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Maclean's Pastoral Vision in *A River Runs Through It*

by

Jason Nichols

B.A. University of Connecticut, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

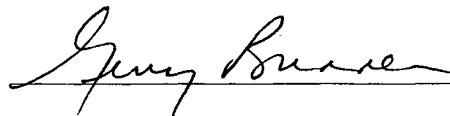
for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-15-03

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Maclean's Pastoral Vision in *A River Runs Through It*

Director: Gerry Brenner 

While some contend the pastoral genre disappeared with the distinction between country and city in the modern, industrialized world, the vast tracts of unsettled land in America's West sustain contemporary version of this form. The themes of retreat to the country (followed by a return to the city), critique of the values and lifestyle of the city, and reflexive critique of the pastoral invoked in traditional works such as Theocritus' *Idylls* or Vergil's *Eclogues* persist in contemporary literature. In *A River Runs Through It*, fly fishing provides a model for the pastoral movement of retreat and return that informs Maclean's story. The artist reconciles dualisms evoked by the oppositions between country and city. In traditional pastoral, artists redress the pastoral ideal with various motifs that indicate the presence of death in Arcadia. In Maclean's version of the pastoral, the deaths of his brother, home river, and way of life are counterforces to the pastoral ideal he conjures in his novella. Poetic exaltations are leveled by fact and abstractions grounded by the real in a series of corrections that act like ballasts to help Maclean balance in the middle ground between extremes often idealized in pastoral works. Maclean's novella, an elegy to a brother and to a river, a story about the complex relationships within a family and between nature and culture, continues today to provide an inspiring model of accommodation as people attempt to bridge their increasing distance from the natural world.

Maclean's Pastoral Vision in *A River Runs Through It*

In the approximately 250 years that people have been fly fishing in North America, scholars point to two booms in the sport's growth. Just after the Civil War, the railroad opened up the frontier to traveling sportsmen, ushering in a new era of retreat to the wilderness. Immediately after World War II, increased leisure time and the rise of the automobile provided another boost as weekend warriors sallied forth from a burgeoning suburbia into the woods for a little rest and relaxation. In addition to these two well-defined periods following major wars, scholars point to another phenomenon that has shaped the course of contemporary fly fishing: Robert Redford's 1992 movie adaptation of Norman Maclean's novella *A River Runs Through It*.

Fly fishing molted in the popular imagination from a blood sport to a chic way of communing with nature when Redford's movie appeared at the beginning of the booming economic climate of the 1990s. Drove of would-be anglers descended on Montana's mythic waters enabled by frequent-flier miles, the latest gadgetry, and fishing rods made from high-tech materials such as graphite and boron developed in America's quest for another frontier—space. Angling historian Paul Schullery writes that the Redford movie “ushered in a new era in fly fishing's aura as a fashionable activity. In no time, and ever since the film's release, fly fishers have appeared as part of car commercials and all kinds of other advertisements; we have arrived, rather like tennis and golf players, on the social scene (a friend in the Montana real-estate business tells me that the boom in regional home-buying by excited fly fishers lasted a year or so after the movie came out” (275-76). Or, as one writer stated it more succinctly in a recent *Chicago Tribune* article, “Fishermen, guides, real-estate agents. A river runs through them all” (Freedman 2).

Redford's interpretation of Maclean's story captured the essence of fly fishing and the sense of place evoked in the novella well enough to tug at the American imagination for the magic of Maclean's river. “Over the last decade, annual fishing days on the Blackfoot River expanded from 16,229 to 46,385, according to Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks agency” (Freedman 2). Rivers across the United States felt the double edge of the movie's popularity. While people complained of overcrowding on rivers such as the Big Blackfoot, the crowds brought a new level of consciousness to environmental issues. By the mid-1990s

Maclean's Blackfoot, a river he watched die in his lifetime from mine drainage and erosion caused by unrestricted livestock grazing, was on its way to recovery, and the native cutthroat and bull trout, once displaced by poor water quality, were returning through the efforts of people who loved and used the watershed. Maclean's humble story, an elegy to a brother and to a river, a story about the complex relationships within a family and between nature and culture, continues today to provide an inspiring model of accommodation as people attempt to bridge their increasing distance from the natural world.

Several articles in the growing body of critical work on Maclean's story collection, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, focus on the links between religion and fly fishing suggested throughout the text and signaled by the memorable opening line of the novel and the 1992 movie: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." While these readings lend valuable insight to a text with which critics struggle, they tend to ignore the more secular components of Maclean's novella or force those components into a religious framework. Few critics have explored the link between fly fishing and Maclean's aesthetic in depth, an area that deserves more attention.¹

In his essay "The Places of Writing," the Irish poet Seamus Heaney points to the etymology of the word religion as *relegare*, "to bind," and I have this embedded meaning in mind as the full force of fly fishing as religion in the Maclean family, a religion that seemed to require of its faithful only that they bind together in their enjoyment of nature. The Big Blackfoot River was clearly their church, and the pull of Maclean's home waters would carry him back from Chicago and his life as an academic at the University of Chicago each summer to restore his connection to the land of his youth.²

As an adult Maclean was conscious of the two worlds in which he lived and came to call both of them home, but each represented something different to him. Just as he divided his days between school and fishing in Montana as a child, so too he divided his adult life between the school year in Chicago and the summers at their family cabin on Seeley Lake, near the confluence of the Clearwater and the Blackfoot rivers:

"Very early I got the sense that this was a complete life—terrific intellectual discipline half the day, and freedom, nature, doing what I wanted to do, the world of . . . hunting and fishing, the other half. I didn't realize it was schizophrenia coming. When I saw that's

what was coming, I said, that's what coming, but it's not going to be schizophrenia for me. I'm going to see that I live two lives as one life—clear to the end.” (“Two Worlds” 118)

Despite his desire to live two lives as one in a seamless unity between intellectual discipline and the freedom of the woods—what he would later cast in Freudian terms as the ego and the id³—he implies in an early speech on storytelling that this unity was more idealized than actualized. One of his intentions for writing *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* was to attempt to shore up some of these fragments. “Before I die and disintegrate altogether, I wanted to put some of the pieces of myself together, and I have some pretty big splits in my personality” (“Montana Memory” 68).⁴ Equally as important as mending any splits between his dual citizenship and schizophrenic lifestyles, Maclean also sought to come to terms with his brother's death as part of his healing process.

Glen A. Love, author of several articles that re-evaluate the importance of pastoral genre in literary studies, has pointed out that Maclean “ably spans two different worlds” in the book in which “at least two sets of literary contrasts are at work . . . the contrasts between West and East, country and city, nature and civilization . . . and . . . youth and age, heart and head, energy and wisdom, [and] naiveté and tragic awareness.” He goes on to write that Maclean “stretches these patterns of contrast to their extremes” and that Maclean's is a “unique and startling distance, among the lives of our writers, between gypso logging [Maclean's time in the forest service] and a University of Chicago chair in literature” (202). Although Love points to these different sets of dualisms at work in Maclean's stories, he pursues a different course in his study “On the Sublime and the Beautiful.” A few of these strands suggested by Love need elaboration to show how Maclean weaves them into his narrative; specifically, the interaction between the extremes of country and city and nature and civilization, and how Maclean not only literally bridges these worlds but also reconciles them in his story in an aesthetic vision.

Fly fishing reconciles worlds of Chicago and Montana, art and nature, city and country. But more important it inspires a literary model for a pastoral movement of retreat and return that informs the entire story. I'll first discuss three uses of the term pastoral—as a genre, a work relying on broad themes of the genre, and a pejorative term—and all that these terms imply. Then I'll trace different pastoral spaces of

retreat as well as distinguish between physical and poetic pastoral counterforces in Maclean's narrative. In doing so, I hope to show how Maclean incorporates the larger pastoral movement of retreat and return in his artistic project into a technique as he holds the interplay of dualisms such as the city and country, culture and nature, and abstract and real in a tenuous, momentary unity in his story, creating, thereby, a complex pastoral. In the penultimate section of this paper, I identify Maclean's trope for the artistic middle ground that integrates the dualisms as the divide, which is both a space to traverse--a frontier--and a place (formed by two sides) for the writer to occupy. Finally, I suggest that Maclean's elegy for his brother is also an elegy for the Blackfoot River and is more than a romantic vision of a landscape but rather a political force that redresses those forces that attempt to erase the sense of place Maclean evokes in the story.

In the process of pursuing these objectives, I will point to some of the ways in which Maclean uses fly fishing to fuse the nature-oriented skills of his Montana childhood and his love of lyric poetry nurtured in eastern universities into a tragicomic vision that marries nature and culture while elegizing his brother. Just as Paul's rod conducts the electricity of fisherman and fish, Maclean returns "to [his] memory of Montana for [his] energy and to [his] years of teaching for the power lines to conduct it" ("Montana Memory" 69). Maclean uses his spatial and temporal distance from Montana as perspective and as a lever to do the work of his craft, which is to paint a water-colored picture of his brother's artistry.

Contemporary Versions of Pastoral

Understanding the pastoral genre is an entry point to discuss the underlying patterns of Maclean's novella. As with any critical approach, tracing the various ways in which Maclean works with or departs from a literary tradition provides a framework against which to read some of layers of architecture in the novel, describe the dramatic movement, and hopefully deepen a reader's engagement with the novel.

In *Pastoral*, Terry Gifford identifies three types of pastoral modern critics encounter. The first is a literary form with common motifs such as shepherds, idyllic rustic settings opposed to courtly lives or lives in the city, close relationships with nature, preoccupations with love, and utopian visions. Theocritus' *Idylls* (c. 316-260 BCE) and Vergil's *Eclogues* (c. 42-37 BCE) are the two primary classical works in this genre, which thrived in the English language in works such as Spencer's *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579);

Shakespeare's pastoral play, *As You Like It* (c. 1590); and Milton's pastoral elegy, *Lycidas* (c. 1637). The works mentioned above, and the best works in the pastoral genre, are vibrant, complex, and engaging texts that explore man's dynamic relationship with nature and the irony implicit in the pastoral form, which idealizes country life and nature while at the same time ultimately being subservient to the very things that distinguish the writer of pastoral from country life and nature—art, intellect, and a dependence on an urban audience.

