

Ecopsychology's Wilding

CHRIS ROBERTSON, Re-Vision, London, UK

ABSTRACT *This article follows Nick Totton's focus on "Wild" as paradigmatic for ecopsychology. It re-examines the tension between domestication and wildness that Totton sets out and links the devastation felt at the estrangement from "mother nature" with the experience of shame and loss of reciprocity. In differentiating between pre-conquest wildness that holds homogeneity of values and that of post-conquest groups, a central paradox in ecopsychology is identified as that of our dual nature: that we are both a part of nature and apart from nature. In complement to Totton's qualities epitomised by "Wild Mind", the Trickster is seen as a vital source of imaginative power with which to face the demonic presence of collective destruction. With an ecopsychology perspective, a parallel is drawn between the dilemmas of individual therapy and the collective challenge of potential species extinction, suggesting a reciprocal affinity with the more-than-human. Finally, the article notes the difficulties inherent in creating alternative discourses while also looking to be published. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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ECOPSYCHOLOGY'S WILDING

Nature is what has a sense without this sense being posited by thought. (Merleau-Ponty, 1988, p. 19)

A friend, Tony, and I were at the traffic lights when a young man pulled up beside us. Tony, looked at the young driver with a fierce eye and revved the car engine, pulling the young man into the expectation of a competitive race. Tension rose as the lights went amber; then, at that critical moment, Tony smiled and waved him forward.

Childish game or Trickster playfulness? Probably both, but, in any case, a good example of Tony's facility to dance on the edge. He had a certain feral potency, which often took us in strange directions. It was not so much that he was a model for my rebellious spirit, but that his thinking and behaviour often challenged me with my own conditioned socialisation. I was confronted with my domestication. He claimed that having left school at ten was what gave him the edge and suggested that I might do better in prison than studying at university.

Correspondence to: C. Robertson, Re-Vision, London, UK.
E-mail: chrisrobertson@re-vision.org.uk

In Nick Totton's brilliant, thoughtful and passionate book, *Wild Therapy* (Totton, 2011a), he explores the historical, anthropological, political and psychological background to our present culture's loss of wildness – both internal and external. Rather than trying for an overarching theory for ecopsychology, such as Ken Wilber and his followers attempt to do, Totton has taken the seminal notion of “wildness” and woven different threads together into a subtle and complex web that challenges many cultural assumptions. For psychotherapy to take up even some of these challenges would return it to its radical roots. While calling for a change of heart, he recognises that our present culture is not listening. Elsewhere, he has written (Totton, 2011b):

Most people are deeply traumatised, acutely or sub-critically, personally and/or by inheritance, and live in a society which as a whole is also traumatised; trauma gives rise to dissociation and denial. I trace this trauma to its origins, mythical or otherwise, in what I call the Neolithic bargain, when we exchanged the freedom and wellbeing of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for the combination of protection from other humans and increasingly damaged attachment which goes along with urban existence in patriarchal societies. The structures of domination that this created now reach very deeply into our psyches and bodies; in viral fashion, they seek to take over and control every new social formation that arises. As we are currently experiencing, they make it enormously hard for us to free our attention to deal with the environmental crises we face. (p. 13)

One of the major themes Totton has developed is how this “Neolithic bargain” of exchanging freedom for safety led to domestication, not only of other species but also of ourselves. This is a complex issue. For instance, Paul Shepard (1996, 2004) is a severe critic of what we have done to domestic animals but considers that humans, as a dominant species, are genetically wild but tame: “Our tameness, not our domestication, makes us at home in domestic landscapes” (Shepard, 2004, p. 132).

Nick Totton deals subtly with this complexity, avoiding the polarisation of *wild* and *domesticated*. I aim to explore more about their interrelationship in this article.

