
Intimate Distance: The Dislocation of Nature in Modernity

Author(s): Shane Phelan

Source: *The Western Political Quarterly*, Jun., 1992, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Jun., 1992), pp. 385-402

Published by: University of Utah on behalf of the Western Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/448717>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Western Political Quarterly*

JSTOR

INTIMATE DISTANCE: THE DISLOCATION OF NATURE IN MODERNITY

SHANE PHELAN

University of New Mexico

Contemporary political theory has moved increasingly to adopt the methods of literary analysis in an effort to understand both canonical texts and current sociopolitical events. This analysis focuses less on the meaning of terms than on the role they play; it involves a “shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading” (de Man 1979: ix). This new theory is especially helpful in discussing some of the central, and essentially contested, concepts in political theory. It helps us to understand these terms, not as unified markers, but in terms of the role they play in a given writer’s thought or in the dynamics of a political culture.

One of these key terms is “nature.” Nature has had many meanings in political theory, and the unity and stability of those meanings has varied over time. A central feature of modernity is the shifting, problematic relation between nature and culture. In Ernesto Laclau’s terms, nature has been “dislocated” insofar as its identity or meaning “depends on an outside which both denies that identity and provides its condition of possibility at the same time” (Laclau 1990: 39). Dislocation describes a situation of inescapable ambiguity. The opposition to “culture” provides the bedrock meaning of “nature” in the West, but this opposition has become fraught with tension. Since the eighteenth century, the “outside” of culture has given meaning to nature, but it has also increasingly been used to deny the identity of nature as something distinct from culture.

This dislocation of nature is directly relevant to arguments about and within current social movements. They are relevant because nature underlies several crucial nodes of political argument: ideas of justice, of the desirability of change, of freedom and the limits of human action, of the source and possibility of knowledge, all involve differing senses and aspects of nature. The destabilization of nature is the open-

Received: January 23, 1991

Revision Received: May 20, 1991

Accepted for Publication: May 22, 1991

ing into a new politics and a new common life, but only if its many dimensions are explored.

This paper will explicate the dilemmas of modern nature. After a brief description of some of the definitions and uses of the category of "nature," I will examine the work of Rousseau and Nietzsche as paradigmatic of the dislocation of nature in modernity. I will then return to nature as a category and argue that we can deconstruct, but not eliminate, this vital and inherently ambiguous idea. I will urge instead the notion of nature as "intimate distance," exploring the implications for theory of such an idea.

NATURE

Nature has several meanings in political theory. As the origin, nature is both the source of authenticity, the precultural "reality," and the archaic, the primitive, the incomplete. As the real or authentic, nature serves to call us home, to remind us of what we "really" are, and to critique culture. In the second usage of nature as origin, nature is a ground that requires supplementation; it is a lack. The "merely natural" has served to privilege human culture over other animal life, to justify racial oppression in the name of civilization, and to provide a rationale for male domination of women (Lloyd 1984; Griffin 1978; Harding 1986). It has been impossible for women and colonized people to use nature as origin, as authenticity, in their favor without having the corresponding use of origin as lack brought to bear against them.

A related, but distinct usage calls on nature as limit. In this role, nature has served as a barrier to social and political change. Within liberal theory, the claim that a given feature is natural is a way of refusing to consider the possibility of doing, thinking, or being differently than one is (Madison et al. 1961: 78; Hobbes 1962). In this view, nature can be identified with the given world. Conservatives have used nature in this way to endorse existing arrangements and argue against such imagination, and even those who we might not simply call "conservative" rely on nature as limit at the points in their arguments when they wish to shut the doors of possibility. For example, Jane Flax (1990) describes this use of nature when she writes of Freud that "he displaces conflicts within culture onto conflicts between 'nature' and culture; hence he renders their social sources, especially in gender relations and discourse dependence, opaque and inaccessible" (235). This use of nature is not the property of any one ideological

orientation, however. It is a buttress for liberal thought, prevalent among both those who seek to counter teleological or other condemnations of unpopular acts or identities and those who condemn them.

For example, many lesbian and gay rights activists counter conservative objections with the argument that existence proves nature, while their opponents appeal to the prevalence of heterosexuality for refutation (Phelan 1989: ch. 2). Both sides tend to use numbers for support; while gay/lesbian activists argue that 10 percent of the population “is” gay, and that this is too large a number to be considered deviant, their opponents challenge the 10 percent figure (thereby implicitly acceding to the hypothetical argument) and point to 90 percent heterosexuals as proof of the intent of nature.

