The Better Bathroom:

A Spiritual and Political Landscape

*by Andrew Satterthwaite**

Introduction

Imagine this scene: luxuriant broadleaf greenery, ferns and verdant mosses. Perhaps a rock or two poking through. A pool, perhaps with clear water, but obviously deep, and a waterfall, flashing and tumbling, soothing to the ear, and lending the air a tangible humidity. Filtered sunlight dapples the waters.

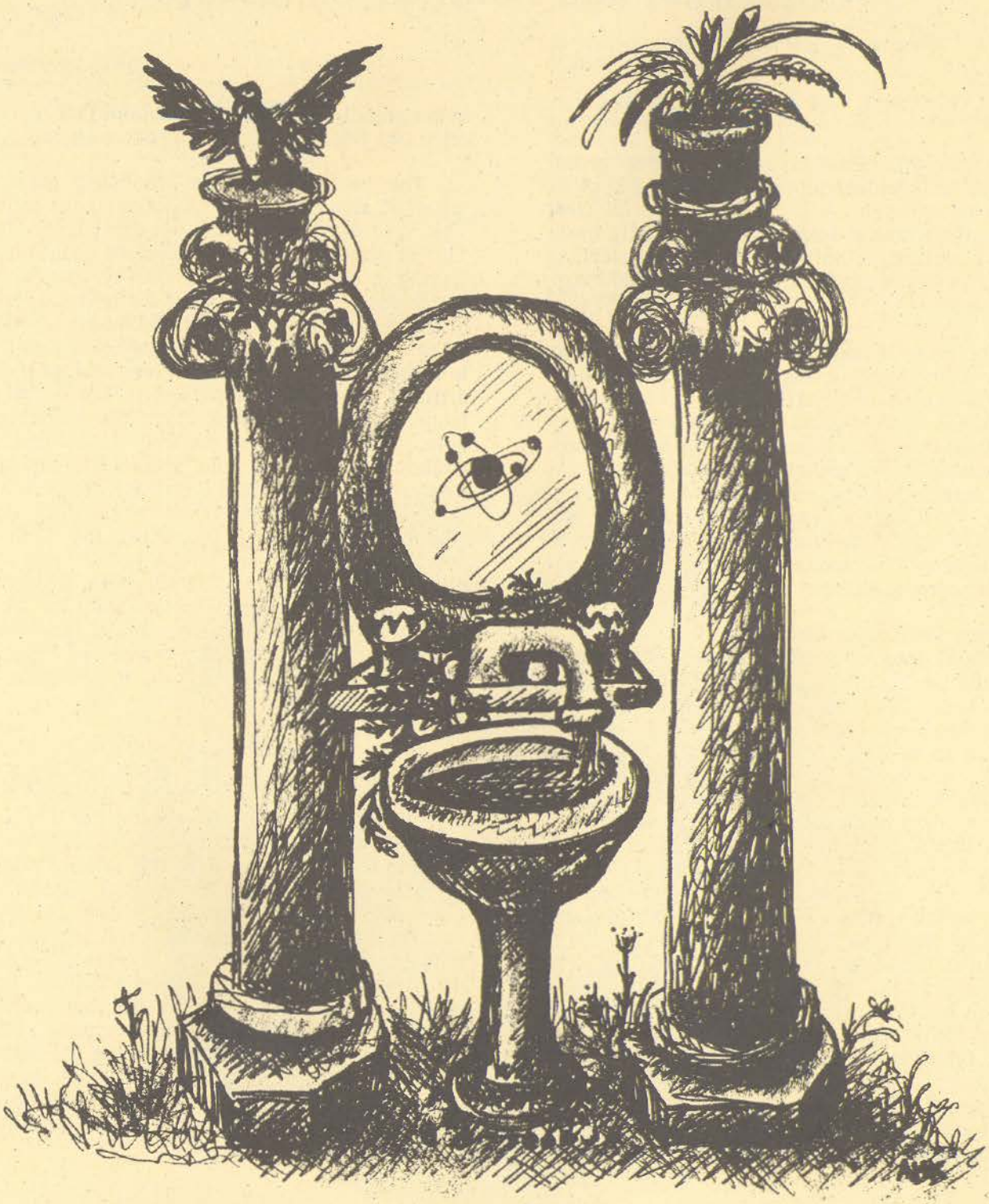
The image is familiar: it is a preferred advertising backdrop because it is exactly a cultural idyll-/idol.[1] We see it in advertisements for cigarettes, for all kinds of detergents, for cars and all other types of environmentally-adverse consumer goods. In advertising it is a manipulated image, but it can only be manipulated because it already has cultural standing. The image also appears on the big screen, as a background to positive action, to romance, to private scenes, and resolution of tragedy. It is our entertainment and solace.[2]

