



## JOHN ELDER'S VERMONT The value of territory as example

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John Elder resides in Vermont, where he teaches Environmental studies and Literature at Middlebury College, and is a well-known nature writing scholar. In 1998, Harvard University Press published his major contribution to the domain, which turns out to be neither an essay on the question of environmentalism or ecology, nor a journal of his travels through the Vermont wilderness, nor a book of local history, nor an essay about nature poet Robert Frost, but a book that synthesizes the various traditions of American nature writing, and hardly conceals its ambition to redefine it and set models for the future of the genre. Elder's book, *Reading the Mountains of Home*,<sup>1</sup> concentrates on questions of territory and human presence, examines how the features of a specific home may carry meaning beyond themselves by acquiring paradigmatic value, and also assesses modern American environmentalism to devise a more optimistic vision likely to encourage faith in the gospel of nature. That Elder should thrive on a rich and varied tradition of environmental writing is obvious enough. Elder's more recent book, *The Frog Run*, published in 2001, is devoted specifically to the Vermont woods, which remind the author of his salad days when he received Thoreau's *Walden* as a present on his fifteenth birthday.<sup>2</sup> In a foreword to the book, which is hard to classify as essay, journal, or even autobiography, Scott Slovic describes the piece as what may pass for a new category, "narrative scholarship."<sup>3</sup> That scholarship should now begin to narrate may be thought amazing as seen from old Europe, at a time when one realizes that a great many American scholars want to do just this, avoid our high theoreticism and abstract notions.<sup>4</sup> What is at stake is a direct confrontation with the experience of territory from which, it is hoped, meditation on the cultural values of American environmentalism will emerge. This hope is not frustrated, as the critical re-examination of environmentalism's somber streak and apocalyptic ways proceeds.

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<sup>1</sup>. John Elder, *Reading the Mountains of Home* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); hereafter cited as RMH.

<sup>2</sup>. John Elder, *The Frog Run: Words and Wildness in the Vermont Woods*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001); hereafter cited as FR.

<sup>3</sup>. See Scott Slovic, "John Elder, a portrait", FR, 97-127.

<sup>4</sup>. Consider Louis Menand's book on American intellectual traditions, *The Metaphysical Club: a Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

Why should John Elder be in need of *Reading the Mountains of Home*? Such a title is the acknowledgment that the area he has made his own in Western Vermont, slightly to the North of Middlebury, is like a text, a social and geographic one, that requires interpretation and yields lessons and messages valid beyond the strict confines of a given territory. Vermont has its own literary tradition: this is the State where the American nature poet Robert Frost lived. Although a Californian himself, much like John Elder, Robert Frost was constantly associated with Vermont, which he loved, throughout his mature years. In 1955, the Vermont state legislature named one mountain near Ripton after him, which is a striking connection with territory in the poet's life.<sup>5</sup> What allured John Elder was a poem that Robert Frost wrote in the 1940s entitled "Directive."<sup>6</sup> Elder has chosen to use this two-page poem as an epigraph to his book, moving slowly from one area to another around his home in the village of Bristol, Vermont, with some lines attached to some specific aspects of the woods, mountains, and abandoned farms in the surroundings. The very title of John Elder's book is exceedingly metaphorical, as is the idea of a palimpsest written by the past events that have shaped the territory around the village of Bristol—events which were geological, and also social, since what wells up from the past is the presence of a rich agrarian culture swept away by the scant profitability of these Vermont slopes. What strikes John Elder is that Robert Frost has a capacity to read the past the way he would a palimpsest. John Elder has some of Frost's lines in mind, these in particular, which are strikingly explicit, conjuring up images of a world that is dead and gone:

There is a house that is no more a house  
Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
And in a town that is no more a town.<sup>7</sup>

A palimpsest was parchment used as writing material one or more times after earlier material had been erased. The word derives from the Greek *palimpsestos*, meaning "to scrape again." The scraping does not obviously do away with all the traces of former writing since some of the words that were there may survive sporadically. Elder is interested in the potential one finds in the idea of a palimpsest for geographic meaning. The Swiss geographer André Corboz has explored the notion at length in his latest book entitled, precisely, *Territory as Palimpsest and other essays*.<sup>8</sup>

Why should John Elder be in need of such notions, like looking at territory as if it were parchment already written on? Might this not be a response to an epistemological difficulty of some sort at the core of nature writing, all the more so as John Elder's ambition is to redefine a genre? A genre may need redefining at all times, and more so whenever it causes epistemological difficulty, thus inviting one to devise newer forms of expression. John Elder faces these questions bravely, and he does so by

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<sup>5</sup>. See the "Chronology" section in Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 929-55; hereafter cited as CPPP.

<sup>6</sup>. Robert Frost, CPPP, 341-42.