Some, such as Barrell and Bull, editors of *The Penguin Book of Pastoral Verse*, contend that “true” pastoral in the English tradition disappeared with industrialization and the dissolution of the distinction between country and city (Gifford 3). However, the broader themes of retreat to the country (followed by a return to the city), critique of the values and lifestyle of the city and/or the court, and reflexive critique of the pastoral form invoked in traditional pastoral persist in contemporary literature. In fact, pastoral themes in North American writing still thrive because places in nature relatively untouched by civilization have been preserved. Though some such as Bill McKibben ask what part of our country is not touched by the ill effects of acid rain or ozone depletion, writers such as Max Oelschlager point out that even though “ten thousand years of cultural history separate us from intuitive awareness of the *Magna Mater*. . . . wild nature still offers opportunity for contemplative encounters, occasions for human beings to reflect on life and the cosmos, on meaning and significance that transcends the culturally relative categories of modern existence” (2). And since the pastoral Eden has always been an imagined space (at least in Christian-era pastorals), conceiving of a relative idea of nature as distinct from the city is easier for Americans than the British. For Western writers such as Maclean, it is fairly easy, especially when they spend a significant amount of time only “sixteen miles from everlasting snow,” as Maclean did when he summered in Montana each year. America's vast tracts of land and wilderness areas and national parks sustain the pastoral genre because pastoral relies on the concept of frontier, a region beyond or at the edge of a settled area, a borderlands in which the act of crossing and recrossing brings discovery.

Gifford's second, broader, characterization of pastoral centers around this concept of frontier, a border between the wild and cultivated, the country and city. Maclean primarily works with this second meaning in *A River Runs Through It*, although he also exploits some of the more traditional pastoral conventions of bucolic love, song contests, and redemptive nature in his satire of Neal, Norman's brother-

in-law visiting from California. The term “pastoral” can imply any literature describing the “country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” or any other dualisms invoked or implied by this contrast (Gifford 2). Ettin calls this sense of the pastoral a “mode” in which the pastoral is not explicitly operating in the familiar territory of pastoral genre but retains larger movements or motifs (64-66) of the form such as the primary movement in the pastoral “away from the city toward the country” (Marx 9-10) or themes of retreat and return. Variations on this theme include the movement from an artificial world to a more natural landscape, from civilization toward nature, or many other relationships between opposite forces associated with these broader dualisms.

In conventional pastoral tradition, such as in the poems of Theocritus or Vergil, this space of retreat was conceptualized as various versions of Arcadia. Over the years, pastoral tradition has cast this space in terms of a garden, a secluded place, a Golden Age, and a host of other oppositions against the predominant culture of the outside world such as the court or the city. This fundamental opposition between nature and culture or nature and art is one way of “schematizing a vast body of cultural polarities” (Ettin 29), such as true and false art, moral and immoral, and youth and old age.

By establishing these polarities, the pastoral critiques the world from which it retreats. Gifford points out that “pastoral is ‘carnavalesque’ in Bakhtin’s sense of playfully subverting what is currently taken for granted: the hegemony of the urban establishment” (23). In this sense, the pastoral is not merely a retreat to nature but a counter-cultural and subversive form responding to the dominant culture, a culture today characterized by an industrial juggernaut of fast-food chains, strip malls, and international corporations that erases all local forms of knowledge.

And just as poets from Vergil to Spencer and beyond criticize the world outside of the sphere of the pastoral world, they also criticize the limitations of the pastoral form and recognize it is implicated in the very thing it criticizes. Even as pastoral poets retreat to the natural world, the construction of that world belongs to the world of artifice and depends on culture for its proliferation. Because of this dual criticism—aimed at society and the pastoral idyll—it helps, as Humphrey Tonkin suggests, to distinguish between the pastoral world and pastoral works, which often seek to dissolve or complicate that world (as cited in Berger 787).

When discussing pastoral, critics often distinguish between the pastoral's simplistic versions—merely sentimental narratives of escape—and its complex versions, which are ironic, reflexive explorations of man's relationship with the city or society. As Gifford points out, when pastoral fails to raise critical questions about the dominant cultural order and explore man's complex relationship with nature, it conjures the third sense of pastoral as we understand it today—pastoral as pejorative. Here, pastoral is a negative term “implying the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country” (2). When this concept of an idealized, simplistic landscape goes unchecked, “the result is a simple-minded wishfulness” (Marx 10), which characterizes the pejorative notion of pastoral as escapist fantasy. Marx identifies this simple version of the pastoral as the one most often exploited in popular culture. The “mass media cater to a mawkish taste for retreat into . . . primitive or rural felicity” the most pervasive perversion of which are the ubiquitous and effective cigarette, beer, and automobile ads that exploit nature's alterity as an enticing selling point (6).

This simple idea of nature as refuge or retreat links closely with the romantic notion of nature as a redemptive or therapeutic force that cures problems often associated with the ills or stresses of city life. For example, in *A River Runs Through It* Neal is a bastardized version of the pastoral thrown into the Maclean's world by his parents who hope fishing will redeem their prodigal son. He retreats to the country and Black Jack's bar, and through his guile the artist manqué in his faux tennis sweaters woos the closest thing to a dairymaid on the Blackfoot, the prostitute Old Rawhide (with love tattooed on her bucolic buttocks), the emblem of perverted pastoral love. Neal is not saved by fishing or by his visit to Montana; instead, the unkind landscape sends him packing with a bad sunburn and possibly a dose of the clap. His role in the story is entertaining and shows the range of the narrator's filial attachments. He also opposes the knowledge and value system of the brothers Maclean. Contrasting Neal and Paul lends insight into a darker and more tragic vision of the dangers of the pastoral escape, which I discuss toward the end of my essay.

As I mentioned earlier, the complex pastoral explores critical issues and tensions between city and country rather than merely escape from city life. The complex pastoral centers on characters who hold in tension opposite worlds that may become complementary in the artist's vision. Characters in the poem bind the opposites such as Wordsworth's Michael, a sophisticated country person with sophisticated ideas and speech typically reserved for city dwellers, or Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond, the literary description of

which relies on tensions between solitude and society and nature and culture. The pastoral moves beyond a mere critique of society and locates the artist at the nexus of oppositional forces. While the primary goal of escapist literature is to distance the reader from society, the pastoral, traditionally through the figure of the shepherd, “seeks a resolution of the conflict between the opposed worlds of nature and art” (Marx 22). The pastoral has the ironic function of both criticizing “life as we ordinarily live it and also reconciles us to it. Through this process we see its faults more clearly and imagine what it would be like to live without them” and also “see what it would be like to live without society’s compensatory . . . virtues” (Ettin 30).

Terry Gifford calls this mutual dependency the “borderlands” of the pastoral because one border separates it from the city and the other separates the artist from wilderness and the “violent uncertainties of nature” (Marx 22). Speaking of the artist in this middle space, Marx writes that “His mind is cultivated and his instincts are gratified. Living in an oasis of rural pleasure, he enjoys the best of both worlds—the sophisticated order of art and the simple spontaneity of nature” (22). This pastoral retreat is characterized by a harmony between man and the environment situated “in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (23). A Venn diagram of two overlapping circles to create a shared space represents these circumscribed worlds that come together in the shared space of the poetic project.

Viewed in another way, occupying this middle ground is a balancing act between dualisms evoked by the oppositions between country and city in the pastoral. Occupying this middle space involves bridging the spaces between the opposites of city and country in the poetic project. For Maclean, this movement is also literal as he traveled from Chicago to Montana. In his story, the movement also takes both literal and figurative turns. Just as Maclean crossed the Continental Divide each summer in real life, in the story the spine of rock is a metaphor for both a place and a space to cross repeatedly between different worlds of nature and society on fishing trips with his brother. Like a real balancing act, the appearance of standing still requires many subtle correcting shifts, adjustments, and movements to occupy that precarious and lofty place idealized by the pastoral poet. In Maclean’s version of the pastoral, poetic exaltations are leveled by fact and abstractions grounded by the real in a series of corrections that act like ballasts.

Even in Vergil, reality tempered the dreamlike timelessness of the Arcadian vision. As Marx points out, in Vergil’s Arcadia the dispossessed Meliboeus was a reminder of the unstable political

situation in the outside world, and Isabel MacCaffrey writes that Spenser's imagined world in the *Calender* "includes storms and sunshine, friendly and hostile landscapes, benevolent and ravenous animals, good and bad shepherds, [and] high and low personages" (770). Raymond Williams writes in *The Country and the City* that the classical pastoral holds in tension images of a rural ideal with less-ideal ones: "summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour;" or "past or future with the present" (18). These corrections are what Leo Marx calls "counterforces" in *The Machine in the Garden*, his study of the tensions—productive and not—between technology and the pastoral ideal in America. Marx points to one of the more overt corrections to the pastoral ideal, the fairly common practice by Poussin and other seventeenth-century landscape painters of inserting the image of death into the "most delicate pictorial idylls." These painters would often insert the printed motto "Et in Arcadia Ego," meaning "I [Death] also am in Arcadia" (26). For Marx, the train in the American nature-writing tradition is a recurring trope for the counterforce that enters the pastoral scene creating a dissonance that demands to be resolved.

I use Marx's term counterforce to describe any image or presence in Maclean's story that "brings a world more 'real' into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision" that complicates and enriches the pastoral work (25). In Maclean's story these counterforces take two general forms, physical and poetic. Like the memento mori, they are both "stylized tokens of mortality." Neal's presence in the narrative, the first form of counterforce, represents a threat to the values instilled in the Maclean's close relationship with the land, their native knowledge. Neal has been stripped of his native intelligence, experienced a death of a sort, and is a stylized version of the "death's head" in the landscape paintings. His presence, like the train in Marx's study, is a counterforce to the social, knowledge, and value systems of the Macleans' world.

The second type of counterforce is a more pervasive and subtle force in Maclean's text and it, too, is a type of stylized mortality. I call this type "poetic," although the artistic crafting of the scenes in which Neal appears, even that Neal appears at all in the text, is also poetic to the extent that the author chooses to include him. Nevertheless, this aesthetic counterforce doesn't overtly threaten or run counter to the knowledge or values of the Macleans but rather grounds the abstract language and balances the poetic descriptions of the narrative. This counterforce "shadows" the narrative and the poetic descriptions, both as poetic foreshadowing, such as in the roll-casting episode, or as a literal shadowing of a scene such as in the final fishing episode in which a description of a harsh reality closely follows a poetic glorification or

idealization. Both of these types of poetic counterforces are tokens of mortality—whether foreshadowing Paul’s brutal death or grounding (insofar as death is an ultimate reality) poetic episodes that elevate language and subject.