Related to, but not the same as nature as origin is nature as law-giver and orderer, the source of natural right. The tradition of natural right relies on nature as rational order, as something to be known through philosophy. In speaking of these connections, Leo Strauss (1953: 81) wrote that “the idea of natural right must be unknown as long as the idea of nature is unknown,” and that “the discovery of nature is the work of philosophy.” This tradition resists the equation of the empirical with the natural, “for the discovery of nature consists precisely in the splitting-up of that totality into phenomena which are natural and phenomena which are not natural: ‘nature’ is a term of distinction” (82). Here, nature is not an origin so much as a goal, a *telos* to which things aspire.

Returning to my earlier example, we see that nature as order is also a mainstay of anti-feminist and anti-gay argument. Indeed, the “90 percent” argument has as much to do with this sense of nature as it does with nature as limit. Sexuality may not in fact be limited to heterosexual desire, but nature would have it so. Women may contest familial patriarchy and male domination, but in so doing they become monsters. This use of nature is much less ambiguous than nature as the given, however, and it does not generally appear in feminist or gay/lesbian literature. While Strauss’ remarks may be taken to suggest that the existence of male domination does not endorse it as “natural,” in fact nature as order has a rhetorical history in conservative discourse that is lacking among liberals or radicals.¹

¹ On the ways in which Allen Bloom uses nature to attack feminism, see Eishtain 1990, ch. 8.

All of these uses of nature share the quest for clarity, for certainty, that dogs Western thought. Their coexistence is evidence of the foundational status for political theory of the category of nature; contradictory projects and perspectives seek to use the same icon in their service. Rather than abandon nature, the competing parties continually deconstruct one another's uses of it.

Since the eighteenth century, we have seen the growth of another idea of nature. In this view, nature and history do not clearly divide. The idea of a "second nature" enters here, where nature becomes affiliated with habit. We find an increasing awareness that nature is not a thing that can be evaluated separately from human creation, and especially that human nature is inseparable from human activity. Nature shifts from a thing to a process, but never completely. This dislocation and fluctuation is demonstrated in Rousseau and Nietzsche, but it is not limited to them. It is to this demonstration that I now turn.

ROUSSEAU

The popular caricature of Rousseau is as a "nature boy," confident in the "innocence of nature" (Connolly 1988: 62) and the possibility of virtue in accordance with nature. However, as Jean Ehrard (1973) has shown, the idea of "idyllic naturalism" is not that of Rousseau so much as it is that of his predecessors. Rousseau's project is not to return us to nature, but to "denature" us in order to fulfill the human promise of civil and moral liberty (Rousseau 1979: 40; 1973: 177-78). As Asher Horowitz (1987: 36-37) describes it, Rousseau provides the bridge from the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century through his "thoroughgoing historicization of human nature and a naturalization of history." This dual move is not a demolition of the categories or oppositions between nature and culture, but it is a dislocation precisely in Laclau's sense.

In *The Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau describes our progress from nature to present society. He makes the condition of nature sound free of trial and tribulation; however, he does not make it sound human. While he tells us that we might wish to go back, he believes that "peace and innocence have escaped us forever." "When men could have enjoyed it they were unaware of it; and when they could have understood it they had already lost it" (Rousseau 1973: 156-57). His concern is with the present, and history, both actual and hypothetical, serves as a guide for understanding and evaluation of the present. His

concern in the *Second Discourse* is “to mark, in the progress of things, the moment at which right took the place of violence and nature became subject to law, and to explain by what sequence of miracles the strong came to submit to serve the weak, and the people to purchase imaginary repose at the expense of real felicity” (44).

The question for Rousseau, then, is how the naturally strong come to subordinate themselves to the naturally weak, inverting the natural scale of value. The *Second Discourse* gives us the answer. We are introduced to the original human, still for Rousseau really an animal, and are told that its life is straightforward, independent, with no great concern for others beyond the dictates of innate compassion. Compassion, the natural distress we feel at another’s pain, “in nature supplies the place of laws, morals, and virtues” (Rousseau 1973: 68). In this passage, Rousseau describes the voice of this natural feeling as one that “none are tempted to disobey.” It is perfect and complete within itself. And yet, it is not; if it were so, we would not need laws, morals and virtues.

