

Fall 1980

A Drift Towards Nostalgia: The River Trip as Journal of a Changing View of American Wilderness

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.8xgd-3gvt>

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A DRIFT TOWARDS NOSTALGIA:
THE RIVER TRIP AS JOURNAL OF A CHANGING VIEW OF AMERICAN WILDERNESS

A Special Major Thesis
Presented to
The Departments of English and History
and the Environmental Studies Program
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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December, 1980

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for Starr,
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Acknowledgments

In the writing of this paper I owe a debt of gratitude to many people. Acknowledging it is one of the more pleasant parts of the work. Donald Aitken provided the initial impetus for the project by planning and arranging for the Special Major. Martin Litton, David Horosz, Betty Mohr, and Edward Mogler suggested pertinent sources. Jack Haeger offered guidance in the techniques of documentation, and in the spirit of scholarship. Jack Burrows read and constructively commented on portions of the paper. Members of the San Jose City College library staff provided gracious support.

For the encouragement of my thesis committee I am grateful. Robert Woodward supplied detailed, helpful textual criticism. Robin Brooks suggested and supplied many excellent sources. Gary Klee's recommendations added strength and clarity to the paper's structure.

My friend, Jackson Benson, helped me in perceiving the paper's concept and direction. He painstakingly critiqued much of the manuscript and suggested ways to strengthen the theme. His willingness, in itself, was a big help.

The contribution most difficult to describe was made by my wife and family. For their sacrifice and their faithful support I am grateful.

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Abstract

As early as the 1820s and 1830s, observers of the American scene, such as George Catlin, John James Audubon, and Alexis de Tocqueville, were expressing misgivings over the rapid settlement of the American West. In their concern over the passing of pristine landscapes and native cultures was a note of nostalgia for an earlier time, the era of exploration, whose journals echoed the freshness of discovery and spoke of the beauty and inexhaustible promise of the New World. The elegiac tone has become more explicit in our own time. In the works of twentieth century writers is seen a haunting awareness that nature itself is vulnerable to human actions, and that the option of even glimpsing a pristine landscape may be vanishing. This paper explores this shifting perception of nature by analyzing selected works of American literature or New World exploration which deal with river experiences or travels. The time span of this study ranges from the 1970s back to early European exploration of North America, particularly the French explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Writers throughout the time span studied have viewed rivers as representing wholeness, integrity; or as ultimate primordial elements of the natural world, and, by extension, of continental, cosmic forces, large-scale cycles and patterns--though manifestations of such qualities become more explicit in twentieth century works. Rivers, being

complex and unpredictable, an unfamiliar medium, have always posed the possibility of upset, loss, or privation. A river also signifies passage; and passage, to the early explorers, meant access to fabled lands and riches. But perceptions and needs have changed. To today's traveler a river and its environment offer the possibility of purification, renewal, identification with the unfathomable. Such a transformation may be accompanied by a lasting change in perception or perspective.

Introduction

My purpose is to trace perceptions of nature in its essentially unmodified form, often termed wilderness, as they are reflected in literary texts. Since nature is a vast topic, I attempt to provide thematic unity by focusing on experiences which take place on or near rivers while one is afloat or afoot. I would ask, though, that the river experience be construed as representing the wilderness sojourn at large.

In mode and in the perceptions which it evokes, the wilderness river experience of the twentieth century differs markedly from its antecedent of four centuries ago. To trace the evolving differences, the paper generally follows a chronological progression. Chapter 1, "Overview," presents a brief account of evolving long-term western attitudes toward nature in order to provide a historical framework for discussing the narratives which follow.

Chapter 2, "The Boundless View," encompasses the period of European exploration of North America from the 1500s through the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806--and beyond. The notion of the New World's resources and extent as essentially without limits dies hard; its traces can still be detected, for example, in today's call to energy self-sufficiency through tapping our "unlimited" fossil fuel potential. It is not surprising, then, that evocations of boundlessness persist after the era of exploration. They extend well into the 1800s, and can be found in the journals, here included, of travelers and naturalists

such as Brackenridge, Audubon, Nuttall, Thoreau, and Muir.

With the concept of boundlessness as a starting point, the shifts in perception which have occurred since the 1820s can be more clearly distinguished. This tilt in attitudes (Chapter 3, "The Shifting View") accompanies a recognition that the original landscape would soon undergo drastic changes. One visionary writer, George Catlin, would project his thoughts sublimely into a "futurity" of farms and villages, and from there gaze fondly back to a virginal landscape--a kind of prophetic nostalgia. In the 1830s occurs a clustering of concern over the receding wilderness, especially among writers who traveled extensively around the American frontier: Catlin, Tocqueville, Cole, Audubon. But like the displacement along a fault line, the shifting in perspective is not always clear-cut or uniform. Some later writers--Thoreau, Muir, and Powell--exhibit little anguish over this issue in the works studied here, perhaps because they immersed themselves in enclaves of wildness where abrupt change seemed unlikely.¹ For that reason, and because the nature they wrote of had retained its integrity, Thoreau and Muir are included in Chapter 2, though they post-date the "shift." Powell appears in Chapter 3 because of his undulations toward measuring the terrain. As a professional surveyor who, on occasion, embraced the unfathomable in nature, he is an apt symbol of the ambivalence of his time.

Chapter 4, "The Nostalgic View," encompasses our own time. A wilderness (river) experience, within a twentieth century context, can be thought of as a deeply meaningful, perhaps transcendent event--call it

¹ Each of these three writers, elsewhere, evinced substantial concern over the passing of the original American landscape, and advocated conservation in its use.

psychic renewal, spiritual refreshment--which occurs to one in a natural setting as a result of being in that setting.² Going into the wilderness to enhance the state of one's soul is typically a twentieth century phenomenon, with notable nineteenth century antecedents. The externalities of the journey are important, but more crucial is the need to chart one's inner being and then to share the vision, lest the occasion be wasted. Doused by the rapid's spray, notebook and pencil stub in hand, today's traveler seeks to capture the elusive substance of his wanderings. In this age of self-analysis the ambience, the heartbeat, of the river comes through more clearly than in earlier times. Perhaps a heightened awareness of a free-flowing river's ephemeral status--its vulnerability to human modification--rivets the traveler's gaze and impels him to etch the vision in memory before the habitat vanishes. The consciousness of looming change invokes a nostalgic image of an earlier, reputedly simpler time when the earth's natural lineaments, such as rivers, could be counted on to stay where they were. The river itself now becomes both cynosure and symbol, and the need to "save" it induces a distinctly polemical note into the narrative.

The earliest European explorers of North America felt no such compulsions. Their motives melded the worldly with the unworldly, but they were unlikely to admit to psychic or esthetic impulses. Their mission was to bring back geographic data, engender commerce, and build empires. Since their journals were intended as records of what they saw, not as self-revelation, clues as to how they perceived the New

² The required space and time vary. A five-minute stroll in a pristine acre might do, whereas the ambience of a month in the Arctic wilds might be punctured by the squawk of a transistor radio.

World landscape tend to be disappointingly meager. They were not wont to emblazon their feelings on each page.³ Emotion remains locked inside the formulaic notations. Perceptions must be extracted through inference and through a study of whatever preconceptions can be surmised from the historical context.

The relative accessibility of the traveler's feelings--his tendency to disclose or to conceal his inner state--thus bears upon the selection of works for this study. For each era represented here I have attempted to choose works which exhibit characteristic attitudes toward nature. But the problem of selection varies with the period. From the less voluble early era, writers were selected who, unlike Alexander Mackenzie, offer some glimpses into their mental states. Nineteenth century writers are markedly less reticent than their predecessors in divulging their thoughts. With the literature of our own era the problem is one of sifting through a profusion of self-disclosure. In Chapter 4, "The Nostalgic View," I provide samples of representative genres, which I find convenient to group into four categories: the reminiscence, the reconnaissance, the last-chance trip, and fiction. One work, Brautigan's Trout Fishing in America, seems to transcend categories, and so defies easy labeling.

Though the river was the natural travel mode for earlier explorers,

³ A case in point is Alexander Mackenzie. During two remarkable journeys (1789 and 1793) Mackenzie followed the river which was later named after him to the Arctic Ocean, crossed the Rocky Mountains, and, as W. Kaye Lamb puts it, "became the first white man to cross the full width of North America. Literally and figuratively he added new dimensions to knowledge of two vast areas of the continent." See W. Kaye Lamb, ed., The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 1. Yet the several hundred pages of Mackenzie's journals and letters offer hardly a shred of evidence of how he felt about his accomplishments.

the means of physical ingress, the sine qua non, their references to the river itself--to the river as river--were often oblique and scanty. A river, after all, is not sealed off from the rest of the landscape. River is wilderness in microcosm. Both ecologically and topographically it is the living, formative element in its watershed. In all the literature examined here it is a cohesive force: everything ultimately comes back to the river. But despite its fascination, a traveler does not restrict his attention to the water; and a study of early explorations would be particularly impoverished if references to the surroundings (the prairie, the river-eroded banks, the animals which frequent a riparian environment) were overlooked. In tracing perceptions of nature the river is a compelling though not an exclusive focus. To make it such would be to cut the river off from the habitat which it forms and nourishes. And since many significant insights are contained in passages which deal with river-centered environments, not just with rivers, it would also deprive this study of much of the evidence needed to establish a basis of perception: an estimate of how men looked at nature in the days when the notion of a vanishing wilderness would have been hard to grasp.

Chapter 1

Overview: The Evolution of Nature Perception

It is a truism that what one is has something to do with what one sees. The eye must be educated. The notion that landscape per se is an object to be seen and enjoyed is relatively new. In medieval times travel was dangerous and uncomfortable, and the traveler was likely to regard the Alps, for example, as grotesque obstacles rather than the sublime manifestations which most visitors would consider them today. "The idea that the world contains scenery," writes Paul Shepard, "marks one of the great evolutions of human perception." Scenery hints at something detached from the observer, whose "disinterested attitude . . . would be inconceivable if he believed the surroundings to be haunted by spirits and art to be a form of magic." Later, he adds, "Scenery is no scenery without the right cultural baggage."⁴

The "right cultural baggage," which might be thought of as a cultivated appreciation for an uncultivated terrain, did not develop overnight. Throughout most of western history a negative concept of wilderness, or land basically unmodified by the hand of man, has prevailed.⁵

⁴ Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature (New York: Ballantine, 1972), pp. 117, 130.

⁵ Current definitions of wilderness are more technical than philosophical, hinging mainly on how much land, and what degree of wildness, are required in order to qualify as legally dedicated wilderness. Federal wilderness lands, generally found in national forests and national parks, are specifically protected from mining, logging, roadbuilding, and commercial exploitation.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the word generally signified desert, a place where survival was difficult and conditions harsh. Wilderness was the repository of pagan influences and unknown forces which might cause men to degenerate or become bestial. Significantly, in the biblical context, a wilderness experience also provided an occasion for repentance and moral purification. In classical mythology the wilderness was the home of potentially harmful creatures such as satyrs and centaurs. Rivers served as metaphors for the crossing over from life to death, but also for the journey through life and for the origin and sustenance of life. The primeval forests of northern Europe contained trolls, while monsters frequented the desolate crags. In general, wilderness was regarded in the Old World as fearsome and inhospitable--a place to be avoided if at all possible.⁶

In keeping with this negative frame of mind, some of the early colonists in the New World expressed their repugnance toward the unbroken forest which met their eye, even before they set foot on land. A "hideous & desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts & willd men. . ." is William Bradford's depiction of the Pilgrims' first impression of their new home. "For summer being done," he continues, "all things stand upon them with a wetherbeaten face; and the whole countrie, full of woods & thickets, represented a wild & savage heiw."⁷ The vocabulary used by

⁶ See Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973). Particularly helpful was the expansive treatment of the changing attitudes toward wilderness in Chapters I through IV.

⁷ Of Plymouth Plantation, ed. Harvey Wish (New York: Capricorn, 1962), p. 60.

subsequent frontiersmen is revealing. Modifiers such as "howling," "dismal," and "terrible" are routinely associated with wilderness and indicate an attitude consistent with Bradford's. Later settlers frequently employed military analogies to convey their distaste for unmodified nature. Wilderness was an "enemy" to be "conquered" or "subdued," or in general an obstacle to progress--an adversary relationship which even today constitutes the prevailing ethos.⁸

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries intellectual and religious tendencies in Europe evolved which would partially alleviate American misgivings toward wild country. Adherents of deism regarded nature as a proper sphere of study which could reveal God's universal laws. The romantic movement in art and literature caused an upwelling of appreciation of nature in all her moods, including the exotic and mysterious. Earlier American devotees of nature borrowed heavily from the European tradition and vocabulary; rather than frontiersmen they tended to be men of means, literati, and scientists.⁹ By the 1840s the uniqueness of the American landscape was used to inculcate patriotism: wilderness appreciation had become fashionable. Writers from Eastern cities would "make periodic excursions into the wilds, collect 'impressions,' and return to their desks to write descriptive essays which

⁸ Leo Marx suggests that the portrayal of wilderness as "hideous" may have helped, in the New England Puritan communities, to call forth the "aggressive, intellectual, controlled, and well-disciplined" qualities needed for survival in a difficult environment. See The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 43.

⁹ Historically, the champion or publicizer of wilderness values has often been the rapt but occasional visitor rather than the inhabitant of the wilderness.

dripped love of scenery and solitude in the grand Romantic manner."¹⁰

Words such as "sublime" and "picturesque" now came as readily to the writer's pen as did the negatively loaded phrases that had traditionally been applied to wilderness. Linked to the change in attitude was the older awareness that the very wilderness which was despised for its fearsome aspects was a potential garden, teeming with opportunities for economic betterment. But not many who revered nature for its intrinsic qualities realized that to create a garden, to harvest its economic potential, would mean sacrificing the wilder aspects which they valued. Historically, American attitudes toward nature have been beset by deep ambivalences: attraction versus repulsion; the desire to preserve versus the urge to exploit; and more currently, enjoyment of a wilderness experience versus anxiety over the preservation of its locale. These conflicts will be regularly manifested in the works to be examined below.

On the level of individual perception, the way one travels has much to do with how one "sees" the landscape. The shallow, two-dimensional ring of the word scenery must have something to do with the fact that it is often glimpsed through the window of an air-conditioned vehicle or studied, in reproduced form, on a flat surface. An ardent traveler of trails or rivers would insist that his viewing of nature is deeper and more multi-layered because of the obligatory slow pace and of the "immersion" quality of the experience. What one sees and feels in response to nature--the central direction of this inquiry--is clearly affected by the mode of travel, as well as by the purpose of the trip, and the way one has been conditioned to "see." A traveler of any era, whether an

¹⁰ Nash, p. 60.

explorer under commission surveying what DeVoto called the land "over the hill and beyond the sunset"¹¹ or a twentieth century wanderer poking into a sliver of wilderness, is bound to be influenced by such considerations.

¹¹ Bernard DeVoto, ed., The Journals of Lewis and Clark (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), *Introd.*, p. lii.

Chapter 2

The Boundless View

In his book, Passage through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest, John Logan Allen deals with the preconceptions, both geographic and mythic, held by Lewis and Clark and their contemporaries about the territory to be explored.¹² The book is a deep probe of the metaphors implicit in each of the two chief words in the first part of the title. The passage concept, deriving from the quest for a feasible commercial route between East and West, was age-old. Its American manifestation was a tenacious notion, buttressed by logic and desire, that a practical means of water transport would be found between Atlantic and Pacific coasts. To discover such a passage was the fervent hope of the early French explorers. The second concept, that of the garden, had roots of comparable antiquity. Since the garden, in the shape of some hoped-for paradise beyond the sunset, was one of the objectives of the passage, the two notions were closely twinned in the expectations held by the French about their missions. What could be more pleasant, en route to the Passage to India, than to find a garden--The Garden of the World?

Rivers were integral to both concepts. Passage through the continent required a linking of navigable rivers and lakes; and any garden, natural

¹² Passage through the Garden (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975).

or cultivated, presupposed the water supply which the presence of a river would indicate. Both the passage and the garden concepts, as elaborated by French explorers and writers, were profoundly to influence the Lewis and Clark and subsequent American missions.

Despite the antipathy expressed by those who actually had to traverse the wilderness, Europeans had long cherished the notion of an enchanted and ideal land--often located to the west. The actual discovery of the New World provided a focus for this aspiration. Columbus and other early explorers reported detecting the fragrance of the primeval forests, wafted by trade winds miles out to sea. The massed sentinels of the New England forest struck a somber chord in the hearts of the first European settlers there, but Elizabethan voyagers sent back glowing accounts of the lush and beckoning Virginia coast.¹³

The garden concept, as a mythic and poetic notion, was generally applied to land which was relatively unexplored and untouched by Europeans. As the empty spaces on the map were filled in, the land which had "garden" potential thus retreated toward the west. By the time of Thomas Jefferson's presidency the United States stood poised for westward expansion, and it is helpful here to consider the information on which Jefferson based his expectations for the expedition which he initiated, before examining it at length.

Concerning the agricultural potential of the American Northwest,¹⁴

¹³ Marx, p. 39.

¹⁴ I am adopting Mr. Allen's use of the term as "that portion of the North American continent bounded on the east by the Mississippi River from its junction with the Missouri northward, on the south by the Platte River, on the north by the waters of the Saskatchewan system, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean": Passage through the Garden, p. xix, fn.

the British accounts available to Jefferson were notably restrained. Alexander Mackenzie and other British writers regarded the plains as harsh, frequently swept by Arctic gales, and unsuitable for traditional European agriculture. This assessment was the forerunner of a widespread notion regarding the reputed aridity of the plains which for years confronted the myth of the garden: the "Great American Desert." Interestingly enough, although Jefferson and Lewis relied on Mackenzie's accounts for physiographic data, they rejected the Scotsman's unpromising forecast of the territory's agricultural prospects. They chose, instead, to rely on the accounts of French explorers--who, as Lewis and Clark would do, traveled by river.

The first, Jacques Cartier, in 1535 reconnoitered the St. Lawrence River as far as Hochelaga (the site of present-day Montreal). Some 150 years later, La Salle would complete France's imperial thrust--not through to the fabled westward passage but down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Although Cartier saw but a small portion of the land that was to become New France, his perceptions--and his preconceptions--of the New World's riches set the tone for his countrymen who followed, though he seems to have been oblivious of its terrors. His fervid expectations were colored by the recent and lucrative Spanish conquests in Mexico (1518-1521) and Peru (1531-1533). Like many discoveries, what Cartier found, or thought he had found, was closely linked with what he deeply longed to find. His estimates of three different facets of the New World's potential are worth examining for their relative content of wishful thinking and fact.