These counterforces in Maclean’s text provide dissonances that beg for resolution. Maclean resolves these conflicts momentarily in the imagined middle ground of pastoral, which holds in tension the natural, idyllic world and the artificial, urban one. Recasting the Venn diagram I mentioned earlier into three dimensions, the divide between two drainages provides an objective correlative to the psycho-social roots of the opposing energies that drive Maclean’s narrative. The dual nature of the divide as both a space between and a place to occupy for its vantage point is a good analogy to the poetic project undertaken in the pastoral form. The transcendence and timelessness achieved in the work of art is grounded by its correlative in the natural world, and the transitoriness of the “momentary stay against confusion,” to use Frost’s characterization of the end result of a poem, is conjured in the movement and crossings that often take place over a divide in the story. The combination of the idyllic and real or poetic language and fact conjured in the pastoral elegiac tradition helps create what Marx calls the “twilight mood” of both “sadness” and “repose,” which is a momentary place of rest suspended forever in the creation of the poem or other work of art (31), a mood Maclean conjures in the final episode of the story in which Paul’s glory as a fisherman is shaded by the reality of his brutal and inglorious death.

The Pastoral Sense of Place

Nostalgia is one of the primary characteristics of the pastoral genre and can range from a simple longing for a more perfect past to a powerful and painful quest for home. The nostalgic look backward in the pastoral does not have to be to ancient times of green groves and dairymaids. As Gifford points out, “each only-just-vanished period had its pastoral values located in an idyllic recent past when things were less problematic than in the present” (9). In Maclean’s world, “less problematic” is a key point. Maclean’s world is not a fictionalized world like Arcadia. The machine has already entered the native’s garden. The Great Northern Railroad, gold mines on the Blackfoot’s headwaters, even the introduced species such as Eastern brook

trout all point to a world already touched by technology. It is, however, a world apart and, in Maclean's view, represents a world more pure and more youthful than the world in which he is living.

As Garber points out, nostalgia is more than just a sentimental feeling for a bygone era. Nostalgia is the "driving force that brings pastoral into being" and it is felt, not by the characters in the pastoral work, but by the creator of the work, "the pastoralist" (443). For Garber, establishing the force of nostalgia to generate a work of art is crucial to shielding it against criticism that the pastoral oozes with mere emotion: "Nostalgia is more than a feeling because, in its pastoral form, it is also the creator of an act. It is an impulse, an energy, a force, and a thrust" that "performs, or causes to be performed, . . . the *nostos*, the act of return, the homecoming (in its pastoral version actually a *seeking* for return or homecoming) that appears in all pastorals and is essential to the workings of the mode" (444).

Maclean's nostalgia is linked to what he calls his "Montana memory," which evokes both a sense of longing and sense of knowledge engendered by a strong relationship to place. Maclean writes about fly fishing as a way to describe his strong sense of place in the beautiful turn-of-the-century Montana and as an expression of a form of knowledge with "reality and importance" ("Montana Memory" 69). The pastoral places of longing, the worlds Maclean enters when he evokes Montana memory, are temporally, spatially, and epistemologically distinct from the outside world. The first look backward is to the Montana of the storyteller's youth and adolescence. That is the pastoral framework in which the writing of the story occurs. Within the narrative, the world of Montana is defined in opposition to the outside world; nestled within the world of Montana, itself a microcosm of the outside world outside, is another retreat, the world of the trout stream. In addition to this temporal and spatial separation, Maclean's pastoral world is epistemologically distinct from the outside world because the inhabitants' intimate knowledge of it generates a sensual and empirical closeness to the natural world. This multilayering of pastoral retreats adds complexity to the notion of pastoral in the novel and confounds easy conceptions of alterity. While it is necessary to speak in oppositional terms—country/city, nature/culture, real/abstract, complex/simple—Maclean's layering of worlds blurs these distinctions.

Maclean's story begins with his childhood and ends with an image of himself as an old man, exemplifying what Ettin calls the "pastoral emphasis on the extremes of youth and age . . . in the cycle of an individual life" (141). For Maclean, youth signifies toughness of spirit and camaraderie with his brother:

“We held in common the knowledge that we were tough. . . . I was tough by being the product of tough establishments . . . Paul was tough by thinking he was tougher than any establishment” (*River* 7). In youth, they were more alike than different, and grew apart with age: “Circumstances . . . helped to widen our differences” (*River* 6). Maclean’s perspective of writing, his backward look, aligns this pastoral world in a set of oppositions between yesteryear, youth, newness on one hand and the present, old age, and a sense of weariness on the other: “Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now . . . I usually fish the big waters alone although some friends think I shouldn’t” (104).

Maclean sets the pastoral scene by circumscribing a world he identifies as a “world just before this one” (“Montana Memory” 73), one that Wallace Stegner describes as having still “the dew on it.” Maclean considers the time of most of the novel, the summer of 1937, as markedly different than the time of writing because it was a “world of hand and horse and hand tools and horse tools” (“Montana Memory” 73) as opposed to the widespread mechanization of tasks and electronic gadgetry. While the Macleans’ world is not Arcadia, it is made distinct from the outside world by certain codes of conduct such as never being late for fishing and not stealing a person’s beer, skill with one’s hands rather than with machines, and a close relationship with the environment. It is a world of micro versus an outside world of macro, a world in which one knows the landowners along a given stretch of stream or exactly where one’s favorite beer was made.

What a beautiful world it was once. At least a river of it was. And it was almost mine and my family’s and just a few others’ who wouldn’t steal beer. You could leave beer to cool in the river, and . . . it would be a beer made in the next town if the town were ten thousand or over. So it was either Kessler Beer made in Helena or Highlander Beer made in Missoula that we left to cool in the Blackfoot River. What a wonderful world it was once when all the beer was not made in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, or St. Louis. (*River* 56-7)

The state of Montana is the spatial equivalent to the temporal component of Maclean’s pastoralism. Montana’s spatial distinction complements the temporal distinction—its remoteness prevents the rapid technological change that defines our modern sense of history and progress. The Montana of Maclean’s youth was intimately known and experienced and the world outside of that sphere of

understanding was “other”: “Painted on one side of our Sunday school wall were the words, God is Love. We always assumed that these three words were spoken directly to the four of us in our family and had no reference to the world outside, which my brother and I soon discovered was full of bastards, the numbers increasing rapidly the farther one gets from Missoula, Montana” (*River* 7). Though this damning moral judgment was reserved for all outsiders, Californians epitomize all that is evil in the world—a stereotype they haven’t been able to outrun to this day.⁵ Californians have usurped Maclean’s home waters, and in one of the few narrative intrusions that makes readers aware of the great gulf between the Montana of the late 1970s and Montana of the 1930s, Maclean writes, “I surrender it now only with great reluctance to dude ranches, the unselected inhabitants of Great Falls, and the Moorish invaders from California” (13).

Neal foreshadows the Californian invasion and is the harbinger of the outside world and its moral, environmental decay. He defiles the family’s home water⁶ and steals the brothers’ beer. However, from his perch in the modern world, Maclean can romanticize even his memory of Neal and Old Rawhide naked on an island in the middle of the Blackfoot. The narrator reflects on the gulf of time between the two worlds: “[W]hen I view [Neal and Old Rawhide] now through the sentimentality of memory, it belongs to a pastoral world where you could take off your clothes, screw a dame in the middle of the river, then roll over on your belly and go to sleep for a couple of hours. If you tried something like that on the Blackfoot River these days, half the city of Great Falls would be standing on the shore waiting to steal your clothes when you went to sleep. Maybe sooner” (67).

The intimate relationship with place Maclean has in his childhood and his feelings of dispossession as an adult mirrors pastoral themes of dispossession and loss. Andrew Ettin defines the pastoral “sense of a place” as a feeling of at-homeness characterized by “peace, contentment, belonging, and long association, as well as of easy possession” (129). Just as people call a place home, fishermen have “home waters,” those rivers or creeks or lakes with which they feel an especially strong epistemological and emotional connection. For Maclean, the Blackfoot River was a part of the family and as an inheritance had as much sustaining power as a bloodline. “[It] is the river we knew best. My brother and I had fished the Big Blackfoot since nearly the beginning of the century—my father before then. We regarded it as a family river, as a part of us . . .” (*River* 13). Maclean’s sense of place is linked with an intimate knowledge of that place. One comes to understand something by knowing how it was made, by scanning its underlying

poetics. By knowing the insects, the fish species, and being able to “read” the water, he both knew the river in an empirical sense as well as felt it was a part of him. Maclean’s personal geography, which becomes the basis of his memory, both of his knowledge and his longing, drives his fiction.⁷

Just as Maclean portrays Montana as distinct and apart from the rest of the world, he also portrays fishing as a retreat from Montana society. Fly fishing is another world: “Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart—I don’t know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep” (*River* 37) or again a few pages later: “Fishing is a world created apart from all others, and inside it are special worlds of their own” (40). Fishing also has its own set of traditions, etiquette, and rules, such as never being late for an appointment to go fishing.⁸ Fly fishing demands skill, and as Wallace Stegner has pointed out, “Skill is both competitive and proud. As the basis of a code, it can be harshly coercive on attitudes and conduct” (156). It is “right,” Stegner states, that “[Norman] and his brother, trained by their father in fly fishing and its mysteries, should reserve their deepest contempt for bait fishermen” (156).

The sense of time slowing down is one aspect that distinguishes fishing from the world of society: “I took my time walking down the trail, trying with each step to leave the world behind” (37). People don’t fly fish for subsistence, and if they wanted to accomplish something when they went to the stream, to have something to show for their hard work, fooling around with matching the hatch is one of the least efficient modes of putting trout in the creel. Fishing essentially departs from the Protestant-influenced capitalism-and-productivity ethic so prominent in our culture. As such, it is an activity perfectly suited to Maclean’s nostalgia for a world of hand tools and horses. And when opposed to the modern world, it is subversive and deviant, as Leeson emphasizes.