The development of society and the increasing dependence and interdependence that resulted led to the need to convince others of one’s value. At this point, precisely those traits valued in nature—compassion, honesty, etc.—became liabilities in the quest for status. The winners are the hypocrites, those who respect themselves so little that they will do anything for worldly gain. Thus we see the strong, “honest poor” held down by the weak, scheming rich.

It is revealing that Rousseau identifies the process of inversion with that whereby “right took the place of violence and nature became subject to law” (1988: 44). With this conjunction, he expresses a fundamental ambivalence toward society and nature. If we heard of right replacing violence outside of the context of this sentence, we would be sure that a progressive step was being described. Here, however, we must be cautious. What seems to be happening here is a denial of natural right, and an awareness that law is not natural but social. Rousseau knows that the Enlightenment’s “right” is an abstract notion that blinds people to the facts of inequality, and the simultaneous move from nature to law, from violence to right, is an expression of that awareness. His description of the founding of society is a parody of earlier contract theory; in his story, the contract is a sham. Similarly, the imposition of law upon nature implies a view of nature that lacks its own law. This nature, this flux, is contrasted to the law, which is solid and fixed. What is fixed in the *Second Discourse*, however, is injustice.

Thus we find a deep ambiguity in Rousseau concerning the idea of nature. On the one hand, nature is the voice of reason and order, origin as authenticity. As William Connolly describes this side of Rousseau, “the natural condition must be a condition of simplicity, innocence and perfection. And its perfection must degenerate only through action in which human beings themselves are implicated” (1988: 47). In this natural state, we are social beings only minimally; while possessing compassion, we are fundamentally disinterested in others and independent of them. And this, indeed, is one sort of ideal for Rousseau.

On the other hand, we find that nature is too simple to really fulfill the complex nature of humans. Humans are unique in their capacity for consciousness and transformation, their ability to act beyond instinct. Because of this, the state of nature is not only irretrievable, it is undesirable, for at that stage we are not fully human. Human destiny lies in society and the development of institutions that will leave us as free as we were in the state of nature, but not free in the same way. Civil liberty is the liberty of a reflective subject who endorses the rules of the human order within which he lives. His view that the general will is indestructible suggests that we are by nature meant to live in common with others and to will the common good, thinking of what we share (Rousseau 1973: 248).

Is virtue then “natural” for Rousseau? Or is it a product of civilization, which in turn is threatened by culture? While we might say that Rousseau has a certain vision of “natural virtue,” this virtue is not easily translatable into Christian morality. Our natural virtue consists simply in the lack of “active egotism”; naturally, we are indifferent to others. Thus we do not “naturally” lust after domination or violation of others; we are concerned only with self-preservation, and as such are neither good nor bad. The only other motivating force is compassion, which serves to limit the aggression of otherwise asocial, amoral beings.

This ambiguity is not evident merely in the “political” works. The *Emile* provides a closer treatment of nature. While Rousseau opens by saying that “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (Rousseau 1979: 37), he proceeds from there to tell us how to transform the natural man into a citizen. Proper training has the effect of bringing us into line with the education nature has in mind for us. Doing this requires, first of all, that we become immune to our social context. Our social existence is profoundly unnatural. He argues that “Good social insti-

tutions are those that best know how to denature man" (40). "Nature" is not nearly reliable enough to make good social beings; it must be aided, shaped, overcome by human design. Here, nature as origin is both the authentic and the incomplete. The best education unites nature and society, body and mind and will. The goal of education is "the very same as that of nature" (38).

Laws, morals, and virtue supplement nature in a dual sense. In one sense, they are simple substitutes for nature, doing the same job, saying the same things. In another, they arise through the inadequacies of nature. The substitution of natural liberty for moral or political liberty is an advance; nature is good as far as it goes, but it does not go nearly far enough. Humans, it seems, are both natural and non-natural (or potentially so); perfectibility, even when it improves, removes us from nature, but not absolutely. The line between nature and not-nature has been thoroughly problematized by Rousseau.

Ehrard (1973: 394, 417) suggests that this new thought, and the problems raised by it, is not Rousseau's alone, but is shared by the whole range of Enlightenment thinkers. It is, as a central idea, not one to be simply defined or analyzed; clarification and analysis will inevitably fail to do justice to its complexity. This is not an admonition to cease study, but it is a warning that attempts to finally say "here is the meaning of nature in Rousseau's thought" will always fail.