One was the possible presence of precious metals. The French had

heard of the large Indian village called Hochelaga and of copper ornaments. Copper had alchemical significance; its presence whetted the appetite for gold. Large native settlements, in the Spanish experience, meant gold. On his third voyage in 1542 Cartier found, along the St. Lawrence River, what appeared to be "leaves of fine gold as thick as a man's nail" and another mineral, "like diamonds, the most fair, polished, and excellently cut that it is possible for a man to see."¹⁵ Cartier sailed back to France with his treasures, but both the diamonds and the gold proved to be the fool's variety.

Cartier did better in interpreting the geographic data. Upon reaching Hochelaga he was given to understand, through a blurry interchange in sign language, that one could continue to navigate the St. Lawrence River upstream for more than three months. The Indians, perhaps, were referring to Lake Erie and other great lakes beyond; but whatever the actuality, Cartier left the New World with a vision of "waterways stretching into an infinite west toward India," as John Seelye puts it.¹⁶ The notion had an element of truth, and would set events in motion toward the establishment of New France.

In appraising the biota and arability of the new lands, Cartier came the closest, though his optimism had a touch of whimsy. The prolific bird populations on islands adjacent to Newfoundland caused his crew to marvel. The fish catch delighted them. Bryon Island, near the rich allu-

¹⁵ As quoted in John Seelye, Prophetic Waters: The River in Early American Life and Literature (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 18.

¹⁶ Seelye, p. 20.

vial deposits of the St. Lawrence River, they found "all full of goodly trees, medowes, champaines full of wild peason blomed peas in bloom, as thicke, as ranke, and as fair, as any can be seene in Brittainne, that they seemed to have bin plowed and sowed." The theme of nature's uncultivated bounty recurs in Cartier's narrative. Reconnoitering the St. Lawrence Gulf, they came upon "a village . . . called Stadagona . . ." under whose trees "groweth as faire tall hemp, as any in France, without any seede, or any mans worke or labour at all." En route to Hochelaga the landscape, beckoning to the French palate, offered "as goodly a countrey as possibly can with eye be seene . . . Vines laden as full of grapes as coulde be all along the river, whyche rather seemed to have bene planted and wrought by handy worke than otherwise. True it is," he admits, "that because they are not dressed and wrought as they should be, theyr bunches of Grapes are not so great as ours."¹⁷ The concession lends credibility to the account, but the vision of an abundant harvest, ready for the plucking without prior labor, was archetypal. Cartier's reconnaissance on the river seemed to point, logically or not, toward the three hoped-for treasures of the New World: precious metals, passage to empire, and potential for cultivation. The river which bore him emerged as symbol and threshold to their boundless fulfillment.

Subsequent French explorers were similarly impressed with the prodigality of the river environment--and with the potential for ready cultivation of the surrounding countryside. Champlain, in 1608, describes the landscape en route to the lake which now bears his name as "very beautiful

¹⁷ Jacques Cartier, Navigations to Newe Fraunce, trans. John Florio (1580; rpt. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), pp. 10, 38, 45.

and attractive. Along the St. Lawrence river bank," he reports, echoing Cartier's delectation, "it seemed as if the trees had been planted there in most places for man's pleasure." Other Frenchmen, approaching Lake Ontario along the St. Lawrence in 1673, exclaim over "prairies, with good grass, in which are beautiful flowers infinite in number. From Lake St. Francis to the rapids," they report, with a significant proviso, "there is no more agreeable country in the world than this would be, if it were once cleared."¹⁸ Like Cartier and Champlain, they found the pleasures of discovery to be inseparable from the mouth-watering prospect of cultivation.

The New World terrain was not, of course, uninhabited and unstoried; pre-European settlements had existed for hundreds of generations. A constant, sharp awareness of the aboriginal presence, often unseen, was a prerequisite for survival, and must have strongly colored the early explorers' sense of the natural scene. Indian accounts of the nature of the country that lay ahead were closely and skeptically scrutinized. Indian tales of demons and frightful abysses were officially discounted but must have added to their anxieties.¹⁹ Alexander Mackenzie had to "with much ado dissuade" his crew from accepting the Indians' predictions that "we should all be old Men by the time we would return. That we would have to encounter many Monsters (which can only exist in their The Indians own Imaginations)."²⁰ An Indian or two, or a number of them, are known to

¹⁸ As quoted in John Bakeless, The Eyes of Discovery: The Pageant of North America as Seen by the First Explorers (New York: Dover, 1950), p. 131. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Francis Parkman, The Discovery of the Great West: La Salle, ed. William R. Taylor (New York: Holt, 1956), p. 43.

²⁰ The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, ed. W. Kaye Lamb, pp. 182-183.

have accompanied some expeditions (e.g., Lewis and Clark's and La Salle's). In some minds the "primitive" condition of the human inhabitants seemed a fitting complement to the wild landscape, "full of wild beasts and wild men," to invoke Bradford's phrase again. On river trips a constant alert against hostile Indians was essential. While navigating the Mississippi the Marquette/Jolliet party would have dinner on the river banks at dusk, but did not dare to sleep there; rather, they had to search for a sand bar or island and stretch out in their canoes, with one man in each canoe standing watch through the mosquito-ridden night.²¹

Though the abysses and the supernatural beings of Indian folklore failed to materialize, the explorers were given ample reminder of nature's hazards at the entrance of the flooded Missouri River. "I have seen nothing more frightful," writes Father Marquette; "a mass of large trees, entire, with branches, real floating islands came rushing down the mouth of the river Pekitanoui, so impetuously, that we could not, without great danger, expose ourselves to pass across."²²

To the Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, the Mississippi River farther downstream must have seemed even more deadly. His army's mode was cross-country, not water-borne. To them at first the river was an inadvertent and exasperating discovery--an obstruction to their line of march. As they slogged alongside or through its shallows they threaded their way through a maze of willow thickets, bayous, swamps, massive canebrakes, and dead trees gyrating in the quirkish currents. To the river's miasmal air

²¹ Timothy Severin, Explorers of the Mississippi (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 93.

²² As quoted in Bakeless, p. 337.

the battle-hardened De Soto lost his will and finally his life. The river, rather than a pathway to empire, had become an insuperable obstacle, the quietus to the Spaniards' fading quest for gold and empire.²³

The New World environment provided a source of anxiety which for the religiously minded European transcended mere physical danger: the prospect of moral degeneration. "The shape of the New World wilderness," writes John Conron, "was the shape of the profoundest terror this race could imagine." It was a wilderness, he explains,

whose extent and power western Europeans had not experienced since the ancient times, when they had wandered in the gothic forests of northern Europe. . . . The wilderness was a place whose physical and psychic forces stripped men of their reason and therefore their souls. To enter it was to court not simply death but dissolution into a primeval and demonic miasma.²⁴

Such a prospect may have weighed on the mind of the first European to leave a description of Niagara Falls--the Recollet priest, Father Louis Hennepin; ". . . the discharge of so much water," he writes,

. . . centres at this spot and thus plunges down . . . falling as into an abyss which we could not behold without a shudder.

 It is into this gulf then that all these waters fall with an impetuosity that can be imagined in so high a fall, so prodigious, for its horrible mass of water. There are formed those thunders, those roarings, those fearful bounds and seethings, with that perpetual cloud rising above the cedars and spruces.
 . . .²⁵

With some slight changes in wording, the description might have come

²³ Severin, pp. 14-47.

²⁴ John Conron, ed., The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 88.

²⁵ A Description of Louisiana, trans. John Gilmary Shea (1880; rpt. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), pp. 378-381.

from today's awe-struck tourist. The thought of being swept off the brink, a mere speck in a seething fury, could call forth a delicious shudder in any age.²⁶ But it is arguable that Hennepin's fascination may have had more than one side. To him, the Falls appeared as a prodigy of nature, an ultimate (or perhaps the ultimate) manifestation of wildness: "the finest and at the same time the most awful cascade in the world."²⁷ Regarded thus, the Falls, which held the potential of instant physical oblivion, may have also symbolized the downward, satanic pull of unknown forces in whose whirl one could lose one's soul.

In the following year, 1680, Robert Cavelier La Salle, whose party Father Hennepin sometimes accompanied, returned to Ft. Crevecoeur, on the Illinois River, seeking to shore up his faltering trading network after a difficult wilderness trek from Fort Frontenac in Canada. When he arrived in the vicinity he found that Iroquois war parties had invaded and exterminated nearby villages of Illinois Indians. La Salle went through the grisly remains looking for signs of his own countrymen. He found none. But when he reached the garrison itself he found it deserted, demolished, and stripped of its supplies. Written across the side of the unfinished boat which was to have taken La Salle down the Mississippi River was the cryptic message: NOUS SOMMES TOUS SAUVAGES.²⁸ Whether intended by the deserters in a sinister or merely a sardonic vein, the inscription seemed to confirm the notion that exposure to wilderness conditions might cause the fibre of civilized man to unravel.

²⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary suggests, as an early meaning of horror, "Roughness or nauseousness of taste, such as to cause a shudder or thrill."

²⁷ Hennepin, p. 380.

²⁸ Parkman, p. 156.

Notwithstanding the physical and psychic perils of the New World, the French estimates of their imperial prospects remained optimistic, following the pattern of the glowing reports of Cartier and Champlain. The Marquette party, for example, reported prodigious quantities of wild rice on the Wisconsin rivers--more than could be eaten by the local Indian population, and enough to choke up the passage for their canoes. Like Cartier, Marquette noted that "good wine could be made" from the fruit of the "vine-clad islets." Along the upper Mississippi River, passing by the invisible richness of Iowa's topsoil, they saw "beautiful" islands "covered with finer trees." Farther downstream, for a distance of almost three hundred miles, they sighted game--buffalo and wild turkeys--almost constantly. "We have seen nothing like this river . . .," Father Marquette writes, just after entering a Mississippi tributary, "as regards its fertility of soil, its prairies and woods; its cattle, elk, deer, wildcats, bustards, swans, ducks, parroquets, and even beaver."²⁹ Even the other-worldly Marquette may have been thinking in part of the land's potential for resources and trade. But the landscape at the advent of European contact possessed a lushness, an integrity, which must have struck the explorers as something more than a stockpile of commodities. The perception of its organic wholeness, of the intricate kinship between river and habitat, comes through clearly in Marquette's description. Francis Parkman, recreating the Marquette journey some two hundred years later from his own observations of the Wisconsin River, writes:

²⁹ Jacques Marquette, Voyages of Marquette in the Jesuit Relations, Vol. 59 (1900; rpt. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), pp. 109, 161. See also Bakeless, pp. 323-326, 329.

They glided calmly down the tranquil stream, by islands choked with trees and matted with entangling grape-vines; by forests, groves, and prairies . . . by thickets and marshes and broad bare sand-bars. . . . and when in the morning they embarked again, the mist hung on the river like a bridal veil. . . .³⁰

Despite (or through) the romantically hazy atmospherics, Parkman manages to convey the aura of bounty which induced the French to carve out a New World empire. John Logan Allen summarizes thus the impact of the accounts of the French explorers:

Their reports . . . from 1673, when the Mississippi-Missouri system was discovered, to 1763, when France's ouster from North America became official, were seminal in the development of later images of the Northwest. As such, the French contributions to geographical lore laid the foundations for the themes of the Garden of the World and the Passage to India that were so basic to images of the West at the time of Lewis and Clark.³¹

An America gleaming with mineral wealth, teeming with wildlife swarming over arable land, and containing within its depths the water passageways to even greater treasures--such was the dream that lured Cartier and detonated three centuries of westward exploration.

The dream would receive fresh impetus and form during the presidency of Thomas Jefferson. One of its components--the "passage" concept--would drop some of its more fabulous overtones as a more realistic grasp of North American geography ruled out trans-continental water traffic as a practicable option. But the great northwest-trending Missouri River would continue to beckon to explorers with two thousand miles of navigable waters. The other chief component--the "garden"--would still flourish as a driving force behind the westward movement; but its image would be more sharply defined

30 Parkman, p. 45.

31 Allen, p. 2.

by the fact that men had actually been there, and had reported on what there was to see.³²

But prior to that continental extension of vision, what had men expected to see? It was natural that Jefferson, who was inclined to favor French intellectual thought and who longed for a solidly agrarian economy, would conclude his study of the promising French assessments of the Northwest by rejecting the "desert" notion and embracing the vision of a vast garden which would ultimately establish the new republic on a firm agricultural base. The self-sufficient farmers of his day, from whose ranks he sprang, were in his eyes "the chosen people of God."³³ Henry Nash Smith traces his agrarian doctrine to European roots: the ancient poetic tradition of the virtuous husbandman; the French Physiocratic theory that all wealth comes from agriculture. "The master symbol of the garden," Smith writes, "embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow."³⁴ These mythic elements may have taken root in the expectations of Jefferson and of his two commanders.

Meriwether Lewis' two years of service as Jefferson's private secretary and his close ideological and personal ties to the President make it likely that he shared many of Jefferson's optimistic preconceptions about

³² DeVoto, p. lii.

³³ Notes on the State of Virginia (1861; rpt. New York: Harper, 1964), p. 157.

³⁴ Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), pp. 123, 128. See also Vernon Louis Parrington, The Colonial Mind, Vol. I of Main Currents of American Thought (New York: Harcourt, 1930), p. 346.

the nature of the unknown terrain, and that he would attempt to impart these views to the expedition's co-commander, William Clark. As if greater emphasis were needed, Jefferson transmitted another document, an "Official Account," to the two commanders before they embarked from St. Louis. In this they were advised that the land they were to survey would yield "an abundance of all the necessities of life" with little effort required by the farmer.³⁵ Though the express primary purpose of the mission was the furthering of commerce, the expedition's leaders were instructed to reconnoiter and report all they possibly could about the Indian tribes and the nature of the soil, minerals, climate and biota of the new land. In this light their journals reveal a curious dearth of explicit references to the agricultural potential of the land; the word garden itself seldom occurs. Allen interprets many of the stock phrases the explorers applied to the landscape (such as "butifull countrey") as code terms for "lands available for productive American agriculture."³⁶ With this in mind, much of the enthusiastic description from the embarkation near St. Louis to the high plains just east of the Rockies derived not just from the beauty of the landscape but from its suitability for farming. The two qualities were probably complementary.

The prime component of their mission--the quest to discover a commercial passage through the continent--was a solemn charge. The assumption was that the Columbia River basin would form an approximate mirror image of the Missouri watershed, and that the heads of the two rivers were separated by some sort of gentle highland affording easy portage. This dream

³⁵ As quoted in Allen, p. 171.

³⁶ Allen, p. 184.

was to be shattered when the expedition topped Lemhi Pass, above the Missouri's source, and confronted the Bitterroot Range, the prelude to 140 miles of "tremendous mountains which for 60 miles are covered with eternal snows."³⁷

As the contingent of forty-five men and one Indian woman headed upriver from St. Louis on May 14, 1804, their hopes were high though not euphoric. Extraordinary things doubtless lay ahead. But the two commanders and many of the men were pragmatic, experienced wilderness hands. Their zest must have been tempered by the uncertainties and hardships of the trip, the formidable logistics, and the prospect of confronting unknown Indian tribes.³⁸

The portions of their journals most germane to this discussion are those executed while in transit from the mission's departure from near St. Louis until the completion of the portage around the Great Falls on July 14, 1805--representing, in other words, the journey through the primarily and increasingly open country (the hoped-for "garden") of the high plains. Once over the Great Divide, they found the trek to the mouth of the Columbia disappointing in more than one way. Game animals were scarce; the terrain was exceedingly difficult; the weather became increasingly stormy. More to the point, the westward journey, and much of the return

³⁷ As quoted in Smith, p. 17.

³⁸ DeVoto writes, "Not only the Rocky Mountains, their rivers, and the Cascade Mountains were unprecedented and unimaginable; so were the high plains, the high plateaus, the overwhelming waters of the Columbia, the tremendous forest of the Northwest, and the sodden winter climate there. It added up to a strangeness for which nothing in the previous frontier culture was a preparation" (p. xlv).

trip, were anticlimactic. The quest for feasible "water communication" across the continent--the mission's prime objective--had crumbled the moment the men confronted the tortuous terrain west of the divide. The "garden" potential, too, except for the lower Columbia basin, seemed almost nil on the Pacific slope. It is hardly surprising that the journal entries of these periods lack the buoyancy of the initial encounter with the open plains and prairie. (On the symbolic level, too, the men may have been responding to the age-old anxiety of immersion in a dense and unfathomable forest.)³⁹ The prevailing mode of the journals as a whole, in fact, is the detached and unemotional one which a reader would expect in an official account. But the transcendent drama of the journey could not be completely suppressed,⁴⁰ and the journals can be ransacked for nuggets of insight as to their authors' mental state and their perceptions of the new land.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark witnessed the American landscape in as pristine a state as was possible to non-aboriginal man in the first decade of the 1800s. The country's sheer expanse seemed without limit. The Missouri River, coiling interminably around bluffs and bends, gleaming

³⁹ Though wilderness can denote any extensive and unaltered landscape, Nash contends that most unfavorable responses to wilderness were evoked by thick forest--the archetypal wilderness--which "hemmed man in, frustrating his vision and concealing a host of dangers, both real and imaginary." The point has relevance to those who today visit the wilderness for more leisurely pursuits: "The same preference for openness influences our choice of camping sites. Isn't it true that we prefer open places like meadows and lake shores and river banks? Don't we avoid camping in the dense forest, the classic 'wilderness,' if we can? Ancient impulses that we scarcely understand cause us to feel vaguely ill-at-ease in the deep woods" (pp. x-xi).

⁴⁰ As it was, for example, in Alexander Mackenzie's journals.

against the evening sky, heightened the sense of space without end, serving always as symbol and threshold of what lay ahead. The land was rich, handsome, and incalculably fertile. Its lush grassy cover and immense herds of buffalo, antelope and elk gave it the aura of great productivity. If it was not literally a garden, its transformation was not difficult to envision. More than that, the land was "butifull" (a recurrent term in the journals): it contained the amenities traditionally ascribed to an Edenic landscape. One passage will illustrate. Lewis, reconnoitering in advance of the party near the confluence of the Yellowstone River with the Missouri, surveyed the "pleasing" and "delightfull" scene from some low hills above the river valley. The "whol face of the country," he records, "was covered with herds of Buffaloe, Elk & Antelopes. . . ." But sheer abundance is an everyday affair, and, characteristically, he goes on to describe the animals' actions:

the buffaloe Elk and Antelope are so gentle that we pass near them while feeding, without appearing to excite any alarm among them; and when we attract their attention, they frequently approach us more nearly to discover what we are, and in some instances pursue us a considerable distance apparenly with that view.⁴¹

The playful curiosity thus revealed is clearly reflected in the observer's relish in recording the Arcadian scene.

