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The Closed Frontier: from subjugation to equilibrium. A study of man against nature in two wilderness narratives.

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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 ~~the~~ 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 natural sources of our human cultures and conscious existence.

Culture, considered as the totality of the symbolic and technological systems by which we pattern our world, is both the medium which calls our individual consciousness into being, and the means by which we extend our being into the world of nature. While culture is itself a part of the natural world, it is brought into relationship with nature only by human desire expressed through work and love. The frontier seemed to offer the possibility of both forms of satisfaction by providing an unused portion of nature where men could work to make a new home for their families. This hope was contradicted by the facts that the lands were already occupied, and that the effort of subjugating both the land and the native peoples to European will

destroyed the possibilities of a new Eden, but it stayed alive as long as seemingly empty spaces remained--in America, Australia, Africa--where we could escape from the mistakes we had already repeated. The escape sought was not only from the constraints of European society, but also from the evils an industrialism which drove the process of settlement. As industrialism separated man from nature, it simultaneously generated the desire for return and the need for the goods which that return, expressed as settlement, could provide. Thus the new frontiers took up the burden of romanticism, and the frontiersman or bushman became the image of the true identity of the new nations. This identity became fully established just at about the time the frontiers were being closed, and even driven back by the economic and natural realities of depression and drought.

The Eden of frontier dreams was not nature, but a garden planted and cultivated by men. The frontier culture therefore separated men from nature, and from women, as effectively as did the industrialism from which they were fleeing. The culture produced by their work reduced women to a subordinate role and sujugated nature to man's desires. The closing of the frontier has led, however, to the search for a new balance grounded in the idea of wilderness. In America, Faulkner's cycle of stories around "The Bear" is an early example of the wilderness

literature which has grown from this search. Unlike earlier romantics, from Wordsworth to Thoreau, Faulkner sees the wilderness not as a place for contemplation and renewal, but as a living reality against which men must struggle to create their own authentic being. This struggle is, however, for Faulkner still a business for men, who must prove themselves as individuals. It omist the communal and feminine aspects of nature, and therefore finally fails to achieve a blance. Faulkner's narrator despairingly comments that the wilderness has only to wait for its vengeance as men destroy each other with the same violence that they have destroyed it. More recent writers have attempted to find a balance which escapes this violence and brings the three facts of people, culture and nature into a harmony. In examining narratives by two of these writers, however, I wish to show that failure to consdier the importance of work leads to an exclusion of culture, and thus to a renewed conflict between the individual and nature and the continued cycle of violence.

Much recent wilderness literature arises from a disgust with cities and the material culture they breed. Although the writers are intent on escaping urban, industrial society, their attempt to return to what they suppose is the true core of man's nature has led to a revival of the concept of man as the lonely hunter. This solution leaves man outside the culture both of the family

and of a wider society, and so fails to provide an alternative for the way societies actually relate to nature. The search has, however, 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 his autobiographical A River Runs Through It, Norman Maclean takes us with him in search of this new relationship. The book begins with his early childhood, when his clergyman father introduced him to fly-fishing and God, and God, man and nature seemed linked in a single unity of love. Two later stories deal with an adolescence in the logging camps, brothels and bars of the mountain country, but the first, and title, story brings the author back to fly-fishing with Paul, his reprobate brother, and their now aging father. In this episode, when the family comes together for what proves to be the last time, the ritual of its solidarity is challenged externally by the amoral

outsider, and internally by Paul's wild ways. The brother-in-law who profanes the river by screwing instead of fishing, and commits the ultimate solecism of drinking his hosts' beer, suffers not only a sun-blistered bum and body, but also exclusion from the healing communion of rivers and mountains. Although Paul returns to the urban world where his passions lead to inevitable conflict and death, his short life is redeemed, given meaning, by his understanding of the mountain waters and the art of fishing which unites desire, action and nature in complete harmony. The story is a loving elegy for the author's father and brother, and a comedy of the manners and mores of a Scots-American family, but its true subject is how the mountains nurture in the author an understanding which allows him to contemplate steadily the violence and treachery whic h contradict the unity they symbolize.

The whole story is built around the art and practice of fly-fishing, both as the subject of the narrative and as a metaphor of the lives it brings together. However, although the story celebrates an achieved unity of family and nature, it is about exclusion as much as inclusion. The art of fishing separates the community of the elect from those outside: from the feeble of spirit who have deserted the mountains for the easy life of the coast, from folk who fish with bait, from the brother-in-law who does not even recognize the rituals of holiness. It also

separates the men who fish from the women who stay at home. Yet these women form a part of the community. Their role is to indulge the weakness of the men who need to actually practice the art to become part of that harmony of humans, waters and mountains that it produces and confirms. Scottish mothers, more than most mothers, "have had to accustom themselves to migration and sin, and to them all sons are prodigal and welcome home" (p.11). Hope and Fear are a normal part of their lives, and they do not need to indulge in the further dialogue between them that fishing involves in order to nurture a community which, the narrator is sure, already includes Christ and his disciples, fly-fishermen of Galilee. The fishing both symbolizes a possible grace and generates division.