DOMESTICATION

Even the knowing animals are aware that we are not really at home in our interpreted world. (Maria Rainer Rilke, *First Duino Elegy*, cited in Totton, 2011, p. 51)

While acknowledging that domestication has enriched our lives in the process of civilisation, Totton uses anthropological evidence to show the horrendous trauma of de-wilding for pre-conquest peoples. It may be controversial to claim that indigenous peoples were corrupted by exploitative aggressive colonists, as does Richard Sorenson (1998), but what is more pertinent to this article is what he has called “sociosensual awareness” – a sensitivity to maintain well-being within the community that “spawns an intuitive group rapport and unites people without need for formal rules” (p. 80). This reciprocity both within the community and between the community and the other-than-human surrounding is characteristic of indigenous pre-conquest peoples and is in contrast to the dominating, split-off ego-based culture of the European colonists.

This *sociosensual* awareness is richly attuned to reciprocity but precarious to dissociated reasoning that is intrinsically dominating. Sorenson (1998) wrote:

Any form of subjugation, even those barriers to freedom imposed by private property, are the kiss of death to this type of life. Though durable and self-repairing in isolation, the unconditional open trust this way of life requires shrivels with alarming speed when faced with harsh emotions or coercion. Deceit, hostility, and selfishness when only episodic temporarily benumb intuitive rapport. When such conditions come to stay and no escape is possible, intuitive rapport disintegrates within a brutally disorienting period of existential trauma and anomie. (p. 80)

These rupture stories challenge our domineering, exploitative culture. The trauma of alienation, of being removed from a connected world in which we are embedded, to the estrangement characteristic of our present Western culture is paralleled in small ways in every client story of attachment disorder and abandonment. Nick Totton has noted that such pre-conquest stories are in danger of reproducing the myth of the Fall – that the Neolithic bargain is the primal fault out of which our troubles, if not our punishments, come.

This very danger of reproducing the Eden myth may be indicative. Reading these anthropological accounts I notice the absence of the word “shame”. Nick Totton (2011) has come near in his exploration of “Beyond the pale” – beyond the boundaries of civilised behaviour on to which we project our dissociated animal and bodily objects, i.e. things we find disgusting. Whatever historical sequence led to the rupture of indigenous peoples from sociosensual awareness and losing trust in rituals to mediate with nature, shame seems to accompany this rupture. Sadly, this continues, as in the case of abuse of Aboriginal peoples by Catholic priests in Australia (see Goreng Goreng, 2012). Such shame, along with self-blame, is widely recognised in psychotherapy as the inevitable consequence of trauma and abuse. The devastation felt at the estrangement from “mother nature” may have led to buying into the denigratory rhetoric and status claims of the dominators. The new alienated state feels like a punishment for our “badness” – nakedness, neediness, and helplessness and, paradoxically, self-blame gives the illusion of control.

While the Genesis story has, as Jerome Bernstein (2005) has pointed out, much to answer for in terms of perpetrating the fallacy of humans as superior/other to animals over which we have dominion, it defines shame as accompanying the awakening to self-knowledge. The portrayal of this shame is based on the Christian idea of “original sin”, which leads to temptation, disobedience and banishment.

The story is, however, open to being deconstructed, as, for instance, Elaine Pagels (1979) has done. We can recast the serpent as a Trickster who holds the poles of creativity and destruction, the underworld potency and cunning together with the upper world knowledge and power. According to Genesis, the serpent tricks poor Eve into eating the fruit of knowledge and perhaps tricks Jehovah into banishing the humans. By being cursed and shunned, the serpent avoids domestication. There are snake charmers and shops that sell snakes, but they are the exception. Snakes have managed to remain wild and undomesticated both literally and in our imagination as elemental beings that have their own potency independent of humans.