<sup>7</sup>. RMH, epigraph.

<sup>8</sup>. André Corboz, *Le Territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais* (Besançon: Les Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 2001); see in particular 209-29; hereafter cited as TP.

narrating stories, several stories weaved into one: there is of course the local story, a chronicle of village life; one encounters the wilderness story, since the expanding wilderness of Vermont is the result of the decline of rural pursuits; one cannot miss the primeval story, in an area shaped by glaciation and its attendant topography; one comes across the aboriginal story, since the social text the palimpsest insight gives us access to involves the celebration of Vermont's Indian communities of the past; finally one reads the *oikos* story, the story of home, where, as a man, John Elder digs roots, inviting us to wed human life to territory.

### *The local story*

*Reading the mountains of Home* focuses on a fairly circumscribed part of Vermont, in and around Bristol. The book slowly moves from the wilderness areas to the village, through various chapters, or sections, which seem to encapsulate Elder's considerations on new rural life. The village itself, we hear, is located at a place of rest, the way Manhattan is. John Elder goes into a bold comparison that establishes a parallel between a village in Vermont where a few hundred souls are tucked up in a propitious and protective place and a mightily urban ecosystem. We hear the birds migrating South flow through Manhattan at the confluence of the Hudson River and the East River; similarly, the people of Bristol have found protection at the foot of some rocks:

In our smaller natural and human scale, Bristol, too, expresses the rush of water through rock, the energy of falling from the heights, the seasonal shake of life replacing life. Our village squares its houses and its streets on a little plateau tucked up against the western side of Bristol Gap, a human encampment beside the life-giving rush of the New Haven River. [RMH 137]

The village is therefore viewed as protective; it expresses the need to find a home, and is one form of spatial organization that proceeds from the idea that humans and birds alike need shelter from an aggressive or hostile wider ecosystem within which a niche has to be found. In this particular instance, John Elder's environmental imagination relies on analogy, the analogy of the urban with the infra-urban, Bristol being such a small collection of souls; it also relies on an analogy between wildlife and human life, bridging cultural gaps that would otherwise widen, if the cultural work consisting in bringing the wild and the homely together was not effected.

The story of life in Vermont, however, also touches upon more disquieting matters, as when the wide world impinges upon the perfection of this restful place where the villagers have constructed peaceful abodes in which to find protection. At one point, a World War draws near these lives, hardly affecting them, as if historical reality were at a remove, forever distant and yet also close. We hear a plane was found on South Mountain, an elevation of land to the South of Bristol, as its name indicates. One day, John Elder, on a hike nearby, finds remnants of a fighter plane that crashed on October 24, 1945, while returning from a military air show in Burlington, which is not far away. This is not a real war, though we feel it must have existed. John Elder narrates this episode of local history not because he

wants to write local history, but because he means to tell us that nature writing should go beyond it, and should avoid finding itself at a remove from global history, sheltered away from it, the way the village of Bristol saw historical reality from afar, as the plane crash episode suggests. Cultural globalization is therefore Elder's ambition, even while writing local history, a genre he has respect for, but also wishes to assess, and maybe bypass. Thus, we realize that if there is in American life a drive towards globalization, this being one feature of the American economy, American culture is shaped by much the same trend. The writing itself, when John Elder seeks the remnants of the fighter plane, is an inscription of cultural values within narration. Though it may sound matter-of-fact to write this, John Elder does not hesitate to indicate: "I never found the plane on that August hike. A broader circle through the woods, and through the seasons, was required before I reached the wreck" [RMH 77]. As a result of the find, made through a broadening of his whereabouts, but also most certainly of the angle of his vision, John Elder becomes aware of the circumstances of local history. This is a case of serendipity, quite typical of environmental literature. What is meant by serendipity is the faculty of finding objects unsought for, and here we are talking of objects of attention. The word was coined after Horace Walpole's *Three Princes of Serendip*, an oriental tale which narrates the story of heroes who make chance encounters. The object of awareness under consideration in John Elder's book is human presence, and John Elder realizes this in the very chapter devoted to the finding of the fighter plane wreck, when he comes to considering the major change that has occurred in these Vermont woods, the return of the wild. "This region," Elder writes, "which was among the first parts of the country to be settled, is now growing wild" [RMH 81]. What Elder comes across is a definition of territory, territory not being a stable unmoving reality, but space open to change. The Swiss geographer André Corboz has a striking definition of this: "Le territoire n'est pas une donnée: il résulte de divers processus" [RMH 81] ("Territory is nothing given; it is the result of various processes"). This is why Elder's narrative rapidly veers to theory, which is another word for fundamental environmental questions, having to do with human presence on a given territory.