As they progressed northward and westward through the high plains and into the shadow of the Rockies, the woods disappeared except for fringes along rivers, the country assumed a more arid, open, and uneven appearance, and phenomena alien to the men's experience occurred more frequently.

⁴¹ DeVoto, p. 99. Hereafter, references to this book will appear in the text.

They passed unusual rock formations. They hovered, spellbound, over a prairie dog village, and had hairbreadth escapes from grizzly bears. They experienced violent storms and sudden shifts in weather. On the high plains they were tormented by mosquitoes and gnats, while the pervasive prickly pear assaulted their feet during the numerous portages. But all hardships notwithstanding, the tone of the journal entries before the crossing of the Great Divide is clearly upbeat. The beauty and bounty of the new land, as well as the zest of discovery, shine through clearly.

To the Virginia-born explorers, habituated to the more woodsy, intimate vistas of the Southeast, the wildlife and the sheer open expanse of land upriver from the Platte must have seemed to approach infinity. Entry after entry speaks of sights which transcend all previous experience:

. . . below the bend is a butifull inclined Plain, in which there is great numbers of Buffalow, Elk & Goats in view feeding & scipping on those Plains (p. 30)

barking squirrel /prairie dogs . . . appears here in infinite numbers and the shortness and virdue of grass gave the plain the appearance throughout it's whole extent of beatifull bowling-green in fine order. (p. 28)

. . . infinitely more buffaloe than I had ever before witnessed at a view. (p. 136)

. . . immense herds of Buffaloe, Elk, deer, & Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture. (p. 98)

In his entry of June 8, 1805, Meriwether Lewis attains a lyric peak in describing a certain Montana tributary and its environs:

. . . it passes through a rich fertile and one of the most beatiffully picteresque countries that I ever beheld, through the wide expanse of which, innumerable herds of living anamals are seen, it's borders garnished with one continued garden of roses, while it's lofty and open forrests are the habitation of miriads of the feathered tribes who salute the ear of the passing traveler with their wild and simple, yet sweeet and cheerfull melody. (p. 132)

Lewis named the river Maria's in honor of his cousin Maria Wood, and

despite the touch of hyperbole, the incantation reinforces the Edenic image which has been developing. Access to such scenes today is to be found mainly in museum dioramas, or in paintings. Thomas Hart Benton, the painter of spacious western landscapes, splendidly evokes the sense of expansiveness which accompanies (or accompanied) travel in the West:

Strung in a zigzag pattern up and down the ninety-eight degree line, there is a marked change of country which is observable wherever you journey westward. . . . About this line . . . the air becomes clearer, the sky bluer, and the world immensely bigger. There are great flat stretches of land in Louisiana, there are prairies in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, but . . . they lack the character of infinitude which one gets past the 98° line. . . . In the West proper there are no limits. The world goes on indefinitely. The horizon is not seen as the end of a scene. It carries you on beyond itself into farther and farther spaces. Even the tremendous obstructions of the Rocky Mountains do not affect the sense of infinite expansion which comes over the traveler as he crosses the plains. Unless you are actually in a pocket or a canyon the Rocky Mountains rise in such a way, tier behind tier, that they carry your vision on and on, so that the forward strain of the eyes is communicated to all the muscles of the body and you feel that you can keep moving forever without coming to any end. This is the physical effect of the West.⁴²

To the Lewis and Clark party other natural features of the high plains, some unique and exotic, some simply negative, served to reinforce the impression of the new lands as pristine wilderness, uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable by human agency; they also underlined the two-faced nature of wilderness, revealing its pleasant features as well as its more "savage heiw." From the threshold of the high plains to the Pacific the

⁴² "Where Does the West Begin?" in A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land, ed. Alan Gussow (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth, 1971), pp. 86-87. Benton's painting, Lewis & Clark at Eagle Creek, which aptly reinforces his message in the excerpted passage, is reproduced opposite the page which bears this quotation. The passage first appeared in an account of his life entitled An Artist in America, which he wrote in 1937.

party traversed territory with whose features and life forms they were not familiar. Some of the animals they encountered--the buffalo, the antelope, the prairie dog--not only appeared in immense quantities, but they also struck the travelers as exotic. To observe these creatures and bring back meat, Clark and Lewis would frequently venture out on solo scouting trips while the main party battled its way, in three heavily-loaded craft, up the river. On June 14, 1805, Lewis was reconnoitering a portage route around the Great Falls of the Missouri River. Having just shot a buffalo, he was routed by a large brown bear which was "briskly advancing" on him. He managed to reach the river ahead of the bear, wheeled about in waist-deep water and brandished his bayonet at the "monster." To Lewis' delight the bear "declined to combat on such unequal grounds and retreated with quite as great precipitation as he had just before pursued me." In rapid sequence, a wolf-sized, brownish-yellow animal "of the tiger kind" crouched as if to spring at him; and three bull buffalo left their herd, gave momentary chase at full speed, "took a good view of me and retreated with precipitation." On the way back to camp Lewis passed the buffalo he had killed, thought of securing the meat, but

did not think it prudent to remain all night at this place which really from the succession of curious adventures wore the impression on my mind of inchantment; at sometimes for a moment I thought it might be a dream, but the prickly pears which pierced my feet very severely once in a while, particularly after it grew dark, convinced me that I was really awake, and that it was necessary to make the best of my way to camp. (pp. 139-141; emphasis added)

Today's equivalent of this wry confession might be an Air Force pilot's detailed report of a close encounter with an unidentified flying object. Meriwether Lewis, professional soldier and experienced scientific observer, would hardly have made such a self-revelation unless the experience

had been thought-provoking.

In addition to the "new" animal species, the high plains provided a variety of unique natural features. Between the Musselshell and Maria's rivers the fantastic erosional forms of the cliffs, a commonplace sight along many western rivers, reminded Lewis of architectural features, of "lofty freestone buildings, having their parapets stocked with statuary . . . ruins of elegant buildings . . . niches and alcoves. . . . As we passed on it seemed as if those scenes of visionary enchantment would never have and an end" (p. 123).

Another scenic climax was provided by the Great Falls. Lewis, scouting ahead the day before the animal incident just mentioned, was the first to gaze on this spectacle. His description leaves little doubt that he was struck by its awesome quality. Standing on some rocks opposite the center of the falls, he watched while the water broke

into a perfect white foam which assumes a thousand forms in a moment sometimes flying up in jets of sparkling foam to the height of fifteen or twenty feet and are scarcely formed before large rolling bodies of the same beaten and foaming water is thrown over and conceals them. in short the rocks seem to be most happily fixed to present a sheet of the whitest beaten froath for 200 yards in length and about 80 feet perpendicular. (p. 137)

Mysterious phenomena and the climatic extremes characteristic of the high plains must have added to the exotic aura of the experience. While reconnoitering near the falls, Captain Clark and others repeatedly heard a noise like thunder or gunfire which could not be pinned down to either source. He recollected "hereing the Minitarees say that those Rocky mountains make a great noise, but they could not tell me the cause. . . ." He had "no doubt," though, that if leisure permitted he "could find from whence it issued" (pp. 145-146). On May 2, 1805, just west of the mouth

of the Yellowstone River, it snowed--a not unseasonable occurrence for the high plains. To Clark, though, it seemed "a verry extraodernarey climate, to behold the trees Green & flowers spred on the plain, & snow an inch deep" (p. 104). During the 3½-week portage around the Great Falls--an experience rendered agonizing by having to haul the heavy loads over the prickly pear-infested terrain--the party was further beset by sudden violent storms which "gullied the portage route and made the clayey soil an impassable glue" (De Voto's words, p. 148). One storm produced hail stones "7 Inches in circumference"; fortunately the men had found shelter, or they "should most certainly have fallen victims to its rage as the men were mostly naked, and but a few with hats or any covering on their heads." Lewis' words are an apt summary. "I have scarcely experienced a day since my first arrival in this quarter," he writes, "without experiencing some novel occurrence among the party or witnessing the appearance of some uncommon object" (p. 148). On the lower Missouri the party had already encountered snags similar to those reported earlier by Marquette. Snags were often whole trees, embedded in the river bottom, with lethally protruding branches. Not infrequently snags would trap other floating trees to form "a solid mass . . . all bristling with branches and stumps" called an embarras, which the boatmen were sometimes obliged to chop their way through in order to proceed.⁴³

Despite such occurrences (or perhaps in part because of them), and

⁴³ Bakeless, pp. 362-364. The author amplifies: "Dragged along the bottom, banged by floating timber, scoured by sand, the water-logged tree trunks soon imbedded their heavy roots in the bottom while the jagged stumps of limbs thrust up through the water or lurked just under its surface ready to impale any river boat that happened to strike them. One of these could hold up a forty- or fifty-ton vessel."

despite hardships which stretched endurance to the outer limits, there is reason to believe that the explorers experienced moments of exhilaration which came from discovery. Though cold rationality might have dictated otherwise, the land seemed invested with the qualities of infinity and inexhaustibility. Lewis, thinking he was beholding the Rocky Mountains for the first time, confesses that while viewing them he "felt a secret pleasure in finding myself so near the head of the heretofore conceived boundless Missouri. . . ." ⁴⁴ Lewis and his companions surely knew that the Missouri, though subcontinental in scope, was not boundless. But in the choice of words, and in the repeated references in the journals to immensity and vastness, the explorers gave voice to an assumption, shared by most later Americans, that the potential of their land, if not infinite, was for all practical purposes inexhaustible. Had not Jefferson, after all, expected that the resources of the New World would last "to the thousandth and thousandth generation"? ⁴⁵ John Logan Allen contends that much of the "beauty" perceived by the explorers derived from the presumed "garden" (economic) potential of the land. But is it far-fetched to read into Lewis' lengthy musings over the "visionary enchantment" of the Missouri River bluffs, for instance, anything but an appreciative response to the spectacle itself?

As mentioned earlier, it had already become intellectually respectable to admit to such an emotion. Edmund Burke, in "A Philosophical

⁴⁴ DeVoto comments, "Like many a traveler after him, Lewis mistakes the detached formation now called the Little Rocky Mountains of northern Montana for a chain of the main range" (p. 118). Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ "First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801," in Documents of American History, ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: Appleton, 1934), p. 187.

Inquiry into . . . the Sublime and Beautiful" (1756), argues that a landscape's sublimity might be attributed to several qualities. They include obscurity (darkness); power (suggesting the unknown potential of natural forces); privation (solitude, silence); vastness (length, height, depth); infinity (the sense of indefinite extent or duration); and magnificence (as of the starry heaven).⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson had studied Burke, and his two expedition leaders and subsequent travelers were to perceive the New World as an abundant repository of all these attributes.

Evocations of vastness or infinity, especially, are commonplace in accounts of wilderness travel from the early 1800s. Rivers, as natural assembling zones for wildlife, and as age-old flight paths for migrating birds, frequently serve as backdrops for such depictions. In 1811 Henry Marie Brackenridge, lawyer and son of a prominent Pennsylvania jurist, accompanied a party led by Manuel Lisa of the Missouri Fur Company in a journey up the Missouri River. One evening, from their canoes, they became aware of a "tremendous noise." The woods nearby, they discovered, were "literally swarming with buffaloe. . . . Late in the evening," he continues, "we saw an immense herd running along the sides of the hills in full speed; their appearance had something in it, which, without incurring ridicule, I might call sublime--their footsteps resembled the roaring of distant thunder."⁴⁷ Brackenridge, on this trip, crossed paths with an "eccentric" naturalist, Thomas Nuttall, whose name has since become

⁴⁶ Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry (1756; rpt. New York: P. F. Collier, 1937), pp. 49-67.

⁴⁷ Views of Louisiana (1814; rpt. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), p. 263.

enshrined in the nomenclature of many American species. Nuttall was regarded as utterly devoted to his craft, to the point of disregarding personal danger and commonsense precautions. He generally confined his writing strictly to observed facts and shunned associative language. In December of the same year (1811), "while leisurely descending on the bosom of the Mississippi," Nuttall witnessed a vast migration of whooping cranes,

assembled by many thousands from all the marshes and impassable swamps of the North and West. The whole continent seemed as if giving up its quota of the species to swell the mighty host. . . . The clangor of these numerous legions, passing along, high in the air, seemed almost deafening. . . .

To amplify the idea of immensity, Nuttall adds that the "confused cry of the vast army" continued nearly all night as the flocks passed by.⁴⁸

The whooping crane's numbers have been reduced now to a tiny remnant. Another bird, once present in enormously greater quantities, is extinct. In the autumn of 1813, while at the confluence of the Ohio and the Salt rivers, John James Audubon observed the aerobatic display of a flock of passenger pigeons "when a hawk chanced to press upon the rear of a flock":

At once, like a torrent, and with a noise like thunder, they rushed into a compact mass, pressing upon each other toward the center. In these almost solid masses, they darted forward in undulating and angular lines, descended and swept close over the earth with inconceivable velocity, mounted perpendicularly so as to resemble a vast column, and, when high, were seen wheeling and twisting within their continued⁴⁹ lines, which then resembled the coils of a gigantic serpent.

⁴⁸ As quoted in Bil Gilbert, "A Somewhat Peculiar Fellow," Audubon, Sept. 1979, p. 121.

⁴⁹ As quoted in Edwin Way Teale, Audubon's Wildlife (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 48.

Nuttall and Audubon communicate the aura of the "sublime," through auditory and visual images, more forcefully than Brackenridge, who relies on the word itself to summon up the feeling. All three writers are working to convey a quality beyond quantity: the effect on the mind of the ungraspable. Similarly, from the narrator's perspective, the river's presence in each episode seems to go beyond its obvious function of providing a convenient staging area for wildlife. Visually, a river and its embankments provide an arena which contains and intensifies the unfolding drama. The unobstructed vistas along a large river offer a depth of vision which, as John Conron points out, "immerses the perceiver" and evokes the "sublime" qualities of vastness and infinity.⁵⁰ Symbolically, the river may do more. In the congregating of the whooping cranes, the notion of a river as mainstream and successively smaller tributaries down to the tiniest ramifications ("marshes and impassable swamps") seems implicit in the structure of their southward flow. In the Audubon passage, though, the event transcends the river and environs, transcends itself to become an elemental force that brands the consciousness like the after-image of a burst of light.

The common element in the last three excerpts--the gathering of a species in vast numbers--holds an ironic twist for a modern reader. Audubon did not dream that the passenger pigeon would disappear; he saw thousands slaughtered, but that was nothing when the skies were darkening with them. The whooping crane and the buffalo exist on the edge of extinction and are no longer vital forces in their habitat. The

⁵⁰ Conron, p. 143.

phrase "lost glory" comes inescapably to mind--the glory of nature beheld by these writers in a diversity and profusion which will not be seen again. Two other writers in this chapter, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, came later, considerably (in Muir's case) after the shift in nature perception, the awakening to rapid, man-caused change, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. They need to be discussed here because their perceptions of nature, of the forests and cascades of the Sierra Nevada or of New England's more leisurely streams, also partook of that original, unspent glory.

In the way they perceived nature, both Thoreau and Muir derived inspiration from an important movement in American thought and literature: Transcendentalism.⁵¹ Bedrock to transcendental thought is that the externalities of the world, and especially of nature, possess an underlying spiritual significance which can be discerned if one is receptive to the "currents of the Universal Being."⁵² If one approaches nature in an open, non-dogmatic, even playful manner, some of the many

⁵¹ The two most definite literary expressions of Transcendentalism, according to William Thrall and Addison Hibbard, were Emerson's Nature (1836) and Thoreau's Walden (1854). See A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey, 1936), p. 445. Muir's year of birth coincides with the formative years of the transcendental movement. Although his blossoming as a writer-naturalist came some thirty years later, when the movement's impetus had dwindled, he became a passionate proponent of its ideas. In his pack he carried a much-glossed copy of Emerson's works. In 1871 Emerson (then 68) made the arduous trip to Yosemite to acquaint himself with the Sierra and with Muir.

⁵² Tony Tanner, The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965), p. 31.

layers of meaning will reveal themselves. Furthermore, the poet's (in the expansive sense of the word) perspective can integrate seemingly random elements into a meaningful whole to form higher patterns of order.⁵³ Any object, no matter how commonplace, may provoke an intuitive leap to an underlying principle: a well in which butter is cooling may remind one of the earth's essentially insular state; a thawing mass of clay may conjure up thoughts of life's formative processes. In this respect the transcendentalists shared a basic tendency with romanticists in general: an intense desire for an integrated perception, a relatedness, an intimacy with the earth. "Bathe in these spirit beams, turning round and round," said Muir, "as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your separate existence; you blend with the landscape, and become part and parcel of nature."⁵⁴ The transcendental vocabulary, as John Conron brings out, leans heavily on semantic equivalents of blend: penetrate, pervade, interfuse, bathe, wed, wash.⁵⁵ Both Thoreau and Muir eagerly pursued the blending approach. Rather than merely looking, they sought to experience nature in all her phases, with all their senses.

The environs of Concord in Thoreau's day were not wilderness. Concord itself was a bustling commercial town, and the surrounding countryside had undergone two hundred years of modification since Colonial days. There were enclaves of relative pristineness, and for two years Thoreau

⁵³ Marx, pp. 232-233.

⁵⁴ As quoted in Nash, Wilderness, p. 126.