Shame can also accompany an existential awakening and taking of responsibility for self-betrayal. It is worth distinguishing neurotic shame based on external dominance from shame based on betrayal of kinship and authentic relating. The interesting thing about Tony, mentioned at the start of this article, is that although sensitive to relational reciprocity, he was seldom ashamed and never in relation to breaking taboos. This provocative refusal to be embarrassed is very much the character of Tricksters. Coyote, the Trickster of the North American Indians, rather than calling on sacred spirits when he is in danger, calls on his talking excrement that tells him what to do (Waddell, 2010). The elemental potency of the Trickster is untamed. As Kalsched (1996) put it:

The trickster is ideally suited to be an agent of transformation because he/she carries both sides of a split in the psyche. The trickster is evil and good, loving and hateful, male and female, and thus holds the opposites together while also keeping them differentiated. Shape shifting at will he/she is the transformer who also gets transformed. (p. 189)

I would suggest that to reclaim something of our species wildness, we need support from Tricksters. Nick Totton has acknowledged the importance of the Trickster mode of discourse, especially in relation to paradox and absurdity, in his introduction to *Wild Therapy* (Totton, 2011a). Naïve responses to unconscious processes in therapy lead to impotence. Facing into unconscious complexes that may personify as dominating demons that supposedly keep us safe while forbidding any creative movement calls for the imaginative inventiveness of deception. Tricksters are liminal characters.

At these edgy, liminal spaces it is no good relying on what we know, let alone our good intentions to help – something has to come outside the known, outside of the therapeutic safe container. Similarly, Western culture and possibly our species culture seem to be heading for a similar impasse where the old solutions are increasingly proving untenable. For instance, through isolating ourselves in germ-free “safe” bubbles, we have de-potentiated our own immune systems and are reliant on medical antibiotics to keep the “unseen” enemy at bay. Yesterday’s medical triumphs, like the repressed, are coming back to haunt us in the form of superbugs that are resistant to known antibiotics and are far more deadly to humans and other species than the original bacteria.

One of the consequences of domestication is that human animals, like those we have domesticated, cannot feed and sustain themselves independently. We have lost the keen awareness of environmental possibilities that allow a species to survive in the wild. As the other-than-human prove increasingly uncontrollable and our lifestyle unsustainable, we will need to reclaim this sharp awareness. Attempting to return to pre-conquest consciousness, as Nick Totton (2011a) has pointed out, is impossible. Even if it were possible, it might well be a dead end as pre-conquest peoples had their own precarious evolutionary niche. As the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974/1983) pointed out, the emphasis in tribal liminality is on anonymity and normative *communitas*:

In tribal societies, due to the general overriding homogeneity of values, behavior, and social structural rules, this instant can be fairly easily contained or dominated by social structure, held in check from innovative excess, “hedged about,” as anthropologists delight to say, by “taboos,” “checks and balances,” and so on. Thus, the tribal liminal, however exotic in appearance, can never be much more than a subversive flicker. It is put into the service of normativeness almost as soon as it appears. (p. 75)

WILDNESS

This normative, stable wildness is distinct from what we might call “post-conquest wildness”, in which liminal spaces open up transformational potentials normally disallowed in everyday consciousness, for example, in those individuals facing a mid-life initiation whose “colonising” egos are secure enough to face the loss of their known world and risk crossing this uncertain and often confusing existential threshold. Turner (1983) again talked of this marginal “limen” that lies in between past and future:

There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance . . . For me, such relatively “late” social processes, historically speaking, as “revolution,” “insurrection,” and even “romanticism” in art, characterized by freedom in form and spirit, by emphasis on feeling and originality, represent an

inversion of the relation between the normative and the liminal in “tribal” and other essentially conservative societies. For in these modern processes movements, the seeds of cultural transformation, discontent with the way things culturally are, and social criticism (always implicit in the pre-industrially liminal), have become situationally central. (p. 75)

Liminal states, *where everything trembles in balance*, like water on the edge of boiling, bring high degrees of anxiety because they are essentially unknowable and uncontrollable. It is this very vulnerability that makes them potentially creative and transformative, which is why they have been used in rites of passage and initiation rituals. What I am suggesting here, as elsewhere (see Robertson, 2012), is that cultural insurrection in post-conquest societies begins at the liminal margins where the controlling hold of the central authority is weak; cf. the Arab Spring. While Winnicott (1953) talked of cultural transformation happening at transitional spaces, Laing (1967) described them as bridgeheads out of a depersonalised world:

They are bridgeheads into alien territory. They are acts of insurrection. Their source is from the Silence at the centre of each of us. Wherever and whenever such a whorl of patterned sound or space is established in the external world, the power that it contains generates new lines of forces whose effects are felt for centuries. (p. 37)

These new lines of force are not what we expect or know. They are transformatory “nova” – new scintillations in consciousness – with the potential for a radical integration. In opening new lines of cultural transformation post-conquest wildness needs to include our species move to domestication, rather than polarising and reversing the split. But how do we integrate wildness and domestication?

In his book, Nick Totton (2011a) listed six properties of wild mind, namely that it is: embodied, animal, spontaneous, co-creative, self-balancing, and inherently wise. This is a great list (as lists go) but misses the crazy, foolish, unbalanced, risky, provocative wilding that accompanies that edge. These latter Trickster qualities are often sleights of mind, magical deceptions, for wildness is not a state of disorder, but a condition whose *order is not imposed from outside*.

This seems to me to lie at the heart of ecopsychology and to hold one of its deep dilemmas: the paradox of our dual nature that we are a part of nature and apart from nature or, rather, that we act as if we are apart from nature. It is as if there is something in our human nature that separates us, that alienates us. If pre-conquest peoples have an innocence that supports a rapport with their natural surroundings, then it is as if post-conquest people inherits their Shadow and unconsciously act it out. This could be another way of thinking about the myth of the Fall: that on the journey of human evolution, we need to come to terms with our dark, destructive aspects before we can re-integrate this split in our nature.

During the ecopsychology courses we have held at Re-Vision (www.re-vision.org.uk), the most challenging aspect (of many) has been that of facing into our destructiveness as a species – not as a concept but as a lived experience. Such explorations have led to confusion, depression, withdrawal and despair. While this may be in part due to the delivery of the workshop, it may also be due to its archetypal nature and the symptoms correspond well to psychotherapy work with the Shadow. The challenge for the therapist–client couple is to integrate creative and destructive polarities through facing Shadow issues such as seduction, envious attack and negative transference. The challenge for ecopsychologists is to engage with this on a cultural level.

It has been suggested, for instance, by Sardello (1995) that the dropping of the atomic bomb created a deep trauma and alienation for humankind. The bomb certainly personified our destructive capacity but, following Nick Totton's (2011b) concept of the "Neolithic bargain", I suggest that this is as much a re-traumatisation in facing into our archetypal Shadow. In *Dreaming the End of the World* Michael Hill (2005) has worked with this complex directly. He explored apocalyptic dreams of atomic destruction as a root expression of the conquest of nature and the progressive split between civilisation and wilderness. The bomb itself is not the cause but a personification of our dark Shadow. He considered that the challenge is to descend into our dreams of apocalypse and accept rather than interpreting them as a *literal* apocalypse.

Collective dreams, as shown up in social dreaming matrixes, may now contain fewer dreams of the bomb but regularly reveal other apocalyptic dreams, especially of environmental disaster. The challenge is still to recognise this as our own – not our personal psyche but of collective psyche. It is not an easy task as it means facing our collective toxic projections. As Laing (1967) said:

We are not able even to think adequately about the behaviour that is at the annihilating edge. But what we think is less than what we know: what we know is less than what we love: what we love is so much less than what there is. (p. 26)

From an ecosystemic perspective this is a transformational threshold. That the human species acts out destructively is evidence that we have not come to terms with this side of our psyche, let alone accepted it. The denial of man-made ecological destruction (ecocide) is a direct parallel with the denial of our collective Shadow. The denial leaves this power as demonic.

