THREE

WILDERNESS AS PHILOSOPHICAL HOME

Royce offered us work as philosophical wanderers in a wilderness, but he gave little articulation to the nature of that wilderness.[1] I turn now to Henry Bugbee's thoughts on such a wilderness, and I begin by noting that Bugbee was deeply influenced by Gabriel Marcel, who, in turn, was much indebted to the work of Royce.[2] Thus, there is a natural continuity that underlies the discussion at hand. In his essays "Walking" and "Wild Apples," Henry Thoreau spoke of wilderness as a metaphorical expression of the inner wildness necessary for us to overcome the deadening effects of overcivilization. He also took time to show that actual wilderness worked as an important condition or catalyst for setting this wildness free. Bugbee takes up both of these themes of wilderness and moves a step further. Rethinking philosophy from the heavily analytic cast that dominated its practice in the 1950s, he suggests that thinking is about finding our way in a literal wilderness of being; he provides existential purchase to Royce's conception of philosophy as wandering. George Williams

provides a view of the breadth and depth of Bugbee's conception of wilderness: "The wilderness for Bugbee is at once the world without and within perceived no longer as wasteland but as reality beheld contemplatively as 'our true home'; as 'that world of every day,' experienced in faith."[3] In wilderness we are never fully lost nor fully arrived. Wilderness is in fact where we always find ourselves and where we are inevitably in the process of finding ourselves. Put another way, we find ourselves—our meanings—through localized expression and orientation but always against a backdrop of wilderness unexplored, indeterminate, and untamed. Bugbee sees human philosophical activity as an ongoing experiment to make ourselves at home in this wilderness. This requires of us an explorer's attitude, an attitude of finding, creating, and risking—an openness to possibility within our awareness of our precarious human situation. What this explorer's attitude does, is allow us to reorient our relationship to and understanding of things, to revise our modes of acting in the world, and to find and create meanings in our worlds that otherwise might escape us.

In his *The Inward Morning,* which he subtitles *A Philosophical Exploration*, Bugbee notes a recurrent experience that faces all philosophical inquirers: "The world as I take it reflectively and the world as I muddle through it then seem excruciatingly worlds apart. Does one write such philosophy out of compensation for his inadequacy?"[4] This existential disorientation reveals that forms of alienation and lostness pervade our wilderness experience and demand our patience. Simply willing ourselves forward does not suffice to make us feel at home in the world. "In our discursive thought," Bugbee observed, "we are imbued with the condition of exile, which involves some measure of sensitivity to our homelessness."[5] For Bugbee, to note our exile and homelessness is to make an explicit claim about the wilderness of being he believes we inhabit. But it is also, in the very inadequacy of our speaking, to disclose wilderness in its immediacy. This is important just to the extent that we are able to find our meaning here in our homelessness. For Bugbee this is a performable task, but one that, as John Anderson notes, requires a particular outlook, atti-

tude, or orientation: "Only the hunters and trappers on the long hunt," Anderson says, "could penetrate the wilderness and dare the unknown, for only they could discover and hold to a human meaning on the frontier."[6] As philosophers, we can try to dominate being, whip the world into shape, and come out with a clean version of just how things are. Or we can, in the manner of contemporary skeptics of all varieties, simply abandon our concern for how things are. Or we may live with Bugbee between these particular extremes: "We may open ourselves to the meaning of a *life in the wilderness* and await with patience the founding of that assurance which may overtake us in the course of our wanderings and make us at home in this condition."[7]

Bugbee's own thought in *The Inward Morning* exhibits a version of the explorer's attitude as it moves back and forth between rooted, everyday places in which we are settled and the philosophical and existential thickets where things are less clear. Scanning coffee shops, school yards, Western rivers, and ships' cabins, and explicating the insights of Meister Eckhardt and Spinoza and the blindnesses of Sartre and John Dewey, Bugbee has a knack for keeping us attentive to experience regardless of where we wander philosophically. He asks how we can give expression to our life in the wilderness—how we can express our feelings of exile without abandoning purpose and hope. Where is it, he asks, that our reflection finds a path or highway on which to work—a path or highway not so entirely remote from our actual experiences that it becomes merely our profession: "The life we lead and the philosophy we believe in our hearts," Bugbee says, "cannot be independent of one another."[8] Bugbee does not build a philosophical system or world on the ground of some specific determinate belief such that we are bound to feel secure. But he also does not abandon philosophy's power for establishing a feeling of being at home. He builds the themes of his reflections as if he were building a campsite in a wild setting—from what is at hand, what is responsive, and what is useful in a philosophical way. As his journal progresses, his themes get roughed out not as if by blueprint, but as if by artful discovery of where they belong. Bugbee explores the possibilities of