Other landscapes have cultural standing. The French hold the American desert as the proper ground for inner exploration; the British have a pastoral ideal. Mountains have acquired a special place in Anglo-American culture. We go into the mountains to be away from people, to escape the urban world. It was not until the urban world existed that mountains acquired their cultural value, as a place to get in touch with the soul, without the commotion of the city.[3] Appreciation of landscapes is not simply at the level of seeing the objects that comprise the view: landscapes are also the fields in which spiritual reflection takes place, and as a consequence landscape can never be completely described in the absence of human aspirations. The human aspiration that has become attached to mountains in North America is that of self-discovery: here the receptive individual finds the unity between their singular being and that of the rest of the cosmos. In the mountains and the forests one finds oneself, composes oneself, is constituted. These were the terrains of Thoreau and Muir, American transcendentalists of the last century. It is in the grandiose spaces of mountains that, paradoxically, we find the intimacy of our own being.

The positivity of the woodland glade with waterfall also resides in its potential for intimacy. This, like the mountains is not a place for crowds. This is nature stripped of awesome grandeur, possessing a *directly* personal quality that is surely important. There is room for a closer ex-ploration of this more intimate side to the nature idyllic. But let me expand the image I started this paper with. Imagine where the stream is going: things get more difficult here, for the image is not so fixed in modern culture - perhaps it just goes down a dark hole, with a gurgle at the end. In a bygone age doubtless this dark hole would be gaping and mysterious, and perhaps it still is. But then it went down to Hades, and the realms of the dead, and the stream was variously the Styx, the Lethe, the Jordan, the Ganges, etc.[4] Now in our mind's eye it might as well go down the plughole, to end up in the sewage plant or the septic tank, for we have already lost our paths to Heaven and Hell. As Ivan Illich notes in **H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness**, the water that goes down the plughole is no longer magical.[5]

Illich was concerned with water that ran through pipes, and did not reflect too much in his book on how we think of the water before it is let out of the bath. He especially did not think of the space in which we find that water. And here we come to the central motif of this article: that small room in which we take our privacy. Specifically I am concerned to explore the cultural place of the modern bathroom within our practice and metaphysics. I am concerned to explore the way in which we, as individuals and as a culture, reformulate, rethink, ourselves in the bathroom. We apparently do this by a strange cultural metamorphosis that in part entails redefining the bathroom, and redefining nature at the same time, as well as many of the precepts that inform our sensibility of what constitutes nature, and what constitutes a bathroom.

* *Andrew Satterthwaite is a graduate of the Masters program at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University. His thesis was entitled "The Human Understanding and the Natural World."*



The relations between nature, culture and self are the relations of our everyday being. These relations are defined in part by our practices, and in part by our beliefs. The analysis of these relations, always dynamic in themselves, is not always as simple as marking out the physical boundaries between city and trees, between animals and humans. Oftentimes these relations are extraordinarily subtle, not least because they are the most basic to any civilization.[6] Tracing the relations that obtain at any given time, in any given culture, is in its entirety an obviously impossible task. What can be attempted, mostly by way of providing the merest outline, is a sketch of some small part of these relations, and this is what I hope to accomplish here. By focusing on a single locus, in this case the bathroom, I may be able to sketch out the sort of interactive relations that obtain between our concepts of nature, culture, and self.

