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### Hans Peter Duerr. *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *THE BOUNDARIES OF CIVILIZATIONS IN REALITY*

Hans Peter Duerr. *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*. Translated by Felicitas Goodman from the German (1978) *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation* Oxford, 1985. Basil Blackwell.

This is a book uncommon both in erudition and startling iconoclasm. The author sets out to show that civilization is a device of society to impose order upon the human experience of reality. What is “real,” then, is filtered through a cultural screen which blocks out the “crazy, obscene and lewd” that come to human senses. But, says Duerr, the experiences beyond the boundaries of civilization are also real and human. Citing the *ngarungani* or dreamtime initiation of the Australian aborigines, Duerr asserts, “Much more clearly than we moderns, archaic humans recognized themselves in what they were *not*.” Accordingly, he sets out to show how those who pass over the boundaries are more aware of what is real than those who abide by the constraints of civilization.

His book details exhaustively instances that have been classified by their societies as occurring beyond these boundaries. Cultural equivalents of dreamtime reoccur in all societies at different times, and Duerr expresses great sympathy for those who are unable to deny these experiences, but who—precisely on that account—suffer rejection from society.

The book is populated with an endless parade of witches and werewolves, druids and shamans, nude women and talking animals, caves and vaginas. The author borrows eclectically from Jung, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault for his examples, but never succumbs to the temptation of defending any particular methodological view. His acceptance and defense of Carlos Castañeda (pp. 296-98 *et passim*), however, does violate this general prudence. His descriptions are weighted heavily in favor of pre-Christian and Medieval Europe or the tales of classical Greek mythology, but he is not Eurocentric and demonstrates a remarkable command of non-Western sources.

The translation by Felicitas Goodman reads well. Sadly, the index is very limited, although one would readily argue that it would have added many more pages to an already thick volume.

Unfortunately, it is easy to get lost in this book. The examples are so well drawn and documented that they often sidetrack the reader from the main points to be illustrated. The Teutonic tendency to erudite overkill can be measured by a glance at the division of the book: 133 pages of text, 236 pages of notes, 86 pages of bibliography. His description of witches’ salves is so detailed, the English version includes a warning to the reader not to use them. Footnote #107 runs from page 213 to 218 to

discuss the pre-Hispanic Mayan ability to distinguish between green and blue. All of this to explain a sentence in the text about "shamans climbing into the world beyond."

At times the author tries to use sarcasm that is embarrassingly too "cute" for a work of this kind. For example, the American Indians are citizens of "The Altered States of America" (p. 282). Las Casas is quoted (p. 139) to the effect that a Taino shaman spoke "gibberish or as the Germans, in a confused manner." "Some elves or fairies," says Duerr, "are interested only in spontaneous fuck (p. 211)."

These annoyances aside, the book is a treasure of information on human experiences beyond the ordinary. It serves as a dialectical tool to remind those absorbed with the ordered constructions of reality that human experience is more vast than our conceptions of it. But it also raises questions about how one comes to validate opinions on civilizational values. These implications, never clearly stated in the book, provide it with disturbing power.

The author forces the reader to enter the civilizational wilderness with him. By frequently crossing over conventional boundaries in the text, Duerr practices what he preaches. Indeed, in one sense the book is an *apologia* for Duerr's significant participation in the counterculture movements of the 1960s. The book jacket describes him as a "sometime Visiting Professor of Cultural History at the University of Kassel," but it does not mention his role in advocating mind-expanding drugs, in the style of Timothy Leary during the hippie era.

Duerr with all of his erudition, and perhaps in spite of it, essentially attacks all social conventions. He views those who have crossed the boundaries as clearly superior to those who have not when it comes to understanding reality. These crossings include the use of drugs, the acceptance of pagan rites and of exploratory sexual relations. Apparently, the author himself has crossed over the boundaries of convention by these bridges and his book is, in sum, an invitation for others to do so as well.

The dilemma presented by the book is this: if one accepts the validity of Duerr's description of the need for wilderness in understanding civilization, is one not also accepting the need to make the same "trips" through drugs and sex? It is possible simply to ignore Duerr and those who have begun to teach cultural history from his perspective, pretending that the time-honored methods of Toynbee, Nelson, Quigley, et al. are the only reliable road to civilizational analysis. But, it seems to me, sooner or later, our discipline will have to confront the wilderness and dreamtime of Duerr.

*Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo*