



Escapism

Yi-Fu Tuan

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Who," writes the distinguished geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "hasn't--sometime--wanted to escape? But from what?" In his fascinating look at the idea of escape, Tuan suggests that all human culture is really a kind of flight, an evasive mechanism, a means of not facing facts: our shelters give us refuge from the weather, our cities give us protection against nature red in tooth and claw, our religion and institutions give us solace against the certainty of death. "A human being," he says wryly, "is an animal who is congenitally indisposed to accept reality as it is." Tuan examines the artifacts of our present civilization to buttress his argument. The cornucopia of the modern supermarket, for instance, with its "dazzling pyramids of fruits and vegetables, its esplanades of meat," which promises ceaseless abundance, and the growth of escape-to-nature ideas, which, he insists, depend on an antithetical escape from nature (nature being, in his definition, "what remains or what can recuperate over time when all humans and their works are removed"). That escape to nature, he suggests, relies on an unfortunate abstraction, one of simplicity. Images of nature, he continues, are often formed from wishful thinking and not from direct experience, and they tend therefore to lack the complexity of reality. Tuan's vigorous essay is provocative, challenging, and a pleasure to read.

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