The bathroom itself may at first glance appear to be an odd choice, and an exploration of these issues around this locus seem an exercise in obscurity. But this is not the case. The bathroom as a collection of ideas sits exactly at the inter-section of the conceptual fields delineated by nature, culture and self, and affords a good vantage point from which to view the interaction between these fields. Let me briefly explain why this is the case. 'Culture', or 'civilization', as a concept, can loosely be defined as the practices that set humans apart from nature. 'Nature' is the collection of objects that are not specific to cultural practice. 'Self' is one way of identifying the natural object that takes part in culture. These definitions are necessarily vague because they are constantly changing, necessarily inter-referential because they define the totality of a dynamic human experience. They are made up as they are required: we compose, or constitute, the basic elements of our world.

Self for the most part is a concept that is defined within culture.[7] The selves so defined are not wholly cultural beings however: they still have biological functions. Historically this has been problematic for the maintenance of order. Some cultures have resolved this problem by denying the fact of defecation: although in Hindu society it is common practice to squat and defecate anywhere, this is never spoken of, never written about; Chagga men pretended at initiation the anus was permanently plugged.[8] In contemporary North American households, the bathroom is the most biologically-oriented room, and at least as regards elimination functions, at the farthest end from civilization. It is where we are most like animals. The categories break down.[9] For this reason, the bathroom is an interesting crucible for the present exploration.

But I should be clear about motivation: this article is a reaction to the **Better Homes and Gardens** approach to bathrooms (and to rooms generally). **Better Homes and Gardens** features the homes of the rich. Because rich people are seen to have a leadership role in North American society, the rooms displayed become the objects of desire, come to represent the aspirations of the not-yet-wealthy.[10] In the social context the objects of desire are laden with symbolic associations, and at the level of this symbolic association, I think a distinct pathological tendency can be detected. A society made aware of unconscious movements may be inclined to change directions. What is required is an exploration of the symbolic content, and how it affects the larger ordering of human experience.

The 'Better Bathroom'

Let me sketch what I am after. The pool with waterfall and ferns that was conjured up in the opening paragraph is one archetype of nature out there. Within the cities, and most especially within our homes, the space that increasingly bears the closest resemblance is the bathroom. Perhaps not exactly the bathroom you have in your house right now. But our next bathroom will be like that, the bathroom we dream about, especially if we happen to read **Better Homes and Gardens** or some other such magazine. And there are many of these magazines, with very high readerships, so I assume the image of the 'better bathroom' has some currency. It is the 'better bathroom' that is dealt with in this paper.

Bathrooms have not always been accorded attention. Until quite recently in North America the privy was outside, and the bathtub was made of tin and hauled out and filled once a week. As the bathtub was made progressively of cast iron, and later pressed steel, the bathroom evolved into a separate room within the house. As the privy moved indoors, it occupied a separate room, the water closet. Later, in tract housing, the bathroom typically conformed to a 5' x 7' plan, containing both the water closet and bathtub. Today's better bathroom is larger, and almost certainly has a ceramic tile floor. Marble is used in the better bathroom with large mirrors, and the truly wealthy use opulent gold plated faucets, sleek pedestal sinks and toilets, enclosed shower stalls, and high volume bathtubs with whirl-pool attachments. The small frosted window that gave privacy is replaced in the better bathroom with picture windows and an expansive view. The world outside is invited in as a large painting. That painting is the painting of Nature. The appearance of plants in the bathroom creates an apparent botanical connection between the space outside and the space inside.[11]

When Gaston Bachelard first engaged in **The Poetics of Space** the phenomenological geometry of the house, he discussed the verticality implied by attic and cellar, the intimacy of small places, and their archetypes of shell and nest. What Bachelard demonstrated was the imme-diacy of symbolic content. Within the created structure, symbolic relations are set up that are at once deeper and richer and more basic to our understanding than the structures itself. The walls, in essence, speak to us.[12] Ivan Illich compared how many lavatories there were in America a hundred years ago and now, and reflected on how the increase had affected our appreciation of what came out of the tap, till the 'mercurial healing liquid' was rendered mere 'stuff'. He ably demonstrates that the myriad symbolic attributes of water are subject to historical change.[13] But neither of these authors consider the spiritual and political landscape of the bathroom, although their analyses set the stage for such consideration.