⁵⁵ Conron, p. 229.

homesteaded one of them at Walden. In general, though, Thoreau was well aware that the woods he tramped through were sadly diminished, with "many of the first leaves and grandest passages" gone.⁵⁶ Nor were the Concord and Merrimack rivers--the route of the Thoreau brothers' week-long journey--virginal streams. They flowed past towns and farms, and were bordered, along some stretches, by railroad tracks. Thoreau championed "absolute freedom and wildness";⁵⁷ he frequently lamented its passing. Other writers, as will be shown, had already expressed profound misgivings over the tide of development. Thoreau demonstrably shared these concerns; he proposed, for example, that each town set aside a nearby forest preserve to advance "instruction and recreation."⁵⁸ Yet in the work under discussion there is little nostalgia, no trace of the inner dilemmas which wracked writers such as Tocqueville and Audubon.⁵⁹ One wonders why. Did Thoreau, perhaps, shun polemics in order not to mar the tone of tranquil contemplation he sought to sustain? Did he fear that conflicts and alarms might detract from the leisurely literary and philosophical discursions he intended? From what is known of his life and works, this reasoning seems overly simple. Thoreau was not one to gloss over unpleasantness. A better explanation may lie in his knack of reconciling diverse elements, a trait which he shared with other transcendentalists. Here an episode from Walden--the "Deep Cut"

⁵⁶ As quoted in Donald Worster, Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor, 1979), p. 68.

⁵⁷ "Walking," in Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 595.

⁵⁸ As quoted in Worster, p. 75.

⁵⁹ To be discussed in Chapter 3.

passage--pertains. The "cut" was an embankment made to accommodate the railroad track which skirted one end of Walden Pond. As the train's whistle distracted him from his quest, the beholding of nature, so did the "cut"--an unhealed wound--intrude on the green landscape. In his final chapter, "Spring," the thawing of the congealed slope induces a corresponding release in Thoreau's potential to perceive analogies.

"What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" he asks.⁶⁰ The complex patterns and processes reassure him of the earth's lively organic nature. From a leisurely contemplation of this homely sight (he describes it as "excrementitious") he derives a renewed sense of life's yeastiness, its unexpected possibilities.⁶¹

Thoreau does not confront the reader, in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with anything as disagreeable as the "Deep Cut." It may be that he encountered no such eyesore. In any event, he conveys the impression that the sporadic human activity blends benignly into the natural scene. There is the lock-keeper who interrupts his Sunday leisure to let Henry and his brother down into the Merrimack.⁶² "Two men in a skiff . . . floating buoyantly" evoke the art of navigation in general, and the wish that "our life in its whole economy might be as beautiful as the fairest works of art or nature" (pp. 326-327). There are fishermen, who represent "nature's impulse to fill every niche." Barking dogs and crowing cocks are clear "evidence of nature's health or sound

⁶⁰ Walden, p. 274.

⁶¹ See Marx, pp. 260-264.

⁶² A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, from Walden and Other Writings, p. 334. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

state" (p. 320). The human, the domestic, merge unclashingly with the natural scene. At night, hovering between sleep and wakefulness, he listens to "A thousand little artisans beat on their anvils . . ." in the "tinkling ever-busy laboratory . . ." of the grass. Blending into the insect symphony comes a distant drumming from a nameless village, a "stray sound . . . far, sweet, and significant . . ." (p. 363). Even the telegraph wires, humming convivially in the morning air, loft his consciousness beyond the immediate circumstance, to "things which are priceless, of absolute truth and beauty" (p. 367).

The river itself provides both visual substance and a convenient metaphor for integrating the seen with the unseen. At first the images are commonplace: ". . . we seemed to be embarked on the placid current of our dreams, floating from past to future as silently as one awakes to fresh morning or evening thoughts" (p. 312). But the pure light of the second morning⁶³ suggests a palpable link between levels of perception:

As we thus dipped our way along between fresh masses of foliage overrun with the grape and smaller flowering vines, the surface was so calm, and both air and water so transparent, that the flight of a kingfisher or robin over the river was as distinctly seen reflected in the water below as in the air above. The birds seemed to flit through submerged groves . . . and their clear notes to come up from below. We were uncertain whether the water floated the land, or the land held the water in its bosom. . . . For every oak and birch, too, growing on the hilltop . . . we knew that

⁶³ Thomas Cole praised the "purity and transparency" of American lakes and rivers as adding to the uniqueness of the New World terrain. "It is a circumstance," he writes, "which contributes greatly to the beauty of landscape; for the reflections of surrounding objects, trees, mountains, sky, are most perfect in the clearest water; and the most perfect is the most beautiful," in "Essay on American Scenery" (1836), Conron, p. 572.

there was a graceful, ethereal and ideal tree making down from the roots. . . . (p. 323; emphasis added)

Thus the outward and inward fuse, and image (internal reality) becomes more real than the substance.

Thoreau's perception of the river, and, by extension, of nature, is implicit in his ordering of what he has to say in A Week on the Concord. Although the trip's external events are, to be sure, divulged, the preponderance of the book consists of what might be called literary, philosophical, or historical digressions. Major interruptions, during which the trip itself is not mentioned, range from one to eighteen pages in length; I count sixteen. Minor digressions are legion. But like the fusing of the reflection and the object, it is obvious that the "interruptions," rather than the events, constitute the book's substance. Nature, for Thoreau, is "emblematic"; and, as he confides, "The current of our thoughts made as sudden bends as the river, which was continually opening new prospects to the East or South. . ." (p. 418).

What Tony Tanner calls Thoreau's "sauntering eye" helps to explain his approach. Each random impression is a pebble, a nugget of insight, to be picked up and examined in all its facets.⁶⁴ Language itself is a capacious quarry for verbal nuggets. Thoreau delights in prying loose the surfaces of words, probing for new meanings, new conjunctions--then yoking them to the phenomenon of the moment. From this springboard it is a short leap to regarding all nuggets, whether sensory, cerebral, or verbal, as equally worthy of leisurely assay.

Probably because of the nature of the trip, the observations in A

⁶⁴ Tanner, pp. 59-62.

Week on the Concord lack the earthy approach that is revealed in Walden and in his later journals. In his later excursions Thoreau sought direct physical contact with nature, the soggier and oozier the better. Wading, sometimes barefoot, through swamps, gazing out from the muskrat's eye-level, eating forest plants, he gained an intimacy with nature which books could never provide.⁶⁵ This ground-based perspective is missing in A Week on the Concord; there, instead, the cues tend to be literary or verbal. "Here . . .," he writes of their second day, "we took our nooning. . . . As we thus rested in the shade, or rowed leisurely along, we had recourse, from time to time, to the Gazetteer, which was our Navigator, and from its bald natural facts extracted the pleasure of poetry" (p. 343). Poetry is where one finds it, and one of Thoreau's favorite probes is to juxtapose "bald facts" and test the resonance. The "facts" might be simply clusters of words or names. The following passage gains momentum and symbolic impact from the mix of Indian with Anglo-Saxon names:

It was already the water of Squam and Newfound Lake and Winne-
 pisiogee, and White Mountain snow, dissolved, on which we were
 floating, and Smith's and Baker's and Mad rivers, and Nashua
 and Souhegan and Piscataquoag, and Suncook and Soucook and
 Contoocook, mingled in incalculable proportions, still fluid,
 yellowish, restless all, with an ancient, ineradicable incli-
 nation to the sea. (p. 339)

One senses that Thoreau was an exceptional human being who could have

⁶⁵ See Worster, Ch. 4, "Nature Looking into Nature," pp. 77-79. In 1839, two years after graduating from college, Thoreau and his brother John made the river voyage described in A Week on the Concord. The book was published in 1849. Thoreau lived at Walden Pond from 1845 to 1847. Walden was published in 1854. Compared to Walden, in which the modes (sensory and intellectual) are closely integrated, A Week on the Concord is an imperfect amalgam. It has a longer "wavelength": its discursions are undigested, and not as painstakingly woven into the fabric of the narrative, no doubt because it lacks the ground-level perspective of Walden.

thrived intellectually in a prison cell if fortified with a few books. He describes a poet, a few pages later, as "he that hath fat enough, like bears and marmots, to suck his claws all winter" and feed "on his own marrow" (p. 351). Had he not been on a river, Thoreau would have generated his own. "We should consider," he writes, "that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the result of a celestial influence, not of any declivity in its channel" (p. 355).

The tranquil New England rivers with their sparkling, reflective surfaces were a fitting backdrop for Thoreau's contemplations. But for John Muir, the challenge of the rough-hewn Sierra canyons with their frothy streams called forth a more rhapsodic homage. If Thoreau endeavored to become like a muskrat, "a limpid eyeball peering out of the sedges of a flooded meadow,"⁶⁶ Muir sometimes preferred a loftier vantage point. It might on occasion be arboreal, as when he climbed a tall Douglas fir during a storm and "clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed" for hours enjoying the view while gyrating wildly in the wind.⁶⁷ Generally he found a walking mode more suitable for absorbing the verticality of the Sierra's trees and cliffs. As for direct contact with nature--being stirred by its storms and fragrances--Muir may have outdone Thoreau; the compass of his daily walks was legendary, and his style was more kinetic. Even Thoreau, despite his celebration of wildness, of the "tonics and barks which brace mankind,"⁶⁸ expressed ambivalence on occasion. His trips to the Maine

⁶⁶ Worster, p. 78.

⁶⁷ The Mountains of California (New York: Anchor, 1961), p. 132. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁶⁸ "Walking," in Walden and Other Writings, p. 613.

woods made him wonder if there were not such a thing as too much wildness; an individual, he concluded, should aim at a balance between the wild and the domesticated.⁶⁹

But for John Muir, at least in his writings on the Sierra, there was never any such doubt over the value of the wild. He never wavered in his conviction that wildness is essential for human sanity, and the more wildness the better. The best way to get the "good tidings" of the mountains was to get as close as possible to the wildest, most phenomenal conditions: gales, wind-choked rains, tempest-tossed tree tops, avalanches, and floods. Departing from conventional behavior, Muir deliberately sought out such calamities. He survived with splendid impunity, and, as befitting an admirer of Thoreau, realized his goal: a palpable and heady sense of nature's organic wholeness.

In January 1875 occurred an event for which Muir felt an especial affinity--an unusually warm and copious winter rain which melted the existing snow cover and induced a flood of memorable magnitude in the Yuba River watershed. "These two distinct harvests of flood waters," he wrote, referring to the rain and the snow-melt, "were gathered simultaneously and poured out on the plain in one magnificent avalanche." Muir lost no time striking out for the heart of the storm. His route crossed Dry Creek, by now a surging river, brown with mud and wooden debris. He had to negotiate "a slim footbridge" stretching ". . . scarcely above the swollen current." Clinging to the rickety platform which most travelers would have departed with all haste, Muir was quite "glad to linger, gazing and listening, while the storm was in its richest mood--the

⁶⁹ Nash, Wilderness, pp. 90-93.

gray rain-flood above, the brown river-flood beneath."

The word linger is reminiscent of Thoreau, whose contemplation of nature had to be, above all else, leisurely and deliberate. Lingering and gazing seem like absurdities when most folk would be scurrying for shelter. But for Muir the contemplative mode made sense even in the wildest of tempests. His description of the sounds of the river in flood is characteristically buoyant:

The language of the river was scarcely less enchanting than that of the wind and rain; the sublime overboom of the main bouncing, exulting current, the swash and gurgle of the eddies, the keen dash and clash of heavy waves breaking against rocks, and the smooth, downy hush of shallow currents feeling their way through the willow thickets of the margin. And amid all this varied throng of sounds I heard the smothered bumping and rumbling of boulders on the bottom as they were shoving and rolling forward against one another in a wild rush, after having lain still for probably 100 years or more. (p. 202)

Muir's exhilaration derived in part from feeling himself a part of archetypal wildness, swept by wind and rain from above, perching just over the torrent below. He wished to be on intimate terms with nature's flow, whether from cauldron, glacier, or fountainhead. The combination of everything happening at once--long-quiescent boulders rumbling forward in the tumult of the unchecked current--satisfied his craving to know nature whole, all elements moving joyfully in unison, creation in flux and ferment. The stream's wildness is synecdoche for rampant nature at large, for latent processes now in rare, splendid emergence. He goes on to describe how many an exposed rock fragment, normally untouched by the water, was now receiving its "first rounding and polishing in the wild streams of the storm. On they rushed through every gulch and hollow, leaping, gliding, working with a will, and rejoicing like living crea-

tures" (p. 203).⁷⁰ His rapture is in a direct line with Thoreau's thoughts on the human need for exposure to untamed nature:

We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thundercloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.⁷¹

After the rain abated Muir "sauntered down through the dripping bushes reveling in the universal vigor and freshness . . ." of the life about him, and reached human habitation, "warm with excitement and reeking like the ground . . ." (p. 208).

From Cartier's hopeful penetration of the New World to the cosmic and earthy observations of Thoreau and Muir, those who confronted rivers have witnessed, in awe, expectation, or dismay, their "own limits transgressed" in diverse ways. The motivation for their journeys has ranged from imperial to empirical; the mode from expeditionary to excursionary. The rivers have been raging ephemeral torrents or broad and serene expanses. Visually, they tantalized with an ever-receding panorama which contained and provided focus for shifting configurations of landforms with teeming and unique wildlife. They provided a surface for reflection, both optical and metaphorical. Symbolically, they extended an infinite ocean into an infinite West, and opened the New World's potential for

⁷⁰ Wild seems to be derived from willed, meaning self-willed or ungovernable. Wilderness, in its earliest sense, was a wild-deor-ness, a place of wild beasts. Nash (Wilderness, Prologue, pp. 1-7) discusses the historical changes in the meaning of wilderness.

⁷¹ Walden, in Walden and Other Writings, p. 283.

empire, both religious and secular.⁷³

The baggage of preconception often determined how the river and its surroundings were "seen." "The rivers," said Tocqueville, "are like main roads by means of which Providence has been at pains . . . to open up the wilds and make them accessible to man."⁷⁴ Such anthropocentrism dogged most writers until Thoreau. The age-old dream of a western Eden with boundless room for work or play tugged seductively at travelers, whispering of boundless potential around each bend, resources which would never give out. The largesse, in John Logan Allen's words, was "a luxuriance of the mind as much as of the landscape. . . ."⁷⁵ The harvest had lain unplucked for millenia; now it was time. Few questioned the rightness of the plucking.

Despite the potential for mishap and the physical ordeals of river trips, a buoyant, sometimes visionary tone prevails among the writers in this section. Prophecy was being fulfilled, and they were the chosen instruments. They beheld on the American horizon an untarnished and varied landscape, brimming with promise. The threshold of discovery was theirs. Whatever their motivations, it seems reasonable to take a good part of their promising accounts at face value: a rapturous glimpsing of sights heretofore unglimped.

⁷³ Seelye, pp. 7, 20.

⁷⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, Journey to America, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), p. 370.

⁷⁵ Allen, p. 191.

Chapter 3

The Shifting View

"No landscape, no environment," writes Kevin Starr, "is perceived save through prisms of myth and metaphor. . . ."76 Of the two dominant mythic concepts which underpinned Jefferson's westward venture, one--the age-old dream of through-river passage--had to be scratched, at least as a commercial possibility, amidst the ice and rocks of the Continental Divide. As metaphor, as inspiration to fortune-seekers or to poets such as Whitman, it would long retain much of its vitality. The second notion, the garden concept, would for a century remain a magnet for those who believed that the wilderness could be made, literally, to "blossom as the rose."

Lewis and Clark saw a "garden" potential in the beauty of the landscape. To subsequent travelers, emboldened by the expansionist fever which would later be called "manifest destiny," the wilderness' beauty and its agricultural prospects went hand in hand. Brackenridge's Missouri River trip of 1811 offers a perspective. While disclosing that his motive was mere "idle curiosity," he explains that his observations would focus on those features of the countryside which would "give an idea of its capacity for the reception of population."77

⁷⁶ "Albert Bierstadt: The Civilizing Eye," Sierra, Nov./Dec. 1977, p. 27.

⁷⁷ Brackenridge, Views of Louisiana, p. 198. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

As his party progressed upstream into the high plains, the lush river bottom land must have seemed oasis-like compared to the drier, flanking uplands. His account bears the redolence of the river habitat. "No art," he writes on June 8, while encamped a few miles above the Cheyenne River junction, "can surpass the beauty of this spot. . . . What coolness and freshness breathes around!" Mentioning the "charmingly disposed" arrangement of vegetation and meadow, he goes on to describe the river, "bordered with cotton wood, and a few elms," and then, after an open space, by "a delightful shrubbery of small ash trees, the graisse de boeuf, the gooseberry, currant, &c. forming a most delightful avenue." The bird songs here strike them as "much sweeter than in the forest of the states," and they speculate that the sparseness of woods compels the birds to crowd together on the same tree, and "in this way, impart improvement to each other" (p. 243).

But, in keeping with the focus of his observations, Brackenridge's pleasure in the beauty and vitality of the riparian landscape is inseparable from his appraisal of the settlement potential of the surrounding countryside. Two weeks earlier, on the open prairie, he describes the sky "as clear as in a Chinese painting," the country "delightful. . . . But," he confides, "there appears to be a painful void--something wanting--it can be nothing else than a population of animated beings. It were vain to describe the melancholy silence which reigns over these vast plains. Yet they seem to give a spring to the intellectual faculties. One never feels his understanding so vigorous, or thinks so clearly!" (p. 234)

Seldom has the dichotomy been expressed more vividly. The natural landscape has become to him a fount of vitality; yet he would fill it

with "animated beings." A garden uncultivated is no garden.⁷⁷ Its very emptiness is a source of both strength and oppressiveness. "Were it safe," he continues, referring to the possible presence of Indians, "with what delight would I roam over these lovely meads!" On another occasion, contemplating his possible death at the hands of Indians, he reflects that his bones "might be deposited on some dreary spot, far from . . . the haunts of civilized man." But he consoles himself with the thought that "there is no spot however distant, where I may be buried, but will in time, be surrounded by the habitations of Americans . . ." (pp. 219-220).

The wave of change was poised, about to break. Brackenridge's vision of settlement would soon be fact. But exceptional observers began to sense a paradox: as the prairie became dotted with farms and villages the natural qualities which intrigued them--the fecundity and immensity of the New World--would begin to vanish. The intricate broth of wilderness was on the brink of unprecedented mutation.