three features of experience for enabling us to adapt to our ongoing present and to find a way in our wilderness condition: things, action, and meaning. In so doing, he suggests ways in which a philosophical life might proceed.

Things

Bugbee begins with a radical and realistic empiricism of the ordinary that is Jamesian in flavor. As philosophers, as professionals, as consumers and constructors, we have become so used to reducing "things" to some common feature—matter, mind, utility—that we tend to forget the things themselves. James suggests that things are "gifts" of our experience; this seems an apt expression for Bugbee's aims. Through our reductive behaviors we make things as we wish them to be, we give them *our* perspective and *our* purpose. This is indeed a powerful and seductive way of treating things, a way of bringing them under our control. Through the powers of language and imagination, we make our "worlds" of things. This method of manipulating experience is not lost on contemporary thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson, who see language as the constructor and the material of this world and all worlds. But Bugbee notes that such dominance on our part ignores the residual resistance and independence of things, what Charles Peirce called their "secondness" or, borrowing from medieval thought, their "haecceity." For Bugbee, however much we succeed in controlling things through reductive strategies, if we remain blind to their haecceity, we will fail to be fully at home with them. In Thoreau's way of putting it, we will "own" them, but they won't be our own. For things to become our own in Thoreau's sense of communal interaction, we require another sort of orientation toward things. The explorer's or adventurer's attitude remains alert to the otherness of things; it demands what Dan Conway aptly calls "patiency."[9] As Anderson notes, it was an incapacity for this attitude that made Columbus a poor explorer and fostered his ultimate failure in the midst of his apparent success: "For his inability to see anything except what his hopes and aspirations sug-

gested to him, in his inability to see the West Indies while he searched for the East Indies, Columbus typifies Western man."[10] Columbus missed the "secondness," the otherness, of the "new world."

Avoiding the blindness of subjective reduction does not, however, translate into a calculative objectivism. Bugbee resisted both idealism and naturalism: idealism because it leaves "things" out of account and naturalism because it leaves us in a world devoid of meaning. "If either theory were true," he suggests, "the upshot would be the same: Man is left to himself, sovereign over a world of things vacuous in themselves. Neither theory seems to do justice to things as radically unknown; in neither is the dense presence of things preserved in thought."[11] For Bugbee, things both share and constitute our wilderness, and they are among the conditions of our feeling at home. For him, things are at once immediate and meaningful, as well as dense and elusive. We know them in only a limited way when we use them; we must also let them begin to speak for themselves. And even then there is a residual mystery that will call us back for further encounters; no finite experience will exhaust the possible, transactional meanings of things. Cézanne did not merely repeat paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire; the mountain itself called forth new and different paintings. Certain things in experience demand our attention and call for naming or poetic accounts: mountains, artworks, storms, and sunsets. Bugbee would have us become more democratic in attending to things; he reminds us to notice and appreciate the feel of a diner, the quiet of a local swamp, or the smell of coffee at sea. We must come to accept things as they are for themselves and for us: "Things exist in their own right; it is a lesson that escapes us except as they hold us in awe. Except we stand on the threshold of the wilderness, knowingly, how can our position be true, how can essential truth be enacted in our hearts?"[12] This acceptance underwrites Bugbee's ongoing sense that we are to be in league with things—that we "receive the gift of all existent things: coexistence in communion."[13] We live in wilderness with things, and their residual wildness both demands our respect and attention and resists any complete "knowing" on our part.

