could remind the human soul of what Arcadia was like, or inspire the human mind as to what Utopia could be.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>9</sup>Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

In the earlier paper I discussed briefly the immediate conscious impact of the discovery on European sensibilities in terms of its availability as a metaphor to writers such as Thomas More and, later, John Donne, Shakespeare and John Milton; but the very strangeness and unexpectedness of the Americas and their inhabitants precluded their incorporation into any existing canon. As Anthony Pagden has written:

The tensions which were created by the very different responses to the presence of the 'new' of America derived, at one level, from the problem of how to create a text where none had existed before. This led to the invention of new genres or, at least, to new versions of old genres.<sup>10</sup>

The genre to be transformed during the 'Age of Discovery' was that later to become known, after Thomas More's coining, as Utopian fiction. (Although More's eponymous work should probably be read more as a critique of Tudor society than a proposed model for a perfect one, despite the intriguing suggestion that it was based on the report of a real community in the Yucatan.<sup>11</sup>) Of course, books of travel and outlandish adventure like Mandeville's voyages had long been popular in the west, as had paradise fantasies, and the pre-Christian tradition was rich in such constructs: Homer tells of the Isles of the Blest and the model societies of the 'happy Phaeacians' and the 'blameless Ethiopians'; Hesiod, Ovid and Virgil all sing of the Golden Age, the reign of Saturn; Plato describes most famously the happy life of the inhabitants of Atlantis but also, in the *Symposium*, presents the intriguing Arcadia of humans as perfect spheres who subsequently broke in half, since when each hemisphere has been searching for its mate. Therefore, as J.H. Elliott has written in connection with the impact of the discovery of the Americas:

The temptation was almost overpoweringly strong to see the newly-discovered lands in terms of the enchanted isles of medieval fantasy. . . . With the discovery of the Indies and their inhabitants, who went around naked and yet — in defiance of the Biblical tradition — mysteriously unashamed, it was all too easy to transpose the ideal world from a world remote in time to a

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<sup>10</sup>Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 54.

<sup>11</sup>See Lorraine Stobart, *Utopia: Fact or Fiction* (London: Alan Sutton, 1992).

world remote in space. Arcadia and Eden could now be located on the far shores of the Atlantic.<sup>12</sup>

The mediaeval church, however, had dismissed the classical myths as undesirable pagan fables, and monopolised the paradise myth by imposing its own ideologically determined concepts of an irrecoverable Arcadia (Eden) and a conditional, elitist Elysium (Heaven, or the Millennium) thus precluding any truly imaginative development of the theme. Isaiah Berlin has eloquently suggested the church's rationalisation for this approach:

During the Middle Ages there is a distinct decline in Utopias,\* perhaps because according to the Christian faith man cannot achieve perfection by his own unaided efforts; divine grace alone can save him — and salvation cannot come to him while he is on this earth, a creature born in sin. No man can build a lasting habitation in this vale of tears: for we are all but pilgrims here below, seeking to enter a kingdom not of this earth.<sup>13</sup>

Such Utopias as were conceived, furthermore, tended to be urban, based on ecclesiastically sanctioned models like Augustine's *Civitas Dei* or the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation. This was also partly due to an association of cities with civilisation and progress, and the corollary linking of unimproved nature with savagery and backwardness; the historian Keith Thomas confirms that, in early Renaissance times, ". . . when men thought of heaven they usually envisaged it as a city, a new Jerusalem."<sup>14</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that fictional Utopias became increasingly scientific as the rise of science became equated with progress. Thomas's book, however, is a study of man's view of nature subtitled "Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800", which he concludes thus:

By 1800 the confident anthropomorphism of Tudor England had given way to an altogether more confused state of mind. The world could no longer be regarded as having been made for man alone, and the rigid barriers between humanity and other forms of life had been much weakened. . . . [A] kind of

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<sup>12</sup>J.H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New 1492-1650* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 24-5.

\*The term as used here refers to all literary conceptions of paradise, not just Utopias.

<sup>13</sup>Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 23.