John Elder encounters metaphor as a consequence of narration, and, while walking in the mountains near home, around Bristol, an image suddenly strikes his imagination. One finds the reason why the farming families are gone, and why wilderness has crept back in. "The mountain has a dress that's just too *short*. It simply doesn't have enough soil to cover its extraordinary rockiness or decently clothe its farms (and families)" [RMH 31]. The sloping terrain is unable to feed all those who were in need of nourishment, hence the idea that prevails throughout Elder's book that there is an injunction of geography to human society, the very idea that Robert Frost explores in his lyric "Directive." The injunction is the directive: it shapes human society; it gives an order, and in this case, the order was the order to leave and try to make a living out of farming elsewhere. The farm is no more a farm because of the obligations of territory that have themselves—this is unsaid—offered new opportunities to farm in the West and given over the highlands of Vermont

back to wildlife. John Elder, by writing the story of local populations, steadily decreasing in the wake of the Civil War, also brings in the more global question of land occupancy in the United States, marked by agriculture expanding in the West and the general availability of cheap land [RMH 14].

The directive that has, for reasons of topography, driven the farmers out of Vermont is also an occasion for rejoicing, and avoiding the tone of lament which is typical of environmental writing. One may of course argue that both Robert Frost and John Elder cling to lament, that lament is experienced as profoundly reassuring, profoundly American, and thus in many ways consoling. In Frost's poems, dealing with the farmhouses slowly returning to the earth whence they came, having shrunk to ruins in the 1940s, when the poem was written, one finds solace and wistfulness, modes of emotional commitment that John Elder celebrates yet also elegantly waves away as much too attached to the past.

### *The wilderness story*

To John Elder as to the many well-versed in geographic lore, territory is more of a project than a heritage. André Corboz put it in quite an articulate manner: "Being a project, territory is viewed semantically. It may turn into discourse. It bears a name. Projections of various kinds cling to it, and shape it into a subject."<sup>9</sup> The subject under consideration in John Elder's book is the subject of a story of today, the wilderness story. One section of his book is a piece of nature writing devoted to the question of recovery, this having to do with the handling of the peregrine falcon populations, which have been reintroduced. Thus, Elder's book connects with one major book of environmental writing, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which was first serialized in *The New Yorker*, and brought to public attention (in 1962) the damage to the environment done by the use of DDT. The pesticide was banned shortly after this, but peregrine falcons had already disappeared East of the Mississippi, including Vermont.<sup>10</sup> John Elder conveys a detailed account of wildlife recovery, in which optimism dominates, in spite of the fact that the peregrine falcon of today is extinct, the birds now being a mixed subspecies of North American and European origin. Thus the wilderness story is told, while the writer expresses one essential aspect of environmental literature, awareness of the danger of toxics. The impulse to conform to an established tradition of writing shapes the book, as much as the facts of the return of wildlife under human guidance.

This no doubt effects universalization of place. Vermont is certainly distinctively Eastern. The book teems with notations opposing the wide open spaces of the West to the restricted perspectives of the East. Yet the

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<sup>9</sup>. « Étant un projet, le territoire est sémantisé. Il est 'discourable'. Il porte un nom. Des projections de toute nature s'attachent à lui, qui le transforment en un sujet » in TP, 214-15.

<sup>10</sup>. RMH, 152-53 ; also consider Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, with an int. by Al Gore (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962): "As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him," 85.

narrative goes into so many particulars having to do with the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975 that one feels that story-telling in this case is also a projection of specific events onto a higher plane, raising questions about the Forest Service's handling of environmental policies and how Federal responsibility affects the lives of whole communities and citizens. John Elder suspects the Forest Service of a bureaucratic approach to land-management, and narrates at some length an episode that occurred right before the legislation was passed by Congress in 1975. In particular, Elder narrates a congressional public hearing held in Vermont, which enables one to assess the resistance of the local landowners to an inclusion in the new perimeter, most of them worried about forest-management if surrounded by an area of wilderness in the hands of the Forest Service. It was then planned, more specifically, that the trees would be left rotting in the lands newly included, the return to wildlife being effective but left to nature to engineer. This organ of central government, the Forest Service, is suspected of disregarding private needs, however modest, by depriving the area of wildlife that would be slow in returning. Moreover, Elder argues that the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975 has led to an expansion of the public lands in areas that could no longer be logged. The Act itself is available to the public on the Internet, and any reading will call to attention one particular passage of this essential wilderness legislation:

Additional areas of wilderness in the more populous eastern half of the United States are increasingly threatened by the pressure of a growing and more mobile population, large-scale industrial and economic growth, and development and uses inconsistent with the protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the areas' wilderness character.<sup>11</sup>

The legislation is worded carefully and, if scrutinized, seems precisely to conceal the objective that John Elder says it has—that is, to include the public lands where logging is impossible or at least unprofitable—by calling our attention elsewhere, to population mobility and urbanization, these not having any urgency in Vermont. John Elder makes us aware of the fact that the threat to these rural spaces is not so much overuse as underpopulation. Elder thus shows that the land-management culture of the 1970s did not try to shackle urbanization, but did in effect accompany the trend without in any way altering the depopulation process at work within Vermont elsewhere.