To begin this task, first consider what makes the idea of bathroom unique, what distinguishes it from other rooms in the house. Our houses are built to resist the vicissitudes of weather, to shelter us from air and water. Water however comes into houses in many places: the kitchen, the laundry room, but most especially in the bathroom, where we duplicate rain in our showers, refreshing ourselves as the rain refreshes the wild things outside, and where we duplicate the lakes and streams in our baths, now with wave action from the whirlpool attachment. The idyllic gesture of woodland brook is caught in the specialty waterfall tap, pool, and the exotic fern. The bathroom has become landscape - just like that of a forest, and indeed, now with the bottled fragrances, it even conjures the same olfactory experience.

Certainly there are other urban spaces that resemble the woodland pool: we find it reconstructed in the plazas before office towers, and with fountains in suburban shopping malls. These locations have their successes: pennies and coins can be seen even in the shallowest of pools, guaranteeing wishes. Yet even though their falling waters succeed in blocking out some of the noise, we are still confronted with people: these are, after all, public spaces (there is perhaps an unintended collision of design metaphors here).[14]

The bathroom however, is unequivocally our most private location, guarded over by some of our most powerful cultural taboos.[15] It is a place we retreat to. The situation that I have described arises from historical accident rather than by design. The functional combination of what previously had been two rooms with the advent of cost-conscious tract housing brought about the juxtaposition of the taboos surrounding excretory beha-viour and their privacy-maintaining orientation, with the recuperative elements that have always been associated with cleansing and bathing. The result was that what has often been a social activity (the French kings and other nobles held salon while in the bath, the Romans had public bath houses) became surrounded with the veil of pri-vacy, and the opportunity of retreat without the stigma of dirt became possible: in short, it became a socially acceptable isolation, in which the individual was free from interruption.[16] Here, even more than in the mountains (now full of hikers), solitude is possible. This solitude is very important.

Nature as presently constituted is something that, for the most part, we approach as individuals. Great significance has been attached to the idea of the solitary figure in the face of Nature, finding truth, beauty, God, or whatever. Ever since Descartes, the French mathematician and philosopher who wrote the **Discourse on Method** in 1637, it has been individuals who are aware first of themselves, then of the world, and finally of other people within that world.[17] Thus Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Enlightenment philosopher, entitled his personal reflections **Reveries of the Solitary Walker**, while Thoreau spent his year alone in the woods, written up in **Walden**.[18] But Rousseau and Thoreau wrote in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before the advent of the mo-dern city. Nature then included the pastoral, and finding a Nature in which to reflect, alone, was not a difficult task. More than a century later we have forced a conceptual retreat of nature: no longer is the pastoral entirely sufficient, especially in North America, where the transcendental legacy of John Muir leads us into the Sierras. Besides, much of the pastoral scene bears the distinct imprint of agribusiness. For the city dwellers of the world, crowded together and insulated from what little remains of the wild, solitariness - the condition for constituting the self - is an increasingly difficult state to attain. However, as the boundaries of nature are subject to revision, a space has been found in the underbelly of cultural taboo. Today we retreat to the bathroom. The old excretory euphemism of 'nature calls' has new literal currency.

The Political Dialectic

Having sketched out the role of the better bathroom in modern culture as a retreat for introspection, it now remains to explore in more detail some of its symbolic elements. By this exploration I hope to unveil some of the political and spiritual

functions of the better bathroom that hide out of sight, lurking around the bend of the wastepipe.

The grandiose better bathroom is, of course, a signifier of wealth. Already bathroom appointments have become selling features in large houses and executive apartments. For a while bathroom fixtures imitated the utilitarian cabinetry found in the kitchen, but now the pedestal sink is reinstated, as pedestal approximates altar. From being the most forgotten room in the house, it is now the most expensive, demanding materials not found in other rooms. The bathroom has become the principal signifier of wealth in the modern dwelling.

