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Regeneration through Violence: James McQueen's Hook's Mountain.

John McLaren

By the end of the nineteenth century the frontiers around the globe were effectively closed. During the twentieth century, migration has been from the country to the cities, and from the cities to extermination and refugee camps. Although romantics, and those who exploit the romantic ideology for material profit, may still search for new frontiers in the depths of the sea, on the peaks of the Himalayas or the icy stretches of Antarctica, or on the face of the moon, these places will always be outside the boundaries of effective settlement. The greatest extension of settlement will continue to be the expansion of cities to consume previously wilderness or farming land. The attempts that have been made to extend agricultural settlement by razing forests or watering the deserts have generally led to disaster. They have brought about the misery of Manchuria, the dustbowls of Oklahoma or the Victorian Mallee, the destruction of rainforests in Borneo and Brazil, the salination of the Murray River basin. At the same time, the displacement, repression and exploitation of people which allowed Europeans to subjugate new worlds has bred violence and disorder which contradict the hopes of peace and plenty that first led them into these worlds. Both forms of disaster come together in Africa and the Middle East. But with the closing of the frontiers to further settlement has come also a new recognition of the power of nature and the need to seek accommodation rather than domination. This has led to a literature which seeks to produce a culture based on a

relationship of partnership between humans and nature, and which looks at wilderness not as a resource to exploit but as a place where we can return to the sources in nature of our human cultures and conscious existence.

Much of this wilderness literature arises from a disgust with cities and the material culture they breed. Like the romantic poets, these writers seek in nature a renewal of a primal energy from which we have been separated by industrial capitalism, but rather than seeking this renewal through contemplation they seek an active partnership which will restore a unity of word and action they associate with the earliest societies of hunters and gatherers. Implicit in much of this work is the idea of man as the lonely hunter. These hunters share the self-reliance which made the frontier hero superior to those who relied for survival on the artefacts and social supports of the cities, but unlike the frontiersman they do not try to impose their will on the wilderness or make a path for others to follow. Rather, they seek the kind of wisdom that Faulkner's Ike McCaslin learned from Sam Feathers and the bear. But while Faulkner portrayed the wilderness as the image of a sullen continent waiting its revenge on those who had ravaged it, more recent wilderness writers see the land as still offering the strength and wisdom men need to live fully in harmony with the nature that is both inside and beyond them.

While Faulkner finally recognizes that his people are irrevocably tied to metropolitan industrial society, the wilderness writers are still intent on escape, on making an alternative. This search for an alternative has been particularly important in writings from around the rim of the

Pacific, the provinces or regions of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Northwest of America. In all these regions there are still places where the wilderness is still sufficiently untouched or regenerated to offer a connection with the pre-industrial and pre-agricultural past. At the same time, the lives of the people in the provinces are subject to the control exercised from the remote metropolitan centres of political and economic power. The global economy spreading from these centres simultaneously generates demands for more resources and control over the process of production, which becomes steadily more mechanical and impersonal. Capital is preferred to labour, and the jobs which remain are more tightly organized and controlled. People therefore lose at the same time power over their work and over the goods and the environment they produce. The consequent disputes within the provincial communities over the use of resources are ultimately the local expression of a conflict between the metropolitan centre and the provinces. Because the regions still have areas which by their nature cannot support settlement, although they can be destroyed by attempts to exploit their wealth, it is in the writing of these regions that we can expect to find the search for the new balance between land, culture and the individual which the closed frontier of a finite world demands.

The distinctive literature of these places begins when expansion and settlement have finished, and humans are left alone to contemplate their puny culture against the immensity of land and sky. The land which had been the enemy, an object to be subjugated to human will, reveals itself as the continuing subject which ultimately controls all human activity.

Individuals can realize their desire only by learning to accommodate its demands. As in the earlier phase, the dialectic continues between the individual and the land, but now its aim is the construction of a new culture of harmony rather than the imposition of established ideas of dominance.

In the novel ~~Hook's--Mountain~~, James McQueen describes the partnership of man and nature in a remote area of Tasmania where his hero, Lachlan ^{Hook}~~McQueen~~, has retreated to escape his memories of the war and his disillusion with society. McQueen's determination to defend his solitude is however a major factor in bringing further destruction into the heart of his fastness. The crucial episode in the novel is Section 5, when Hook finally takes his rifle and, with his neighbour Arthur, goes off to defend his mountain against the loggers who want to destroy its forests and the agents of law and order who protect their assault. This section could be read on its own as a novella, a tale of individuals pitting their wits and skills against organized force, of overcoming their fear in order to achieve a true integrity of manhood, symbolized by the ease with which they move through the bush and by the phallic power of their assertion through the rifle. The episode gains its significance, its meaning, however, from the memories of wartime violence which it repeats and expiates, and from the action of the earlier episodes in which Hook has revealed himself to Arthur and has had one last attempt to encounter with love and family.

Hook comes to the mountain as a solitary. Because his wartime experiences make him incapable of emptying his own shitcan, he is forced to employ his neighbour, Arthur, another solitary, to perform this service for him. Arthur has compensated

for his size by his physical strength, his knowledge of the bush, and an intellectual stretch which took him beyond his schoolfellows and gives him continuing access to the world of books. The community which is unable to understand him contains his unsettling presence by classifying him as crazy and allotting him a place on its margins, where it contemptuously throws him scraps of charity and employment. By allowing him to share the secret of his coprophobia, Hook breaks the solitude in which each has been enclosed, and so creates an alternative community of two. This community poses a greater threat than either could alone, and provokes Kevin Monson's verbal, and then physical assault on Arthur. Arthur's violent response seals his alliance with Hook and marks his rejection of his allotted status, his first attempt to assert himself, to claim a space within society rather than a refuge outside it.