Fishing in general has always seemed to me a form of subversion anyway. In a world that insists upon “means” and “ends,” that dooms every path to a destination, fishing elides the categories and so slips the distinction altogether. You become engaged in the nonterminal, participial indefiniteness of “going fishing.” It exists wholly for its own sake, productive (at least in the late-twentieth-century sense of the term) of absolutely nothing. Measured against the ledger-sheet sensibility, corporate or Calvinist, it is a form of anarchy, and that the legions of bottomliners haven’t yet sniffed it out as something

dangerous baffles me a little. To go fishing is essentially functionless, though that's not at all the same thing as saying it is without purpose. (28)

In addition to valuing time differently than most who have no time for trout streams, fly fishers experience time differently on the trout stream. With its emphasis on imitating emerging insects, fly fishing is typically an exercise centered around a sense of time dictated by nature rather than the outside world. Combine that with the need to step outside of yourself and think like a trout to catch one and a fly fisher has the makings not of Zen, but of a good day on the stream. "The object is not to ambush the river . . . the idea is to trick yourself out of yourself, where you can get a better look" Leeson writes of learning to "read" a particular piece of water, a term fishermen use to describe the act of coming to understand the interrelationships between trout, trout food, and stream currents (111). Maclean describes the process of losing himself while fishing and becoming one with the natural world:

I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river. (61)

Critics such as Weinberger have used passages such as this to point to the religious nature of Maclean's vision in the story, and fly fishers have for a long time endowed their sport with religious import. Whether Maclean's vision is secular or religious, like the pastoral, religious terms offer a way to describe the obvious sanctity with which Maclean treats fishing. Weinberger quotes the philosopher George Santayana: "Another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion" (281). But one thing that distinguishes religion from fly fishing is that though both require faith (fishing to a less-consequential degree than religion), Maclean does not posit fishing as a means to redemption. At its best, fishing offers momentary visions of unity such as the one above and temporary respite from the outside world. But water reflects the viewer looking into it. Fly fishing is a nexus between nature and culture, and the frontier between the world on stream and the outside world is often a swinging gate.

Pastoral Counterforces

Maclean's counterforces, whether physical or poetic, function in a manner similar to the conventional pastoral's *memento mori*. They complicate and enrich the pastoral work by introducing elements of realism into the space of the pastoral retreat, whether that idyllic space is physical, such as the trout stream, or metaphysical, such as in Norman's poetic amplifications of Paul's fishing prowess. These various types of realism are also stylized versions of mortality, whether they represent the death of values and forms of knowledge the Macleans hold sacred in the form of Neal's character or darken Maclean's poetic descriptions with intimations of Paul's death. Neal's presence in the story is a pretty straightforward counterforce to the sanctity of the pastoral world. He represents all those forces implicit in Maclean's text that threaten the pastoral world of Montana—the large-scale companies that wipe out local ones, outsiders developing land along the Blackfoot, and the moral decay of a modern society that doesn't respect another's property. The counterforces to Maclean's art, what I call poetic counterforces, are more subtle, yet more insidious, and they threaten the metaphysical space of Maclean's pastoral retreat, his poetic idealizations of nature and of his brother Paul. I'll first take a look at Neal's presence in the narrative and then explore the types of poetic counterforces.

Neal enters the Macleans' world and his presence creates a tension that begs for resolution. Cast in Leo Marx's terms, Neal is the machine in the garden, or at least the disruptive force carried by train into the Macleans' world. Neal, the artist *manqué* and invasive species from California, opposes the Macleans' local knowledge and is a foil for the artistry of the brothers Maclean, in sport and writing. He is a baitfisherman and a liar. He is vain, shallow, and has been stripped of his native intelligence by the cultural forces of the West Coast. Neal has no Montana memory. In fact, he becomes one of the Moorish invaders from California whom Maclean is forced to accommodate. Neal's sedentary ways oppose the dynamic motion of fly casting, and his ignorance of the stream opposes the intimate knowledge required of a good fisherman.

“Those are squaw fish and suckers,” I told him, without looking.

“What’s a sucker?” he asked, and so became the first native of Montana ever to sit on a rock and ask what a sucker was.

In the deep water below him was a little botch of pink that was sure to be angleworms with one hook running through all of their guts. On the leader, just above the worms, were two red beads, strung there no doubt for cosmetic purposes. The botch of angleworms and the two beads hung within six inches of the nearest sucker. Not a fish stirred, and neither did the fisherman, although both were in plain view of each other.

(River 38)

However, Neal is part of a more insidious subtext to Maclean’s narrative. He portrays what Paul fears he will become if he leaves Montana. One of the most suspenseful moments in the novella occurs when Paul and Norman stop for a rest.

It was so hot we stopped and sat on a log. When we were silent we could hear the needles falling like dry leaves. Suddenly the needles stopped. “I should leave Montana,” he said.

“I should go to the West Coast.” (57)

Norman writes, “It was hard to know whether the utterances I had heard were delphic” (57). Everything stops and for a moment a reader must wonder whether Paul can leave Montana, both the source of his genius and his trouble. But he chooses Montana and says to Norman, “‘I’ll never leave Montana. . . . And I like the trouble that goes with it’” (58). Paul seals his fate by choosing fishing over “making something” of his life, recalling Maclean’s implication that Paul’s tragic flaw was his stubbornness to change and his reluctance to accept help from others. Later, thinking of Paul’s reluctance to accept Norman’s offer on the trout stream of flies to fish with, Maclean writes, “I started by thinking that, though he was my brother, he was sometimes knot-headed. I pursued this line of thought back to the Greeks who believed that not wanting any help might get you killed” (90). Paul’s hubris mirrors Neal’s shallowness and self-absorption. Though Paul does a good job of hiding himself in his narratives—“Paul nearly always had a story to tell in which he was the leading character but not the hero” (13)—Neal is both the leading character and the hero

in his stories: “The mirror behind the bar looked like a polished Precambrian mudstone with ripples on it. Neal watched it constantly, evidently fascinated by the dark distorted image of himself living automatically” (33). But part of the complexity introduced by Neal in the novel is seeing Norman attempting to mediate—both in the drama of the story and in the writing of the story—between the extremes of Neal, who represents the corrupting forces of the outside world and Paul, who represents the corrupting forces of stubborn nativism. Paul’s artistry also has a darker side.

Paul’s desire to be one with nature—“I need three more years before I can think like a fish” (101)—takes on a dark, existential aspect just as it takes on the poetic aspect of him shadow-casting later in the book. His “immersion,” that element that defines both the brothers’ Maclean’s sense of place, seems suicidal as he plunges into the canyon water that instilled fear in Norman:

If he studied the situation he didn’t take any separate time to do it. He jumped off a rock into the swirl and swam for a chunk of cliff that had dropped into the river and parted it . . . sometimes all I could see was the basket and the rod, and when the basket filled with water sometimes all I could see was the rod.

The current smashed him into the chunk of cliff and it must have hurt, but he had enough strength remaining in his left fingers to hang on to a crevice or he would have been swept into the blue below. Then he still had to climb to the top of the rock with his left fingers and his right elbow which he used like a prospector’s pick. When he finally stood on top, his clothes looked hydraulic, as if they were running off him. (20)

This suspenseful scene introduces the shadow-casting episode that allows a glimpse of the lighter side of Paul’s dedication to his art.

In addition to the tensions and complexities ushered into the novel by Neal’s presence, other forces in the text undermine the view of fishing as a “world apart” and counterweigh Maclean’s poetic amplifications. While the retreat into nature is a positive force for Maclean, he also conceives that the mind in nature is inseparable from the mind in the outside world and that the pastoral retreat is a myth. Two of the novella’s three fly-casting episodes, the roll-casting and shadow-casting passages, are central to this

point, for they show that fishing is not care's surcease; it mirrors the characters' and the author's complexity and adds richness and depth to Maclean's pastoral.

These counterforces act as ballasts to Maclean's lofty poetical account of his brother and idyllic pastoral space in the novel. As the text moves from simple, technical, manual-like descriptions of casting in the first casting episode of the novel, in which Norman and Paul are shown learning the fundamental four-four rhythm of the overhead cast, to the roll-casting episode (which is part manual, part literary foreshadowing), to the highly poeticized shadow-casting episode (which has little basis in fly-casting reality), the poetic "shadings" increase in intensity.

The first casting scene of the novella is notable for its straightforward account of a method of casting that contrasts with the later, highly poeticized, shadow-casting episode. Mirroring the time of childhood in which it occurs, the first description of casting is innocent in its detailed preoccupation with casting fundamentals. The four-page description is devoid of any of the foreshadowing of Paul's death in later passages. This scene teaches readers, along with Norman and Paul, how to cast "Presbyterian-style, on a metronome" (*River* 4). As the novel progresses, Maclean moves from descriptions of technique fundamental to fishing to more artistic rendering of fishing. While the roll-casting passage demonstrates a fusion of technique and poetic license, the shadow-casting episode is an example of pure artistry, from Norman and Paul. Just as Maclean is preoccupied with the geology of the canyon and the hydrology of the trout stream, he teaches fly fishing's underlying structures—particularly casting—enabling readers to appreciate the poetry at work in the story.

To better ground this claim requires some biographical context. At Dartmouth and then the University of Chicago, Maclean taught poetry. The few essays he wrote show a preoccupation with the backbone of verse—the meters and feet and inner rhymes that create a rhythm that adds to a poem's meaning. In one essay Maclean bemoans the lack of fundamental knowledge English literature students have of the tools of their trade. Modern students (and critics) too quickly speak of aesthetics without being able to provide an analysis of the art. Maclean writes of students in poetry courses: "[T]hey have to know some things about craft before they can see and feel some of the complex beauty" ("The Pure and the Good" 77). In *A River Runs Through It*, Maclean provides the reader with the necessary background of fly fishing as both an end in itself and an art. In *A River Runs Through It*, knowledge of the sport of fly fishing

becomes inseparable from the its poetry. Maclean writes, “It is essential that the story be both the poetics and poetry of fly fishing because, unless you can see and feel about my brother as his father and brother did, I have no story to tell about him” (“Teaching and Story Telling” 96).

As the story slowly progresses from the “how-to” to the “how-wonderful,”⁹ naturalistic and pure descriptions give way to poetic and ironic ones. In the roll-casting episode, Maclean is not merely conveying a technique; he is conveying both a state of mind and providing a counterforce to the poetic impulse to idealize fishing and man’s relationship with the natural world. The roll-casting episode shows Maclean flexing his literary muscle. Even as he asserts his incompetence to make this cast, his artistry with the pen is its equal.

Norman’s timidity in the canyon mirrors the insecurity he feels casting in front of his brother. Throughout the novella, Paul is both prefigured by and supercedes Norman’s minor failures on the stream. Paul teaches Norman how to cast better, how to set the hook in time with the fish, and how to cast under the brush. Norman brings to the stream both the social responsibilities of babe-sitting his inept brother-in-law and the familial obligation to be his real brother’s keeper. Though he is a fine fisherman, he is a little awkward and slow to wake up to the world of the trout stream. Even the descriptions of the moments of catching and beaching a fish reflect this awkwardness.¹⁰ The fishing retreat is far from a simple movement away from the cares of the world; it becomes an amplification of those cares in nature’s amphitheater, the canyon. This adds to the idea that for Maclean, Paul’s fishing is a performative art.