Maclean's book thus is at once an invocation of Eden and a recognition of the impossibility of reaching it in our actual circumstances. The culture produced by men's work in the mountains can bring them glimpses of immortality, but it cannot sustain a community outside its immediate bounds. The logging camps sublimate sexuality through work or contemplation, but when the men return to society they can release their pent-up energies only through violence. Neither the comradeship of the camps nor the simulated family of the brothel can provide a community which can sustain people beyond the needs of the moment, and they thus remain subjects of the history their work produces. Paul Maclean

lives fully only when he is fishing, and beyond that is unable to bring into any unity his work, his casual lusts and his craving for the excitement of gambling. Eventually, he is found dead, beaten to death in an alley. Even the author has to leave the mountains to find fulfilment in work and family elsewhere. The culture of fishing, expression of the highest elements of human work and desire, can be only a vacation activity. The book's memories of Eden and evocation of what human life might be are held within the recognition that beyond the mountains there are bastards, and only the tough survive. Although the writer captures the world of the mountains in his art, nature, like the fish which escapes his greatest skill, remains outside the best his culture can do.

Yet at the heart of the story the author creates a complete harmony of culture and nature. He has caught some fish, and sits musing on the puzzles in which he is embroiled. These include Paul, the brother who is a great artist with rod and fly but enjoys trouble too much to bring the other parts of his life and ability together in the same way. They also include the brother-in-law Neil, whose life seems nothing but lies but who enlists the sympathy of a succession of women who protect him from a reality his prevarications transform from tragedy to farce. As the author muses over these problems his mind merges them with the pattern it discovers in the river itself:

Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.

Even the anatomy of the river was laid bare. Not far downstream was a dry channel where the river had run once, and part of the way to know a thing is through its death. But years ago I had known the river when it flowed through this now dry channel, so I could enliven its stony remains with waters of memory.

In death it had its pattern, and we can only hope for as much . . .

I also became the river by knowing how it was made. The Big Blackfoot is a new glacial river that runs and drops fast. The river is a straight rapids until it strikes big rocks or big trees with big roots. This is the turn that is not exactly at right angles. Then it swirls and deepens among big rocks and circles back through them where big fish live under the foam. As it slows, the sand and small rocks it picked up in the fast rapids above begin to settle out and are deposited, and the water becomes shallow and quiet. After the deposit is completed, it starts running again.

On a hot afternoon the mind can also create fish . . .

Fishermen also think of the river as having been made with them partly in mind, and they talk of it as if it had

been. They speak of the three parts as a unity and call it "a hole," and the fast rapids they call "the head of the hole" and the big turn they call "the tail of the hole," which they think is shallow and quiet so that they can have a place to wade across and "try the other side."

As the heat mirages on the river in front of me danced with and through each other, I could feel patterns from my own life joining with them . . .(pp.61-63)

The author does not enter into some mystic comunion with nature, but employs language to describe with absolute precision the geological origins and patterns of the river. He then moves from the detached observations of science to the language of fishermen, which orders this natural pattern to fit their desires. He thus imposes on apparently random nature an order which enables the river to enter into his consciousness and so take over his mind and bring order in turn into the confusion of his personal worries. The work and play of words produce the fusion of nature, culture and the individual in which each part, enhanced by the others, still retains its own integrity, is simply itself. This momentarily achieved Eden offers not only a model by which to judge the other parts of life, but a strength with which to endure them. The pattern of the river provides a story giving meaning beyond time.

Just as the rocky obstacles the river encounters divert its course without stemming its flow, so the violence of Paul's life does not destroy the essential truth he found in the grace of his Indian girl's dancing, in the mountains, and in the fusion of self, art and nature that constitutes the high moments of fishing. Nor can Neil's gradeless state destroy the truth embodied in the family whose love and protection he exploits. For finally the story is not about fishing, or even about mountains and families, but about the need of people for each other, and the need to accept their incapacity to solve some problems, their inability to give of themselves to somebody who needs their help badly but is unable to accept it. Watching Paul's triumph and tragedy, the author comes to understand his father's words:

> So it is . . .that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed. (p.81)

This acceptance is the reverse of the ambition to sujugate the land and its people to human desire which drove the frontier west. It is a recognition that nature is finally beyond us, but

not outside us.

Paul and Neil are both black Scots, rocks which divert and enhance, with comedy or tragic beauty, the river of life that eventually sweeps past them. This river runs through all our confusions, turning them into a story that gives assurance that humans can eventually learn to rise above the violence they perpetuate to achieve the harmony with nature of which fishing is a symbol, and which the human mind alone can conceive. This conception comes neither from the individual nor from nature, but from finding the source of culture in nature, from learning that "if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water" (p.95). Reality is beyond us, but we know it through language.

In the novel Hook's Mountain, James McQueen describes the partnership of man and nature in a similarly remote area of Tasmania. But whereas the people in Maclean's work are destroyed when they leave the wilderness, McQueen brings destruction into the heart of their 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 its 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 one 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 thedistance 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 contradicts 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.

Each of these narratives demonstrates the kind of love which could renew in the family the connection between culture and nature that has been lost in industrial societies. Neither, however, deals with the kind of work needed to build a culture that joins individual and nature within a larger society. Norman Maclean's work in the forest camps is vacation work that enables him to get the qualifications for his real work as an academic. The men that he works with are separated from the rest of society by the nature of their occupation. In McQueen's novel, Arthur works on the periphery of the community and Hook works only for himself. The books that link Arthur to a wider culture provide a refuge from the immediate, and so remove him further from his actual community. Other wilderness writers, like Ken Keasey in Once Upon a Notion in Oregon, or Rodney Hall in Just Relations in Australia, have dealt with the function of work in linking all three elements of our reality, but these two narratives, by excluding it, show more clearly the imbalance of our present situation.

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