Bugbee's own experience tells him that the adventurer's attitude, and not the attitude of the reductive idealist or naturalist, will lead us in the direction of the meanings of things. And, as do William James and Thoreau, he tries to awaken us to this attitude directly through descriptions and dramatizations of experiences that bear its mark. On various occasions he points to our transactions with nature and the powers of natural phenomena: "One may," he says, "be struck clean by sunlight over a patch of lawn, by clouds running free before the wind, by the massive presence of rock."[14] But such an encounter is not merely passive. We must involve ourselves with the things we encounter—we must *act*. As David Strong puts it: "Things, existents stand forth. But they do not stand forth except as we ourselves stand forth with them, both independently and in union with them."[15]

Action

We, like Columbus, may be exiled from things; this may be a result of arrogance, ignorance, or indifference, though most often it is a result merely of our habitual taking of things for granted. To the extent that we are not exiled, things may begin to describe a home for us—a place in which we might act. But it is "action" not merely as "doing things" or the pragmatic "fixing things" or "solving problems," but as the site of meaning's acquisition and expression. As Conway points out, Bugbee wishes to avoid the "voluntaristic conceit of so much contemporary philosophy."[16] For Bugbee, action is marked more by one's attitude than by any surface appearance of hurry and flurry. As Strong suggests, *The Inward Morning* "concerns the basic attitude and standpoint from which we act in our situation and from which we approach things, an attitude to which we are recalled by certain texts and by the things of the natural world itself."[17] This is especially important to Bugbee's discussions of our acquiring meaning from things, for then we must learn to "be still," to "leave things be," to attend to the instruction of things. "By 'leaving things be' I do not mean inaction," Bugbee says. "I mean respecting things, being still in the presence of things, letting them speak."[18] Anyone—hunter, an-

gler, or photographer—who has waited for something to put in an appearance knows the experiential force of Bugbee's remark. He captures it cleanly in his description of swamping: "I can remember the shivering cold. But there was no mistake about the gladness of being in the swamp or the immanence of the wilderness there."[19] This act of "awaiting" and attending is an important feature of the explorer's attitude in the wilderness. Moreover, it is something we tend to learn well in a wilderness setting. Speaking of both Thoreau and Bugbee, Conway puts it this way: "Whereas the guiding aims of civil society require us to act, to form, to impress our stamp onto things, Nature teaches us to wait, to observe, to receive things as they present themselves to us in their reclusive reality."[20] Such reception is an important, perhaps the most important, mode of action for an explorer. It is the action that underwrites the authenticity of other actions and allows us to experience the otherness of things.

Repeatedly in *The Inward Morning* Bugbee seeks ways to awaken his reader to this explorer's attitude as it involves action. One of the most memorable is his description of his rowing coach, John Schultz. Schultz understood—experientially *knew*—the *community* of rowers, boats, oars, and water. He felt the integrity of a well-rowed boat; he sensed the absence of community of a poorly rowed boat. And he found ways to bring his rowers to this same appreciation: "He was the awakener. John Schultz, he was—rigger of shells and coach of sculling."[21] What Schultz awakened his rowers to was their complicity with things in the world—the absence of essential separation between themselves, the tools of rowing, and the water. Only when the rowers were acting in concert with the things around them would the full meaning of rowing appear, only then would Schultz acknowledge that they were "rowing." They were moments of neither domination nor mere passivity, but moments of integral action. "It was as if rowing had a kind of ground–bass [down-to-earth] meaning for him which underlay the constancy of his concern and seemed to him to demand relevance from the oarsmen in each and every stroke.—And so he momently expected each one of us to wake up on the end of an oar. This infinite expectation of dawn often made him seem very

unreasonable."[22] We think of Thoreau, from whom "the infinite expectation of dawn" is borrowed, as likewise being unreasonably demanding. They both ask that we do something in the world as if we were alive and interested, and not as a matter of the course of things. Put another way, only insofar as our act *is* alive and interested can it *truly* become a matter of the course of things.