As Marx points out, the counterforce in the pastoral can come from the city border (Neal) or from the wilderness border. The Blackfoot River “roars loudest” in the canyon, where it is “no place for small fish or small fishermen. Even the roar adds power to the fish or at least intimidates the fisherman” (*River* 15). While trying his roll cast, Paul senses his brother watching him struggle with casting, and he feels like an amateur: “I knew he had stopped to watch me. . . . I knew that I wasn’t looking like much of anything” (15). Despite his avowed “warm personal feeling” for the canyon, Norman admits that “it is not an ideal place for me to fish” (15) because of the cliffs and trees behind the fisherman that prevent a conventional overhead cast. Fly fishermen have developed a special cast to deal with these limitations, called a roll cast, which Norman admits is a “hard cast,” and one that “I have never mastered.”

Maclean’s description of the roll cast is the novella’s second casting lesson.

The fisherman has to work enough line into his cast to get distance without throwing any line into his cast to get distance without throwing any line behind him, and then he has to develop enough power from a short arc to shoot it out across the water.

He starts accumulating the extra amount of line for the long cast by retrieving his last cast so slowly that an unusual amount of line stays in the water and what is out of it forms a slack semiloop. The loop is enlarged by raising the casting arm straight up and cocking the wrist until it points to 1:30. There, then, is a lot of line in front of the fisherman, but it takes about everything he has to get it high in the air and out over the water so that the fly and leader settle ahead of the line—the arm is a piston, the wrist is a revolver that uncocks, and even the body gets behind the punch. Important, too, is the fact that the extra amount of line remaining in the water until the last moment gives a semisolid bottom to the cast. It is a little like a rattlesnake striking, with a good piece of his tail on the ground as something to strike from. (15-16)

This fairly conventional description of the roll cast compares favorably to the many casting manuals then and now that describe the technique similarly. However, the nature images and the violent, forceful imagery in the piston, revolver, and punch Maclean uses to describe the application of power in the casting stroke set this description apart from conventional ones, and makes it markedly different in character than the first casting passage that was a straightforward description of casting technique. The “punch” reflects the Macleans’ propensity to street fight and their toughness. The phrase “the wrist is a revolver that uncocks” foreshadows Paul’s broken hand and death by pistol whipping, Paul having “been beaten to death by the butt of a revolver and his body dumped in an alley” (102). The rattlesnake imagery ties in the threatened feeling Norman feels in the canyon and the natural world. It also ties in with the dangerous and dark side of the natural world glimpsed in the previous scene in which Paul jumped into the water.¹¹

The roll-cast passage undermines the notion of the beneficence of the pastoral retreat into nature. Insofar as this seemingly naturalistic and realistic description of the technique of casting is infused with metaphoric language that foreshadows Paul’s death, it subtly implies that Paul’s mastery is ironically part of his undoing, a theme foreshadowed in both the scene in which Paul almost drowns in the Blackfoot and when he chooses Montana and all the trouble that comes with it. The casting scenes become, in addition to

forming the organizing principle of Maclean's narrative, spaces in which Maclean holds technical descriptions in tension with artifice.

In this passage technique is married to literary description and recreates the pastoral movement. The natural world is fused with the world of manuals. But literary foreshadowing and dangerous images of nature mirror the author's initial apprehension of being in the canyon in the first place and undermine the notion of fishing as simple or a world apart. Norman brings his cares to the world of fishing, making impossible the idea of its being "perfect and apart." In Garber's eloquent terms, this is an example of the "clash of the pastoral conceiving with the machines that seek to undo it" (431), though here the machine is not a locomotive, but rather the narrator's knowledge of the tragic future. These darker elements in the description of the roll-cast suggest a mind influenced by the true path of events (the author's nostalgic mind) and the intimidation of the canyon. Man and nature fuse in this clash of opposites. As Andrew Ettin points out, "In pastoral literature, experiences and emotions are contained within finite limits. Those limits are implied by the patterns revealed within the natural world and within the pastoral way of life, consonant with the patterns of the natural world. The containment is necessitated by the fragility or delicacy of the experiences and emotions, or by the tension between pastoral and nonpastoral experience" (22).

While Paul's death is foreshadowed in the poetic language of the roll-casting episode, a different shadow hangs over Maclean's description of the third casting episodes, his brother's shadow-casting. In the description of this passage, both of the Macleans are at their artistic height, and just as with the roll-casting episode, the counterforce increases in proportion to the level of artifice. Earlier in the novel, Norman admires Paul's efficiency: "One reason Paul caught more fish than anyone else was that he had his flies in the water more than anyone else" (*River* 36). Ironically, in Paul's most supreme artistic act, Paul violates his own rule and fishes with his flies in the air. This is another scratch in the canvas that invokes the memento mori motif of the complex pastoral and a clue that Norman is obeying art rather than Montana memory. Just as Paul departs from the four-four time of his father's metronome, the storyteller also emerges by leaving behind technical descriptions of casting to capture the poetry of the art.

The river above and below his rock was all big Rainbow water, and he would cast hard and low upstream, skimming the water with his fly but never letting it touch. Then he would pivot, reverse his line in a great oval above his head, and drive his line low and

hard downstream, again skimming the water with his fly. He would complete this grand circle four or five times, creating an immensity of motion which culminated in nothing if you did not know, even if you could not see, that now somewhere out there a small fly was washing itself on a wave. Shockingly, immensity would return as the Big Blackfoot and the air above it became iridescent with the arched sides of a great rainbow.

He called this “shadow casting,” and frankly I don’t know whether to believe the theory behind it—that the fish are alerted by the shadows of flies passing over the water by the first casts, so hit the fly the moment it touches the water. It is more or less the “working up an appetite” theory, almost too fancy to be true, but then every fine fisherman has a few fancy stunts that work for him and for almost no one else. Shadow casting never worked for me, but maybe I never had the strength of arm and wrist to keep line circling over the water until fish imagined a hatch of flies was out. (21)

As Norman writes, the idea is “almost too fancy to be true” and indeed it is, but made nonetheless artistic by its description. Paul has taken the square four-count of his father’s metronome and converted casting into the syncopation and individual expression of jazz. Maclean probably made this cast up. It is not just one of the artistic casts to which Maclean refers in the beginning of the story, “special casts that anyone could predict would be difficult . . . casts where the line can’t go over the fisherman’s head because cliffs or trees are immediately behind [the roll cast, which Paul helps Norman with], sideways casts to get the fly under the overhanging willows, [another cast Paul helps Norman with] and so on” (3). The “shadow cast” had not even been invented.¹²

The droplets of water cascading from the script of the line around the caster in a halo are like daubs of color on a canvas that, when viewed from a distance, compose a scene like a pointillist painting. “Big-grained vapor” mixes with “finer-grained” spray to literally elevate the brother’s image from a “wreath in the wind” to “rays of the sun.”

Below him was the multitudinous river, and, where the rock had parted it around him, big-grained vapor rose. The mini-molecules of water left in the wake of his line made momentary loops of gossamer, disappearing so rapidly in the rising big-grained vapor

that they had to be retained in memory to be visualized as loops. The spray emanating from him was finer-grained still and enclosed him in a halo of himself. The halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself. The images of himself and his line kept disappearing into the rising vapors of the river, which continually circled to the tops of the cliffs where, after becoming a wreath in the wind, they became rays of the sun.

Rhythm was just as important as color and just as complicated. It was one rhythm superimposed upon another, our father's four-count rhythm of the line and wrist being still the base rhythm. But superimposed upon it was the piston two count of his arm and the long overriding four count of the completed figure eight of his reversed loop.

The canyon was glorified by rhythms and colors. (21-22)

Some of the fancy casting in Winslow Homer's paintings offer insight into Maclean's description of Paul's shadow casting in the novel. Like some of Homer's casting conundrums such as in "Casting, 'A Rise,'" (1889, watercolor on paper), the artist sacrifices realism for the play of the line on the canvas, which, in turn, intrigues, entrances, and appeals to viewers' eyes with its curves. The cast becomes larger than life and suspends any expectation of a goal, which is to hook a fish (often indicated in rings on the water's surface in Homer's watercolors). Instead of catching a fish on a hook, the scene catches viewers by the cast's swirling line. In *Winslow Homer Artist and Angler* Paul Schullery questions "the obvious disproportion of the cast and scene": [W]as Homer just enjoying the graceful flow of the line, or was he setting us up to admire a picture so much that we wouldn't even notice that it made very little sense as a casting scene?" (78). Maclean's shadow cast invites the same questions.

The shadow-casting scene is immediately "shadowed" by an incident that anticipates the phone call later in the story in which Norman learns of Paul's death. A ringing telephone wakes Norman up in the middle of the night with the news that his brother is in jail. This movement from a state of suspended time and transcendence to realism recurs in varying degrees throughout the novella and, like the roll-casting episode in which the poet consciously foreshadows Paul's death, juxtaposes pressures from the outside

world against an idyllic dreamlike state. To describe the narrator's dream state, the author invokes language similar to that which he used to describe the shadow-casting scene such as "river mists" and "molecules": "I learned later it must have been around two o'clock in the morning when I heard the thing that was ringing, and I ascended through river mists and molecules until I awoke catching the telephone" (*River* 23).

The mystical and mythical act of fishing meet the real world when the narrator catches the telephone:

The telephone had a voice in it, which asked, "Are you Paul's brother?" I asked, "What's wrong?" The voice said, "I want you to see him." Thinking we had poor connections, I banged the phone. "Who are you?" I asked. He said, "I am the desk sergeant who wants you to see your brother." (23)

When Norman enters the holding area in the jail, he covers the image of his drunken brother with the image of him as an artist. "Wanting to see him in perspective when I saw him, I stood still until I could again see the woman in bib overalls marveling at his shadow casting. Then I opened the door to the room where they toss the drunks until they can walk a crack in the floor" (25).