The French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville, with his usual dazzling insight, anticipates what generations of commentators on nature in America would say. With consummate skill he freezes an instant of intense agitation--the instant of the wave as it is breaking, the Euro-American onslaught rumbling just off-stage. His immediate mission (the year is 1831) strikes local frontiersmen as enigmatic, a purposeless escapade. His destination is an island in Lake Oneida, in New York State. He has heard of a French couple, long-ago fugitives from the earlier French

⁷⁷ The Spanish equivalent for wilderness is falta de cultura (lack of cultivation); a French equivalent is solitude inculte. (Nash, p. 2).

revolution who had homesteaded and died in this lonely refuge. He will visit the spot and see if any trace remains of their habitation. His description of the scene en route, as he traverses "a thousand streams not yet hemmed in by the hand of man," must stand as an ultimate evocation of the forest primeval in its awesome organic complexity:

Over our heads stretched a vast dome of vegetation. Below this thick veil and amid the damp depths of the forest, there lay one vast confusion; a sort of chaos. Trees of all ages, foliage of all colours, plants, fruits and flowers of a thousand species, entangled and intertwined. Generations of trees have succeeded one another there through uninterrupted centuries and the ground is covered with their debris. Some seem to have fallen yesterday; others already half sunk into the ground have but a hollow surface without depth, others are finally reduced to dust and serve to fertilize their last offshoots. . . . Sometimes we happened to come on an immense tree that the wind had torn up by the roots, but the ranks are so crowded in the forest that often despite its weight it had not been able to make its way right down to the ground. Its withered branches still balanced in the air. . . . everything in nature showed a creative force unknown elsewhere; . . . the air seemed impregnated with the smell of vegetation. It was as if one heard an inner sound that betrayed the work of creation and could see the sap and life circulating through ever open channels.⁷⁸

Once on the island, Tocqueville and a companion grope their way through the vegetation and locate the remnants of the former dwelling, all but smothered in the tangle of growth. They return to the mainland and for two weeks visit scattered Indian settlements. On the last day but one of their wilderness sojourn, gliding back downstream by canoe "without effort and without sound," they experience a state of rapport with their surroundings, with the passage of time, and with their own inner beings. They fall, he writes, "into a tranquil reverie full of inexpressible

⁷⁸ Journey to America, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 321-322. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

charm" (p. 371)--an enviable state which eludes those who consciously strive for it, and which he depicts so clearly and appealingly that future writers can but emulate him. Far ahead of his time, he conveys the essence of the river experience--at least in its contemplative mode--which still draws men today. He speaks of the elation which comes when physical and spiritual well-being coincide, and one is in equilibrium with the universe. Beholding the wilds the same as "when our first fathers saw them six thousand years ago," he feels at one with all time and with the natural world as he senses the "even beating of his arteries that seems to him to mark the passage of time flowing drop by drop through eternity" (p. 371).

The impact of these moments must have been lasting, for Tocqueville, who went on to a career of prominent public service in his country, refers longingly to the memory of those "fugitive hours which neither time nor the demanding cares of life have been able to efface." But his meditations are convulsed by a gunshot that "suddenly echoed through the woods. . . . It might have been," he comments, "the long, fearsome war cry of civilisation on the march." The sequence of events is ironic. They had just witnessed nature, on the island, lush and ascendant, reclaiming its own after a brief human intrusion. Now the unfathomable forest looms on both sides of the stream. But the sudden noise thrusts a different sort of reality before them. The teeming outside world is evoked, the familiar enterprising Yankee world which Tocqueville has been chronicling for weeks, about to intrude and send the forests reeling. The spell is shattered, and it is replaced by a disquieting mixture of prophecy and nostalgia.

The facts are as certain as if they had already occurred. In but few years these impenetrable forests will have fallen. The noise of civilisation and of industry will break the silence of the Saginaw. Its echo will be silent. Embankments will imprison its sides, and its waters, which today flow unknown and quiet through nameless wilds, will be thrown back in their flow by the prows of ships. . . . we are perhaps the last travelers who will have been allowed to see [This solitude] in its primitive splendour, so great is the force that drives the white race to the complete conquest of the New World. (p. 372)

The prophecy's concreteness gives it cogency. But the nostalgia that follows is also, paradoxically, prophetic. The tone is oddly reminiscent, as if looking back from a future time.

It is this consciousness of destruction, this arriere-pensee of quick and inevitable change, that gives, we feel, so peculiar a character and such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of a hurry to admire them. Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilisation. One feels proud to be a man, and yet at the same time one experiences I cannot say what bitter regret at the power that God has granted us over nature. (p. 372)

The change in mood is heightened by the dramatic juxtaposition of themes. Tocqueville has immersed us in the forest primeval and (apparently) invincible, and has celebrated the wholeness which comes from being attuned to nature. Now comes a sharp, sinking awareness of nature's fragility. The circumstance, a sudden intrusive noise, is a common motif in American literature. Leo Marx has termed it "the trope of the interrupted idyll."⁷⁹ In Tocqueville's narrative the device is a gunshot; in other instances it may be the shriek of a locomotive, or a steamboat's sudden looming appearance--any abrupt, mechanized encroachment. Whatever the cause, the outcome is similar. A condition of well-being, of

⁷⁹ Marx, p. 27.

thoughtful contentment, gives way abruptly to a more complex state of anxiety and conflict--as suggested here by Tocqueville's phraseology: "touching beauty"; "melancholy pleasure." A seemingly minor event, the unexpected firing of a gun along a peaceful river, has been projected onto a larger canvas which now foreshadows instability and the rapid transformation of the natural scene. It also suggests that a state of rapport with unmodified nature will become increasingly difficult to attain.

About a year later, and half a continent westward, another traveler was also experiencing and recording new scenes. The traveler, George Catlin, was a passenger aboard the American Fur Company's new steamer *Yellowstone* on her maiden voyage up the Missouri River--a two thousand mile trip from St. Louis to Fort Union. For Catlin, a lawyer turned artist, the trip was also his first entry into Indian territory. What he saw convinced him that the Indians' traditional ways were on the verge of extinction, and he resolved to record, with paintbrush and pen, the people, their cultures, and their habitats before the opportunity vanished. From 1832 to 1836 he completed twenty transits of the American West, visited forty-eight Indian tribes, and did hundreds of authentic and historically valuable paintings of Indians in their own surroundings.⁸⁰

Catlin's initial style of travel could hardly have contrasted more strikingly with Tocqueville's unobtrusive mode. His steamer was a sidewheeler whose belching smokestacks astounded the Indians and caused

⁸⁰ Henry Savage, Jr., Discovering America, 1700-1875 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 226.

grazing animals to leap away in alarm--a perfect illustration of the "interruption" motif mentioned above. Though Catlin referred gleefully to the commotion which his ship caused--an ironic and nearly perpetual disruption of the natural scene he wished to record--he managed to get off the boat long enough to paint and get a good feel for the countryside.

Like most easterners, Catlin was struck by the seemingly grotesque features of the Missouri River: its snag-choked shallow currents, its coffee-like consistency and color; "The River of Sticks" he dubbed it for its quantities of driftwood: a "most frightful and discouraging prospect for the adventurous voyageur."⁸¹ From the deck he gazed at the prairie, the boundless, teeming prairie which Lewis and Clark had described--and the river. All this he was seeing for the first time, but he was seeing it at least in part through his predecessors' eyes--through their journals and through the encouragement which William Clark, then Superintendent of Indian Affairs, personally extended to the newcomer. Catlin's description is a leisurely, and non-sequential, amplification of the Lewis and Clark journals; he glowingly expands, for instance, on the architectural likenesses suggested by the strangely eroded cliffs. A new and notable feature, one which adds to the feeling of vastness of a river crawling through endless plains, is his depiction of a prairie fire at night, when the flames "are seen at many miles distance, creeping over the sides and tops of the bluffs, appearing to be sparkling and brilliant chains of liquid fire (the hills being lost to the

⁸¹ George Catlin, Letters and Notes of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1965), I, 18.

view), hanging suspended in graceful festoons from the skies."⁸²

It was atop one such bluff, gazing over the Missouri and its "windings infinite," that Catlin had a vision of the future. The bluff, a particularly imposing feature, was known as "Floyd's Grave" in honor of Sergeant Floyd, the only fatality of the Lewis and Clark expedition. That this spot, alone in a nameless immensity, did have a name and a history, may have helped to evoke Catlin's prophetic musings:

I . . . looked into the valley below me, both up the river and down, and contemplated the thousand hills and dales that are now carpeted with green, streaked as they will be, with the plough, and yellow with the harvest sheaf; spotted with lowing kine--with houses and fences, and groups of hamlets and villas --and these lovely hill-tops ringing with the giddy din and maze. . . .⁸³

Wilderness was not to remain wilderness. Cultivated, it would become a garden, and then progress further to add "wealth and refinements." Catlin was a fervent chronicler of the aboriginal scene; he beheld with delight both the natural habitat and the natural man. But he beheld them on the threshold of change, and the feel of the change was part of his beholding, and the reason he was there. Like the salvage archeologist of today, he was racing against the rising tide. Catlin's writing style is semi-opaque, and his real perceptions have to be filtered out from a torrent of hyperbole. He seems, though, to have shared some of Tocqueville's ambivalence: regret mingled with wonder at what was about to happen. But Catlin seems more easily reconciled to the ascendancy of the "bustling, busy, talking, whistling, hopping, elated and exulting white man." He saw civilization's march as "grand

⁸² Catlin, II, 17.

⁸³ Catlin, II, 3-5.

and irresistible," a "splendid Juggernaut." Even when he contemplated, in amazement, the "mighty Missouri river . . . eternally rolling its boiling waters through the richest of soil, for the distance of four thousand miles," he thought of the steamers which would "improve" the river by raising the sediment and deepening the channel "for the temptations and enjoyment of man"; and of marshland "drying and growing into beauty and loveliness under the hand of the husbandman." Man's works would simply complement nature's wonders.⁸⁴ It should be mentioned here that Catlin was the first to propose, in 1832, "A magnificent . . . nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!"⁸⁵ In the light of the later evolution of the park concept in America, his proposal was remarkably apt and prophetic. But despite his commitment to the natural habitat, Catlin's inclinations betrayed the divergent pulls of his time. While part of him lamented the passing of the primitive, another portion of him was awaiting, with fascinated awe, the changes about to be wrought on the aboriginal landscape.

The events Catlin foresaw through "sublime contemplations," John James Audubon beheld during his years of constant naturalizing. In Volume I of his Ornithological Biography, written from 1826 to 1831, Audubon recalls a boat trip down the Ohio River with his wife and infant son in October, 1810. Among hundreds of comparable trips Audubon undertook, this one stands out for its luxuriant serenity and

84 Catlin, II, 156-157.

85 As quoted in Nash, p. 101.

quiet emotional intensity. "Purer pleasures I never felt," he writes. "Clustered fruits of varied brilliancy" hung from vines. A squatter's cabin or a sluggish flatboat were occasional reminders of man's presence as they glided down the river, "meeting no other ripple of the water than that formed by the propulsion of our boat." Like Tocqueville, Audubon conveys the sense of being at ease and at one with himself and the world.⁸⁶ But no gunshot breaks the reverie. Instead, the writer shifts into reminiscence, summing up an era in one sentence:

When I think of these times, and call back to my mind the grandeur and beauty of those almost uninhabited shores; when I picture to myself the dense and lofty summits of the forests, that everywhere spread along the hills and overhung the margins of the stream, unmolested by the ax of the settler . . . when I see that no longer any aborigines are to be found there, and that the vast herds of elk, deer, and buffaloes which once pastured on these hills, and in these valleys, making for themselves great roads to the several salt springs, have ceased to exist; when I reflect that all this grand portion of our Union, instead of being in a state of nature, is now more or less covered with villages, farms, and towns, where the din of hammers and machinery is constantly heard; that the woods are fast disappearing under the ax by day, and the fire by night; that hundreds of steamboats are gliding to and fro over the whole length of the majestic river . . . when I remember that these extraordinary changes have all taken place in the short period of twenty years, I pause, wonder, and, although I know all to be fact, can scarcely believe its reality.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Many nineteenth century writers reserve their warmest praise for the Ohio River, also known as the Frontier River. Its situation and lush vegetation impressed early observers, including Charles Dickens, as ideally beautiful, with rolling hills on one side and rich alluvial plains on the other.

⁸⁷ As quoted in Edwin Way Teale, Audubon's Wildlife, pp. 143-153.

In this remarkable sentence the events are subordinate to the main structure: I pause, wonder, and . . . can scarcely believe. The jarring changes are recounted to convey a state of mind--of reflection, nostalgia, and of slight disbelief that the Eden of long ago can never be recaptured.

Some forty years after Audubon was recording his bafflement over the dizzying pace of events, it was still possible to find a region of the country that had not been systematically surveyed and inventoried, its recesses illuminated for all to see. In 1869 John Wesley Powell set out to remedy that deficiency. What tantalized Powell was precisely the "unexplored" status of the land adjacent to the lower Colorado River and its chief tributary, the Green. From the Unita Valley in Northeast Utah to the Grand Wash Cliffs, near the upstream limit of present-day Lake Mead--a river distance of some eight hundred miles--the terrain was dimly defined save for an occasional traverse. Within what are sometimes called the "lower 48" states it is doubtful that there existed as extensive a stretch of unmapped land. During some sixty westering years since Lewis and Clark the blank spaces on maps had been sketched in to the extent that a comparable exploit was to be had only by probing the canyons of obscure rivers which had eaten their way deep into geological time.

Though the pursuit of a "wilderness experience," in today's sense of the term, was not precisely the motive behind Powell's first Colorado River expedition in 1869, he and his men felt, in Wallace Stegner's words, "what every river tourist has felt since: the stillness, the

remoteness, the lovely withdrawn quiet" of the Colorado canyons.⁸⁸

In his journal entry of August 3, Powell records these words:

Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak-set glens, past these fern-decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder. . . .⁸⁹

He was writing of Glen Canyon, a 149-mile long chasm through Navajo sandstone which, even before its present incarnation as Lake Powell, contained little of the turbulence encountered elsewhere on the Colorado. But the river elsewhere is hardly one continuous seething fury. Even the downstream canyons like Marble and Granite, with their worrisome rapids, offer serene stretches, often two miles or more long, before the next dropoff and white water: tamarisk and arrowweed-scented interludes to revive the weary spirit--unless one broods over what the next turbulence may hold in store.

Both Powell's explorations and the resulting work, The Exploration, are marked by a number of contradictory elements. The ten-man party, according to Stegner, was a "meager force with which to conduct a major exploration." Though the purpose of the venture was scientific rather than military, its leadership was held by two ex-Civil War officers: Major Powell himself, who had lost an arm at Shiloh; and his brother, Captain W. H. Powell. The Powells represented "military discipline and the officer class." John Powell was "intense, ambitious, intellectually

⁸⁸ Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West, introd. Bernard DeVoto (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), pp. 88-89.

⁸⁹ The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons (1895; rpt. New York: Dover, 1961), p. 233. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

curious . . . committed to the abstract cause of Science." By contrast the eight-man crew--mostly trappers, mountain men, outdoorsmen--"represented frontier independence and a violent distaste for discipline. . . ."90 With their scant understanding of what Powell was about they could be expected to grumble when his insatiable urge to clamber up and measure every cliff came up against the loss of rations and the need to put miles behind them.

Despite its minimal crew the expedition, under the auspices of the Illinois Natural History Society, was thoroughly planned and reasonably well equipped, and was designed to bring back scientific data. It would serve, too, as a catalyst, a launch-pad, for Powell's self-propelled career in governmental science and land policy. It was also a great adventure, a feat of endurance, leadership, energy, and imagination.

John Wesley Powell himself was both an enjoyer and an analyst of nature, and he saw no essential contradiction, as he amassed the building blocks for a brilliant career, in combining both approaches. Despite his role as "a thorough and convinced scientist and a believer in facts," Stegner suggests,

Powell was a child of his own time, touched by the excitement and wonder of new country and new knowledge. He was committed to the philosophy of progress and perfectibility, he had on occasion played the public hero just a little, he affected the romantic poets. It would be misleading to call him a completely objective realist. He liked a dash to things; he also liked things accurately stated.⁹¹

For the second occurrence of "things" read "scientific data" and Powell's

⁹⁰ Stegner, pp. 43-44.

⁹¹ Stegner, pp. 176-177.

intent becomes clearer. Powell revisited the Colorado River in 1870, 1871, and 1872 to gather additional data; but to add unity and force to his narrative he treated some observations and events from these later trips as if they had occurred on the original expedition. In this respect his procedure paralleled that of some painters of early Western scenes. All of Albert Bierstadt's grandiose paintings of the American West, for example, were

done in his studio and were based on stereoscopic views, photographs, sketches, and water colors. Many of his pictures are composite scenes and are not views of the mountains, waterfalls, or other natural features that their titles name. In fact, the titles themselves sometimes give names of places which do not exist.⁹²

Powell never fictionalized places, though the names he bestowed on prominent landmarks were imaginative and apt. He did create a composite narrative of his trips, squeezing the facts together a bit for literary and promotional purposes.⁹³ Thus, although he never tried to conceal the later trips, he "got himself into something embarrassingly close to manipulation of the facts."⁹⁴ Powell altered the chronology, the human history, of his explorations, but he did not play games with what really mattered: the scientific data. He was, as Stegner insists, "no

⁹² Hans Huth, Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes (1957; rpt. n.p.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 141.

⁹³ As to the public relations potential of Powell's writing, Stegner suggests: "When he wrote the Exploration he had his eye partly on scientific results and the scientific reader, partly on the persuasive power the narrative might have on appropriations committees, and partly on the public impression he would make" (p. 148).

⁹⁴ Stegner, p. 148. There is literary precedent for such a device. Thoreau, for instance, merged two years of experience into one in Walden.

nature faker," and the liberties he took in telling his story to a rapt popular readership in no way detracted from the enormous scientific value of his report. Its scientific findings are embodied primarily in what, in some editions, is the second part of his Exploration, "The Physical Features of the Valley of the Colorado." It is restrained in tone but occasionally glows in appreciation of the superlative nature of the landscape. It appeared first, in serial form, in The Popular Science Monthly.

The narrative itself is of more direct concern here. It was published, also serialized, in Scribner's in 1875, generously illustrated and "written as a popular adventure story of original exploration. . . for a popular magazine."⁹⁵ The work was done during winter evenings in Washington, D.C.; and like a painter, Powell expanded his field notes into the sweeping wide-angle views calculated to catch the public eye--couched, as Stegner puts it, in "the tone of the nineteenth-century literary traveler with an expanded and throbbing capacity for sensations."⁹⁶

There was justification for such a tone. In their scope and complexity and in their impact on the brain and the senses, the canyons of

⁹⁵ Stegner, p. 151.