Thus John Schultz exemplifies for Henry Bugbee the importance of our community with things and the attitude required to find this community and be at home as we act in it. Schultz, like Thoreau, presents us with a demand for action. In "Civil Disobedience" and elsewhere, Thoreau calls on us to commit to a possible future and to act on it immediately. Schultz demands that his rowers learn to act with their immediate world. These are very difficult demands. Note how short-lived are our commitments to and energies for essential human development. It is always too easy to fall back into a life of passivity or of apparent action, where we "act," but more like automata than persons. We are in the habit of finding ways to dismiss, ridicule, or ignore the call to action. We tend to live neither resolutely nor deliberately; we tend to skate through life on paths that yield the least resistance to our personal comfort. What Bugbee does is to show us, again and again in simple examples, the importance for our lives of this demand for action. He shows us the transfixed state of two youths building a dam in a small stream; he shows us the silent, efficient concert of men at work on a ship in war; he provides a close-up of a brush with death in white water. He has seen commitment in action and patiently writes so that we might share his vision or recognize our own: "I think of men whom I have watched while they were lost in a scrupulous endeavor, as in holding a small ship to a course in a difficult sea."[23] As readers, we develop an awareness of his own developing sense of the meaning of things in action, and we may become convinced of his judgment both through our own related experiences and through the power of his examples. His remembrance of a trip down the Rogue River in the hands of a Native American boatman is exemplary of this power:

> Even though he steered standing, there were quite a few drops which precluded a perspective of what lay below until you were over and into the run. In general, you might say, he had to be steeped in the river, constantly alive to it in its ever unfolding. . . . As the Indian boatman stood there in steady communion with the flowing river over mile and mile of deeply remembered bottom, as the full-throated engines sang along the river bars and through the pine-forested valley, as we labored up in the teeth of the constantly opposing current and then turned back down with it into the accelerated decisions of descent, the lasting impression was built into me that without a reasonableness instant with faith, this thing could not be done. I can feel that Indian standing there handling the boat aright. And to this day, from some fifteen years ago, this man has seemed to define the condition of man as it should be, and as it should be understood.[24]

We see Bugbee's adventurer's attitude shift our focus from the specific outcomes of agency to its very enactment. Action, however useful, is not merely a pragmatic tool in Bugbee's hands. Rather, action—alive, awakened endeavor—engenders meaning. It both discloses the meanings of things and expresses and publicizes our human meaning. Life in an awakened state in the wilderness is an ongoing experiment in meanings. Bugbee's is the sort of "mysticism" written of earlier in the twentieth century by W. E. Hocking, and underwritten by his reading of Meister Eckhardt, which is completely engaged and committed. It is not an accident of the universe but an achievement of being in the world: "If there is satisfaction involved in these experiences," he says, "it is satisfaction of the demand to be and act consonantly with the felt universe."[25] Yet it is not an achievement in the sense that a completion of something finite occurs; it is not a mechanical activity measured by a formula of life. It is simply an awakening to our community with things and the meanings to be found on the highway in our engagements with them. "No man arrives," says Bugbee, "decision cannot be boiled down to informed choice. The frontier on which each one of us commits himself in action, is an incorrigible feature of the situation of a man who acts."[26] One's active learning from, with, and through things changes one's

life—our actions then reveal the touch of our instruction. These are actions in whole—body, soul, being. When John Schultz says, "Boy, you was rowing!" he has seen a difference in an action, a moment in which "co-existent community" is awakened in the world. He has seen meaning disclosed and created in an action through community. So, too, of the boys building a dam, of young men steering a ship at night, of the Native American boatman, and of Bugbee's own walking. In our actions with things, meanings appear, as they do in poetry, that cannot be precipitated into a complete, discursive account. "That which illuminates our labors," Bugbee says, "in reflection as in other channels of endeavor, that which decisively empowers us in the deed, comes as an unanticipated precipitation of meaning."[27]

Meaning

To act with things is, for Bugbee, the most basic—that is, the most down-to-earth—human endeavor; it is a fundamentally philosophical endeavor to find meaning in our lives and world. But it is neither the acquisition of an aggregate of facts nor the adoption of a calculative, self-correcting method. "Philosophy," Bugbee intimates, "is not a making of a home for the mind out of reality. It is more like learning to leave things be: restoration in the wilderness, here and now."[28] Bugbee thus thinks of Dewey's concern over the quest for certainty as something like an interesting mistake. For him, philosophical query has in only a few instances been a quest for deductive certainty or scientific verification. But it has always been, in all its guises, a quest for meaning in our worlds. "I freely admit, "he says, "to reading the history of philosophy philosophically, and differently from those who think of philosophy either as a forerunner or as a construction of systematic knowledge about reality on a footing with the yield of scientific investigation."[29] He agrees with Dewey that we must seek out meaning. But he does not share Dewey's confidence in the scientific attitude; he does not believe meaning is generated merely through technical solutions and logical and genealogical analyses. That is, the important clarity of meaning is "felt" and is not produced by the

sieve-like clarifying activity of analysis or scientistic reduction. For Bugbee, as for Thoreau, to live as awake is to philosophize; it is to act with an attitude that allows for the "appreciation of the possibilities of meaning" as we listen to "things saying themselves."[30]