Notations on the role and the culture of the Forest Service go beyond the narrative aspect, having to do with how the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975 was brought into effect. The projection of story onto a higher plane of meaning is such that Elder comes up with a theory when we least expect it, and the theory has to do with how history, in this case the history of human presence, is conceived. Elder argues that in the Bristol Cliff area, the Forest Service had lost track of the essentially historical dimension that shapes the way one population connects with the forest. He writes:

I think that the forest service got into so much trouble including private holdings within the original boundaries of Bristol Cliffs

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<sup>11</sup>. Log on to <<http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legis/>>

because of an assumption that the experience of wilderness, even that of a recovered wilderness like this one, was essentially ahistorical—or even ‘prehistoric’. [RMH 117]

What this implies is that the Forest Service has taken it for granted that there is no memory whatsoever in the American population of life in close conjunction with the forest, and that the experience of the forest is in its entirety a present-day construct with no roots left in the past. The assumption at the back of it, though Elder does not say so, is that the very idea of land-management is a man-made, city-bound culture, not anything remotely connected with a rural pursuit, as if America’s environmental culture were the result of urban values of government. That suspicion on the part of Elder is enticing if we bear in mind that America’s agrarianism has been on the wane for quite some time, ever since the days when Thomas Jefferson pronounced it was necessary to “place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturist.”<sup>12</sup> As a result of these considerations, what Elder identifies as gone is the agrarian myth: it is not gone from the minds of the people but seems to have evaporated from the minds of the land-management bureaucrats in charge of the land. The historian Michael Kammen holds the view that

the agrarian myth associated with Thomas Jefferson took hold so swiftly and endured because it already had roots in an eighteenth-century freehold concept of independent yeomen farmers that antedated Jefferson.<sup>13</sup>

What John Elder identifies as still alive in the hills of Vermont is precisely that bond with the past which has not totally been severed, but on which a serious threat hangs, with the slow passing of the generations that his book also chronicles. The most woeful accusation lies of course with government policy, since John Elder suggests that government has totally eradicated a historical tradition that went into the making of the very idea of government. Hence the capacity for bringing general political meaning to the meditation upon territory.

### *The primeval story*

If the sense of the past has waned into thin air, why not let it be wafted back to us again to breathe the atmosphere of America as it began in the days of the creation of the world? There is Puritanism in this: the Puritan age of ecology comes under the guise of those times of creation that, surprisingly, John Elder, like John Muir before him, prides himself on bringing back to life. Those times of genesis are the days when nature was in pristine condition, unadulterated by human life, unspoilt by human conflict, with nobody around in the days of glaciation. There was special emphasis on the glacial period in John Muir’s book about *The Mountains of California* too. The nascent, incipient dimension of the time following glaciation was for Muir, a

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<sup>12</sup>. Bernard Bailyn brings us some insight into this dimension of Jefferson’s political culture in *To Begin the World Anew* (New York: Knopf, 2003), especially in chap. 2, “Jefferson and the Ambiguities of Freedom”, 37-59.

<sup>13</sup>. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York: Random House, 1991), 703-704; hereafter cited as MCM.

Westerner, an opportunity for what might be termed geological lyricism. It is one specific moment that Muir likes to focus on: "This change from icy darkness and death to life and beauty was slow, as we count time, and is still going on, north and south, over all the world wherever glaciers exist," he writes, trying to construct a vision that elevates us well above his beloved Californian mountains.<sup>14</sup> John Elder experiences a fascination for his mountains which is very much in keeping with Muir's, although one suspects that Muir went into such considerations for reasons not entirely proceeding from the love of geology, to build historical depth and add value to the California sierra. Elder's awareness of the present condition of environmental change is so acute that one feels some kind of pressure is being lifted off by concentrating on a period which has at best only abstract existence for us. Sensing this, John Elder overdoes description, producing what literary critics will call a *purple patch*, that is a passage written with so much care that the author demonstrates virtuosity of expression, and tends to overdo effects. One finds this in particular in the opening scene to the chapter titled "Bristol Cliffs." On this occasion, John Elder celebrates the beauty of the area, and encompasses the world's geological history, amid considerations that overlook the question of human presence and occupancy. The million years make us swoon, but we would be mistaken should we not resist the temptation to relish the inebriation. Thus goes John Elder:

The finely grained quartzite glinting around me now in the talus and ledges of Bristol Cliffs began as Cheshire Formation sands deposited on the ocean shelf 600 million years ago, before the collision of plates that raised the second, higher Appalachians. About 445 million years ago, under pressure of reconverging plates, these sands were metamorphosed into quartzite and arenite as they lifted up into a mountain that also combined material from the opposing ocean shelves. [RMH 49-50]

Territory undergoes metamorphosis, being the locus of immense historical development of epic proportion. Where are the humans? Are they part of the picture? They are nowhere to be found, and this may cause immediate frustration in the reader, so that John Elder circles back to the idea of a directive that geology sends like an order, an order which bypasses human responsibility. We soon hear that human occupancy of the land was the result of geology. John Elder makes his own a remark by the geologist Sverson indicating that Vermont geology conditioned settlement patterns. Are we to believe this, or are we to consider that the surrender of human society to such orders proceeding from below is the avowal of low collective implication in soil occupancy and the social order that it expresses? Never does John Elder express political disapproval when focusing on the abandoned farms, one aspect of the social history of agriculture in Vermont and elsewhere which seems to derive from geology, whereas he might have taken into consideration the low implication of government in the matter, and the prevailing surrender of American agriculture to economic liberalism that might have been socially controlled. In fact, the surrender of American agriculture was a surrender to what is generally considered by historians of

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<sup>14</sup>. John Muir, *Nature Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1997) 323.

agriculture as the second agricultural revolution, the one that connected one century with the following, when mechanization, the massive use of fertilizers and plant technology eliminated agriculture from unfavorable terrain, all the more so as state involvement had been non-existent to avoid massive social changes, precisely the changes that have returned Vermont to wilderness, and American nature writing to the expression of glee about the return of wildlife.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence of these epistemological uncertainties, not to say difficulties, John Elder walks down memory lane, and brings some attention to the history of vegetation, and the imprint on vegetation of previous human presence and activity. Elder thus conveys some of the biological knowledge he has acquired as a member of the dedicated community of Middlebury College environmentalists. We learn that on any given territory the presence of stone walls and the existence of juniper trees are the signs of previous pasturing, the shepherds being nowhere to be found [RMH 89]. There are many notations having to do with what is called "the successional history of a site," when John Elder summarizes the biological thinking of a close friend, scientist Tom Wessels [RMH 88], thus bringing the readers fresh knowledge they may not be familiar with. Elder's aim is to educate and synthesize specialized discourse, which has always been typical of nature writing, wanting to educate the public on notions having to do with the marks of populations acting upon territory, be they human or animal. What however transpires from this is one uncertainty in environmental thinking having to do with whether one accepts a vision that opposes population to territory or whether one favors a culture of the natural world that will always connect population to territory.

One famous Vermonter of the nineteenth century, Theodore Perkins Marsh (born 1801), became an early advocate of environmentalism, and reached public recognition through his early book of nature writing entitled *Man and Nature, Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, originally published in 1864.<sup>16</sup> What appears in one section of this book, which fascinates John Elder, is the primeval story, and the focusing on origins and beginnings rather than the processes and effects of the human population. This intellectual attitude sheds light on one feature of the environmental heritage of American culture, its incapacity to fully consider the abiding integration of population and territory. It may well be that forests do not feed populations, as Marsh has amply demonstrated in his essay. Why, however, postulate regions absolutely covered with trees if such a thing has never existed? Marsh notes:

In a region absolutely covered with trees, human life could not long be sustained, for want of animal and vegetable food. The depths of the forest seldom furnish either bulb or fruit suited to the nourishment of man. [MN 117]

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<sup>15</sup>. To get some insight into the second agricultural revolution of modern times, consider Marcel Mazoyer and Florence Roudart, *Histoire des agricultures du monde: du néolithique à la crise contemporaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998) 377-444.

<sup>16</sup>. George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature, Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., seventh printing 1998).

But do we care about what might happen? Is it not rather the varied and contrasted realities of territory we want to read, where forests provided transitional spaces rich with game, at least in the course of the nineteenth century? Such notations by Marsh only serve as an inscription within the environmental heritage of the readiness with which territory and populations are realities one may oppose easily. Hence the difficulty to reconcile population and territory, a necessity fully acknowledged by Aldo Leopold's environmental thinking, and closer to us, by the French geographer Augustin Berque.<sup>17</sup> Hence also John Elder's groping for the right direction within a general intellectual context of environmental thinking which is somewhat murky. The wistfulness of John Elder's writing, telling the primeval story, from before the beginnings of human society, is a response to times that are not morally comfortable if one has to say whether human presence should be encouraged or whether it should be countered. The historian Michael Kammen has demonstrated this ambiguity of American culture at large when examining what he calls the heritage imperative, in one chapter of *Mystic Chords of Memory*: "A quest for timelessness that would counterbalance the perplexities of change provided comfort to some."<sup>18</sup>