There is of course a practical explanation of why more money is being spent on bathrooms. The work day is long, and bathroom provides a respite from human contact. I am not immune: after a hard day I will relax in my tub, even though I may have had a shower that morning: the water goes down the plughole almost as clear as it came out the tap. Occasionally I read there, but the steam does funny things to the pages, so often I simply sit there, old bones and worn muscles soothed. There is after all, comfort here. It might even be enhanced by windows looking out across the landscape.

But sometimes we go too far: picture windows in the bathroom are quite probably not a good idea. Why this is so requires some explanation, for I do not think it is immediately apparent.

The designer of a better bathroom has an incredible array of images and symbols to manipulate, the more powerful for their lack of exercise. At the elemental level, there is the play of light with water. Also the gurgle, glug of the tub, the splash of falling water. There are textural elements, the possibilities and associations of wood, of marble, of glass and mirror, of plaster and enamel, of ceramic tile and porcelain. There are the fixtures themselves, steeped in social expression. There are the accessories and ornaments, designer taps, the gold-plated toilet seat, the art, the plants, the colour coordinated towels. There are the architectural and historical references, composite elements: the bath alcove, the shadows of fixtures, the mysterious black holes (those pop-up sink plugs hide the reality of Hades), the creeping water stains, flaking paint, and the simulated effects of mildews, moulds, fungi, etc. From all these, moods are created. Moods that carry with them the associations we have built up around each element, and around each composite element; associations that are the depositaries of value within the culture. Bathrooms are thus often the most symbolically interesting rooms.[19] Beyond physical form, the better bathroom designer designates the patterns of interaction between occupant and fixtures: thus it happens that the picture window is next to the bath, and not the toilet.

The better bathroom, designer-wrought, marbled, mirrored and picture-windowed is a scene to be looked at rather than lived-in. It is in itself beautiful, conforming to the Kantian aesthetic, rather than acquiring its beauty through the process of being lived in. This is beauty made objective, and therefore marketable. Indeed, the mirror and marble, precisely because of their impervious durability, defy living-in.[20] The beautiful out-there beyond the ego (both the bathroom itself and the scene through the picture window) is objectified, is untouched, unchanged by human presence. No organic relationship between the occupant and room is ever entered into. There is no sense of exploration, and little of creation. The only relation left between room and occupant is one of aggrandizement, an identification with the values that inhere in the mineral purity of glass and marble: the status function of the better bathroom becomes apparent. Above the altar constituted by the pedestal sink, we find the object of worship. Before the mirror, naked, the aesthetic constitution of self takes place. Narcissism rears its head in the materiality of the better bathroom. Are these glorified bathrooms mere temples to the body or does the steam get up the nostrils and into the mind?

The Spiritual Dialectic

In the basin, in the bathtub, our ritual cleansing take place, washing off the day's psychic baggage. It is at this level the proverbial gold-plated toilet seat is found, for those with truly caustic shit. It is this spiritual purification, rather than any hygienic imperative (which was met at the stage of the tin tub, pitcher and basin, and hand-pump), that has created the better bathroom. In North America cleanliness is next to godliness, and our sins disappear down the plughole on their way to Hades. The holy liquid that courses from the gold-plated taps creates a pool in the better bathtub, into which we submerge, to arise baptised. Water has always had this symbolic function of purification, but it is often context depen-dent. The context of the bathroom is given greater legitimacy by appeal to existing cultural idylls. Thus the woodland glade, a symbol of naturalistic innocence, enters the house. And having entered the bathroom it carries with it the symbolic function of reflective contemplation, so that the bathroom becomes the locus of reflective contemplation in the home. Beyond the politico-aesthetic constitution before the mirror, spiritual constitution takes place in the bathtub.