It is unhelpful to think of destructiveness as a human aberration or cancer. Its cancerous qualities come in splitting it off onto the "wild". The ensuing collective denial becomes a cultural issue not a personal one. Collective Shadow, unlike its personal counterpart, cannot be "owned". Facing it may feel like the end of the world, a bottomless pit of shame and torture that is overwhelming and deeply humbling. This terrifying descent, like facing into actual cancer, may be survived through love – but even that love, as Laing pointed out, *is so much less than what there is*.

In complex systems it is often the point of rupture that offers the possibility of healing. Nick Totton has suggested that our disconnection from the other-than-human worlds has been pivotal. Perhaps this very point of rupture offers new possibilities of intimacy with the other-than-human; not, as Mary-Jayne Rust (2012) has pointed out, that this is easy or quick: "For those in positions of power-over, this involves unbearable guilt for the damage inflicted, as well as humiliation. This psychological work takes generations, and it sheds some light on the difficulties in recovering ecological intimacy." (p. 159)

Jerome Bernstein has been researching how some humans have a particular sensitivity to animals that could represent an evolutionary vanguard of proto-human capacities. Reciprocal phenomena from the other-than-human may also be happening. In response to the beautiful and moving story of the "elephant whisperer" (Anthony & Spence, 2011; see *The Delight Makers*, 2012), one participant in a group offered her own accounts of how two horses initiated contact with her. Since being a child she had been frightened of horses. Despite this,

she went into a field next to her home in which these horses lived, to collect wood from a tree brought down in a storm. The two male horses approached her simultaneously, one from the front and the other from behind. Although frightened, she stood still while the horses sniffed her up and down and she told them of her fear. She felt this close exploration by the horses as both tender and healing. The telling of this story evoked a strong resonance in the group eliciting other animal-initiated accounts.

In a similar vein, Nick Totton (2011a) tells other animal stories, including that of Billy Jo the chimp who, despite being the literal victim of human cruelty, shows sensitive empathy to Jane Goodall, the British primatologist, anthropologist and peace activist, in reaching out through his cage to wipe her tears. The central point here is that it is not just up to humans to save the planet. This anthropocentric mistake is part of the problem. It is not so much that “the World” is not listening, rather it is we humans who may not be listening to the more-than-human who are reaching out to us in innumerable ways. As Nick Totton (2011a) has pointed out, without effective predators, humans are cut off from the experience of wild animals being our friends, of our own wildness being a guide.

What is at stake here for us to listen? Echoing what has been referred to as the “relational turn” in psychotherapy, Kari Weil (2012) has suggested that the “animal turn” requires us to relinquish the privileging of our language capacity. She cited Kafka’s story of Red Peter, the captured and educated ape, who becomes able to converse like an “average European” but, when asked to report on his previous life as an ape, is unable to remember anything. His assimilation has effectively destroyed his ape self. Human language certainly drew on animal sounds (Shepard, 1996), and David Abrams (2010) has suggested that it evolved out of tracking – just as dogs might read a trail of scent, so we follow the marks (or tracks) on a page. While we cannot un-domesticate, we could loosen our attachments to comforts that tame us, and make a post-domestic move to the recognition of inhabiting one of many language-worlds. This would free us to re-cognise our co-evolution with other species and, without erasing our significant differences, move to mutual engagement and learning with the other-than-human.

REFLECTIONS

The fish will be the last animal to discover water. (Sufi saying)

In *Animals Erased*, Arran Stibbe (2012) has warned how the self-referencing of modern discourse has marginalised or even eradicated animal from our experience – even in such supposedly pro-animal narratives as that of animal liberation and animal rights. In this pause, I want to reflect on my own language in this article. Where does the story that I have been telling about “wilding” fit? Is it part of the problem, belonging to the dominant discourse that abstracts experience and reinforces domestication, or does it offer different ways of thinking and relating to “wilding” both within ourselves and with the other-than-human?