### *The aboriginal story*

One is however unsure that an evocation of Indian life in Vermont should put John Elder's inquiring mind to rest. He remains one of the few nature writers to be fully aware of aboriginal presence before the settlers made the territory their own, and regrets the lack of attention to the existence of the Abenaki nation in this section of New England. One funny episode is John Elder's walk through the woods of Vermont with the Dalai-Lama who, looking at a maple leaf, says: "Transience." What is ironic here is that this should be presented as an essential realization whereas the whole book keeps exploring connection and distance with the past, therefore demonstrating that the realization has already set in.

Timelessness is attached to the Indians of Vermont. John Elder insists on the age-old dimension of their civilization, by providing information on the Paleo-Indians who were present there when the world began, and human history was fresh and young [RMH 218]. John Elder follows the development of Indian civilization, praising in particular the talent that the Abenakis, like many other communities throughout America, have in the domain of wickerwork, basketry and pottery, and insisting upon the delicacy of the objects used in daily life. John Elder thus integrates Indian culture within the American experience. On the other hand, the Abenakis express cultural values in ways which are to be understood as territorial and territorial experience also records change. The elegant craftsmanship of the Abenakis could not have existed elsewhere, and yet, in spite of the proximity of these feats of workmanship, they are forever distant and belong to a dead world. The writing tries to preserve the magic of it:

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<sup>17</sup>. See in particular Augustin Berque, *Écoumène: Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains* (Paris : Belin, 2000).

<sup>18</sup>. Michael Kammen, MCM, 537.

I can see the sweet-grass, fine but tough, being braided into cord from which baskets were woven and against which the wet clay of a new pot was pressed to make it beautiful to the eye and palm. These are all imaginings, but accessible through my shared humanity with these ancient families, and through the plants and grass that still tremble in this morning breeze, the trees that still stand watch above this shore.  
[RMH 220]

To be sure, the magic is enhanced by the biblical vision of essential and unified humanity. John Elder's holism at this point is especially strong because of his belief that memory should be eulogized. Is such insistence on memory a response to anything in American environmental culture that may be experienced as unsavory? John Elder understands American environmental history as a process that shifts populations from one territory to another, and thus responds to an abiding feature of land-occupancy in the U.S., the instability of which should, this is implied, be held in check. As a result of these underpinnings of territorial experience, John Elder feels it is his duty as a writer to upgrade territorial experience as a form of commitment to a specific place. On the other hand, if population instability is typical of American environmental history, and Elder acknowledges this, he does not condone the fact. One thus understands that as a writer, John Elder has a moral ambition, and that he is aware of the destructive dimension of population instability. What Elder has in mind is no less than the cultural identity of Americans. In a fascinating article on the aims of environmental literature, John Elder formulated what should be on the nature writer's agenda: "Our central purpose should rather be renewing literary education and enhancing the vitality of our culture."<sup>19</sup> Memorizing the past is thus deeply vital, and should be viewed as an act of revivalism in public discourse, which elevates literature above the merely personal or the backwaters of arcane confession.

John Elder points out that if Abenaki presence in Vermont has been unjustly neglected, the word meaning in Indian language *the people of the dawn*, he is unsure that it is his business as an American nature writer to be vocal on their behalf. Their very name suggests that an essential experience is attached to them, like a dawn of humanity or even Americanness. What however Elder suspects is that speaking in favor of a neglected human group may be counterproductive to this group because true cultural self-empowering implies that one should speak out for oneself instead of leaving the initiative to somebody for whom it will be more a matter of moral duty than identity. In spite of these qualms, John Elder wants to be aware of the Abenaki presence, and he seeks them out at the village cemetery, thus wanting to demonstrate that they have always been around, within the community.

John Elder starts the chase of the Abenaki man who died in Bristol 160 years prior to the writing of his book. All we know is that this old man died in Bristol village in the course of the nineteenth century and that a large congregation attended his funeral preached by the local minister. This demonstrates that the early local inhabitants were also part of the home that

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<sup>19</sup> John Elder, "The Poetry of Experience," special issue *Ecocriticism, New Literary History*, vol. 30, number 3, summer 1999, 650-51.