<sup>14</sup>Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p.243.

pantheism was to become very general in the eighteenth century, when it was widely urged that all parts of creation had a right to live; and that nature itself had an intrinsic spiritual value. Not everyone now believed that mankind was uniquely sacred.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, ironically enough, the great humanist confidence engendered by the Renaissance with its characteristics of scepticism, individualism and secularisation was itself responsible for producing this “confused state of mind.” On the one hand, there was an intellectual liberation, the rapid growth of an empirical reluctance to take on trust the old doctrines of the church and ‘approved’ philosophers like Aristotle, and this was to a large degree both a result of the discovery of the new world and an impulse to further exploration. Anthony Grafton opens his study of the intellectual impact of the new world on Europe with the uncompromising statement that: “Between 1550 and 1650 Western thinkers ceased to believe that they could find all important truths in ancient books.”<sup>16</sup> This revolution in thought broke the authority of the church and thus created the humanist conditions under which the previously accepted ‘dominion’ view of man’s relationship to nature could be positively reassessed, as Thomas’s book shows. At the same time, however, this same intellectual and individualist freedom created the conditions for the Protestant Reformation which, by effectively stripping the natural world of spiritual or sacred meaning, was to have consequences even more environmentally damaging than the Catholic belief in man’s divinely-sanctioned right to dominion over nature.

The Protestants were trying to bring about an irreversible change in attitude, eradicating the traditional idea that spiritual power pervades the natural world, and is particularly present in sacred places and in spiritually charged material objects. They wanted to purify religion, and this purification involved the disenchantment of the world. . . . Nor were the desecrations of old sacred places by Roman Catholic missionaries an attack on the sanctity of the Earth; they wanted sacred places to be Christian rather than pagan, and often took over the old ones.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>16</sup>Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 1.

The Protestant iconoclasts had a different goal: not the substitution of one kind of sacred place for another, but the abolition of all sacred places.<sup>17</sup>

This attitude encouraged and even enabled the widespread acceptance of the mechanistic view of nature embedded in the rise of science, which itself led to the rationalist dualism of the Age of Reason, the settling of the Americas (along with the dispossession of their indigenes<sup>18</sup>), urbanisation, materialism and the industrial revolution, all of which immediately or ultimately threatened the natural world (as they still do) in the name of the 'new religion' of progress. A depressing contemporary example of the Protestant legacy is provided by the writer Norman Lewis, who recently visited a remote site in the jungles of Irian Jaya where an American company had created the largest copper mine in the world, essentially by destroying an entire mountain, extracting the copper, and filling an adjacent valley with the debris. Lewis powerfully describes the environmental desecration of the place and the squalid conditions of the local Amungme tribe, who have been forcibly dispossessed. He then reports a conversation with a senior employee who is in charge of the Local Community Development Project, and who is also a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the largest and most influential Protestant fundamentalist mission in the world:

'Don't the Amungme regard these mountains as holy?' He laughed it off. 'Let me say this,' he said. 'What's a mountain to them? These mountains are not even so valuable as a pandanus nut tree.'<sup>19</sup>

Ironically then, it was this humanist revolution itself and the unchecked arrogance it bred that, with the increasingly powerful tool of technology, were to destroy the balance of the natural world to the crisis point of today. The tendency was perceived very early; in the sixteenth

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<sup>17</sup>Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature* (London: Century, 1990), pp. 20-1.

<sup>18</sup>One recalls the old line about how, on reaching Plymouth Rock, the Puritans first fell upon their knees, then fell upon the Indians. Not, however, that the Catholic Spaniards in the days of the conquest had been any more considerate.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Lewis, *An Empire of the East* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p.237. A previous book, *The Missionaries* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1988), is a reasoned but terrible indictment of the activities of Protestant fundamentalist missions such as the S.I.L. Lewis has a great deal more respect for the Catholic missionaries, who seem more willing to compromise with the cultures they encounter.

century Michel de Montaigne was deploring the effect Europeans were having on indigenous cultures in the new world, as Andrew Sinclair writes:

Montaigne had been the first commentator on European expansion to see the effect of its terrible mechanical civilisation on the cultures of the rest of the world. . . . The expansion of Europe was merely a series of mechanical victories in which a superior organisation of war and commerce overcame the resistance of the cultures of the rest of the globe.<sup>20</sup>

This was Renaissance Europe's manifest destiny. That these indigenous cultures often possessed what we now think of as a more sophisticated attitude toward the natural world than the invaders was hardly an inhibiting factor; if (generally) acknowledged human beings were not allowed to stand in the path of progress, flora and fauna were even less likely to be considered. In *Voltaire's Bastards*, his wonderfully sustained polemic against rationalist system makers, John Ralston Saul notes of the political impotence of modern environmentalists that:

The problem is not Green or anti-Green any more than it is environmentalists versus capitalists. The problem is a whole approach to truth and knowledge retention and power which goes far beyond these movements.<sup>21</sup>

The tragedy of the dedicated humanitarian Voltaire and his Enlightenment colleagues, Saul says earlier in the book, is that their optimism was misplaced. They had indeed swept away much of the darkness and superstition of the preceding centuries in the name of rationalism, but could not foresee how the force of reason itself would become an oppressive intellectual tyrant. "Humanism was proving itself unable to balance reason. The two seemed, in fact, to be enemies."<sup>22</sup>

Following the discovery of the Americas, then, two contradictory attitudes towards the natural world can be discerned, and the tension between them runs through the succeeding centuries to be echoed today in the passionate, sometimes violent debate of developers and

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<sup>20</sup>Andrew Sinclair, *The Naked Savage* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991), p.98.

<sup>21</sup>John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), p. 316.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

environmentalists. Clearly, the prevailing philosophy has always been that of the scientific materialist; most popular histories, at least until recently, have portrayed this period as one of the triumphant progress of rational, scientific humanity, and titles such as *The Ascent of Man*, *The March of Progress* and *The Triumph of the West* are still to be seen on bookshelves. These, as their titles suggest, tend to stress the technological ingenuity of man in subjugating the natural world, in adapting the environment to his needs or, more realistically, his comfort and convenience. There has, however, been a concurrent counter-culture to which less attention has been paid by mainstream historians, a series of writers and artists, “. . . individuals or groups whose members do not wish to be dragged along by the chariot-wheels of scientific progress.”<sup>23</sup> Many, though not all of these writers belong to the literary movement known as romanticism, and their works have demonstrated, perhaps sometimes unconsciously, an awareness of the mythological importance of the natural world as an image of paradise. Today’s environmentalists owe a considerable debt to these figures for keeping alive, in an increasingly utilitarian and materialist philosophical climate, a spiritual dimension in the consideration of nature. The remainder of this essay will discuss the contributions of some of these writers and consider the influence on them of the discovery of the new world as an inspiration and a model.

As I have shown above and in the previous essay, writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made extensive metaphoric use of new world imagery in poetry and Utopian fiction. More, Spenser, Shakespeare and Bunyan spring immediately to mind, as of course does John Milton,<sup>24</sup> both for his theme and his imagery, and of whom one of his editors has written:

He belongs with Shakespeare and Wordsworth precisely because his writing balances so transcendently both the conservative and the revolutionary. In one artistic lifetime, he was both historian and explorer. Of all our writers, he pays the most sincere respect to classical literature (how could he ever

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<sup>23</sup>Berlin, op. cit., p. 258.

<sup>24</sup>As a Puritan, Milton was to that extent an heir of the Protestant tradition, but as a highly individual genius, he was able to transcend its more reductionist implications.

have written without Homer and Virgil?), and at the same time he makes it tauntingly new; the epic becomes the anti-epic.<sup>25</sup>

In the eighteenth century, however, in the unpromising intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment, the fundamental doctrine of which, again in the words of Isaiah Berlin, was: "Scientific knowledge alone can save us,"<sup>26</sup> the very distinctive sensibility of Jean-Jacques Rousseau was to return a consideration of man's relationship to the natural world to the very forefront of philosophical enquiry. This is not the place for a reassessment of Rousseau's political philosophy, nor am I qualified to conduct one, but a brief summary of the substance and expression of this controversial figure's views of man and nature is a necessary component of this investigation.

One of Rousseau's main concerns is to deny the view of thinkers like Hobbes that the state of nature is 'a war of all against all', ascribing this rather to the flaws of society. Basing his descriptions on reports of the indigenous societies of the Americas, Rousseau looks back to a time in mankind's history before the developments of agriculture and metallurgy — before, in fact, there was a significant distinction between 'mine' and 'thine' — and concludes that this was a period when all men were innocent and happy, living in the immediate present in harmony with the environment. The truly revolutionary aspect of Rousseau's thought was this advocacy of primitive society as a viable model both for human relations and for man's relationship with the natural world.<sup>27</sup>

In his first Discourse he had been content to contrast the defects of contemporary society with the stern demands of true virtue by invoking the historical examples of communities, both ancient and modern, which drew their strength from firm moral principles, but he had taken no more than a rapid glance at these pre-historical times of purity and innocence. In his

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<sup>25</sup>Christopher Ricks, Introduction to John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), p. xviii.