The meaning we seek and create is not analytical clarity, but rather a felt clarity that dawns on us as we act in the world. The futility written across the entire history of analytic philosophy is found in this confusion of austerity with clarity. It is as if an army of engineers had been sent to, in William James's phrase, "clean up the litter" in philosophical meaning, and in so doing left us with nothing—no meaning, no philosophy. "Clarity" of this sort is a barrenness, a "false clarity" whose "tough-mindedness and hardheadedness conceal a refusal . . . to accommodate reflectively the gift of the world in the experience of things."[31] The felt clarity we seek is found only in our active openness to this "gift of the world." It is disclosed to us in and with things, in our communal actions.

Meaning is what gives us bearings in each level of wilderness we face: our inner wildness, the natural wilderness, and the wilderness of being. It provides a working stability for the adventurer's attitude. Though it avoids the sterility of analytical clarity and closure, it does not bequeath to us a mere lostness. Acknowledging our lostness brings us to the brink of recognizing our wilderness condition, but accepting lostness as the fundamental human condition—the cynic's conclusion—prevents us from seeing what stares us in the face. "We may speak poignantly," Bugbee says, "of the experience of being lost while we are lost; but we cannot be clear about ourselves and our situation insofar as our thinking is dominated by that experience. Disillusionment with the world knows nothing of the sacrament of coexistence."[32]

Here is the locus of Bugbee's dissent from the existentialists. They came to recognize our wilderness condition, but in doing so mistook it, on many occasions, for absolute alienation. Bugbee suggested that his approach be dubbed "experientialism" to distinguish it from the existentialists' version of the cynical outlook. "The question," he maintains, "is whether we can rejoice with things, or whether we find

them simply inane. Sartre finds them inane, absurd."[33] From such an outlook, action itself becomes rudderless and must always be traced to inane and arbitrary origins and ends. Bugbee did not find himself or humanity so completely lost and adrift.

Bugbee's turn sees our wilderness condition not as a dead end but as an opening; it calls us out of our mechanical existence and draws us toward our possibilities. It offers another sort of instruction than does absolute and unredeemable alienation. Reality encountered "as a wilderness," as Thoreau suggested repeatedly in *Walden* and "Walking," provides opportunity for us to find meaning in acting with things: "Through it I find my vocation, for the wilderness is reality experienced as call and explained in responding to it absolutely."[34] Nor is such learning narrowly instrumental or intellectual—it is an instruction of a whole life. "Not merely in verbal response," Bugbee believes, "but in all our doing there seems to be this aspect of learning to make answer and of groping for articulation which may thread us on a central strand of meaning capable of bearing the weight of all the disparate moments of our lives."[35] For this we must pack along our humor, our caring, our interest, our commitment, and our patience. Still, we are actors; we will not experience the gift of things in a stupor, but only when we are awake and alive, only when in an adventurer's attitude.

Conclusion

It is just here, where things, action, and meaning stand together, that Bugbee attends to the possible importance of our actual wildernesses. In our wandering after meaning, wilderness stands forth for us and instructs those with an attitude of "unconditional concern."[36] In his essay "Wilderness in America," Bugbee approaches something like a political statement concerning the importance of American wilderness: "If wilderness may yet speak to us and place us as respondents in the ambience of respect for the order of Nature as primordial, it must be liberated from ultimate subsumption to human enterprise."[37] This is not merely an appeal to an aesthetic interest. Rather,

Bugbee raises the question of the essentiality of actual wilderness as a catalyst to wonder, as a reminder of our lostness, and as a place of encounter with our possibilities. Wilderness is a condition of maintaining our humanity.