the newcomers made for themselves, integrated into village life. Elder's message at this point is that aboriginal America and the populations that came later are not that distant, and that one must bridge the gap that has widened between them. Yet also, symbolically, the Indian that occupies so much space in Elder's book is a dead Indian, therefore Elder acknowledges the long process of social enfeeblement which has marked Indian history ever since the nineteenth century. We hear in particular that the Abenakis were not involved in agriculture, and that the Abenakis of Vermont were mostly hunters. Presumably, if Elder pays attention to them, it is owing to personal knowledge of Vermont history, but attention paid to the first inhabitants of these lands is not unrelated to a political fact of modern America, what one might call the renaissance of the Indians, in particular in the East of the United States.<sup>20</sup> John Elder is aware both of their past presence, and of the intellectual importance of acknowledging this fact. What is amazing is that the farmers of Vermont were swept away by the necessity to develop more profitable farming activities elsewhere in the U.S., but the Abenaki nation, in Elder's book, has been retrieved from the deep recesses of local history. Of the farmers, only a poem by Robert Frost is left, identifying the past as unmistakably distant, while some new form of political organization is re-emerging among American Indians, especially the Abenakis. Elder mentions that in 1976, the then Governor of Vermont, Thomas Salmon, issued a proclamation recognizing their tribal status, which involved rights of fishing and hunting without specific state license. Where are the farmers of yester-years? Gone, and their farms are no longer farms in Robert Frost's vision of them.

Can poetry make up for such utter annihilation? Certainly not, and this is what John Elder suspects. Because of poetry's essentially verbal nature, one ritual of some sort that transcends the merely linguistic has to be gone into. This is why Elder visits Abenaki ancestral ground on the banks of Bristol pond, John Elder's own essential Waldenesque wonder-land, where he sits pondering: "Because I am not sure what would be the most fitting way to relate their narrative to my own, I have come to the waterside at dawn—their hour" [RMH 204]. The homage paid to Frost's poetry therefore catches on a specific dimension. Obviously, John Elder writes no piece of poetry he might want to read as a celebration of the Indian past. Words do not measure up to the celebration that he wants. They would be either detached or ineffectual to celebrate the beauty of these lives in close conjunction with the land. Some ritual has to be performed, and we soon realize that John Elder will build a canoe as a tribute to the past, to his father, and to the traditions of fishing of the Vermont Indians. Not that poetry should be downgraded, but it seems to have lost the power to celebrate other lives, and to have lost connection with the forces of territory, only memorizing past lives but hardly capable of projecting their meaning into the future.

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<sup>20</sup>. On the question of the modern Indian movement, see Laurence M. Hauptman's *Tribes and Tribulations: Misconceptions about American Indians and their Histories* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1995), esp. chapter entitled "There are no Indians East of the Mississippi", 93-108.

*The oikos story*

The sense of home has always been strong in nature writing. One may remember Henry David Thoreau for this, who has eulogized in both his *Journal* and *Walden* the dialogue between wilderness and a sense of home that has to be constructed in harmony with it.<sup>21</sup> John Elder belongs to this tradition, wanting to make a home of a place felt to be endearing. The village where Elder lives is perceived as especially protective, so is the actual home of the author, an old house built in 1821. The architecture bears the mark of the place where it was erected. Elder notes the following, in particular: "Our home, at 74 North Street, is a typical Bristol type. In it the natural, social, and economic history of our settlement may be read, just as the narrative of geology is written in the talus slope of Bristol Cliffs" [RMH 39]. Why is the home the home? It is so because it strings together the past with the present. We hear that the roof on John Elder's house has slates arranged in a diagonal pattern, this being what locals call "a poor man's roof". Through this, the industrial past of Vermont society is remembered, when most Vermonters worked in sawmills and box factories, a past long gone, whose presence is necessary to build up a sense of belonging. The snowy areas round the village that might be perceived by some as a kind of wasteland are alive with the inhabitants who were around earlier in the history of the Vermont settlement. Remembering in this case is not passive, but has matured into an active mental attitude: "It's hard to bear our predecessors always in mind" [RMH 111], Elder writes, hereby understanding the act of memory as a duty that will eventuate in the construction of territory as *oikos*. Territory is therefore also an act of the mind and requires active participation.

The episode of the construction of a canoe through which three generations will bond is narrated at some length. By this, Elder wants to honor his father's memory, and beyond that, perform a ritual of participation to territory, although the adventure into carpentry is a painful process for a writer's hands familiar with computer key-boards. Despite this, the experience is exhilarating, especially because an encounter with a Yup'ik woman of Alaska sheds light on the meaning attached to canoe-building. The episode is narrated in Elder's other Vermont book, *The Frog Run*. The Yup'ik woman tells Elder that "for her people, knowledge of nature was assumed to come from following the older generation around and watching what they did" [FR 81]. Making territory one's home is thus understood as an act with a collective dimension. Home-building is therefore not a solitary adventure or a personal endeavor. Through these considerations, John Elder wishes to revise environmental writing, by distancing himself from John Muir, and his usual insistence on a personal view-point, perhaps fuelled by the romantic tradition of lyricism, that always extols the ego as the source of awareness. Thus, territory is an example for Elder, in that connecting with it enables a definition of the conditions of perception of the natural world. We are invited, through the narrative of how John Elder works his way through and around the territory that he has made his own, to reach a general understanding of American nature. Nature is there to be used, and we must