<sup>26</sup>Berlin, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>27</sup>The remarkable prescience of Rousseau's thought is demonstrated by the recent work of scholars such as Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler and Geoffrey Ashe, who have presented convincing cases for the existence of environmentally and socially harmonious societies in either Neolithic or pre-pastoral Europe. Their research will be discussed in a later section of this study.

second work, however, this primitivist element is given a prominent place in the argument which is vigorously opposed to present-day attitudes.<sup>28</sup>

The influence of paradise myth as well as primitive cultures on the self-taught Rousseau is clear; he was well-read in the classics, and his favourite novel was Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in which Crusoe's Edenic island owes much of its topography to descriptions of the new world. Paradise had indeed often been envisaged as an island, and writing in *The Confessions* of his idyllic sojourn on the Ile Saint-Pierre, where he was to find temporary refuge from his persecutors, real and imagined, Rousseau deliberately evokes the image of a second Adam:

To wander through the woods and fields, and mechanically to pluck here and there, sometimes a flower and sometimes a branch, to munch my fodder almost haphazard, to observe the same things thousands and thousands of times and always with the same interest, because I always forgot them each time: that was the way to pass eternity without the possibility of a moment's boredom.<sup>29</sup>

The Ile Saint-Pierre was, apparently, "an almost perfect island of its kind, . . . Part wild, part carefully cultivated, it contained hills and valleys, fields, vineyards, woodlands, orchards and shady meadows;"<sup>30</sup> and Rousseau's subsequent eviction from the island therefore echoes the expulsion from the garden in Genesis. This image in itself suggests a fallen world and, of course, much of his writing was very consciously a criticism of the evils and miseries of contemporary society, but Rousseau's genius lay in part in his fusing of ancient mythic idealism with contemporary political criticism. As a recent commentator has written:

He also gave us a romantic picture of the blessed life of *l'homme de la nature* which, despite the fact that the dream of a Golden Age may be as old as

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<sup>28</sup>Ronald Grimsley, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983), p. 29.

<sup>29</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, translated by J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 592.

<sup>30</sup>Peter Quennell, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1988), p. 38.

civilization, is a strikingly modern vision in its critique not of a corrupt society but of human civilization as such.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to say that Rousseau glorified nature, a common misunderstanding against which he has been defended by his great admirer Lévi-Strauss, who honours Rousseau as the first true anthropologist, using Rousseau's own words in assessing his contribution and influence thus:

Rousseau never fell into Diderot's error of idealizing natural man. He is never in danger of confusing the natural state with the social state; he knows that the latter is inherent in man, but that it leads to evils; the only problem is to discover whether these evils are themselves inherent in the social state. This means looking beyond abuses and crimes to find the unshakeable basis of human society.

. . . [Anthropological study] leads to something other than the revelation of a Utopian state of nature or the discovery of a perfect society in the depths of the forest; it helps us to build a theoretical model of human society, which does not correspond with any observable reality, but with the aid of which we may succeed in distinguishing between 'what is primordial and what is artificial in man's present nature and in obtaining a good knowledge of a state which no longer exists, which has perhaps never existed, and which will probably never exist in the future, but of which it is nevertheless essential to have a sound conception in order to pass valid judgement on our present state.'<sup>32</sup>

Rousseau is thus a figure of central importance in this investigation. His significance in part lies in that he posed a challenge to the scientific Utopias of his age by restoring a mythic image of Arcadia stripped of its Christian accretions. His influence may be seen immediately in the reception given to the reports of the Pacific discoveries of Cook and Bougainville, where islands like Tahiti seemed to offer an opportunity of observing human beings in precisely the state of nature imagined by Rousseau. While the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment discussed the social and moral implications of the discoveries, painters, poets and pamphleteers all expressed

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<sup>31</sup>Andrzej Rapaczynski, *Nature and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 220.

<sup>32</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, translated by John and Doreen Weightman (London: Pan Books, 1989), pp. 512-4.

themselves in images drawn directly from ancient myth.<sup>33</sup> In contrast with responses to the discovery of the new world two and a half centuries earlier, there is a sense of expectedness and inevitability about the eighteenth century reaction to the voyages of discovery; there was no rigid world view to be threatened, and minds were open to new possibilities. Scientific materialism and rationalism were in the ascendant, but Rousseau had provided a framework of expression for the inevitable reaction, which is loosely known as the romantic movement.