However, we may try to locate the *place* of nature. In Paul de Man's reading, "nature" does not denote "a homogeneous mode of being" in Rousseau's thought, but rather "connotes a process of deconstruction" (1979: 249). "Nature" is the name given to "any stage of relational integration that precedes in degree the stage presently under consideration"; this appellation "conceals the fact that it is itself one system of relations among others" (248), subject to history and variety as much as the present. Far from being an element in a theory of history, "nature" has embedded within it that very theory. Nature does not "refer" to a time/place/mode so much as it *constitutes* a conceptual opposition between nature/culture, private/public, female/male, particular/general. At the same time, the category of nature is "self-deconstructive" in that it "engenders endless other 'natures' " by which to measure the succeeding period. There is no point at which nature is reached, and no time when denaturation is complete.²

² It is useful to contrast de Man's reading of Rousseau with that of Allan Bloom (1979), and to reflect on the different political implications of the reading. Whereas

Similarly, Ehrard explores the “duality of points of view” from which Rousseau uses nature. He distinguishes the sense of nature as thing or state from nature as process or becoming, and argues that Rousseau uses both, not from sloppiness, but as a result of conflicting aims. When the aim is social criticism, he uses “the fiction of natural man”; when he is discussing philosophic method, he returns to the notion of a socially, historically created human nature. For Rousseau, nature is “at the same time a historical phenomenon and a transcendental reality” (394); which sense is used depends on the point of his argument. Rousseau does not, then, simply rely on nature as a standard for evaluation of societies, but constructs “natures” as part of his political judgment.

Rousseau’s construction of nature, then, is part of what Michel Foucault labels the “empirico-transcendental doublet” of “man” that is created in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The new questioning of human nature, that is, the process of inquiry into “a being whose nature (that which determines it, contains it, and has traversed it from the beginning of time) is to know nature, and itself, in consequence, as a natural being” (Foucault 1970: 310), necessarily involves the dislocation of nature as a larger category. The ambiguity in Rousseau is not unique to him, but is shared by philosophers of all political persuasions, reflecting a general uncertainty over the place of nature.

NIETZSCHE

Asserting that “man has become more natural in the nineteenth century,” Nietzsche argues that this is not a return, but a new point reached only after struggle. By “natural,” Nietzsche means that Europeans in the nineteenth century are “coarser, more direct, full of irony against generous feelings even when we succumb to them” (Nietzsche 1968a: 73). He explicitly contrasts the nineteenth century with the eighteenth, the age of Rousseau, of nature as beauty and order and harmony. He sees this view of nature as bound to the “slave morality” of Christianity, a morality that denies conflict and struggle. Slave morality severs us from nature by imposing a whole metaphysical

de Man stresses the openness and complexity of Rousseau’s “nature,” Bloom denies the problems lurking in that complexity. For Bloom, nature is a simple standard, both an origin and a telos, though one that can be deformed. This use of nature is linked to his conservative educational politics by Jean Elshtain (1990), who finds similar uses of nature in his *Closing of the American Mind*.

schema on existence. Thus, being “natural” here means to be pre- or nonmoral, not to be anti- or immoral. Being natural requires rejecting moralities that restrain and deform our instincts.

Nietzsche does not reject all morality, however. He finds morality to be “a system of evaluations that partially coincides with the conditions of a creature’s life” (148). The key word here is “partially.” What of the non-coincident part? Does he mean that morality supplements and supports life to a certain point at which it becomes irrelevant, or does he mean that at that point it becomes antagonistic toward life? Or does he perhaps mean that morality fosters certain forms of life, certain forms of will to power, but not others? Whichever of these we choose, we must acknowledge that morality is not simply opposed to nature, or can we speak of the natural self as something distinct from the cultural self. The question is not whether to endorse morality or not, but which morality.

