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The Postmodernist’s Journey Into Nature:
From Philo of Alexandria to Pocahontas and Back Again,
By Way of Jean-François Lyotard

This essay examines the way in which the notion of a ‘postmodern sublime’ functions in Lyotard’s later work as an attempt to recuperate the transcendent, revelatory, role traditionally assigned to encounters with ‘Nature.’ It analyses the failure of Lyotard’s attempt by examining his successive location of this hyper-authenticity in the avant-garde, in art, in a form of aesthetic perception, and, finally, in matter itself, and shows how the very self-contradictory nature of what is required precipitates this succession. The chapter concludes by noting how the course of Lyotard’s thinking, which ends, as it must, in the quasi-theological, reflects the tenacity of our belief in the epiphanic.

[To] take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature (not merely to have taste in estimating it) is always a mark of a good soul ...
Immanuel Kant. The Critique of Judgement

A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.
Oscar Wilde. The Importance of Being Earnest

I call this contention [that civilization is largely responsible for our misery] astonishing because, in whatever way we may define the concept of civilization, it is a certain fact that all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization.
Sigmund Freud. Civilization and Its Discontents

Gone are the days of such innocence. If innocence is what it was, that could conceive of an ‘interest’ in the existence of nature that was nevertheless free of any contingent interest. There is, of course, always the ‘disinterested pleasure’ of the aesthetic (whatever that may turn out to be); but how will this help to redeem our innocence when the very object, this ‘nature’ standing over against culture, in which the pleasure is taken, is a cultural construct, an object actually constituted by human
interests? For the virgin land, it is generally acknowledged, is always already pregnant with the possibility of human meaning.

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Before, however, the reader becomes too excited, one way or another, about my simple assumption that ‘nature’ is now commonly, if not universally, recognized as a construct, I must explain why ‘nature’ appears in quotation marks above, and will often appear in this way, or capitalized, in the rest of this essay. The word ‘nature’ can (though almost never does) simply designate the current state of scientific knowledge concerning the physical world. This definition of ‘nature,’ so apparently impoverished as to cause a mental double take, refers to what is, necessarily, not a cultural construct, and it is a mark of the power of the notion of Nature that anyone could for a moment believe, or believe they could believe, that it was. The ‘nature’ dealt with here, is the ‘nature’ of common parlance, which has, for the last two centuries at least, East and West, ineluctably connoted a value. Hence the apparent impoverishment and the double take.

Our recognition that the most common use of the word ‘nature’ refers not to something radically other, something unmarked by the human, but is rather a rhetorical device to project a particular human set of values out of the realm of the contingent, the human, and into the realm of the transcendental, is not, of course, a new development. The worry, for example, that the elevation we experience in sublimity might be no more than overweening pride, nags constantly at the edge of the 18th century discourse of the sublime. Romanticism, which was to become the religion of the educated classes in the 19th century (particularly in America, which had ‘nature’ in spades and ‘good souls’ to spare), and which is the most conspicuous progenitor of our modern nature-worship, is, nevertheless, in its canonical representatives, a self-conscious negotiation of this border between revelation and projection.

Wordsworth might have claimed that to learn more than culture could teach you of good and evil, and of man, it was only necessary to come forth into the landscape and ‘bring with you a heart that watches