Romanticism is a vast, complex and protean concept, but for the purposes of this discussion and in the manifestations that concern this theme I shall reduce it simplistically to a number of basic (and possibly dubious) propositions: romanticism valued the individual over society; liberty over equality; nature over artifice; spirit over matter; emotion over reason. Different artists and thinkers obviously exhibited these tendencies in varying proportions, and the cultural milieus in which they wrote to a certain extent determined the outcome. Paul de Man has written:

An abundant imagery coinciding with an equal abundance of natural objects, the theme of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature, such is the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism. The tension between the two polarities never ceases to be problematic.<sup>34</sup>

This inherent tension meant that the ultimate consequences were unpredictable indeed. In writers such as Goethe and Byron, for instance, a stress on individual liberty gave rise to the so-called Byronic hero, of which Milton's Satan may even be a precursor ("Better to reign in hell, than serve in Heav'n."<sup>35</sup>). In the United States, however, where the paradisaical vistas of the west were being opened up by hardy individualists, the powerful influence of the natural environment produced a very different imaginative tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 'sage of Concord', used romantic tropes to form what has been called the 'American religion' of self-reliance, combining this with a strong sense of the spiritual value of the American land. Harold

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<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>34</sup>Paul de Man, "The Romantic Image", in *William Wordsworth*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), p. 24.

<sup>35</sup>John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Book I, l. 263.

Bloom, writing of Emerson's 1836 book *Nature*, shows the importance to him of both Rousseau and the Arcadian myth, and how land meant a great deal more to Emerson than just landscape:

... the title of the little book, *Nature*, is rather perversely the wrong word, since Emerson does not mean "nature" in any accepted sense whatsoever. He means Man, and not just natural man or fallen Adam, but original or unfallen Adam, which is to say America, in the transcendental sense, just as Blake's Albion is the unfallen form of Man.<sup>36</sup>

An unfallen man necessarily implies an unfallen world, and in Emerson's friend and disciple Thoreau, love of the land was developed to a very high degree. Thoreau has been called "one of the pioneer American conservationists,"<sup>37</sup> and has obviously had a major influence on the modern environmentalist movement. The great poet of this American tradition in the nineteenth century was of course Walt Whitman, who sang passionately "To the garden the world anew ascending,"<sup>38</sup> in a fully developed mythic identification with the land, and his twentieth century inheritor would be Wallace Stevens. This mythic strain in romanticism, however, could take very different forms to the essentially democratic American vision. In Germany, for instance, where thinkers of the stature of Kant, Herder, Fichte and Nietzsche asserted in their differing ways the primacy of the individual will, a revived mystical conception of the land combined dangerously with this idea to lead on through romantic nationalism to leader worship, racism and fascism — a development for which Rousseau has even been blamed.<sup>39</sup> This is a political dimension, however, outside the scope of this essay; my concern here is with the romantic attitude to man's relationship to the natural world, and the key figure in the early nineteenth century is William Wordsworth.

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<sup>36</sup>Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), p. 6.

<sup>37</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, *Henry David Thoreau* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 130.

<sup>38</sup>Walt Whitman, "To the Garden the World" in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*, edited by James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 69.

<sup>39</sup>It has also been suggested that the greenest modern political party has been the Nazis. See Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Wordsworth is not uniquely significant in this respect. Both Blake and Whitman, for instance, mentioned above, shared many of the same concerns and had similar ideas. Their mythological sensibilities, however, are too individualist for them to have had the direct, immediate, widespread influence that Wordsworth has; they were perceived as difficult, arbitrary, downright odd.<sup>40</sup> Wordsworth's output, though varied, is always consistent;<sup>41</sup> his philosophy, though subtle, is always clear:

On man, on Nature, and on Human Life,  
Musing in solitude, I oft perceive  
Fair trains of imagery before me rise,  
Accompanied by feelings of delight  
Pure,  
...  
— Beauty — a living Presence of the earth,  
Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms  
Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed  
From earth's materials — waits upon my steps;  
Pitches her tents before me as I move,  
An hourly neighbour. Paradise, and groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields — like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main — why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?<sup>42</sup>

Although not always presented and combined as directly as in the above example, Wordsworth's poetry abounds in images of both paradise and voyages of discovery. In Wordsworth, classic myth is fused with both historical awareness and present reality, just as imagination is fused with reason, in a celebration of the natural world and man's place in it that was to inform the perception of the entire nineteenth century. In his fascinating study of what

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<sup>40</sup>Whitman, also, exhibits a complicating infatuation with technological progress.