More fundamentally, however, Nietzsche rejects any notions of a stable human nature. We are constantly mutating, as it were:

as we are merely the resultant of previous generations, we are also the resultant of their errors, passions, and crimes; it is impossible to shake off this chain. Though we condemn the errors and think we have escaped them, we cannot escape the fact that we spring from them. (Nietzsche 1957: 21)

Nietzsche sees what Rousseau saw; nostalgia must not be confused with the belief in the possibility of regression. We may sigh for the past, but it cannot guide us. For Nietzsche, the “return” to nature is “really not a going back but an *ascent*—up into the high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness where great tasks are something one plays with, one *may* play with” (Nietzsche 1968b: 552). Nature is not something to return to, but something to work toward. Nietzsche argues that we inevitably “plant a new way of life, a new instinct, a second nature, that withers the first” (21). Nature is not opposed to culture for Nietzsche, but is its product; culture and history are part of our nature, forming it, while our nature in turn produces our culture.³ Thus Nietzsche tries to eliminate the ambiguity in nature by assimilating it into culture.

This transformation is harder than it seems. What would working toward nature mean? If nature is the product of culture, what might

³ I thank Tracy Strong for clarification of this idea.

distinguish “natural” outcomes from “unnatural” ones? Surely, Nietzsche does not endorse as natural any historical outcome; most notably, European Christian civilization is unnatural. Further, as a goal, nature is not simply the existing state at any time; nature may be the product of culture, but it is not any culture at any given time. Some cultures are more natural than others, and a given culture may become more or less natural over time.

Nietzsche in fact moves on two tracks. In the first, perhaps more careful thought, he resists the idea of nature as anything more than a ground for action, as something with “order, arrangements, form, beauty, wisdom.” Here, morality removes us from nature by imposing purpose, order, etc. on chaos. This is the sense in which morality coincides with life; we cannot live in chaos, so we build an ordered, orderly world. The “return to nature” of the nineteenth century amounts to our recognition that this is the case; it is the “de-deification of nature” (Nietzsche 1974: 169) in favor of recognition of history and human agency.

The second thought represents Nietzsche’s own inability to live without these notions, this order. We find that this post-moral self is validated in his discourse by its connection to nature. He asks: “When may we being to ‘*naturalize*’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (169). Lurking in this question is a telic nature; the nature that we work to create is simultaneously waiting to be discovered. Nietzsche has not eliminated the ambiguity, but continues to move within it.

Nietzsche has actually taken aim at two targets. The first target is that of “nature” as material entity, as “neutral” reference; this must be challenged on epistemological grounds. The second is that of nature as an order which corresponds to moral notions. This is less dispensable for Nietzsche, but still not unambiguous. He is, in fact, moving within the same duality as that which governed Rousseau. While he develops a sophisticated, historical nature for ontological and epistemological purposes, his moral and political discourse relies on a more settled nature. This more traditional nature is directly linked to the political anachronism that rests so poorly with his radical metaphysics (cf. Warren 1988). When Nietzsche tells us that domination and exploitation are natural, he is instructing us to accept, even celebrate these without the genealogical inquiry that he applies to other values and concepts.

A more visible gap between Nietzsche and Rousseau revolves around the issue of compassion or pity. When Nietzsche states that pity is a

dangerous force that enhances suffering, he is in apparent conflict with Rousseau, who sees our natural compassion for others as the balance to our basic love of self. This conflict is the basis for Nietzsche's scorn, his charge that Rousseau points toward the "softening, weakening, moralization of man" (1968a: 529). However, we find that Nietzsche in fact agrees with Rousseau that there is such a thing; while "empathy with the souls of others is originally nothing moral, but a physiological susceptibility to suggestion" (428), this does not dispute Rousseau's point. The two thinkers agree that "before culture" we have an innate impulse toward compassion.

The two thinkers differ in their view of the relation between natural empathy and social emotions such as pity. Where Rousseau seems to equate the two, Nietzsche sharply distinguishes between "physiological susceptibility to suggestion" and pity, which is a form of will to power indulged in by the weak (1968a: 199). Pity is a celebration of another's weakness, rather than an ennobling sentiment. The spread of pity, in Nietzsche's view, is a direct indication of passive nihilism in a society (1956: 154). Thus, while for Rousseau the erosion of pity is a degradation, a problem, it is for Nietzsche a sign of health and strength.

Both thinkers agree that at some point the physiological order is turned upside down. For Nietzsche, the consequence of the slave revolt in morals is the creation of a new elite which is always conscious of its own relative position, always weighing itself against others; it is unhealthy precisely because it is self-conscious, reactive rather than active. Rousseau would agree with this portrait, and this evaluation of the situation; the transition from *amour-de-soi* to *amour propre* is a transition from active to reactive love of self. However, the *Genealogy* describes a non-reflective natural elite based on strength. This elite is indifferent to others, but this indifference extends to the absence of compassion for the weak. Thus the elite sees no problem with rape and pillage, for they do not see those attacked as equal to themselves, as "like" themselves; they do not aim at domination, but they do not refrain from violation. While Nietzsche argues that empathy may be physiological in its origin, his early strong people in the *Genealogy of Morals* have already lost, or contained, that empathy. The strong lack compassion for the weak, and it is this lack that partly defines their strength.