⁹⁶ Compared to some of the overwrought nature writing of his century, Powell's prose stands out as relatively restrained. One turgid example will suffice for comparison. A traveler, on viewing the panorama from the summit of Mt. Washington, N. H., wrote: "the sensations which affect the corporal faculties, as one views these stupendous creations of Omnipotence are absolutely afflicting and painful . . . too sublime and overwhelming to be described" (from Joseph T. Buckingham, Personal Memories, as quoted in Huth, p. 79; the date of publication was 1882, that of the visit, 1826).

the Colorado are "calculated to stir the superlatives out of almost anyone."⁹⁷ For the voyager, the cycles of the river from still water to frothy can catapult the mood from contemplative to adventurous, from foreboding to open-eyed wonder. Powell's parlor-ripened work may or may not have accurately reconstructed each nuance of the journey's moods, but it does exploit their dramatic potential. His July 15 journal entry will illustrate. Four days upriver from the junction of the Green with the "Grand" (Colorado) River they thread their way through a meandering watercourse and gape at conjurations of erosional forms. The remote canyon, which they dub Labrynth (sic), has since become part of Canyonlands National Park. After camping in "a great bend of the canyon" (the river, over a tortuous stretch of fourteen miles, describes almost the figure 8: they call it a "bowknot" of river) they explore by foot an alcove-like side canyon. They pass "between high walls of sandstone, and wind about in glens." They see springs "gush from the rocks at the foot of the walls. . . ." They make their way through narrow, convoluted passages in the rocks and peer into caves. These sights are but prologue to the wonders which follow. They encounter

a narrow, winding gorge, with overhanging walls, almost shutting out the light. . . .

an amphitheater, turning spirally up, with overhanging shelves. . . .

a series of basins filled with water . . . and overhead . . . an arched ceiling. . . .

naked rocks . . . buttes . . . here rounded into cones, there buttressed, columned, and carved in quaint shapes, with deep alcoves and sunken recesses. . . .

[Now back in the main canyon] the walls symmetrically curved and grandly arched, of a beautiful color. . . .

⁹⁷ Stegner, p. 149.

Harvest enough for one day's ramblings. "We are all," Powell reports, "in fine spirits and feel very gay, and the badinage of the men is echoed from wall to wall. Now and then we whistle or shout or discharge a pistol, to listen to the reverberations among the cliffs" (pp. 200-203).

There are other moments of high spirits, hard-won after the beastly work of portaging around or lining their boats through rapids:⁹⁸

What a headlong ride it is! shooting past rocks and islands. I am soon filled with exhilaration only experienced before in riding a fleet horse over the outstretched prairie. One, two, three, four miles we go, rearing and plunging with the waves, until we wheel to the right into a beautiful park and land on an island, where we go into camp. (p. 176)

Future river-runners would echo these thoughts.

In quiet moments, lying awake in deepening twilight "with thoughts of the morrow and the canyons to come," the scientist in Powell surfaces. He is distracted by the undulating canyon walls, and the analytical part of him will give him no rest. Lying on one's side, he discovers, enhances optical triangulation, and from that position a mountain's true distance and altitude can best be estimated (p.138). Powell the scientist hankers after topographic exactitude; within a few years, as Director of the Geological Survey, he would initiate a nation-wide mapping program. He is determined, whatever the hazard to life and limb, to bring back data. For this purpose he lugs along a bulky tube barometer on his

⁹⁸ When the river filled the channel from cliff to cliff, making portaging impossible, they would negotiate a bad rapid by letting "one boat down the full length of its line, then push off the second attached to it, and the third attached to the second, until all three were stretched out straining in the rapid, when the third was pulled in, then the second loosed and snubbed in, then the first" (Stegner, pp. 74-75).

scrambles (the climbs would be challenge enough for a two-armed man without such an encumberment), and he and a companion pass it back and forth as they shinny up narrow fissures to the rim-tops. Powell includes altitudes and distances in his narrative; but paradoxically his most effective passages shun measurements. The poet, the interpreter in him, prefers to bring out the immeasurability of the terrain, and to use analogy and imagery to convey the scope and scale of his surroundings:

And what a world of grandeur is spread before us! Below is the canyon through which the Colorado runs. We can trace its course for miles, and at points catch glimpses of the river. From the northwest comes the Green in a narrow winding gorge. From the northeast comes the Grand, through a canyon that seems bottomless from where we stand. Away to the west are lines of cliffs and ledges of rock--not such ledges as the reader may have seen where the quarryman splits his blocks, but ledges from which the gods might quarry mountains that, rolled out on the plain below, would stand a lofty range; and not such cliffs as the reader may have seen where the swallow builds its nest, but cliffs where the soaring eagle is lost to view ere he reaches his summit. Between us and the distant cliffs are the strangely carved and pinnacled rocks of the Toom' pin wunear' Tuweap'. On the summit of the opposite wall of the canyon are rock forms that we do not understand. Away to the east a group of eruptive mountains are seen--the Sierra La Sal. . . . Their slopes are covered with pines, and deep gulches are flanked with great crags, and snow fields are seen near the summits. So the mountains are in uniform,--green, gray, and silver. Wherever we look there is but a wilderness of rocks,--deep gorges where the rivers are lost below cliffs and towers and pinnacles, and ten thousand strangely carved forms in every direction, and beyond them mountains blending with the clouds. (pp. 212-213; emphasis added)

It is the very undecipherability of the rock forms, one senses, which contributes to the ecstatic mood. The man of science is undetectable in these lines; but fully revealed is the Major Powell who likes to read the romantic poets--Wordsworth, Southey, Shelley--to his crew during quiet interludes. Powell, of all men, knows that the canyon is not bottomless, and he carefully qualifies the word; we may be sure that a part of him is

aching to gauge its depth. Bottomlessness as a state of mind rather than as physical fact is what he is trying to convey. The thrust of Powell's career would tend toward reducing complexity to graspable and copable form. This passage celebrates the ungraspable. With its unplumbed canyons, its lost rivers, its mountains blending with clouds, its hazy, indeterminate distances, it is a blueprint for a Bierstadt or a Frederick Church.⁹⁹

The tug of war between the poet and the scientist can be seen in other descriptive passages. "Beyond the cottonwoods," he writes of an excursion into another side canyon,

The brook tumbles in a series of white, shining cascades from heights that seem immeasurable. Turning around, we can look through the cleft through which we came and see the river with towering walls beyond. What a chamber for a resting place is this! hewn from the solid rock, the heavens for a ceiling, cascade fountains within, a grove in the conservatory, clear lakelets for a refreshing bath, and an outlook through the doorway on a raging river, with cliffs and mountains beyond. (p. 216)

⁹⁹ Clarence Dutton, a geologist with the Powell Survey, and on whom Powell's professional mantle fell, is remembered today as much for his esthetic speculation as for the more purely scientific of his writings. Speaking of the means by which we seek to comprehend an alien scene, he writes: "The observer who, unfamiliar with plateau scenery, stands for the first time upon the brink of the inner gorge, is almost sure to view his surroundings with commingled feelings of disappointment and perplexity . . . he forgets that the human mind itself is of small capacity and receives its impressions slowly, by labored processes of comparison. So, too, at the brink of the chasm, there comes at first a feeling of disappointment; it does not seem so grand as we expected. At length we strive to make comparisons . . . and now the real magnitudes begin to unfold themselves, and as the attention is held firmly the mind grows restive under the increasing burden. Every time the eye ranges up or down its face it seems more distant and more vast. At length we recoil, overburdened with the perceptions already attained and yet half vexed at the inadequacy of our faculties to comprehend more" (as quoted in Francois Leydet, Grand Canyon, ed. David Brower [San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1964], p. 20).

The tone lies somewhere between fact and fantasy. The spot, a respite from the river's turbulence and roar, is a brief escape from immensity to intimacy, into a womb of nature which offers cultural amenities to boot. Powell, but for the imagery, could be an eight-year-old telling of his secret hideaway. His diction (tumbles, hewn) is metaphorical. Though the context is factual, the tone is anything but neutral; it is luminous with discovery. To gauge its position between the extremes of the objectively scientific and the unrestrainedly romantic, two examples, both dealing with similar subject matter, are offered for comparison. The first is an excerpt from "Mile 150" of a standard guidebook to the Colorado River:

Alcoves and amphitheaters in the Redwall Limestone are reminiscent of the Redwall Cavern upstream. On the north shore, the Muav Limestone is locally veneered with dripstone and travertine derived from solution activity in the limestone sequences above. The travertine deposits are associated with springs which produce more luxurious vegetation.¹⁰⁰

Next to this the Powell description glows fancifully--until another selection is juxtaposed:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
 Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
 So twice five miles of fertile ground
 With walls and towers were girdled round:
 And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

¹⁰⁰ W. Kenneth Hamblin and J. Keith Rigby, Guidebook to the Colorado River, Part 2 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1969), p. 61.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
 Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
 A savage place! as holy and enchanted
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
 By woman wailing for her demon-lover!¹⁰¹

What might Coleridge have written had he glimpsed what Powell did? Powell, in any event, swings to competing urges. A few more lines, and he is back to exact distances ("From the edge of the water to the brink of the cliffs it is 1,600 to 1,800 feet"), only to revert once more to the immeasurable ("yet we can look down into waters that reflect a bottomless abyss") (p. 217). His circumstances contained enough of either fact or fantasy to account for the oscillation. Weighing the two inclinations, Stegner writes:

In any of its phases it [The West] was big, grandiose, fabulous. It stunned the imagination or detonated words of prophecy. . . . In the popular mind the West stayed fabulous, partly because many of its very facts were fabulous. . . . What convert yearning toward Zion could contravene the evidence of the desert blossoming as the rose? Fantasy won also because ideas are like dye thrown into moving water, and American minds two or three generations later and thousands of miles away could be tinged with the coloring of a Rousseau or a Chateaubriand, the German romantics or Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It won because what people wanted was not facts at all, but corroboration of legendry and lore.¹⁰²

Powell's narrative emerges as neither a scientific monograph nor a

¹⁰¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," in The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Including Poems and Versions of Poems Now Published for the First Time, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912), I, 297-298. John Livingston Lowes, in The Road to Xanadu, traces the literary sources of Coleridge's imagery through a study of Coleridge's notebook and a comparison of other works which the poet admired. One of the foremost was William Bartram's Travels, a vivid account of a four-year exploration of the American Southeast in the 1770s. Lowes finds that the meandering waterways which Bartram observed in Florida have been transmuted, through Coleridge's imaginative powers, into the river "Alph" and the "caverns measureless to man." See The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Way of the Imagination, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), pp. 365-370, 372.

¹⁰² Stegner, pp. 174-175.

romantic gusher--just an exciting adventure told with restraint and some literary flair. Given the conflicting pulls of the subject matter, it is a reasonable place to be.

Anxiety and hardship, recurring elements of the journey, heighten as the men drift from the sanctuary of Glen Canyon into the gorges of Marble and Granite Canyons. Today this free-flowing stretch from Lee's Ferry to Lake Mead, though still awesome, is a rafter's delight. To Powell's crew, during the climactic final 3½ weeks, the adventure was losing its lustre. Food supplies were running ominously low; the canyon walls loomed higher; the rapids were more formidable. Powell's account rises to the high drama of the occasion:

August 13.--We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown. . . .

We are three quarters of a mile in the depths of the earth, and the great river shrinks into insignificance as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs that rise to the world above; the waves are but puny ripples, and we but pigmies, running up and down the sands or lost among the boulders.

We have an unknown distance yet to run, an unknown river to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not. Ah, well! we may conjecture many things. The men talk as cheerfully as ever; jests are bandied about freely this morning; but to me the cheer is somber and the jests are ghastly. (p. 247)

Powell's style, with its phrasal repetition, echoes the monumentality and formality of the canyon's geological features. Let us recall an earlier passage (quoted above, p. 60):

past these mounded billows of orange sandstone,
 past these oak-set glens,
 past these fern-decked alcoves,
 past these mural curves,
 we glide hour after hour

The grammatical parallelism evokes, to this reader, the systematic

variation among the formations along the canyon walls.

The next day would provide ample grounds for their misgivings. On August 14 they enter gneiss formations, "rocks harder than any we have experienced. . . . and sharp, angular buttresses, bristling with wind- and wave-polished spires, extend far out into the river" (p. 248).¹⁰³ As the dark walls of gneiss mount higher, so does the burden of uncertainty:

Down in these grand, gloomy depths we glide, ever listening, for the mad waters keep up their roar; ever watching, ever peering ahead, for the narrow canyon is winding and the river is closed in so that we can see but a few hundred yards, and what there may be below we know not; so we listen for falls and watch for rocks. . . . (pp. 251-253)

Even Powell's notorious enthusiasm for scenery seemed muted by this awesome gorge. Whether the other men retained any at all during their final race against hunger and disaster is dubious. An August 29, with profound relief, six men out of the original band of ten rowed out of the imprisoning walls into open country. One man had exited safely much earlier. Three others, just before the final fearsome rapid, opted to strike out on their own across the canyon walls and were later found slain by Shivwits Indians. But John Wesley Powell emerged from the canyons, in Stegner's words,

a national hero, a club-car celebrity. People found him romantically maimed, awesomely resolute, winningly genial and enthusiastic, a persuasive talker. . . . He had unlocked the last great unknown region in the country and made it his own, and in that region so simple and so empty

¹⁰³ The hardness of the rock determined the difficulty of navigation: hard rock, bad river; soft rock, smooth water. The blackish or brownish gneiss and schist were interlaced with lighter-colored granite dikes, and the resulting formation was miscalled granite; hence, Granite Canyon.

of people, scientific knowledge lay on the surface like the moss agates and jasper geodes of some of its valleys, ready to be scooped up in the hand. Powell's mark was already on it. Its mountains and creeks and buttes bore names he and his men had given them. And his mark would be on it more, by his own determination and the national consent.¹⁰⁴

In his Preface, Powell writes: "The exploration was not made for adventure, but purely for scientific purposes, geographic and geologic, and I had no intention of writing an account of it, but only of recording the scientific results" (p. iii). There is no reason to question Powell's commitment to science; the second half of the Exploration and his subsequent public writings contribute significantly across a range of scholarly fields and public land policy. But adventures are not planned; they happen--and Powell, despite his modest disclaimer, was able to parlay a smashing good adventure into political capital.

Much of the drama of the mission springs from its wilderness character, heightened by the unknown quality of the terrain. Against this backdrop the changing moods of the voyage stand out in bold relief: the foreboding, the hardship, the exhilaration born of crashing through barriers, the sheer enchantment. By 1869 the wilderness quality of the journey was almost an anachronism. By that I mean that the "purity" of the experience--the prolonged absence of human artifacts in a landscape of such sublimity and magnitude--could not even then have been duplicated this side of the Canadian border. And part of the impact of the Exploration is that this quality is not diluted by speculation. By way of contrast, it is useful to recall George Catlin's two-layered perception of the prairie, written some forty years prior to Powell's manuscript. He gazed at the mounded prairie in its nearly pristine state;

¹⁰⁴ Stegner, p. 113.

but as he did so, almost like a time-lapse machine, he saw "axes leap and shapes arise"¹⁰⁵ and he heard the din of hamlets and villages where stood only the wind-stirred grass.

As Powell rafted with his men down into those "grand, gloomy depths," some thoughts of the future development of the Colorado River basin must have crossed his mind. Exploration's normal purpose is to discover resources for possible exploitation. The impetus of Powell's career was toward wise use of land as determined by fact. But it was not the purpose of his narrative to foretell. Powell may have excluded speculation for the same reason that he merged the events of the several trips--to enhance its readability and sharpen its focus. Later there would be occasion for prophecy.¹⁰⁶ Its omission and the lack of comment on potential human intrusion on the natural scene designate the Exploration--rather later than might be expected--as a benchmark of "pure"

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is not Catlin's, but Hans Huth's adaptation, as the title for his first chapter, of key lines from Whitman's "Song of the Broad-Axe."

¹⁰⁶ In 1878, three years after the Exploration appeared, Powell's seminal work, Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States, was published. It contained, prophetically, "both in its analysis of western conditions and its evaluation of consequences, the classic statements of the terms on which the West could be peopled" (from Stegner's Preface to the Report, p. xxiv). Its far-ranging recommendations included a policy of cautious husbandry of limited water resources which ran counter to the frontier expectation of a shortage-free Eden in the West. They included irrigation and grazing districts, touched on the minimum feasible size of farms, and proposed a definitive national survey system. The book's proposals are relevant here only to the extent that they provide insight into those of Powell's musings which remained unexpressed in the Grand Canyon narrative.

wilderness narrative, its impact undiminished by omens of future change. Yet the narrative's internal dynamics betray a conflict which goes beyond one man's dilemma. In the tension between competing mental states --the urge to measure and the jubilation over unsurveyed nature--emerges a basic schism in American attitudes toward nature. It is currently reflected, to name one instance, in the debate over conducting oil exploration in dedicated wildlife preserves or wilderness areas. Is it not imprudent, the argument goes, not to know what potential resources exist? To that the wilderness advocate would counter that the very act of surveying leads inescapably toward exploitation, thus invalidating the concept of preserving nature undisturbed.

But long before the treatment of natural areas and natural resources burst into public awareness as an issue, the conflict was detectible in literature. As has been pointed out, it is implicit in the nervously oscillating moods of Powell's narrative. It would surface more explicitly in the writings of a contemporary who also wrote of rivers: Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

In 1856 Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) met Horace Bixby, a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. Clemens persuaded Bixby to teach him his craft, and after eighteen months as an apprentice served two portentous years as a licensed pilot.¹⁰⁷ In 1876 the story of Clemens' days as cub-pilot and pilot appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in seven

¹⁰⁷ Roderick Nash, From These Beginnings: A Biographic Approach to American History (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 239.

installments, titled "Old Times on the Mississippi." The experience as pilot fulfilled a boyhood dream and was climactic in a number of ways. One of the more revealing, and to this study the most relevant, was the transformation which occurred in Clemens' perspective on the river.

When he began his tutelage as a cub pilot, the young Clemens was almost totally innocent of the encyclopedic hoard of knowledge required for mastery of the job--and ignorant of the need to acquire it. His appreciation, deriving from his boyhood days spent by and with the river, was that of feeling and intuition. His River was an elemental essence, beyond questioning or logical analysis. It was

the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun; the dense forest away on the other side; the "point" above the town, and the "point" below, bounding the river-glimpse and turning it into a sort of sea, and withal a very still and brilliant and lonely one.¹⁰⁸

Sam Clemens almost gave up when he discovered that to become a pilot he must commit to memory every bank and shoal, every rapid and jutting-out reef of the twelve hundred-mile stretch of the Mississippi upstream from New Orleans. He must know these features day or night, high water or low, fair weather or foul, and he must know them to a "dead moral certainty, and never get them mixed . . ." (Life, p. 85). Now he began to comprehend why a pilot's prestige far eclipsed that of a captain, and was noble beyond compare.

