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Writing the Essay

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John Muir

John Muir, an avid naturalist and proponent for the preservation of the great wildernesses of the United States of the 19th-early 20th century, wrote a great number of essays regarding the glory and beauty of nature in its original form. Indeed, he is, today, regarded as one of the most influential environmentalists in the history of the United States, and much of his work is still being quoted in contemporary arguments put forth by modern preservationists. What set him apart from other writers was the method in which Muir generally forwarded his arguments—instead of engaging in philosophical musing and argument in order to present his argument for preservationism, he presents his arguments through an *experiential* manner—that is to say, it was through his description of the glory of nature and his experiences in the wilderness areas of the United States that he conveyed his arguments. To be sure, there are works in which he *did* engage in purely philosophical argumentation; however, these works are in a minority—the vast majority of his arguments were presented in an experiential manner. This experiential method of argumentation is furthered by Muir’s stylistic tendency to focus on rich description and vivid detail—indeed, his propensity for incorporating metaphors and similes, along with his exceedingly detailed description of various aspects of nature contributes embodies the *very glory* of nature as he wishes to present it (that is to say, his very method of writing and description embodies the underlying ideas of his writing). Indeed, his “obsessions,” or, rather, the topics which he writes about with such enthusiasm, are embodied and conveyed in the *very style* of his writing itself.

Although Muir’s wide repertoire of works encompassed a large swathe of specific subjects in the theory of preservationism, the large majority of his works focused on one of two subjects—either the misguided state of public conceptions of the wilderness, or, of course, the glory of nature itself. With regards to the misguided state of public conceptions of the wilderness, one can find within many of Muir’s works a vehement condemnation of the ideas which the public hold about the wilderness, and nature in general. In *Wild Wool*, a seminal work of his wherein he argues passionately for preserving nature as it is, he states that “no dogma taught by the present civilization seems to form so insuperable an obstacle in a way of a right understanding of the relations which culture sustains as to wilderness, as that which declares that the world was made especially for the uses of men” (*Wild Wool,* 874). Muir believes that the fundamental socialization of the public with regards to the subject of nature and the wilderness is flawed, and that it is due to this that the true glory of nature is experienced by so few people—indeed, he states that “in [his] experience it seems well-nigh impossible to obtain a hearing on behalf of Nature from any standpoint than that of human use,” even though “every animal, plant and crystal controverts [that idea] in the plainest terms” (*Wild Wool,* 874). It is only, he claims, through the understanding and realization that the wilderness was “made first for itself, then more and more remotely for all the world” that one can truly appreciate nature for what it is.

To be sure, the idea that nature was made first “for itself” then for the rest of the world was a rather contentious idea in Muir’s time—most environmentalists were conservationists—that is to say, although they believed that although nature had to be *conserved,* it did not necessarily need to be *preserved*. That is, they saw nature’s resources as something to be taken advantage of as men, so long as the gathering of those resources was through sustainable means. For example, Gifford Pinchot, a leader in the national conservationist movement, with whom Muir became closely associated with, believed that forestry was “tree farming,” and believed in the perpetuation of forestry, which he defined as “the practical knowledge of how to use the forest and range without destroying them” (Pinchot, 31). Clearly, this belief that nature should be exploited as a resource of man (so long as it is through sustainable means) contrasts with Muir’s views, which were essentially to preserve the wilderness areas of the United States as they were; in effect, to quarantine them from the oft-destructive practices of logging and forestry, rather than to exploit them in a sustainable manner. This obsession with the preservation of the wilderness stems largely from his valuation of nature as a source of transcendental and mysterious energies—indeed, in a description of the national parks of the US, he urges one to “climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves” (*Our National Parks,* 56). Muir, a prolific writer, was quite appreciative of the national parks of the United States, where he spent a great many days hiking and exploring; a great deal of his experiences in those parks were captured in his writings, of which *Our National Parks* makes up only one of the plethora of documents authored by Muir which expound upon his valuation of nature through his experience in the parks. His opposition to the use of nature by man is also seen in his opposition to the Hetch Hetchy dam—he asserts that those who fight for the establishment of the dam are “temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism,” and “instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar” (*The Yosemite,* 249-62). Again, he wrote prolifically in his support for preservation in a multitude of publications, and *The Yosemite* is but another of the many, many books which he authored regarding the intrinsic worth of the national parks, wherein he not only criticizes the detractors of preservationism but shows the reader, through an experiential exploration of the parks themselves, the value that can be derived from preservation of nature as it is.