Even with regard to a radical journal such as *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, there are subtle pressures that come from our conscious and unconscious fantasies and phantasies of peer review and editing – despite the supportive actuality. What sort of writing is felt as desirable for such a journal? While metaphor and story are welcome, other imaginal discourse such as ritual and ancestral dialogues are tricky to re-locate. Does my own professional enculturation pressure me into a conforming discourse or can I reach for the feral

potency personified by Tony? Probably not. I can recognise through my own desire to deepen the discourse, that it has become abstract in parts. It is as if it has slipped away from my relational intention and assimilated itself to the dominant “logos” discourse.

Rather than attempting to “correct” this limitation, I am acknowledging it here and relating it to a wider tension in efforts at cultural insurrection. Frankly, the relational, erotic longing for connection and spontaneous impulses within me are not writing this article! If I pause to include them through internal dialogue with the animal figures that carry these energies for me, they are not that interested. In a similar way, my physical dog waits patiently to re-connect when my attention is more available. As in my psychotherapy practice, when I am waiting for a client’s attention to become freer (less domesticated) so that openings between us can be explored, I feel that the imaginal animals (and my own animal body) are waiting for this opening in our relationship. As the above Sufi saying suggests: we are swimming in a sea of our own domesticating constructs; what would enable us to recognise this and to reconnect?

Jung (1977) made the comment that the ego is the most unconscious part of the person – in that it is unconscious of everything outside its bubble. This is ironic considering the ego considers itself to be the pinnacle of evolutionary self-reflective consciousness. It is usually only deep wounds that shatter the ego’s dominance and reveal the hidden vulnerability of the soul. In working with individuals and groups, it is the risks to our vulnerable wounded selves that open the space, that create that trembling scintillation of alive wildness. The healing journey is in forsaking that superior, dominant ego position that wants to eradicate the embarrassing shameful weakness of this vulnerable part (often personified as a child) and in starting the painful process of accepting its value and accepting this is “me too”.

In a parallel manner, the opening in our tamed post-conquest culture comes when we leave that superior, dominant position and make the move to include the indigenous self that, while old, so often feels young and vulnerable – in this context, in terms of surviving in our present culture without being isolated, shamed, ridiculed and de-potentised. As already explored, this is not a regressive move but an inclusive one that parallels the healing that happens in individual therapy when a client comes to accept the rejected, inferior part of themselves – and then discovers the wisdom from which their dominant ego had separated them.

Like all initiations, such a cultural transition is far from certain and ecocide or suicide has a high probability. While ecopsychologists need to be wary of being assimilated into the dominant narrative, we can avoid isolation by noticing the reciprocal affinity of the other-than-human. We are not the only beings with agency in this world and that shift to recognising our shared participation within the wider web relieves us of this anthropocentric burden. Following a Taoist line, Nick Totton (2011b) has said:

Fortunately, though, things will happen of their own accord, as newly emergent features of the complex web of being, not following any intention or plan. If a new culture is going to come into existence, then it must be already brewing, already cooking in many thousands of places around the planet; slowly assembling itself out of millions of local acts of creativity and resistance. This may not be enough; but we can relax in the knowledge that it will be as good as it is possible for it to be. (p. 14)

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Chris Robertson has been a psychotherapist and trainer since 1978, working in several European countries. His training background includes psychosynthesis, child psychotherapy, family therapy, and archetypal psychology. He contributed the chapter “Dangerous Margins” to the recent ecopsychology anthology *Vital Signs* (Karnac, 2012); he is co-author of *Emotions and Needs* (OUP, 2002), and author of several articles including “The Numinous Psyche” in the *International Journal of Psychotherapy* (2012). He is co-creator of the workshop *Borderlands and the Wisdom of Uncertainty* which, in 1989, became the subject of a BBC documentary. He is a co-founder of and director of training at Re-Vision, an integrative and transpersonal psychotherapy training centre, London, UK, where he is involved in developing ecopsychology.