During the novel Hook gradually reveals that his bitterness arises not just from the horror of the war, but from the ease with which the establishment discarded him once the war came to a finish. By denying him value, authority also denied value and meaning to the suffering and sacrifice of his fellows. Although during his later life he goes on to work for intelligence and as a mercenary, and for a time becomes a successful and wealthy businessman, he remains the outsider, unable to recover from his rejection. By building his house near the mountain he achieves a sufficiency outside society, and from Arthur he receives a shared knowledge of the land. But he is unable to escape from authority, which intrudes first in the person of his former commanding officer, and then of the foresters who come to take from the mountain its covering bush, to subject it to the

material demands of society.

First, however, Hook becomes involved in a love affair which promises to extend the outcast society of two and provide an alternative to the bitter isolation which eventually drives him to his death. By picking up the hippy girl, Ellen, and her son, Stephen, Hook allows strangers to enter his life. By letting them stay with him, he accepts responsibility for others. By surrendering himself to her in love he admits his own incompleteness and so completes a self-contained world of domesticity in harmony with the surrounding world of nature. But his surrender is never complete. His wartime experiences have wounded him too deeply, and although he admits Ellen to his memories he continues to draw a circle at the centre of his being that he allows no-one to violate. Ellen recognizes that she cannot heal this bitterness, that Hook can free himself only by completely separating himself from society and returning its violence on itself. She realizes also that this complete separation can lead only to his death. Rather than wait to be discarded with the rest of his life, Ellen chooses to leave first. She ends the affair after the day's walk on the mountain has brought them closer to each other and to nature than ever before. The small stone that Stephen finds, "covered with a growth of delicate fan-headed clubmoss' (p.136) is a symbol of the unity they find in the beauty of time and place, but it also marks the end of the distance they can travel together. Ellen knows "how, she could not tell--that they would never climb to the top of the hill." (ibid.) She has no power to turn Hook from his fate, and, as she explains to him through Arthur, "she couldn't stop and watch you hurt yourself." (p.139) Stumbling

through the empty house after she has gone, Hook comes across "the cold feathers of clubmoss on Stephen's stone." It has become a symbol of loss: "he picked it up, sent it skimming viciously into the night." (p.140) By the action, he accepts his fate. "Now nothing." Only the a final act of violence can fill his void.

With Arthur, Hook retires to the mountain to wage guerrilla war against the loggers and their police protectors. For Hook, this struggle is the culmination of his determination to assert his individual values against those that authority seeks to impose on him. For Arthur, it is an opportunity to obtain the value as an individual, as a man, which society has denied him. For, despite the consummate bushcraft which makes him completely at home with the land, his social alienation has robbed him of value in his own eyes. The struggle inducts him into the knowledge of warfare and violence that he feels has separated him from the only people who have mattered to him: his father and uncle, victims of the first world war, and Hook, victim of the second. Eventually, however, even Hook's death cannot give him the place he seeks, and he is forced into the same course of action. The novel closes as he declares his value as a person by taking Hook's rifle in a futile act of defiance against the spoliation of the last of the mountain.

Hook himself is driven to his final, homicidal and suicidal, act of defiance only when authority brings Ellen and Stephen back to tempt him down from the mountain. Until this moment, he has held back from killing, resisting only by threatening and wounding. The use of the family he has adopted is the ultimate betrayal, although the novel leaves it unclear whether he blames

them or authority. Yet this final act of defiance, although inevitable in terms of the novel's action, seems inadequate to its theme. Just as the novel opens and closes with the image of a rifle, the deaths of Hook and then Arthur seem to reduce their lives to these single acts of phallic aggression. The original imbalance in their lives comes from the failure of the culture which has produced them to accommodate to the nature to which they belong. The forests that clothe Hook's mountain, the homes where he and Arthur nurture family love and literary culture, and the ease with which they both learn to move through the bush, symbolize the ideal balance of nature, culture and the individual. The violence of war and deforestation arise from the destruction of this balance, but Hook's resistance leads only to the ultimate destruction of violent death. This death not only fails to save the forest, it denies the value of what he had produced through the work he had put into his home and into the brief family Ellen had given him. By ensuring that Arthur follows him, Hook denies his death even the meaning it would have in the memory of his witness. The novel thus finally denies its own central theme, asserting that there is no escape from violence into nurture, and that the only value the individual can achieve against society is self-destruction.

Although McQueen's novel hints at the kind of love which could renew in the family the connection between culture and nature that has been lost in industrial societies, he does not allow his characters to engage in the kind of work needed to build a culture that joins individual and nature within a larger society. Arthur works on the periphery of the community and Hook works only for himself. Arthur is linked to a wider culture

through his books, but these bear no relationship to his work and have no meaning for others in the local community. They therefore serve, like the forests, to provide a refuge from the immediate, and so remove him further from his actual community. By pushing work to the margins of his narrative, apart from both culture and nature, McQueen shows more clearly the imbalance that leads to the violence that characterizes relationships between society and nature and society and the individual, but he fails to suggest any way of escape from this violence. By rejecting society's adversary relationship to the land, Hook and Arthur merely place themselves in an adversary relationship to society. They are oblivious to their dependence on society not only for the technology which enables them to oppose it, but also for the ideas of nature and of individual worth which drive their opposition. Consequently, rather than offering an alternative to a culture of destruction, their rebellion merely compounds it.