With regards to Muir’s argumentation through experiential means, he does this by illustrating the essential beauty and intricate nature of various aspects of nature itself, often launching into extended similes or metaphors or extremely detailed accounts of the beauty of a specific detail of a certain park, or a similar subject. Indeed such writing occupies a large chunk of his essays, and is an important aspect of the means by which Muir attempts to convey his argument indirectly (for, by definition, argumentation through experiential means is indirect—instead of addressing the topic directly, one argues through the presentation of related facts in an effort to convey an idea). For examples of this sort of account, one only need turn to Muir’s *Alaska. The Discovery of Glacier* Bay—written for the purposes of documenting Muir’s experiences with the wild, raw Alaskan wilderness—where one can find on the second page a fine example of his oft-presented similes: while on a boat, he likens the “lovely islands passing in harmonious succession” to “ideas in a fine poem” (*Alaska. The Discovery of Glacier Bay*, 2). By likening the passing islands (nature) to art, he invests in the island artistic qualities which merit it preservation, just as the qualities of great poetry or art merit it preservation, thus indirectly arguing for the preservation of such aspects of nature through an experiential manner. As for the excruciating detail, one can find an example of that in any of his essays—his prose is remarkably dense and detailed, and he often takes a paragraph to describe that which would have been concisely outlined in a sentence. Indeed, a prime example can be found in his *The American Forests*, where he takes care to describe the exact sizes of trees within the forest, and how they “size from twenty five feet in height and less than one foot in diameter at the ground to four hundered feet in height and more than twenty feet in diameter—lordly monarchs proclaiming the gospel of beauty like apostles” (*The American Forests,* 1). Here, in another of his seminal works regarding the beauty of the forests (of all of America, and not merely those of the parks), he argues for the preservation of these great forests by investing in the ancient trees divine qualities—by describing them as “lordly monarchs,” he places great import on them, and thus expounds upon the intrinsic value of nature and its essential beauty—effectively arguing for its preservation as something that transcends the mundane machinations of men. Indeed, in many of his essays, Muir incorporates metaphors or similes which impart unto the aspects of nature which he describes divine or otherwise grand qualities which, like the example of the quote regarding the trees, places an intrinsic value on them as things that are otherworldly in their glory and beauty, things that man has no place in disturbing. Another excellent example of this is in Muir’s *Fountains and Streams of the Yosemite National Park,* in which he describes the streams of the Yosemite, with “their silvery branches interlacing on a thousand mountains, singing their way home to the sea: the small rills, with hard roads to travel, dropping from ledge to ledge, pool to pool, like chains of sweet toned bells…” (*Fountains and Streams of the Yosemite National Park,* 1). In this particular essay, Muir has chosen to focus upon a specific quality of Yosemite National Park; certainly, he has authored a variety of works regarding the parks in general, and has even written regarding Yosemite itself, but he seldom writes an entire essay upon such a specific aspect of a certain locality. It is notable, then, that Muir decides to focus so specifically upon the fountains and streams of Yosemite, which clearly must be of an exceptional nature so as to warrant such close examination, and is itself indicative of the experiential nature of Muir’s writings. Here, Muir imparts unto the streams of the Yosemite an interminable, relentless quality by relating the streams’ paths as “hard roads” to the sea, the water’s “home,” and thus places great import on what otherwise might be seen as mere paths through which water flows. It is through this placing of import that Muir indirectly argues for preservation—for it is through this that Muir shows that nature is something unique that holds value for the common man insofar as what one can experience when in such locations. Indeed, although Muir does claim that the world is not made for the use of men, it is not to say that it does not hold salient value for man in that we can benefit and learn from the uniqueness and grandeur of nature, and it is through the very *description* of nature that Muir conveys this value, and, by extension, the argument for preservation.

Ultimately, Muir’s writings can be characterized in one of two ways: they are either vitriolic condemnations of the foolishness of those who would seek to oppose preservation, harshly attacking the foolishness of men who fail to see the value in preservationism, or they are works which beautifully explicate the specific experience of being surrounded by the glory of nature. In all of his works, one may find beautiful prose—prose that is, perhaps, somewhat more dense than the situation necessitates, as Muir has a tendency of explicating the qualities of nature in a singularly verbose manner. The experiential nature of his writings is clear not only in the nature of his prose but also in the subjects about which he writes; indeed, it is evident even if one only considers the very titles of his publications, as it is clear that he devotes great effort to writing about the places which have left the greatest impression upon him. Truly—few things, aside from perhaps nature itself, are more beautiful than Muir’s writing.