Rousseau is seen by Nietzsche as the champion of equality, the desire for which rests on *ressentiment*. Nonetheless, the ends toward which these two thinkers aim are curiously similar. Rousseau's ideal is not the loss of self-reflective awareness, for he knows that we cannot go

back; it is the development of a strong, simple people who do not live in envy and *amour propre*. Nietzsche also values self-consciousness, as an ambiguous achievement of culture; for him, too, the progress toward which Europeans are moving does not consist in regaining an earlier morality, but in living “without becoming embittered” (1968a: 74), in overcoming the distinction between the ideal and the actual that frustrates everyone who takes it seriously.

Nietzsche can no longer deny the tension implicit in Rousseau between acceptance and rejection of the existing order. Because Rousseau could not in the end accept or reject the moral values of a Christian society, he was forced to insist on “the preservation of existing institutions, maintaining that their destruction would leave the vices in existence and remove only the means to their cure” (Cassirer 1989: 54). Nietzsche’s attempt to move beyond good and evil invites us to reformulate the issue, though we must struggle for the words to do so. His failure to completely extricate himself from the matrix of nature demonstrates the immense difficulty, and the extreme importance, of the task.

In fact, Nietzsche is one of the many descendants of Rousseau. Both thinkers hold together the knowledge of our inevitable historicity with the sense that things were better when we had less history behind us. They share the belief that freedom is never a condition in which we find ourselves, but consists in struggle; freedom does not consist in simply having overcome nature, but in the continual transformation of nature without ever “leaving” nature itself.

The link between these two is not that they said the same things, but that Rousseau’s insights into and ambivalence toward the Enlightenment are shared and developed by Nietzsche in the light of the nineteenth-century development of history and disappointment with human nature. Before the French Revolution, Rousseau could still turn from these problems to envision a free and ordered society, ignoring his own machinations into Emile’s construction and thus the anti-democratic, anti-libertarian element in his thought. The force of the Revolution, and of Kant, worked against any such denial or tensions in thought. Nietzsche’s more extensive dislocation of nature is rooted in the simultaneous historicization of human life and disappointment with the fruits of that history. After the Revolution, Nietzsche could have no patience with someone who seemed to call for autonomy and yet endorsed coercive education; the loss of telos led also to the loss of legitimacy for such projects.

INTIMATE DISTANCE

Much of the annoying energy of “postmodern” analyses resides in the persistent transgression of seemingly obvious and “natural” categories, such as nature. Dislocation reaches its limit when we finally abandon the attempts to limit and fix nature, when we use nature as a foundation only with a strong sense of irony arising from knowledge of its ambiguities. Postmodern theories have enabled us to recognize that nothing ever simply “is” or “is not” natural, that nature never “is,” in fact, anything determinate at all, but that nevertheless nature is ever-present, that which is about us always (Bove 1986).

Can we then say anything about nature? Is there any way to describe a thing/process that insistently oscillates from one pole to the other? I will argue for the formulation of nature as “intimate distance” as a way to move in this direction. Post-modernism signals not the death of nature, but the return of nature as intimate distance.

In *Spurs* (1979), Jacques Derrida’s essay on Nietzsche, he describes the position of woman in terms that are strongly reminiscent of the treatment of “nature”:

Perhaps woman is not some thing which announces itself from a distance, at a distance from some other thing. In that case it would not be a matter of retreat and approach. Perhaps woman—a non-identity, and non-figure, a simulacrum—is distance’s very chasm, the out-distancing of distance, the interval’s cadence, distance itself, if we could say such a thing, distance *itself*. (49)

Whether or not we endorse such a description of “woman,” the identification of women and nature in the West makes this a revealing and useful passage. Certainly Derrida’s treatment of Rousseau develops this line of thought. In language strikingly similar to that used above, he argues that for Rousseau, the question is not that of “departing from nature, or of rejoining it, but of reducing its ‘distance’” (Derrida 1976: 186).⁴ His analysis draws on the idea of nature as supplement (Derrida 1976: 163). “Supplement” is a term that embodies the ambiguity of Rousseau’s understanding of nature. In the first usage, the supplement is that which is added to a full, self-sufficient unit. However, the second usage of “supplement” is that of fulfilling a