Bugbee's claim derives first from his own experience of learning from the wilderness of British Columbia—for him a sacred if not a religious experience. "And it was there," he recalls, "in attending to this wilderness, with unremitting alertness and attentiveness, yes, even as I slept, that I knew myself to have been instructed for life, though I was at a loss to say what instruction I had received."[38] Like Thoreau, Bugbee does not think of his experience as mystical, ineffable, and special in the sense that it is "discontinuous with daily life"; rather, it is a steadfast and simple experience of the everyday that we have a tendency to hide from ourselves. We tend to neglect and ignore the meaning of our being. We seem to fear and to turn our backs on attending, acting, and being. Other things seem more important than learning to be at home in the wilderness—we aim to get our eighty years in, but we aren't sure if we are living or doing time. For Bugbee, ours is a philosophical problem of denial and unreceptiveness, not of fundamental inability: "When we proclaim things as naught, do we not utter the word of a stricken soul, do we not bespeak our own incapacity to receive the ultimate gift from things, of themselves, in their infinite meaning?"[39]

Wilderness—the actual wilderness of forests and deserts—then, is an exemplary site for the finding and creating of meaning; it is where things are most easily left to themselves; it encourages our listening and being still in community with things: "If its instruction goes deep its implications are lifelong."[40] When wilderness is supplanted by and overcome with technical apparatus, when we "garden" it, we tend to seek meaning in technical fashion as well—we revert to the "processing" of meaning. This "processing of meaning has tended to supplant responsibility for meaning, and human communication has become a problem to which techniques of solution are sought."[41] If oil is expensive, we'll either draw on our reserves or open the land to exploration. Even such human endeavors as teaching, learning, and thinking

become *problems* seeking technical solutions—we no longer stop to consider the actual *being* of good teachers and learners. We try—mostly ineffectively—to *produce* teaching and learning. But these are not the sorts of things one produces—teaching and learning are found in life's transitions, in the agency of a fundamental alertness, awareness, and attentiveness. We need only ask the good teachers; like good chefs, they carry no cookbooks and follow no recipes. We become caricatures of "men," who, as many traditional women's magazines attest, when asked to consider any feature of experience, treat it thoughtlessly as something to "be fixed."

Bugbee, however, does not leave wilderness as he finds it in this political space of the early twenty-first century. He is not merely an environmentalist. In a way he slips beyond even the cry of deep ecology. The importance of wilderness is an everyday affair. As he notes of American Indian life: "The dialectical interplay between such wilderness placement and the mainstream placement of everyday life was implicitly appreciated as something fundamental and not to be intruded upon by other members of the community."[42] Like John Anderson, he thinks of wilderness more generally as our "unknown land." The very wilderness that instructs us through our communion with things leads us to consider this world of things and thinking—all of it—a wilderness. Thus, to abandon our actual wilderness may be to commit a suicide of meaning: "That would seem to depend on each one, who must determine in his heart whether he will be party to claiming ownership of life, thus to remain the slave of consumption, rigidified in the conflicts of control, anxiously demanding, stultified in imagination, and ungenerous toward life itself."[43] Bugbee's task, like Thoreau's, is to bring us to our senses—to awaken us to the possibilities of our own clarity of meaning, our own fitness for death and the appreciation of things. "And," Bugbee asks, "may it be that even the wilderness left to us is itself our vestigial hope of being instructed in such a vein?"[44]

Our lives are not about closure and analytic clarity of meaning, about finding out "just how things are."[45] For us, meaning has to do with learning "to take things in their darkness, their utter density and

darkness," so that we might "stand upon the threshold of receiving the ultimate gift of things."[46] We come to recognize our home as an unknown place, and this defines our homelessness; we wander, though not aimlessly; we achieve meaning, though we find no adequate, final knowledge; we live, for Bugbee, in the service of truth, not merely in its acquisition. We will find our meaning in the genuine awe inspired by wilderness. We may arrive at the consideration that our world is itself a more fundamental wilderness. Wilderness, he says, will not "permit one to take one's surroundings for granted"[47]; it inspires in us something like what James called an "ontological wonder-sickness"—a kind of true homesickness. In this everyday awakening to our humanity, we are put in a position "to understand that ours is a holy place, a universe of things, a wilderness."[48]