The ability required of a pilot went beyond merely recognizing salient features under varying conditions. His knowledge of the river

¹⁰⁸ Life on the Mississippi (1874; rpt. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), p. 33. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

must be totally internalized; he must know it so well, as Bixby made clear to Clemens, that the vista of the moment is almost redundant; for it may, in fact, be misleading: a wind-caused reef, a moonlit reflection. The notion seems transcendental. One thinks of Thoreau's reflected image--more "real" than the original. Yet the pilot must note and record significant changes (an eroded bank, a new snag or a disappeared one, a different water level) within his inward chart.

The painfully acquired store of facts required a quid pro quo. Clemens' prior perceptions of the river--of "graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced . . .," of "reflected images, woody heights, soft distances . . ."--had to be discarded. A pilot had no time nor right to harbor such thoughts when his trained eye told him that "that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights . . .," and that "the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously . . ." (Life, pp. 79-80). Now the river's every nuance must be read as a potential danger signal, and all "the grace, the beauty, the poetry . . ." of the river--its unfathomability--were gone. Clemens still felt the lure of the river, which was "so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparkingly renewed with every reperusal" (Life, pp. 77-78)--but it was a fascination with knowledge, with power, a basking in the glow of status.

In achieving his boyhood ambition, in mounting the pilot's pinnacle of prestige, Clemens paid a price: the loss of his naive perception of nature. His Faustian attainment, his skill in negotiating more than a thousand river miles of snags, shoals and atmospherics, replaced the spontaneous enjoyment and the close sensory contact with the river

which he once knew. The process encapsulates the American dilemma with nature: the river as an entity to be enjoyed, versus river as commodity, a shifting repository of facts to be mastered. The price may be just the price of growing up, and a similar hardening of perceptions will be noted in the life of Boone Caudill, the protagonist of The Big Sky, discussed in Chapter 4 of this work. Sam Clemens, as steamboat pilot, had to jettison his unsophisticated mode of viewing; but as creative artist Clemens, somehow, had to recapture it.

It was more than coincidence, then, that 1876, which saw the appearance of "Old Times," marked also the publication of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Twain was dipping into youthful memories, and, drawing from the same deep aquifer, he completed, in the same year, the first sixteen chapters of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. At the point of the shattering of the raft by a steamboat Twain suspended his narrative. In 1882 he returned to travel the river as a tourist and replenish his inspiration. The trip provided the impetus to complete Huckleberry Finn (published in 1884) and also to expand on the original "Old Times." The enlarged version, entitled Life on the Mississippi, appeared in 1883.

In the life of Sam Clemens, both as boy and as young man, the Mississippi River played a unique and encompassing role. To Clemens the apprentice pilot it was an unrelenting taskmaster. From it he learned courage and decisiveness; he also learned to tax his powers of concentration to their limits. To Sam Clemens as a boy the river was more than a teacher; it was his natural medium. If we take the character of Huck Finn as even slightly autobiographical we can surmise something of the relationship. Space is one component. Twain's depiction of the river

at the outset of "Old Times" is theatrical, adjective-prone; its vastness seems to emanate from an aerial perspective. In Huckleberry Finn, though on occasion explicit reference is made to size ("It was a monstrous big river here . . ."),¹⁰⁹ in general the sense of space is conveyed indirectly. The book teems with auditory and visual images: the gap between the flash of an ax and the "k'chunk!"; the tiny image of the steamboat across the river; distant voices; the faint sound of fiddling; a steamboat, at night, rounding a corner, and "by and by her waves . . . get/ting/ to us, a long time after she was gone, and joggl/ing/ the raft a bit . . ." (Adventures, pp. 141-142); and then the extraordinary episode of being separated in thick fog at night, "nigger" Jim in the raft, Huck tailing him by canoe, the two whooping at each other in dense blindness, to no avail. The enveloping fog, the current's fierce tug, the palpable sense of isolation--all come through with a minimum of stage direction. Instead, we are simply allowed to "see" the action: ". . . if a little glimpse of a snag slips by you don't think to yourself how fast you're going, but you catch your breath and think, my! how that snag's tearing along" (Adventures, p. 101). The sensation of being closed in has, paradoxically, intensified the feeling of vastness, for no longer is there any reference point to chart from.

The sense, or at least the illusion of space, is also fostered by their circumspect mode of travel. They move at night to avoid detection, and encounter less traffic. Their water-level view makes the

¹⁰⁹ Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Leo Marx (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 102. Subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

river seem larger, as does their inclination to hug the contours of the shoreline. The spaciousness may mean disorientation and danger, but it also accords with their primary aim: escape. Huck is fleeing from a demented father, from the Widow Douglas' more refined torments, and in general from the "cramped up and smothery" ways of society. Jim, as a runaway slave, needs room just as urgently.

The fleeting freedom they find has several dimensions. One is being "always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us . . ." (Adventures, p. 121). The qualification is worth noting because it shows that Huck is not playing a role, as would Tom--not deliberately flouting society; he was just being himself. Another freedom is the sense of exclusive possession:

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark--which was a candle in a cabin window--and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two--on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft. (Adventures, pp. 141-142)

Having nothing, they have everything. But the sensation is more than a luxuriance of space; it is akin to reverence:

It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle. (Adventures, p. 81)

When they need to go ashore, their encounters with an irrational society make the contrast of their return to the river more acute. After slipping away from the feuding Shepherdsons and Grangerfords, they find that the next few days on the river just "swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely" (Adventures, p. 140). Twain had

tried, on other occasions, to convey the wonder and delight he felt for the river as a boy, but until Huckleberry Finn the attempts were smothered in the orotund literary style of the time. In Life on the Mississippi neither the effusions of the passengers nor the pilot's laconic jargon come close to the mark. Take, for example, this rendition of the summer sunrise on the Mississippi.

First, there is the eloquence of silence; for a deep hush broods everywhere. Next, there is the haunting sense of loneliness, isolation, remoteness from the worry and bustle of the world. The dawn creeps in stealthily; the solid walls of black forest soften to gray, and vast stretches of the river open up and reveal themselves; the water is glass-smooth, gives off spectral little wreaths of white-mist. . . . the tranquility is profound and infinitely satisfying. Then a bird pipes up, another follows, and soon the pipings develop into a jubilant riot of music. You see none of the birds; you simply move through an atmosphere of song which seems to sing itself. When the light has become a little stronger, you have one of the fairest and softest pictures imaginable . . . and when the sun gets well up, and distributes a pink flush here and a powder of gold yonder and a purple haze where it will yield the best effect, you grant that you have seen something that is worth remembering. (Life, p. 258-259)

The experience of a Mississippi River dawn, which is probably as beautiful as Clemens insists it is, lies gasping beneath layers of esthetic and literary conventions. Except for the allusion to the song-filled atmosphere there is hardly a breath of air. The observer is detached, as though viewing the scene from behind Clemens' first-class cabin window, and one is aware that events are being stage-managed. The cliches ("eloquence of silence" . . . "dawn creeps in stealthily" . . . "a pink flush here and a powder of gold yonder") are as narcotic as the background music in today's Walt Disney nature movie; they diffuse instead of sharpen perception. Like the language, the locus is

generalized; it could be almost any large inland body of water. One suspects that genuine feeling underlies this passage, but that Clemens hasn't hit upon the right mode to release it. His solution in Huckleberry Finn--a much more satisfying one--is to adopt an idiom indigenous to the river. In the character of Huck he finds the perfect voice to transmit his own feeling without sentimentality or false flourishes. Nowhere does the naturalness come through more clearly than in the passage which follows. Sitting on the sandy river bottom in knee-deep water, Huck and Jim "watched the daylight come."

Not a sound anywheres--perfectly still--just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bullfrogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line--that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away--trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks--rafts: sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled-up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods . . . then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh and sweet to smell on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish laying around, gars and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the songbirds just going it! (Adventures, pp. 119-120)

Both versions present the same sunrise, with almost the same events, but the second version, as Leo Marx brings out, is incomparably more effective.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ See The Machine in the Garden, pp. 319-335, for a discussion of the "nativeness" and naturalness of Huck's language. Marx's earlier formulation of the theme, in "The Pilot and the Passenger: Landscape Conventions and the Style of Huckleberry Finn," American Literature, 28 (1957),

Much of its authenticity comes from the sense of closeness to what is being described. Huck and Jim have merged with, or immersed themselves in, the river; they see things from the water's surface. There is the sense that nothing has been left out as unseemly; the fragrance of woods and flowers mingles with the rankness of dead fish. Huck sees a streak on the water. He knows it is caused by a snag, but he does not dwell on the potential hazard, nor does he try to fit the snag into a scenic pattern. It is just there. One hesitates, in fact, to use the word "scene" in connection with this sequence, for it is not theatrical, not intended to bedazzle or impress. There is no attempt to summarize or arrange things; they are simply presented as they happen. The sensory details are so convincing, evoke such a present sense of that place and time, that one wants to hold on to each thread as long as it lasts in order to partake of the experience.

While on the river, everything "fits" as long as society keeps its distance. The marks of human activity--the glow of candles in cabin windows, sparks from smokestacks, faint sounds of voices, music, an ax chopping--are benign and non-threatening because remote, and become part of

129-146, contrasts the "sunrise" sequences from Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Life. Tony Tanner, also, traces Clemens' development of the vernacular first-person narrative form. He considers it "a stylistic rebellion of the first importance for American literature. . . ." Clemens, he writes, "oscillated between a desire to emulate the official standards (the elevated attitude, the endorsed perspective, the sublime rhetoric), and a felt need to find a new point of view and a new language to transmit his insights and formulate his feelings. . . . Clemens owes the significance of his position in American literature to this paradoxical fact: that he found himself unable to speak to his own satisfaction until he had rid himself of the decorous volubility enjoined by the official culture of his age." In The Reign of Wonder, pp. 105-106.

the river's ambience. Huck and Jim are happiest when the outside world is least evident. But pulses from outside, like the ripples from the vanished steamboat, are reminders of their vulnerability. The closer the inroads of society the more irreconcilable the two points of view become. The rhythm of the book, in which ecstatic river episodes alternate with barbarous encounters ashore, illustrates this divergence. To the two travelers the river is meaningful as a source of beauty and sustenance--a potential which is placed in constant jeopardy by chance contacts with entities such as steamboats, the two renegades that Huck takes aboard, or a slave-keeping society. Thus is the river's life-giving potency thwarted.

When the steamboat smashes into the raft (Chapter 16), it also marks the shattering of a pastoral dream. Whether the collision is deliberate is moot, but Huck makes it clear that steamboat pilots "never cared much for raftsmen" and this one wastes no time in a rescue operation. The incident has echoes of an event from the author's life. In 1858, during Sam Clemens' piloting days, his brother Henry was among those killed by a boiler explosion while employed on a steamboat--a job which Sam had helped him to get. Though Clemens continued to pursue his career as a pilot, the tragedy may have sowed the seeds of his later disillusionment with technology.¹¹¹ In Huckleberry Finn, the instant before collision, the steamboat looks like

a black cloud with rows of glow-worms around it; but all of a sudden she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us. (Adventures, pp. 113-114)

¹¹¹ Nash, From These Beginnings, p. 240.

In the Hannibal of Sam Clemens' youth a steamboat and its crew were objects of veneration for every boy in town. Now we see not a gleaming mechanical wonder but a monster which can turn on and destroy human beings--a misguided extension of the quest for power which both fascinated and repelled Clemens in his later years.

The latter portion of Huckleberry Finn, which Twain completed after his 1882 return visit, reflects his shifting state of mind regarding the changes which had occurred since his youth. In the book's later episodes are projected his disenchantment with a money-grubbing and callous society.¹¹² After the steamboat-ramming incident much of the book can be read as a series of satiric thrusts at the various levels of antebellum Southern society.¹¹³ Except for the sunrise sequence in Chapter 19, the river fades as a significant force while Huck and Jim seek in vain to shed themselves of society's snares. When Huck learns that Jim has been traded in by the two scoundrels for forty dollars he realizes that the trip's primary goal is a lost cause. "After all this long journey," he says, ". . . here it was all come to nothing, everything all busted up and ruined. . ." (Adventures, p. 241). Happiness, in the form of immersion in the buoyant river environment, is most attainable when an oppressive society is least manifest. The outside world means only disaster for them--either physically in the form of a collision, or socially in the eventuality of Jim's capture and Huck's return to be "sivilized" again. The raft which provides access to the delights of

112 Nash, From These Beginnings, p. 260.

113 James T. Callow and Robert J. Reilly, Guide to American Literature from Emily Dickinson to the Present (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 34.

nature serves also to float the voyagers deeper into slave territory.

The break-up of Huck's river odyssey has proved prophetic. It has foreshadowed, as Leo Marx has suggested, the break-up of the American nature idyll.¹¹⁴ The potential for an idyllic experience, in the sense of becoming attuned to the rhythms of a natural setting, endures, but with increasing difficulty of access as natural settings become scarcer. The attainment tends to be fleeting, "a momentary stay against confusion," to borrow Robert Frost's expression.¹¹⁵ Frost was speaking of poetry and of love, but the moment of insight he refers to may be attained as well through an experience in nature. Those who seek to strike such a natural resonance find themselves adopting a dual, shifting viewpoint. Their immediate enjoyment is tinged with the awareness that the "nature" they see is not as natural as they would prefer. One response, like Twain's, is to dip into the well of nostalgia, in the hope of finding a natural world which justifies the name.

¹¹⁴ The Machine in the Garden, p. 339.

¹¹⁵ "The Figure a Poem Makes," in Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, 1949), p. 18.

Chapter 4

The Nostalgic View

Deep calleth unto deep
at the noise of thy waterspouts:
all thy waves and thy billows
are gone over me.

Psalms 42:7
(King James Version)

Some nineteenth century travelers, as has been noted, reveal a prophetic uneasiness over the effects of unrestrained technology. Leo Marx, in The Machine in the Garden, expands on the theme of mechanized intrusion into nature and shows distrust of the machine's primacy to have been an enduring element in American literature since Thomas Jefferson. Our own time has transformed such forebodings into reality. Today's river runner knows how susceptible to human actions are the river and the entire ecosystem it serves. He worries that the potential for wilderness adventure, with its precious cargo of experience, may have fallen prey to resource hunters before the next river season opens-- and that the option even of glimpsing a pristine stream may be vanishing. He suspects that somewhere plans are being dreamed up which will render the experience obsolete or at least downgrade its quality; and there is the awesome thought that the prospect for repeating it may be disappearing beneath the waters of a man-made reservoir. Since the river trip stands here for the nature sojourn at large, it is my contention

that few wilderness excursions are undertaken now, or, at least, written about, which are not colored by an oppressive social consciousness, a looking-back-over-the-shoulder feeling. As confirmation one has only to talk with a kayaker about to set loose down a river earmarked for yet another reservoir--the Stanislaus River in California, for example. Today's wilderness quest is thus two-fold: to escape from distraction, but also to draw from the experience in nature its purest essence.

The mood of uneasy ambivalence is reflected variously in the narrative types which follow. The first, the reminiscence, is a spontaneous idyll endowed by hindsight with even wider significance; but the mature perspective also contributes a bit of anxiety. Innocent of any political motive, the reminiscence breathes with the freshness of discovery.¹¹⁶ The reconnaissance is a narrative with a cautionary tinge. It is often designed to focus public attention on an unimpaired river basin and to encourage protective measures so as to avoid the occasion for a "last-chance" journey.¹¹⁷ The last-chance mode may be inspired by the passing of any beloved human institution from a narrow-gauge railroad to the leisurely transatlantic voyage; its manifestations here pertain to travel on free-flowing rivers destined for massive construction projects.¹¹⁸ Its inverted image is the commemorative trip, a

¹¹⁶ The reminiscence is represented here by Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine, 1970); and by Loren Eiseley, The Immense Journey (New York: Random House, 1946).

¹¹⁷ The reconnaissance is represented by Colin Fletcher, The Man Who Walked through Time (New York: Knopf, 1968); and by John McPhee, Coming into the Country (New York: Bantam, 1977).

¹¹⁸ The last-chance trip is represented by Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

venture often undertaken on an anniversary of its prestigious original, and designed not only to celebrate the earlier exploit but to reconstruct its mood and substance. Accounts of such trips will not be discussed here in detail since they are inherently derivative. Their existence, though, exemplifies a primary meaning of nostalgia: a yearning for the long ago and the far away.¹¹⁹ The final grouping, that of narrative fiction, includes also the work by Brautigan discussed initially in this section. The category is inherently diverse; the works differ as much among each other as does the genre itself from the other categories.¹²⁰ A look at a few of the components of the twentieth century wilderness river experience is now in order.

It has sometimes been fashionable, particularly before the environmental movement took shape, to dismiss the nature sojourn and its literature as escapist. "Escape" is thus casually twinned with the "back to

¹¹⁹ Two examples of this burgeoning genre are Joseph Judge, "Down the Grand Canyon One Hundred Years after Powell," National Geographic, May 1969, pp. 668-713; and Gerald S. Snyder, In the Footsteps of Lewis and Clark (n.p.: National Geographic, 1970). The elapsed human history and the different modes of travel make the mood difficult to recapture. The awesome rivers, unstoried when Powell or Lewis and Clark traversed them, now have layers of legendry; each rapid has its complement of escapades; each point is marked in guide books to the tenth of a mile. Chiseled historical plaques have been bolted onto rock surfaces. Even more significant, the rapids now have names, and the names ("Granite," "Sockdolager," "Lava Falls") suggest a presence and history. Many rapids, especially along the upper Missouri River, have long since been turned into placid man-made lakes, making the original prospect almost unimaginable.

¹²⁰ The category of narrative fiction is represented by Richard Brautigan, Trout Fishing in America (New York: Seymour Lawrence, 1967); James Dickey, Deliverance (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970); Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Scribner's, 1938); and A. B. Guthrie, The Big Sky (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947). "Big Two-Hearted River" first appeared in 1925 in Hemingway's In Our Time. For each work in Chapter 4, second and subsequent references are given in the text.

nature" episode in which the participant seeks to untangle himself from society's constraints. Thus regarded, it rings negatively and suggests evasion of responsibility, an immature or imprudent bolting away from one's proper role. But given the conditions which are being escaped from, it is conceivable that both the word and the actions it signifies may merit a less subversive appraisal.¹²¹ Its nuances are various: it may surface as a boyhood lark to elude adult scrutiny, or as a dedicated effort to shuck off the deadliness of routine. It may, then, be productive to focus on the word's converse values: to embrace, to be reconciled with. Reunion with the natural though hitherto obscured parts of one's being is a recurrent theme. In seeking closer contact with nature the traveler may be attempting more than mere escape, though the deeper purposes of his quest may not emerge at the outset. In what may be called an immersion experience the protagonist may experience a quasi-religious transformation whereby his perceptions and attitudes undergo an abrupt shift.