⁴ Neither I nor Derrida seek to establish the presence of metaphors of distance in Rousseau and Nietzsche. What I hope to achieve here is a means of conceiving their dilemmas as internal to the term itself.

lack.⁵ Derrida uses this notion of supplement as addition/completion to analyze Rousseau's thoughts on nature and politics. Nature is always here, always itself, and yet it is not sufficient.

Returning to the above quote, we can see some of the issues that have plagued thought about nature. Perhaps, as Derrida says, it is "not a matter of retreat and approach," of nearer or closer to nature, for we are always in nature, we are always nature, but yet we are not natural. We cannot simply return to nature, but we abandon it only at our peril.

Perhaps nature, always with us, never directly accessible, is distance itself. Perhaps we return to the idea of nature in order to describe the not-quite-thought, the not-quite-manifest and yet surely here. It limits, it guides, but it never simply and plainly commands us. That which enables us to "leave" nature, to distance ourselves from it, is itself natural in the sense of the given, the existing, but it is profoundly unnatural in any simple teleology. "intimate distance" captures the movement between enough/not enough, between present/absent, between near/far. Nature is never absent, but it is never simply present as a clear referent or guide. Whether it is "enough" or not depends upon the political project we are pursuing.

So much for distance. What of intimacy? Nature may be distance, the unreachable referent of our desire or need, but it is never really far at all. What would distance really mean in a world where habit is nature, where nature is cultivated? The distance of nature is the smallest possible distance. Nature is, in fact, present, but not as a thing or a transparent history, not as a simple origin nor as a clear telos. This is seen by Nietzsche, who develops the idea of "second nature" as a way of understanding change which is not simply "conventional," which is not a matter of adopting roles but of transforming the self. Nature is distance in its ungraspability, but it is always that in which we live as what we are. We are nature, just as surely as we are unnatural. Neither the distance of nature nor its constant presence are avoidable.

Perhaps intimacy is better understood if we contrast it to immediacy. Immediacy has connotations for political theory of the transparent, that without distance. In contrast, Webster's defines "intimate" as "intrinsic," "belonging to or characterizing one's deepest nature," involving

⁵ For example, the first usage occurs in "supplements" to a text, helpful but not necessary; the second is the basis of vitamin supplements, which supply something needed but perhaps missing in regular diets.

“close association, contact, or familiarity.” While these definitions illustrate the inter-connections between words such as “nature,” “intimacy,” and “close,” intimacy does not involve the elimination of distance as does immediacy. Rousseau is often read as the theorist of immediacy; indeed, Hegel’s argument against immediacy has been read for close to two centuries as a critique of Rousseau. However, I would argue that Rousseau in fact is groping for intimacy, not immediacy. Intimacy allows room for ambivalence, for mediation, for complex relations with the not-self (whether another human or the non-human world).

What are the political implications of conceiving of nature as intimate distance? First, and most importantly, such a conception makes explicit the ambiguities and paradoxes in our current usages. It makes clear that nature is always a double standard, never with a univocal meaning by which it can legitimate some political aims and delegitimize others. As a consequence, such an idea fosters a certain humility in our rhetorical and political use of nature. It does not remove nature from the armory of Western political discourse, as some have hoped to do, but it cautions its users that nature is always double-edged, introducing a new humility to its usage. As a result, political contestants may begin to develop other arguments for their aims, arguments that move beyond existing liberal/conservative uses of nature.⁶

Seeing nature as intimate distance places judgment in the foreground. Intimate distance can only be explored and evaluated contextually, within a particular time and place; it does not admit of regulations and checklists. These shortcuts and substitutes to personal

⁶ On the day that I write this, a friend tells me of a gay man he knows who dresses as a woman, refers to himself with a woman’s name and pronouns, and insists that he “feels like a woman inside.” My friend asks, is this unnatural? When I ask what he means, he clarifies: (1) Is this person “pathological”? (2) Could there be a physiological basis for his/her sense of him/herself? I answer by shifting the questions. I talk about the ways in which gender and sexuality are associated in our society, so that many gay men experience themselves as “female” by a simple process of elimination (man = desires women, woman = desires men). I mention the relatively greater social acceptance of women who dress “like men” or “act like” men, stemming from the greater social esteem of men and “male” activities/behaviors. I talk about my own uneasiness around male transvestites, stemming from my own socialization into gender roles. Most importantly, I wonder again about the stakes in calling transvestism or any other social difference “natural” or “unnatural.” My friend seems to think that if he can answer such questions then he will know how to judge people.