Everyone evades the reality of Paul's problem, partly because no one knows how to help him and partly because Paul's artistry extends beyond fishing in his ability to live a double life and hide his troubles with creditors. Norman attempts to avoid reality by transposing the image of Paul shadow-casting over the image of him drunk and disheveled in the jail cell. Paul mirrors this cover up by covering up his face with his "enlarged casting hand":

He was standing in front of a window, but he could not have been looking out of it, because there was a heavy screen between the bars, and he could not have seen me because his enlarged casting hand was over his face. Were it not for the lasting compassion I felt for his hand, I might have doubted afterwards that I had seen him. (25)

In addition to redressing the dreamlike scenes with a solid dose of reality, these tricks of perspective throughout the novella show an author preoccupied with the dangers of nostalgia. Is the author merely covering up the truth about his brother with an artistic rendering of him as an exemplary fisherman? To answer this question, it is important to see that, as with all narratives of the sublime, Maclean's

conceptions of the beautiful and good depend on intrusions of ugliness. Perspective means everything. The following passage enhances the mixture of beauty and ugliness:

It was a beautiful stretch of water, either to a fisherman or a photographer, although each would have focused his equipment on a different point. . . . The reef of rock was about two feet under the water, so the whole river rose into one wave, shook itself into spray, then fell back on itself and turned blue. After it recovered from the shock, it came back to see how it had fallen.

No fish could live out there where the river exploded into the colors and curves that would attract photographers. The fish were in that slow backwash, right in the dirty foam, with the dirt being one of the chief attractions. (17)

Maclean's storytelling oscillates between the "color and curves" invoked by the "rhythms and colors" of Paul's shadow-casting and "the dirty foam" of Paul's life such as the episode at 2 a.m. at the drunk tank. There's really no satisfactory resolution to this because Paul is not a fish—though he wants to become like one. But Maclean moves back and forth between surfaces and depths, pretty pictures and gritty reality. In themselves they don't have to be viewed as pastoral per se. But when considered in light of his larger project of reconstructing a more perfect, Edenlike time—while at the same time trying to describe the tensions of that time—these oscillations between surfaces and realities become crucial to understanding Maclean's complex pastoral.

The final fishing scene reveals what some critics have called the apotheosis of Paul the fisherman. In it he improves and succeeds on all of Norman's minor failures, the narrator zooming out on his subject to describe Paul in action from a distance. Paul moves into position to cast: "As he waded out, his big right arm swung back and forth. Each circle of his arm inflated his chest. Each circle was faster and higher and longer until his arm became defiant and his chest breasted the sky" (97). Maclean does not describe his cast, but insinuates that Paul is lengthening out line for a long one. Then, he presents his fly: "Paul's body pivoted as if he were going to drive a golf ball three hundred yards, and his arm went high into the great arc and the tip of his wand bent like a spring, and then everything sprang and sang" (98). The alliterative rhyme signals the release of the cast's energy toward its target and dramatizes the motionless wait as Paul lets the

fly settle and drift without drag on the water's surface. "Suddenly, there was an end of action. The man was immobile. There was no bend, no power in the wand. It pointed at ten o'clock and ten o'clock pointed at the rock. For a moment the man looked like a teacher with a pointer illustrating something about a rock to a rock. Only water moved. Somewhere above the top of the rock house a fly was swept in water so powerful only a big fish could be there to see it" (98).

The fisherman becomes abstract. No longer Paul, he is "a man." Then, the fish takes the fly and everything becomes connected in an electric frenzy, the rod, the man, the fish, and the water all conductors to some powerful voltage of the world, a powerful life force that Maclean tries to conjure in the surging of a powerful fish on a light line with a trembling piece of wood whose weight is only four and a half ounces.

Then the universe stepped on its third rail. The wand jumped convulsively as it made contact with the magic current of the world. The wand tried to jump out of the man's right hand. His left hand seemed to be frantically waving goodbye to a fish, but actually was trying to throw enough line into the rod to reduce the voltage and ease the shock of what had struck. (98)

Here Maclean both describes the technique for playing a large fish and attempts to conjure what it feels like to have that fish on the end of a fly fisher's line. What he describes as throwing line into the rod to reduce the shock is a technique used by many big-game fisherman, that, in tarpon fishing, is called "bowing" to the fish, a term that conjures both the technical skill and the reverence Maclean achieves here. The author describes the epic fight in which the fish makes "three long runs" and carries the angler far downstream as "electric": "Everything seemed electrically charged but electrically unconnected. Electric sparks appeared here and there on the river" (98).

This elevation of the brother in his final act of artistry reverses time and depicts brother Paul as a primal being in his environment. As Barry Lopez might put it, he's wearing his landscape like clothes: "[Paul] came charging up the bank showering molecules of water and images of himself to show what was sticking out of his basket, and he dripped all over us, like a young duck dog that in its joy forgets to shake itself before getting close" (101). Paul is both child—"it looked more like children playing"—and predator: "The man put the wand down, got on his hands and knees in the sand, and, like an animal, circled another animal and waited" (99).¹³ Paul is young, full of energy, and at one with his natural environment, much like

the impetuous Blackfoot River and the pastoral Edenlike qualities of Montana. But this painting, as the artist repeatedly points out in the story, is just that—artistry—and not a reflection of the real world, which is far more complicated. Paul’s complete immersion in the waterscape recalls the artistic vision of unity with nature and the blunt fact that he is in over his head with gambling debts.

The amazing electricity and light of the scene in which Paul is present for the last time in the story give way to shadows as the pastoral scene is redressed by reality: “In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us” and just as the family symbolically merged into one by the river—“he dripped all over us”—so too they are brought together in grief.

For, when the police sergeant early next May wakened me before daybreak, I rose and asked no questions. Together we drove across the Continental Divide and down the length of the Big Blackfoot River over forest floors yellow and sometimes white with glacier lilies to tell my father and mother that my brother had been beaten to death by the butt of a revolver and his body dumped in an alley. (102)

Maclean posits fishing as a world apart and perfect several times in the novel, but he also makes it clear not all fishing trips are redemptive. The world is ugly and hard and harsh, which is part of its beauty, and real time doesn’t stand still on trout streams. No matter how good a fisherman Norman’s brother Paul was, he was a worse gambler and drinker, and fishing can’t save him from the world, just as it can’t save Neal from his world. Maclean’s pastoral refuses to idealize country life. In fact, neither the genius loci and paragon of native intelligence, Paul, is redeemed by the nature he is so close to, nor is Neal by his mock pastoral vision of return and retreat. Maclean is apprehensive about notions of unity or transcendence or stability. While Maclean portrays his brother in all his glory, these moments are as ephemeral as an insect hatch, and glory in fishing doesn’t translate over into a life lived well.

For Maclean, the worlds of fishing and society are complementary. The poet depends on both to provide the dramatic movement in the novella or vivid imagery in a particular passage. They are contained and coexist in the world of the story, which is conceived of as removed from the author’s place and time of writing. *A River Runs Through It* is both a nostalgic vision of a time before the rest of history and a sequence of interrelated imagery and narratives that undermine the fantasy of the pure, idyllic space.

The Great Divide: Finding the Middle Ground

Another way of conceiving the artistic middle ground between the world of retreat and the world to which the author must return is the trope of the divide, which is both a space between—a gap—and an actual place. The divide is a space to both cross and occupy and a platform that affords a unique perspective, much like traversing the frontiers of the pastoral to arrive at the middle ground, the shared space between extremes in which the artist creates. This trope befits both the geography of the West and the landscape of the pastoral poem. A trip up a mountain to a stream's headwaters can be a return to origins just as a trip West from the East turns back time for Maclean.¹⁴

Just as Maclean envisioned the ideal life as being divided between academics and the woods, Chicago and Montana, crossing rifts between worlds is a predominant theme in *A River Runs Through It*. One trope for the space between different worlds is the divide. The divide marks watersheds as well as a boundary between silence and communication that is traversed in a common ritual: "As usual . . . we sat silently respectful until we passed the big Divide, but started talking the moment we thought we were draining into another ocean" (*River* 13). Crossing the divide marks the movement from society to the world of the trout stream and it also signifies traversing the barriers between Paul and Norman.

Fishing provides a common bond for the brothers and a common language with which to express themselves when other forms of communication fail. Maclean's quest to reconcile opposite worlds in the story also is an attempt to understand his brother's world. Maclean describes the pass they traverse on the way to the Blackfoot as the divide "between our two worlds," (14) but the antecedent to "our" is vague. Maclean's ambiguous language implies both brothers share the perception that fishing is a different world than the one from which they are coming and that both brothers occupy different worlds. Earlier in the book, Norman mentions that he cannot understand his brother and that "circumstances"—Norman's work time abroad and marriage, and Paul's dedication to fishing and Montana—"helped widen our differences" (6). When the brothers fight for the first and only time, their differences come to a head, but they reconcile through nature. "Perhaps we always wondered which of us was tougher, but, if boyhood questions aren't answered before a certain point in time, they can't ever be raised again. So we returned to being gracious to

each other. . . . We also felt that the woods and rivers were gracious to us when we walked together beside them” (8-9). Fishing is both a literal and figurative traverse over the divide. “Paul and I crossed the Continental Divide and left the world behind,” but Maclean recognizes the unstable borders between the constructed worlds and adds “so I thought” (51).

The divide represents the middle ground occupied by the poet in the pastoral. Maclean provides numerous clues throughout his story that stories are told on such ridges, though some stories, like some poems, are truer than others. Paul tells his “Continental Divide stories” that are veiled descriptions of his own antics told in the journalistic third person; Neal’s flagrant first-person lies, in which the otter is as out of place in its environment as Neal is, take place on top of the divide (33); and the author’s divide, his artistic middle space between nature and culture, is a point of perspective. The following passage from “The Cook, and a Hole in the Sky,” helps elucidate Maclean’s conception of the divide. As he stands on the divide between Idaho and Montana, looking back at the mountain on which he had spent three summers, he marvels at how he could know something so well:

When I lived on it, it was a hard climb out of a basin full of big rocks and small grubs, a tent with a finally-mended hole, trees decapitated by lightning, no soft place to sit and one grizzly and one rattlesnake. But here from the divide, it was another reality . . . From the divide the mountain I had lived on was bronze sculpture. It was all shape with nothing on it, just nothing. It was just color and shape and sky. . . . So perhaps what we leave behind is often wonderland, always different from what it was and generally more beautiful. (166)

This artistic vantage point from the space shared between worlds is a platform from which to look backward and forward, to the past and the future. The abstract vision is artistic and beautiful, but it ignores the details of reality like Maclean’s concept of storytelling in which all facts are subservient to the story telling and his conception of good holding water for trout.

