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**Review of *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern
Deconstruction* Edited by Michael E. Soule and Gary Lease**

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BOOK REVIEWS

Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction. Edited by Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995. xvii+186 pp. Tables, notes, and index. \$17.95 paper (ISBN 1-55963-311-5).

The essays gathered here respond to a series of conferences collectively titled “Reinventing Nature,” planned by the University of California at Irvine and held at various UC campuses in 1992 and 1993. More generally (and more importantly), they respond to a watershed in contemporary thinking vis-a-vis “the environment,” “nature,” and “wilderness.” On one side of the divide stand traditionalists who believe in the substantial reality of nature, and on the other postmodernists who are greatly impressed with the degree to which nature is a cultural construction. The authors of *Reinventing Nature?* are spiritedly critical of the postmodern, deconstructionist view. The argument here shares some ground with the old problem of epistemological realism versus epistemological idealism (does the falling tree, deep in the trackless forest and unheard by human ears, make a sound?). But now, when we see nature profoundly affected by the industrial growth society—to the extent that the very temperature and composition of the atmosphere are being unusually rapidly changed, and the community of life on the planet is undergoing a drastic extinction episode—what was once a nice little philosophical debate has taken on consequence. For example, would-be developers of wilderness areas are only too happy to hear, from respected academic sources, that such-and-such a place is not really pristine, and furthermore that pristineness itself is merely a construction, one of the many mistaken ideas flowing from a philosophically dualistic culture.

Many defenders of wilderness are quite aware of the dualistic nature of western thought (see Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, for example), and now that the dualistic paradigm appears to be breaking down, these defenders are profoundly tasked: if everything is relative and there are no absolutes like “nature” separate from culturally-conditioned thought processes, how then can protection of this “nature” be justified? It is one thing to criticize the “hothouse” character of deconstructionist thought—and it is certainly open to such critiques as Paul Shepard’s here: “Intellectuals seem caught up in the dizzy spectacle and brilliant subjectivity of a kind of deconstructionist fireworks in which origins and truth have become meaningless.” But it is going to be much more demanding to construct (in a hurry)

an ethical norm that recognizes the fragmentary, mistaken character of dualistic thought *and then* goes on to value the integrated world that grew us. We are going to have to become observers of our own thought at a deeper level of insight than we have, as a generality, practiced so far. Again, Paul Shepard sums up the situation eloquently: “. . . the genuinely innovative direction of our time is not the final surrender to the anomie of meaninglessness or the escape to fantasylands but in the opposite direction—toward affirmation and continuity with something beyond representation.”

The authors represented in *Reinventing Nature?* are working in this important, in fact urgent, philosophical territory. They are seeking the place where “relative,” with its connotations of pseudo-sophistication and apathy, starts to make a vital transition to “relational,” whereby we recognize the integrated nature of nature and our own responsibility to it. **Thomas J. Lyon,** *Department of English, Utah State University.*