judgment are precisely Nietzsche's targets and, in de Man's reading, Rousseau's as well.⁷

Nature is a foundational category for the West, but the course of modernity is a course of internal conflict for that category. As we become more aware of the ways in which nature functions, not only to limit discourse, but to reflect our alienation and aspirations to become whole, we see more clearly the price of reliance upon it. The challenge to the category of nature made by feminist and postmodern or poststructuralist writers is bound to recognition of the limiting role nature has played in discourse and politics (Lyotard 1984; Lyotard and Thébaud 1985; Haraway 1985, 1991). The avoidance of the chasm of distance is the source of ideologies that reify and reduce nature, including human nature, in the service of clarity and order. Nature as telos and natural right have continually served to repress and oppress, to justify hierarchies; nature as origin has been the expression of our longing, our "homesickness" (Connolly 1988) for an intact, just world. We see all these uses in Rousseau and Nietzsche, as manifestations of differing impulses and needs. These two thinkers also show that nature is too slippery to be confined to any one definition; they show us that the intimate distance of nature is not something to be collapsed or avoided.

Instead of attempting to eliminate nature in political discourse, I would argue for the mediation of intimate distance, a continual reflection and contest over the category. The elimination of nature can only further the solipsism of modern Western civilization, in which the earth becomes "standing-reserve" for appropriation by humans who have themselves become nothing but resources in a global economy (Heidegger 1977: 3-35). What is needed is a reconceptualization that heightens respect and care without a return to medieval piety. Recognition of nature as intimate distance reminds us simultaneously that nature is us and our lives, but that those lives are the greatest, most mundane mystery we will ever face.

⁷ Kevin Paul Geiman (1990) and Bill Readings (1991) both describe the debt that Lyotard owes to the Kant of the *Critique of Judgment* in terms that are strongly reminiscent of my reading of Rousseau and Nietzsche; Kant provides one of the links in the sequence of "sidlocation" that I illustrate here. The function of judgment and its link to a limited, not really knowable nature is an important topic, one deserving of a separate paper.

REFERENCES

- Bloom, Allan. 1979. Introduction to *Emile, or On Education*, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. New York: Basic Books.
- Bove, Paul. 1986. "The Ineluctability of Difference: Scientific Pluralism and the Critical Intelligence." In Jonathan Arac, ed. *Postmodernism and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1989. *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Trans. Peter Gay. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Connolly, William E. 1988. *Political Theory and Modernity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- de Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 1979. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Trans. Barbara Harlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ehrard, Jean. 1973. *L'Idee de Nature en France a L'Aube des Lumieres*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 1981. *Public Man, Private Woman*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 1990. *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Flax, Jane. 1990. *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon.
- Geiman, Kevin Paul. 1990. "Lyotard's 'Kantian Socialism'." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 16 (1): 23-37.
- Griffin, Susan. 1978. *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's." *Socialist Review* 15 (2): 64-107.
- . 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1962. *Leviathan*. Ed. Michael Oakeshott. New York: Collier.
- Horowitz, Asher. 1987. *Rousseau, Nature, and History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 1990. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. 1984. *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledges*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- , and Jean-Loup Thébaud. 1985. *Just Gaming*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. 1961. *The Federalist Papers*. Ed. Clinton Rossiter. New York: Mentor.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1956. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Francis Golffing. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- . 1957. *The Use and Abuse of History*. Trans. Adrian Collins. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1968a. *The Will to Power*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking.
- . 1968b. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking.
- . 1974. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- . 1982. *Daybreak*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phelan, Shane. 1989. *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Readings, Bill. 1991. *Introducing Lyotard*. New York: Routledge.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1973. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. Trans. G. D. H. Cole. London: J. M. Dent & Sons.
- . 1979. *Emile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Strauss, Leo. 1953. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strong, Tracy. 1988. *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*. Expanded edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warren, Mark. 1988. *Nietzsche and Political Thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.