In Maclean’s vision, the trope of the divide is both a space and a place.¹⁵ It is a rendering of the artistic middle ground conceived in a third dimension particularly appropriate to a Western scene. It is both metaphorical and rooted in place, so the tendency toward an abstract conception of a retreat, such as Arcadia, is corrected by the reality of place. Like the trout stream, Maclean’s worlds are both allegorical

and real. This synecdochic relationship helps Maclean's vision of transcendence that isn't logocentric; in fact, conceptions of truth and transcendence are constantly shifting in Maclean's text. The divide is a space that depends on duality, yet it is distinct from them and provides a point of view that Maclean attempts to describe as occurring to him on the trout stream. Ted Leeson writes that trout streams are "points of fixity, certain small stillnesses in the incessancy of the world that anchor us with a sense of continuity and location. They are points of vantage and reference, places to stand from which the patterns of the past might be read and those of the future, perhaps, dimly inferred" (1).

Maclean writes that his book began at the river, just as the Blackfoot's headwaters begin on the Continental Divide. He writes of the Big Blackfoot:

In death it had its pattern, and we can only hope for as much. Its overall pattern was the favorite serpentine curve of the artist sketched on the valley from my hill to the last hill I could see on the other side. But internally it was made of sharp angles. It ran seemingly straight for a while, turned abruptly, then ran smoothly again, then met another obstacle, again was turned sharply and again ran smoothly. Straight lines that couldn't be exactly straight and angles that couldn't have been exactly right angles became the artist's most beautiful curve and swept from here across the valley to where it could no longer be seen.
(*River* 62)

The artist's graceful curve, the one that obscures the jagged angles from the artist's vantage point in the distance, is Maclean's ultimate art and his rendition of his brother's serpentine casting. When he describes his brother in the last fishing scene as "a distant abstraction in artistry" (101), he does so from the distance of the narrator and of the nostalgic author. Throughout the novella, the disparity between things up close, or reality, and the magical illumination of art that elevates life to the point of ignoring the actual, are held in tension. Even in the final, climatic moment in which the author elevates the brother, Paul's so-called apotheosis, the author suggests the tricks of representation on which the deceits of fly fishing and writing hinge. In fact, Maclean writes that when faced with the decision of whether to view his brother up close or from a distance in the final scene, he chose to portray his brother "so far away he could not be seen as an individual. I decided he should start fading away as an individual existence just before he faded away

forever” and for him to be “an abstract in the art of fishing in the most climactic act of the art—landing a big fish” (33).

Maclean recognizes the artifice of the construction and that it necessitates a vision from a distance that obscures the close-up reality. His description of the river, of where fish live (not suitable for photography); his brother shadow casting and the subsequent jail scene; and the final fishing scene are examples of this. But nature’s and his brother’s beauty lie in being complicated. By drawing these comparisons to nature, the author can elegize his brother despite his shortcomings. “The Elkhorn and the Brown Trout are also alike in being beautiful by being partly ugly” (41).

The act of “making up a story and the people to go with it” is a way of “understanding what happened and why” (104) in the same way that for Seamus Heaney a poem can lead to answers of questions about our real lives. The unity Maclean achieves in his text between opposing forces also changes the real world in the way poet Seamus Heaney says that the imagined world of poetry can redress the actual. Heaney states that if we think of our given experience as a labyrinth and then think of the poem as a way of working through the labyrinth, then we can look to art as providing us a way of living and of seeing that has practicality and application in our everyday lives.¹⁶ Just as art is a pastoral space of temporary retreat defined by the borders of a trim size or line count, fishing can also provide a beneficial way of looking at the world: “The vision of unity that had made the aesthetic order . . . possible had been made possible by the retreat” (Marx 243). Leo Marx writes that a good writer of pastoral “not only asserts but exemplifies the possibility of harmony. When he assimilates new and seemingly artificial facts into the texture of a poem, he provides an example for all men. What he achieves in art they can achieve in life” (242).

Fresh Woods and Pastures New?

Maclean presents his final twilight vision, the hopefulness tempered by melancholy, in terms of a natural model of unity. His conception of unity is not cast in terms of a mental or spiritual transcendence, but more like a final composting process in which solace comes from the recognition that we will return to the earth.¹⁷

Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters. (104)

Maclean's final vision is not characterized by the brilliancy and electricity with which he portrays his brother in the final fishing scene. Instead, unity comes as slow as the process of erosion, river water grinding river rocks to silt in due time. "Eventually," Maclean writes "all things merge into one." Maclean's finale is sure but melancholic. Positing unity in ecological terms grounds that vision in immediate, common terms and images and experiences rather than abstract formulations. In this regard, the ecological vision provides options that do not rub the postmodernism project of deflating capital letters and grand statements about telos the wrong way—we get old, streams erode. Larger processes, outside of immediate realms of experience, speak to our lives.

Like the memento mori of conventional pastoral, Paul's death darkens any visions of transcendence or peace Maclean posits in the story. As Ettin points out, the pastoral has a long elegiac tradition. "The funeral elegy is so significant for the pastoral tradition because it permits the poet to speak of the natural cycle of life and death, to contain them both in a comprehensible system, and to establish a necessarily ironic relationship of values between them" (118). He points to Milton's "Lycidas" as one example of a pastoral poem that both "marks a death" and "commemorates the life": "At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:/ Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new" (118). Although Milton intends "fresh woods and pastures new" as a figure of speech, is it possible to read the contemporary pastoral vision of an idealized future as an ecological reality? To what green pastures and fresh woods do we turn when our rivers run muddy from overgrazed pastures and fresh woods logged to its tributary banks? Can the pastoral longing for home look forward to another home, an ecological vision in which the home place

from which we are separated, the *oikos* at the root of ecology, is restored? As Glen Love points out: “Now, it is the death of that conception of nature itself that so troubles our pastoral dreams” (201).

For Love, this death of nature means two things. First, the pastoral traditionally cultivates the natural world to such an extent that it erases its wildness. One criticism of the pastoral is that it privileges the perspective of the cultivated visitor at the expense of the native. In the pastoral equation in which “the tension between the extremist values of primitivism and urbanism” have “allowed the pastoral the normative and conciliatory territory world in between” (Love 202), the narrator gathers up the best of both worlds and at his worst is a hypocrite driving to a Greenpeace meeting in a gas-guzzling SUV or a globe-trotting fly rodder forking out five grand to get in touch with his primal hunter for a week.

While Maclean, to a certain extent, is working with this pattern of retreat and return, I hope I have shown he paints a more complex picture. He is shaped by the trout streams on which he spends his time and returns to society as a different person. Fly fishing merges a dependency on or mentorship of the land with the ingenuity and craftsmanship of man. As such, it is both a natural and cultural construct. “We loved each other because we loved the same sights and sounds and rivers, because we recognized, not only that we were parts of it but that all of us in some ways were masters of it. . . . And we knew that nature was often the master of us, and we loved both nature and ourselves because of that” (“Teaching and Story Telling” 94-95). It is as close to the natural world as our anthropomorphism allows, and Maclean’s view is sophisticated enough to understand the inanity of completely embracing a biocentric view of nature. As David James Duncan writes: “Fly fishing is a flawed way of communing with rivers. Humans invented it, after all.” He goes on to write, however, “But it’s still the best mode of river communion I’ve found” (302).

By locating his pastoral space in real places—Montana, and more specifically, the trout stream—Maclean’s vision depends on a modern conception of wilderness; that is, a land relatively untouched by man, and not on the conventional conception of the pastoral middle ground as a cultivated garden. Maclean’s education in nature, like Wordsworth’s, is “fostered alike by beauty and by fear,” and in not merely, in Meeker’s words, “simplified civilization” (as quoted in Love 204). However, as Maclean’s text implies, the lines between nature and civilization are blurry. Man’s tampering with the environment is insidious and many have argued that in this age of ozone depletion, acid rain, and genetic tampering of fish (as just an example) that there are very few if any spots untouched by man. Conceptions of nature, then, are

largely relative and defined in relation to the outside world. One of the complex pastoral's ironies, according to Ettin, is that ". . . we are made to realize that the appearance of being separate and different from the rest of the world is indeed merely an appearance" (11). In the modern world, the membrane between nature and culture is permeable.

The second death of nature that Love implies is less cerebral. As Kate Soper in her book *What is Nature?* suggests, the hole in the ozone isn't theoretical (151). While Marx's machines have been squatting in the garden for some time, acid rain, acid mine drainage, and polluted watersheds are more insidious and widespread counterforces. In setting up this opposition between worlds, the pastoral prefigures "an idealized future, a restoration of rural values that urbanisation, or industrialisation, or technological alienation from the earth have lost" (Ettin 20). While Maclean's political agenda is not overt, he provides an ethic for interacting with and knowing the land by emphasizing native knowledge. For Maclean, art stitches together culture and nature in such a way that redresses cultural forces that marginalize the importance of nature through forces as benign as sentimentalizing pastoral retreat in the media or the widespread commodification of trees and water. For artist and activist David James Duncan, the sense of place evoked by Maclean is more than a romantic vision of a landscape and is "as a political force, a cultural allegiance, a way of daily life, a combative alternative to the industrial juggernaut that treats watersheds, people, soil, and forests as liquid inventory" that is "as necessary to human beings as water or soil itself" (52). Because of the reality of pastoral counterforces, Marx also implies that the final vision of pastoral is necessarily toward action: "The machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics" (365).

Though the Blackfoot is still not without its problems, it has better water quality than when Maclean fished it as an adult. Hollywood can't work with the ugly truth as well as Maclean does in his book, and Redford filmed most of the movie on the Gallatin River on the other side of the Continental Divide from the Blackfoot River. After the movie, however, and through the efforts of local artists and activist groups such as the Clark Fork Coalition (of which the Blackfoot is a tributary) and Trout Unlimited, native cutthroat and bull trout have been restored, overgrazing has been curbed, and water quality has improved.

As Browning has illustrated, one of Maclean's primary themes in the story is communication. *A River Runs Through It* attempts to bridge those spaces between interpersonal relations as much as between man and nature. In its second life as a love poem to the Blackfoot River, the book fueled the "war for Norman's river," which bonded a rag-tag group of otherwise diverse interests into a force that opposed cyanide heap-leach mining and helped create a stronger sense of community in towns along the river.¹⁸ Gifford states that the pastoral "retreat informs our sense of community," and that "no literature could be more important to our imaging our very survival" (Gifford 174) at a time when there are vast spaces between people as well as between people and the natural world. The Blackfoot river runs through Maclean's story, but it also runs through the very community that continues to fight for its survival.

With the threat of a cyanide heap leach mine still looming on the headwaters of the Blackfoot, it's clear that environmentalists' accomplishments, whether through art or activism, are tenuous. But among the hordes of people making the pilgrimage to Norman's river each summer are CEOs, senators, teachers, poets, and hosts of other people who can make a difference in the river's fate. The pact between nature and culture obligates people to give back to a river that gives so much to them. Norman's story is a paean to his home water, just as it is a love poem to his brother. When we listen well enough to the river's words to begin to understand them, water will haunt us too.