<sup>41</sup>At least in his views on nature; what Shelley, Browning and others saw as his later apostasy was a political shift, a perceived betrayal of his early republican ideals.

<sup>42</sup>William Wordsworth, Preface to "The Excursion" in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 590.

he calls the natural history of perception over the last two hundred years, Don Gifford identifies the revolutionary element in Wordsworth's poetry:

What is involved in all this is the faith that moments of visionary experience that seem to come unbidden and announced can, through mature and searching introspection, be traced to their source in impulses received from the forms of nature and felt through "the blood and vital juices of our minds."<sup>43</sup>

This sounds suspiciously pagan for the post-Reformation Age of Reason, and some early critics were made uncomfortable by what they saw as Wordsworth's pantheistic tendencies; Coleridge, for example, though a great friend and admirer of Wordsworth, had reservations:

. . . the vague misty, rather than mystic, confusion of God with the World & the accompanying nature-worship . . . [is] the trait in Wordsworth's poetic works that I most intensely dislike as unhealthful, & denounce as contagious.<sup>44</sup>

Contagious it certainly proved, however; Christianity was under attack by the forces of scientific rationalism and, as the Arnoldian Sea of Faith receded, so this spiritual dimension of the natural world acquired increasing importance in the face of the accelerating depredations of the industrialisation of England, inspiring a succession of reactionary romantics such as John Clare, John Ruskin, William Morris and D.H. Lawrence, all of whom owe obvious debts to Wordsworth in what might be termed their re-sacralisation of nature. When Ruskin argues in 1869 that the major myths spring from and remain rooted in natural phenomena, he is giving prose expression to numerous poetic suggestions in Wordsworth. Even where Wordsworth did not influence writers directly, he had forever altered the perceptions of their readers. Jonathan Bate, who shows very persuasively the influence of Wordsworth on Ruskin, introduces his short book on the former by stating that it is:

dedicated to the proposition that the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or to endure life was by teaching

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<sup>43</sup>Don Gifford, *The Farther Shore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 76.

<sup>44</sup>Cited in Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 302n.

them to look at and dwell in the natural world. . . . it still seems to me valuable and important to make claims for the historical continuity of a tradition of environmental consciousness; Wordsworth by no means initiated that tradition, but he has been a vital influence upon it.<sup>45</sup>

In the above paper, I have tried to show how, following the European discovery of the Americas in 1492, there was a significant revival of interest in the idea of paradise. The idea was consciously expressed either as an image, as used by poets such as Donne; a theme, such as Milton chose in order to “justify the ways of God to men”;<sup>46</sup> or as a social model, as in the myriad Utopias that were conceived. At the same time, a deeper, less conscious concern can be traced running through these and the other works I have cited: a mythopoeic sense of spiritual identification with the natural world. To a certain extent a reaction against the breakdown of traditional faith and the increasing rationalism and scientific materialism of the period, this undercurrent breaks through to the surface in the writers and artists of the romantic movement. Reaching its fullest development in Wordsworth, where it achieves a true religious intensity, this mythic structure was able to fill a spiritual void in the human psyche which the traditional religious structures could no longer satisfy. I should stress that the examples I have chosen to illustrate my thesis certainly do not constitute an exhaustive list; many others could be found, and I have merely attempted to sketch some of the possible links in the chain. In the next part of this study, therefore, I shall go on to discuss what I believe to be the direct inheritors of this gradually rediscovered spiritualisation of the natural world, the ecological, environmental and New Age movements of today. Paradise, in one form or another, but restored to its rightful expression as an attitude toward the natural world, is once more a central concern of the human imagination, and it is surely this essentially positive vision that sustains writers like Theodore Roszak:

It may be that the deep systems of nature, from which our psyche, our culture, and science itself ultimately derive, are the new language through which the Earth once again finds its voice.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 4-9.

<sup>46</sup>John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, l. 26.

<sup>47</sup>Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth* (London: Bantam Press, 1993), p. 20.