Which brings us back to the picture window. The bathroom window is not of itself any different than any other window in a house. But once the viewer is able to gaze, reclining and half-submerged in steamy water, across the landscape framed in the window, both landscape and window are transformed. Because of its function of spiritual regeneration, the vantage of the bathtub is privileged. Because the situation of the bather demands inner gazing, the view through the window is bracketed. The bather does not enter the flat landscape afforded by the pane. The landscape is thus devalued as compared with any other landscape viewed through any other window. The bathroom itself meanwhile, as the crucible of purification, is valued more, until the valuation of the semblance of nature represented within the bathroom exceeds that viewed through the window. The spiritual aspect of nature, through a perverse symbolic manipulation and architectural happenstance, is reconstituted with the home. As Madonna juxtaposes the intimacy of boudoir apparel with the transcendental theological symbol of the cross by manipulating the symbols out of context, so the modern designer better bathroom perverts the unity of individual and nature.

Conclusions

I have described two movements that take place in the better bathroom. A politico-aesthetic relation that feeds materialistic individualism takes place before the mirror. The ego-self is enriched, and the connection with organic nature and communitarian culture loosened by the life-defying associations brought by marble. And a spiritual relation, whose complex dialectics proceed from the bathtub, that serves to appropriate natural idyll as purely cultural form. As I suggested earlier, these cases are overstated to make the point. The incremental difference these new relations make to the boundaries between the conceptual fields occupied by 'nature', 'culture' and 'self' is extremely small. However the bathroom is only one locus in which such changes can take place. Similar analyses of how our practice affects our metaphysics can be made for almost every other location, for almost every cultural object. The additive impact of all of these changes is likely to be much more significant, and can affect the general outlook of society toward wilderness.

The better bathroom is at present the social aspiration, and is a reality only for the few whose houses are featured in **Better Homes and Gardens**. The particular spiritual and political dialectics described have not been able to exert an influence yet, despite their role as cultural leaders. Material aspirations are frequently adopted without an examination of the environmental consequences, which may operate at the level of metaphysics. If this is the sort of relation our aspirations incline us towards with our immediate and personal environment, what does this say about the possibility of a better relation with the wild environment out there beyond the picture window when, perchance, we wander out beyond the bathroom? What is required is an examination not just of the material impacts of our object choices, but also of the metaphysical consequences. Today's corporate Pontius Pilate, enviro-nmental despoiler, goes home to a whirlpool bath instead of washing hands for salvation. Responsibility for the day's deeds goes down the plughole, and the scene beyond the thermally insulated picture window slowly degrades, like the picture of Dorian Gray.

Notes

1. Idyll: a poetic form evoking a rustic episode; idol:an image, excessively admired and worshipped. The woodland waterfall is somehow made discontinuous with the rest of the wood, is rendered a human place above all else, and thus occupies the dual status of idyll/idol. These words are related through the Greek stem 'eidos', meaning form, idea, essence, ideal.

2. Usage of 'our' and 'we' in this paper is intended to convey the collective aspect of culture. Certainly there is diversity represented in any culture, but what helps define a culture is that certain precepts are commonly accessible. Personal agreement is therefore not criteria for evaluation of a cultural statement, but rather recognition is sufficient.

3. Before 1800 mountains were almost invariably referred to as barren wastelands, and forests were thought of as deserts. During the 19th century the Romantics undertook an aesthetic and spiritual re-evaluation of mountains, and in the 20th century general society reappraised wilderness areas in the context of a scarce and diminishing aesthetic resource. For further details on history of Anglo-American attitudes toward mountains and forests, see Marjorie Nicolson, (1959) **Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: the aesthetics of the infinite**. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca; Kieth Thomas, (1983) **Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800**. Penguin, Harmondsworth. 425pp.; Clarence Glacken, (1967) **Traces on the Rhodian Shore: nature and culture in Western thought from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century**. Univ. California Press, Berkeley. 763pp.; and Roderick Nash, (1973) **Wilderness and the American Mind, 2nd Ed**. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven.

There is a vast literature documenting cultural specificity of other idealized landscapes.

4. Dark holes and drains still seem to hold great fascination for small children. Adults in North American culture tend to ignore the symbolic content of water, or have lost awareness of it. In all classical cultures that I am aware of, the symbolic attributes of rivers and the spiritual properties of flowing water were of major significance. The rivers of classical mythology typically carry with them the residues of human folly and sin. Charon the boatman ferried the dead across the river Styx to Hades. The Lethe was a river of Hades which caused oblivion and forgetfulness when drunk. Early Christians waited on the banks of the Jordan for transport to heaven. The Ganges, holy river for Hindus, contains a spirit river, the Saraswati that purifies the spirit. For more on this subject see Ivan Illich (1985) **H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the Historicity of 'Stuff'**. Heydey Books, Berkeley. 92pp., esp. p.30.