Notes

¹ David L. Vanderwerken, in his essay “Fishing for Understanding in Maclean’s ‘River,’” suggests the importance of reading *A River Runs Through It* as “a fishing story” but falls short of the mark by focusing primarily on the metaphorical implications of fishing as a redemptive act. For Maclean, the everyday aspects of fishing are important to his story. Don Johnson, in his article “The Words Beneath the Stones,” raises to the forefront the critical question of art, pointing out that the book deals with art on several levels: the art of fly fishing and the art of fiction writing. He discusses the parallels between the two, finally positing that Paul’s salvation at the end comes through Norman’s painful and difficult process of writing, just as learning to fly cast in their father’s eyes is necessarily difficult: “All good things—trout fishing as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy” (*River* 5).

² See “The Two Worlds of Norman Maclean: Interviews in Montana and Chicago” (115) and “Teaching and Story Telling” in *Norman Maclean*: “During the fifty years since [teaching at the University of Chicago], I have returned every summer to a log cabin my father and I built in 1921, on a lake south of Glacier Park, and now that I am retired I spend about a third of each year there sixteen miles from everlasting snow” (90).

³ The split between Norman and Paul can also be cast in Freudian terms, but Maclean is uneasy about such formulations; he merely borrows from them, as in his portrayal of the childlike enthusiasm with which Paul plays his fish in the last fishing scene. Maclean writes in ““This Quarter I Am Taking McKeon””:

There is no greater commonplace from Freud than that in the beginning we are all Id, the principle of pleasure and lust, and the Ego, the principle of reason and sanity, comes later and is only a feeble outgrowth of the Id, is always subservient to it, and is developed only to protect the Id from the censure of society and to allow it the maximum fulfillment in a world where orgy is a bad word.

But long before I reached the age of retirement I realized the reverse of this can be a second truth. The ego can become so powerful that it can woo the id and make pleasure a servant of reason and sanity. . . . I would be willing, then, I think, to consider the art of teaching as the art of perverting nature . . . and I would accept, not wholeheartedly I admit, a definition of teaching as the art of enticing the ego to seduce the id into its services.” (*Maclean* 66)

In a note to me on an early draft, Gerry Brenner points out that part of the problem with Maclean’s formulation in this passage is that he altogether omits the third party of the Freudian triangle, the superego, which is the component of guilt (conscience) and ego ideals that insist upon its prerogatives. Brenner points out that “the elegiac impulse, one of the driving forces behind the novel’s creation, has a measure of guilt in it, guilt for not having taken action to prevent someone’s death (and Norman certainly asks himself frequently enough whether he could intervene to help Paul) and guilt for having unconscious, fratricidal wishes. (After all, Neal is a stand-in for Paul in this respect, and Norman’s hostility for Neal drains the hidden hostility towards Paul, clearly the father’s and mother’s favored son—as Norman makes evident.)”

⁴ Maclean identifies a significant split in his personality as being “brought up in western Montana, and from the time I was 16 I was working in the Forest Service and logging camps” and “since 1924 I have made my living teaching American and English literature in two fairly high-powered universities. . . . So I wanted, before I died, to make one piece out of a once pretty good timber-willie and the William Rainey Harper Professor of English” (*Maclean* 68-69).

⁵ In contemporary fishing writing, Californians are still considered the scourge and all-mighty symbol of those invading the West, such as in this passage from Leeson’s *Habit of Rivers*:

[The] antipathy that Oregonians (at least some of them) bear for Californians is the stuff of legend in this part of the world. It’s less a rivalry than the sense of resentment borne by the invaded, whose homeland has suddenly become a consumable commodity—one of the richer ironies of living in a place whose economic existence is already underwritten by extractive industries (*Habit of Rivers* 30).

⁶ Maclean writes, “I never again threw a line in this hole” (*River* 68).

⁷ Duncan writes of the power of this sense of place in *My Story As Told By Water*: “It is *only* the personal geography—the one experienced in daily depth—that can in fact be *in*-habited, and only the personal geography that has that Yeatsian ability to connect us, root to root, to people or places . . .” (73). Maclean’s personal geography, which becomes the basis of his memory, both of his knowledge and his longing, drives his fiction.

Similarly, fly fishing is both an extension of place and a way of knowing a place. For Paul, it was the organic outflowing of his connection, and for Norman, the son returning, it was his way of reconnecting to the land, a process Norman undergoes in the fishing scenes as he shakes the cobwebs off his brain and hones up his fish-striking skills. Fly fishing, as a skill of those in touch with the land and as a skill itself not entirely artificial but dependent on the land, is an ideal metaphor for Maclean’s conception of the blending of nature and culture in his storytelling, his art. It also embodies what Maclean calls “Montana memory,” for it requires on-the-toes thinking, a receptivity to the natural world, and reflects a bond among men. When writer Ted Leeson moved to Oregon to take a teaching position, fishing became for him not an act of memory, but one of learning, and fishing became a way of knowing, a way to learn about a place you are in. “. . . I looked to rivers and fish as a way of gaining some initial access to an unfamiliar landscape that had suddenly become home” (2).

⁸ “Although he and I had acquired freedoms as we grew up, we never violated our early religious training of always being on time for church, work, and fishing” (*River* 34).

⁹ Stephen Tanner’s astute characterization of the two main strains of fishing literature.

¹⁰ Here is Norman catching and killing a fish:

He was lying covered with sand on the little bar where I had landed him. His gills opened with penultimate sighs. Then suddenly he stood up on his head in the sand and hit me with his tail and the sand flew. Slowly at first my hands began to shake, and, although I thought they made a miserable sight, I couldn’t stop them. Finally, I managed to open the large blade to my knife which several times slide off his skull before it went through his brain. (19)

Everything is awkward, clumsy, and real about the description of this scene, expressing feelings that mirror Norman’s general feeling of apprehension on this particular outing. His movements aren’t as smooth,

refined, or expert as his brother's, as emphasized in the novella's last fishing scene. Even his prize capture seems diminished somewhat by the realistic clumsiness of the dead fish: "Even when I bent him he was way too long for my basket, so his tail stuck out" (19). "I had a fish, so I sat down to watch a fisherman" (19).

Paul, the fisherman-artist, beaches his fish in the final scene thus:

He skidded him across the rocks clear back to a sandbar before the shocked fish gasped and discovered he could not live without oxygen. In belated despair, he rose in the sand and consumed the rest of momentary life dancing the Dance of Death on his tail. (99)

The comparison shows the heightened poetic description of Paul fishing and the assuredness and the confidence of both the fisherman and the artist writing about him. Here the pathetic fallacy works in an artistic rendering of nature. Maclean does not want his descriptions to be transparent; he wants the reader to be aware of the artist painting the picture. Hence dramatic anthropomorphism: "the shocked fish gasped and discovered he could not live without oxygen" and elevated language foreshadowing the brother's death: "dancing the Dance of Death." This language evokes the memento mori motif.

¹¹ This passage is reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's early poetry in which images of the sectarian violence in the urban centers of northern Ireland creep into his consciousness and his poem as adjectives and metaphors in his otherwise naturalistic poetry. In his poem "Trout," Heaney describes the fish as "a fat gun-barrel" that is "fired from the shallows" and darts like a "tracer-bullet" (29). This poem is from a volume titled *Death of a Naturalist*, which means, in part, the loss of a certain homespun naiveté and childlike innocence to the realities of the modern world. The native knowledge gives way to a deeper understanding of the world marked, in Blakean terms, by both innocence and experience. Maclean's naturalist dies when he leaves Montana for the academic world and he begins to see the world as different worlds defined in relation to their opposition.

¹² Jason Borger, the shadow-caster in the Redford movie, had to develop a cast that mirrored the artistic conception of this one:

The "Shadow Cast" . . . [w]ith its near-poetic amplification, . . . was perhaps more literary in its scope of remembrance than piscatorial. Regardless of Norman's desired interpretation, though, the Shadow Cast has to be included in Robert Redford's silver-

screen adaptation. . . . Translating such literary depth . . . was not a simple task. No descriptions of Shadow Casting existed outside of Norman's book, so the cast was assembled." (*Nature of Fly Casting* 258)

¹³ Earlier in the novel, Paul is portrayed as a primal hunter, again from the perspective of Norman and the father together, watching Paul fish. "We could catch glimpses of him walking along the bank of the river which had been the bottom of the great glacial lake. He held his rod straight in front of him and every now and then he lunged forward with it, perhaps reenacting some glacial race memory in which he speared a hairy ice age mastodon and ate him for breakfast" (84). In this humorous passage, the author evokes a return to primacy that he considers more seriously in the last fishing scene of the novella, cultivating a more toned-down, but more powerful, image of the same idea.

¹⁴ As Ted Leeson points out, as one ascends the mountain, time is reversed, the seasons slow, and flowers that have already bloomed in the valley are in full bloom at higher elevations and insect hatches already spent in the large valley streams are just beginning in the colder headwaters. "The farther you rise, the closer you come to the sources; the highest streams are the youngest and the freshest. . . . There is a paradox to altitude: Traveling toward these origins of newness seems to push time backward. The direction is antihistorical, to destinations that have been least touched by the years and remain most like what they once were" (143).

¹⁵ Garber points out that the pastoral genre is defined by its spaces: "the pastoral's inner geography, that moonlike topography of gaps, lacks, and lacunae, . . . is clearly the space through which the pastoral nostos moves. And whatever the fiction says about a successful return, those implacable spaces that dot the internal landscape of pastoral can never be traversed" (446).

¹⁶ *Redress of Poetry*, 2

¹⁷ But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness" (*River* 63-64).

¹⁸ Duncan writes in *My Story As Told By Water*:

In November 1998 we collected signatures for, and passed, an unprecedented ballot initiative that bans all new cyanide heap-leach gold mines from the state forever.

A greater Montana grassroots victory against our extraction-industry-serving government has perhaps never been won. Though corporate gold-diggers are trying to overturn our anti-cyanide law—though the war for Norman’s river may not in fact be over till the sin of greed departs the human heart—Norman says it best: “All good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.” Corporate miners still lurk in our watershed. But tens of thousands of poignantly disorganized river lovers now have their eyes glued to the clean green flow, and vow to mount as many ballot initiatives, concerts, lawsuits, protests, and expressions of love as it takes to keep heap-leachers off Norman’s river till kingdom come” (Duncan 148).

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