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<sup>21</sup>. See my article, "Wilderness and domesticity: secret correlations in American environmental culture" in *Arobase*, vol. 2, nb 2, 1998 <<http://www.liane.net/arobase>>.

work out a definition of the use American nature may be put to: use certainly never meant abuse, but John Elder also establishes that use certainly means collective use, and the reasonable presence of communities. John Elder's insistence on the home, on an *oikos* one finds endearing, and on the comfort of familiar places, should also be viewed as a generic response from within the framework of environmental writing, much too prone to favor empty spaces, lonely quests and solitary imaginings of the magic of the land.

The final episode of the book is both the acknowledgement that America has reached a new phase of development one may term post-industrial, and the admission that this has not swept away the old cares about the way one makes oneself at home, and the way generations should also use the wilderness to house their solidarity in. John Elder ends up striking a positive note when telling the story of the canoe trip with his adolescent son, who finds in that wilderness trip the means by which communication with his father can be established again. They both happen to be shoved straight into the water. Nor do they experience any sense of danger. One wonders if nature has been domesticated or whether their culture of the natural world, that teaches caution and using the right equipment, has protected the two men. "It felt great to be in the grip of that rushing water and, dangerous as the moment might have been, there wasn't a worry in my mind "[RMH 229]. There is a suggestion there of nature performing duties of affection and caring as accomplished as those of human society. Although this remains unsaid, John Elder also looks back, though celebrating a father's affection, at one of the values of the Thoreau heritage, that extols the capacity to nurture of even hostile places, such as the lake frozen over by a ruthless Massachusetts winter, from which life rises again as from the dead as the ice thaws. The sense of home has extended, while awareness reaches outward for a more global answer than just space under one's roof. The fine vernacular housing that the Vermont villages afford is protective enough, but territory as a whole turns out to be a home as well, and territory, an occasion for narrative, slowly turns into another metaphor for home. The sense of home is never static, though. The passing of time, the work of population change, are constantly seen as affecting the bioregion near Lake Champlain that John Elder has made his own. Nature pulses gently, and less cruelly than when whole populations were swept away. The crickets about the house chirr and the flowers in the garden bloom. Vermont, like many other American states, is part of a larger bio-system where one may enjoy that magic moment when, as John Elder views it, "we'll hear a distant calling and rush out into our driveway to watch flotillas of snow geese and Canada geese oaring southward with the turning year"[RMH 237]. The sense of flux is inebriating and much needed to bring gusto to John Elder's vision of the American dream. The American farmer may be far distant in the recesses of long-forgotten history, the idea of America as a home abides a significantly peaceful one which brings forth optimism of a moderate, yet reliable, sort.

John Elder's ambition in his book is therefore challenging to environmental thinking as a whole, and to nature writing, if we take it to be a more

specialized genre trying to define itself, as most genres will do, and probably have done on a constant basis. John Elder also strengthens tradition. The strong heritage of Transcendentalism had gone West, and Elder brings it back home where it originally belonged. New England renews the possibilities of interpretation for land-use: it is made up of territories which are smaller in size, although immense in the epistemology of space that may be drawn from them. Being one world of more restricted proportions, it is one world where land and populations have had to cooperate; being an older world than the West, it is a world where land and humans have long been brought together, and the land has always been a fit abode for populations. The West is dry, and, as Wallace Stegner has pointed out, water is a commodity that has shaped response to territory,<sup>22</sup> inviting one to view low occupation of the land as necessary. John Elder, by focusing on the East, moves with ease towards the conclusion that nature writing may sometimes spurn, especially if it centers on the wilderness areas of the West. Elder's ultimate lesson, which challenges current assumptions about territory, is that territory is made for us, though we must of course use it wisely. "We need to see the land with a less acquisitive frame of mind. We need to sojourn in it again, to discover the lineaments of cooperation with it;"<sup>23</sup> such is the late twentieth-century realization of the environmentalist writer Barry Lopez, who happens to be a Westerner. Like him, John Elder insists on the necessity of a cooperation between humans and the *oikos* that they must respect; this cooperation is badly needed for the rediscovery of America, opening a new frontier which has to do with epistemology rather than geography, unless geography should be just that, unacknowledged epistemology.

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<sup>22</sup> "Aridity and aridity alone, made the West one," Wallace Stegner writes in *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987) 8.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Lopez, *The Rediscovery of North America* (New York: Random House, 1990) 49.