5. Ivan Illich, **H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness**. See esp. pp.75-76.

6. Hans Peter Duerr (trans. F. Goodman) (1985) **Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization**. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 462pp. This remarkable piece of scholarship, focusing mainly on the medieval European concepts, describes how various iterations of this wilderness/-civilization distinction are central to the identity of social formations.

7. It is awkward, although not impossible, to talk of animal selves; when we do so we are realigning the boundaries of the concepts. This is a case in point: the linguistic practice of talking of animal selves redefines the concepts without our having to consider the root concepts directly.

8. Mary Douglas (1966) **Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo**. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London. 188pp. See p.124, p.163.

9. For a full exposition of the importance of preserving categories, see Mary Douglas, **Purity and Danger**, esp. pp.114-128.

10. This relation is important: only those cultural changes that gain legitimacy as proper objects of desire are able to affect the general ordering. Some luxury objects, such as mirrors on the bedroom ceiling, are viewed as aberrant, and do not affect the general ordering.

11. While plants are also found in other rooms, the deliberate placing of organic matter in the bathroom marks a move away from the Victorian obsession with bathroom sterility.

12. Gaston Bachelard (trans. Maria Jolas), (1964) **The Poetics of Space**. Beacon Press, Boston. xxxv + 241pp. (first published in French, 1958 as **La Poetique de L'espace**, Presses Univ. des France). In popular culture these relations emerge in the haunted house and the horror movie, where the audience supplies the associations that make the attic and the cellar frightening. The creature that emerges simultaneously from the drain and the subconscious (see for example Michael Jackson's **Thriller** video) is another case more relevant to the present exploration.

13. Illich overstates the case in **H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness** to make his point, arguing that water has become a mere cleaning fluid, and has lost its spiritual power. I also overstate the case in the opposite direction. In both cases overstatement is necessary because of the subtlety of the phenomena being described.

14. Ivan Illich's **H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness** addresses this aspect of the symbolic use of water.

15. The taboos that allow for privacy in the bathroom are treated descriptively by ALexander Kira (1976) **The Bathroom, 2nd Ed.**. Viking Press, New York. 272pp.; and theoretically by Mary Douglas, **Purity and Danger**.

16. For a description of the social aspect of bathing see Lawrence Wright (1960) **Clean and Decent: the fascinating history of the bathroom and the WC**. Univ. Toronto Press, Toronto, 282pp. Unfortunately Wright's study terminates with the Victorian period.

17. Rene Descartes (1637) **Discourse on Method**. Descartes is held responsible for the modern dualism of mind and body, of human culture and nature. In his "cogito ergo sum", only the self could be immediately known, and all else had to be doubted, particularly the spiritual aspect of anything non-human. For more on Descartes' influence on the relations between nature, culture and self see, for example, Morris Berman (1981) **The Re-enchantment of the World**. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca. 357pp., esp. chapter 1.

18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (trans. P. France) (1979) **Reveries of the Solitary Walker**. Penguin, Harmondsworth. 155pp. (first publ. 1792). Rousseau observed that "These hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am completely myself and my own master, with nothing to distract or hinder me, the only ones when I can truly say that I am what nature meant me to be". p.35; Henry David Thoreau, (1960) **Walden and Civil Disobedience**. Signet, New York. 256pp. (first publ. 1854).

19. Except for those which go wholly overboard on marble and mirror, and thereby demonstrate poor grasp of the symbols of the modern temple, in prematurely alienating the subject. My own favourite bathroom designs recollect the Matisse chapel, the Bhuddist Temple, and the Roman Temple.

20. Marble is the material of choice for mausoleums. During the Romantic period, marble was a symbol of mineral purity, because it did not degrade as organic forms did. This is termed the death-seeking tendency in Romanticism.