A river trip may be the means to spiritual refreshment, but it can also result in mishap. An awareness of potential upset around the next bend is an essential component of an adventurer's survival skills. Both real-life travelers such as John Wesley Powell and literary characters such as Ed Gentry, in James Dickey's novel Deliverance, worry about survival. Once afloat comes the sudden knowledge that experiencing the

¹²¹ Leo Marx, in "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles," Western Man and Environmental Ethics, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley, 1973), pp. 93-115, helpfully discusses the positive and the negative aspects of the temporary retreat to a pastoral existence.

feel of a river, its pulling, tugging and churning, its urgency or quietude, is different from merely seeing. In accounting for a river's whims (the word itself is a kind of personification) the narrator may become engaged in the perennial literary question of whether to ascribe human characteristics to objects of nature. Though scientifically it may be argued that a river, like any natural feature, is simply neutral, neither beneficent nor evil--on the symbolic level, particularly in some works of fiction, the river's image emerges as convincingly animate, if not human, in its vengefulness and sheer playfulness. Critics like Leo Marx point out that the riverine topography may closely resemble the landscape of the human mind in its capacity for violence or beneficence. Ed Gentry's ordeal, more than a venture into savage wilderness, is a journey into the uncouth reaches of the human soul--a vestigial barbarism dreaded by the Puritan fathers and popularized by twentieth century writers of the "Naked Ape" genre.

The latter-day voyager comes well braced against a river's hazards, but he broods more over human impact on the river itself. Few free-flowing streams remain unaffected by a free-wheeling technology and the itch to exploit. The pristine qualities sought after for psychic restoration or just plain adventure are found to best advantage in unmarred river canyons. The message of the twentieth century river devotee to the outside world is "Please leave my canyon alone and find your molybdenum or hydroelectric power elsewhere. Your dam, highway, or mine just will not mix with the kind of deep experience I crave. If it is built I will have to hunt up another unspoiled river canyon. There aren't many left."

The adventurer who is also a writer must confront a perplexing set

of challenges. At the trip's outset he has to shed his artifacts and ingrained routines and adopt a radically new style of locomotion and survival skills. Typically, too, the adventurer-writer is possessed of a schizoid streak: he is torn between the desire to experience and the urge to record. Now, sensing strange cacophonies beyond the canyon walls even as he plunges through white water, he is pulled in a third direction by the need to preserve the qualities which make for a wilderness experience. No longer can he write merely of the experience, for it may end, as did Edward Abbey's, at the base of a sign, "white, rigid, rectangular, out of place," whose message is that there will be no repeat. The pen becomes tipped with concern. The narrative takes on a political and polemical edge. In the testament of communion with nature can be detected a note of appeal: "Join with me. Do something while there's still time." Where the outcome has already been determined, and the dam is not to be thwarted, the mood becomes plaintive and a new genre, the last-chance river trip, emerges. Where a George Catlin foretold the future from signs and portents, the twentieth century writer speaks from what he has seen happen. Elegy has replaced prophecy, and the manifestations of the new mood range from the extravagant outcry of an Edward Abbey to the resigned acceptance of a John Graves.¹²² A twentieth century river experience may happen spontaneously, but more often it is an arduously planned reconnaissance, experienced and recorded with a quickening sense

¹²² In Goodbye to a River (New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine, 1971). Graves's lamenting is not as subversive or inflammatory as Abbey's, but still expresses "enraged awe" over the prospective inundation of his boyhood haunts along the Brazos River in Texas. Not just the natural scene but also a whole human history is to be wiped out. The book is a rich interbraiding of the two themes.

of what is still possible, but with a distinct undertone of nostalgia for what is gone. Before surveying accounts of such experiences, though, let us examine one which by-passes nostalgia for a more subversive mode.

USED TROUT STREAM FOR SALE.
MUST BE SEEN TO BE APPRECIATED.

Richard Brautigan's twentieth century pastoral landscape is stored in a warehouse of the Cleveland Wrecking Yard.¹²³ It is a trout stream. It lies neatly stacked in pre-cut lengths of ten, fifteen, twenty, or one hundred feet. It sells for \$6.50 per foot for the first hundred feet, then \$5.00 per foot. People buy it for birthday and Christmas presents. For those with a modest appetite for trout streams there is a box of scraps with assorted lengths from six inches to two feet. Waterfalls are displayed separately, heaped against the wall in the used plumbing department next to stacks of toilets. A sixty-foot waterfall comes in several sections with tags showing how to put the falls back together again. One waterfall, lying in two lengths near dust-covered sinks and urinals, is also beginning to gather dust. Each section of the stream comes with its own original fish and crawdads, but other life forms--animals, birds, flowers, grass, ferns and insects--are sold separately.

Brautigan makes it clear that this trout stream is for real. "It looked like a fine stream," he writes. "I put my hand in the water. It was cold and felt good." The satire is effective because it is so unblinking. "We always make sure they're running crystal clear," a

¹²³ "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," Trout Fishing in America, pp. 102-107.

salesman assures him, "before we even think about moving them. . . . We've never damaged a trout stream yet. We treat them all as if they were china" (pp. 105, 107).

The spectacle of a river sliced up and housed in a warehouse follows logically from the concept of nature as commodity. If other natural entities--cows, blackberries, electric potential, trees--can be processed, transported, measured and marketed for optimum gain, why not rivers? That Brautigan's version is only slightly far-fetched is demonstrated by the actual, everyday conversion of rivers into hydroelectric power, irrigation water, and so forth. The anomaly of a free-flowing river being harnessed as an economic entity--a ubiquitous twentieth century event--can still produce waves of disbelief. "What seemed unimaginable beside the river in the canyon," wrote John McPhee of the Colorado River below Glen Canyon Dam, "was that all that wild water had been processed, like pork slurry in a hot-dog plant, upstream in the lightless penstocks of a big dam."¹²⁴

Brautigan's patient, wide-eyed pursuit of the pastoral dream in a dusty warehouse is at once uproarious and ominous. The book which contains the episode, Trout Fishing in America, relates to rivers in somewhat the same way that a Dali landscape relates to a real one: with sharply delineated details, but with objects distorted and oddly juxtaposed. It is a montage rather than a novel: a series of seemingly discontinuous episodes thrown together, of incredible tableaux flavored with lurid detail; a jarring blend of surrealism and antic wit. Reading

¹²⁴ Encounters with the Archdruid (New York: Ballantine, 1971), p. 167.

it is somewhat like viewing a photo album of a bombed-out city. It abounds with images--all guilelessly presented--of a world gone topsy-turvy. Dead fish floating belly-up--the pastoral impulse rendered moribund--is a frequent theme. Trout Fishing in America, published in 1967 as environmental concern was beginning to surface, depicts a landscape deformed by unseen forces. Its random incidents, though sprinkled with mordant humor, are paradigms of fragmentation and alienation. The aftertaste is sour.

The book's title, most of its chapter headings, and its disarmingly simple syntax all suggest wholesome and innocent pastoral activity. The impact is sharpened by the deliberate incongruity between expectation and content. By playing to the popular yearning for a natural setting, and then depicting (literally in one chapter) the inside of an outhouse, Brautigan is jolting his reader towards an altered reality. In an age when one may have to procure a wilderness reservation through Ticketron, the message is that nostalgia as a literary or a popular quest may no longer be productive: that is, it may lead to disappointment rather than fulfillment. By extending the quest to its absurd extremity, by going beyond nostalgia, Brautigan provides a useful foreshortening of the paths pursued by twentieth century chroniclers of the nature sojourn. The fulfillment afforded by the experience may be recaptured in part through reminiscence. The experience itself can seldom be had again. Two such reminiscences follow. Both are redolent of expansive, youthful moments--moments of delight, but containing portents for future wisdom.

"It is the part of wisdom," wrote Aldo Leopold, "never to revisit a wilderness, for the more golden the lily, the more certain that someone

has gilded it. To return not only spoils a trip, but tarnishes a memory. It is only in the mind that shining adventure remains forever bright."¹²⁵ The remark prefaces an account of a leisurely canoe reconnaissance which Leopold and his brother made in the Delta of the Colorado River in 1922. The qualities which delighted them would have dismayed an advocate of progress. The river's interbraidings and the lushness of the vegetation and animal life produced a special ambience. It was a forgotten land, devoid of man's marks; the one tin can they came across was "pounced upon as a valuable utensil." The river, in its devious path to the Gulf of California, formed a wondrously tangled maze of green lagoons through which it "divided and rejoined . . . twisted and turned . . . meandered in awesome jungles . . . [and] dallied with lovely groves . . ." (p. 150). The river lost itself, and they gladly lost themselves in it.

The river's very aimlessness suggested a spontaneous mode. Since time was indeterminate, and they had no objective except to wander "like the river," they learned not to plan ahead, for "in the wilderness some new and irresistible distraction is sure to turn up each day before breakfast" (p. 155). It might be an unexpected visitation of sandhill cranes ("the wildest of living fowl"); the chance to watch doves and quail fluttering over a patch of wild melons; or a glimpse of el tigre, the jaguar. The great cat remained unglimped by them, but his unseen presence was known and felt by all creatures of the Delta, both man and beast. "By this time," Leopold remarked, "the Delta has probably been made safe for cows, and forever dull for adventuring hunters. Freedom

¹²⁵ "The Green Lagoons," A Sand County Almanac With Essays on Conservation from Round River (New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine, 1970), p. 150.

from fear has arrived, but a glory has departed from the green lagoons" (p. 152).

Leopold, a professional forester, is now remembered primarily as a pioneer in wilderness preservation, and a deft literary stylist. So forcefully did he articulate the concept of the "land ethic"--that all natural objects are interrelated and have a right to exist in and of themselves--that his arguments have become an intellectual base for the preservation movement. In "The Green Lagoons," as elsewhere in his writing, Leopold pays tribute to the rich diversity of wilderness, and the vitality it offers to those who can accept its rhythms on its own terms. The reminiscence is both a celebration and a lament. "I am glad," he wrote, "I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?" (p. 158).

Loren Eiseley's adventure was even more unpremeditated. A physical anthropologist, Eiseley frequently rambled along rivers of the high plains seeking evidence of early post-glacial man--perhaps a bone or an arrowhead glistening in the gravel of a river bed. Eiseley was a maverick scientist who bristled at the notion that life is reducible to a formula. The metaphor of life as flow, "multitudinous and emergent in the stream of time," is a near-constant in his writings.¹²⁶ His lifelong quest was to understand the interrelatedness among life forms. For other species he had an uncanny empathy which extended through time and space to include inanimate entities. He derived auguries and aphorisms from unpretentious happenings: a flock of southbound warblers hurtling

¹²⁶ The Immense Journey (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 59.

over a desolate landscape; a spider, suspended from a street lamp for warmth, spinning amidst autumn's first snowflakes. Obsessed with time and change, Eiseley sought from everyday experience to gather cosmic insights.

The event to be noted here seems commonplace: a dip in a stream on a hot day. But for Eiseley, a non-swimmer who remembered a traumatic childhood experience in the water, the deed required courage. It took place along a stretch of the Platte River whose thickets "were lonely and untraversed." What began as an impulse for bodily refreshment was transformed, through Eiseley's gift of reflection, into a transcendent experience--an escape, he wrote, from "the actual confines of the flesh." After "floundering pleasantly in a hole among some reeds" he was struck with the urge to go with the current. He shoved off into the main channel. "For an instant," he wrote,

. . . I had the sensation of sliding down the vast tilted face of the continent. It was then that I felt the cold needles of the alpine springs at my fingertips, and the warmth of the Gulf pulling me southward. Moving with me, leaving its taste upon my mouth and spouting under me in dancing springs of sand, was the immense body of the continent itself, flowing like the river was flowing, grain by grain, mountain by mountain, down to the sea. I was streaming over ancient sea beds thrust aloft where giant reptiles had once sported; I was wearing down the face of time and trundling cloud-wreathed ranges into oblivion. I touched my margins with the delicacy of a crayfish's antennae, and felt great fishes glide about their work.

I drifted by stranded timber cut by beaver in mountain fastnesses; I slid over shallows that had buried the broken axles of prairie schooners and the mired bones of mammoth. I was streaming alive through the hot and working ferment of the sun, or oozing secretively through shady thickets. I was water and the unspeakable alchemies that gestate and take shape in water, the slimy jellies that under the enormous magnification of the sun writhe and whip upward as great barbeled fish mouths, or sink indistinctly back into the murk out of which they arose. (pp. 19-20)

The episode is a microcosm of the book which contains it. The

Immense Journey is a metaphor with multiple levels. Human evolution is traced as a component of the development of all life. The genesis of human consciousness is a constant fascination, as are the alarms and ecstasies of birds, fish, and lizards. The work's scientific underpinnings are rigorous but unobtrusive; the writing is that of a poet. Not surprisingly, Eiseley is known as one who has done much to reaffirm the ancient unity between science and the humanities.¹²⁷ Like Thoreau, like Muir--both respected for their scientific achievements--Eiseley sought his own vantage points and arrived at unique perspectives and conjunctions of thought. A scientist, normally, does not indulge in mystic floating experiences to gain knowledge; nor dream of merging psychically with the medium he is studying; nor talk in terms of "unspeakable alchemies" when referring to his discipline. As a dedicated calibrator of skulls, time lapses, and geological strata, Eiseley exhibited somewhat the same behavioral paradox as John Wesley Powell, who rhapsodized over measurelessness while casting an appraising eye at every bluff and promontory. While holding to a resolutely anti-positivist bias, Eiseley succeeded in synthesizing the scientific and the mystic, and he has made both perspectives more accessible. In his writings the river motif--the concept of life as flow--surfaces in myriad forms, of which the floating episode is but one. He wrote:

As for men, those myriad little detached ponds with their own swarming corpuscular life, what were they but a way that water has of going about beyond the reach of rivers? I, too, was a microcosm of pouring rivulets and floating driftwood gnawed by the mysterious animalcules of my own creation. I

¹²⁷ Eiseley's election in 1971 to the National Institute of Arts and Letters attests his standing as a fine literary stylist. His writing often took the form of poems, many of which appear in his book The Innocent Assassins (New York: Scribners, 1973). Eiseley was born in 1907; he died in 1977.

was three fourths water, rising and subsiding according to the hollow knocking in my veins: a minute pulse like the eternal pulse that lifts Himalayas and which, in the following systole, will carry them away. (p. 20)¹²⁸

If pure wilderness is an extensive terrain utterly unmodified by technology, there is but little left, with the possible exception of the polar ice caps.¹²⁹ To visit a place now which even verges on such a condition takes considerable time, competence, planning, money, and drive. The two episodes here described, in all but the extreme sense, occurred in wilderness.¹³⁰ Both took place in areas made remote by distance and geography. Each was a reconnaissance in the sense of an expedition conducted for a designated purpose. Reconnaissance has an adversarial ring which derives from military usage. The quality is detectible in both narratives to the extent that they reveal the controversy over the terrain and the biases of the participants. In each case a massive construction project was planned which would intrude on the wilderness character of the country. The projects were fended off, in varying degrees, through political pressure applied by alert citizens. The works under discussion here may have contributed to public awareness of the wilderness values which were in jeopardy.

John McPhee joined a four-man state-federal study team whose purpose

¹²⁸ The floating episode occurs in the chapter, "The Flow of the River," pp. 15-27.

¹²⁹ Traces of DDT and other chemicals have been detected in Antarctic ice of recent origin; so in a sense there is no untouched land left.

¹³⁰ Some might contend that the Grand Canyon is too impacted by the outside world to qualify technically as wilderness. But Fletcher undeniably achieved the experience of wilderness in sequestered portions of the Canyon, especially during his more receptive moments.

was to assess the Salmon River and environs in Northwest Alaska for potential designation as a national wild river.¹³¹ The party traveled by canoe and kayaks down the Salmon to the Kobuk River, thence to the Eskimo village of Kiana, some sixty airline miles east of Kotzebue. They were air-lifted to and from the site of their trip.¹³²

McPhee's writing is so translucently neutral, and he presents the contending positions so clearly and equitably, that it may be unfair to impute political bias. His primary motivation may be sheer journalistic enterprise. Though McPhee has no political axe to grind, his lucid and compelling description of the Alaskan landscape should tend, at least, to implant an appreciation for its wilderness character. Many of the pros and cons of the preservation issue are revealed through the participants' own words.

Colin Fletcher walked up the Colorado River from one end of Grand Canyon National Park to the other. His route roughly--very roughly--paralleled the Colorado. The two-month trip, born of a sudden impulse when he first stood at the canyon's rim, required a year's preparation. Technically it was an unknown: no one had ever traversed the same route consecutively. Logistically it required four pre-placed caches of

¹³¹ The section is a fragment of some eighty million acres of so-called national-interest land proposed as national parks, rivers, forests, and wildlife refuges as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. See "The Encircled River," The New Yorker, May 9, 1977, p. 88.

¹³² McPhee explains that Alaska contains nineteen streams called Salmon, "of which this one, the Salmon River of the Brooks Range, is the most northern, its watershed wholly above the Arctic Circle," Coming into the Country (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 47. The work first appeared, in serialized form, in The New Yorker.

supplies, plus three air-drops along the way.¹³³ Fletcher's experience in itself is a compelling plea for wilderness; but the book contains no overt argumentation until the epilogue, his report on a conference on the Pacific Southwest Water Plan, which he attended after completing his Grand Canyon trip. The Plan called for three major construction projects in the canyon. Except for a three-day period when a friend walked with him, Fletcher took his journey alone. Being alone was essential to his purpose: to become attuned to the rhythms of the canyon.

The impending construction projects for each area differed in kind, but each would have shattered the silence and, by definition, eliminated the wilderness. In the case of the Kobuk River, a branch of the road which has been cut beside the Trans-Alaska Pipeline was projected to cross the river on its way to Kotzebue, requiring, of course, a substantial bridge (Coming, pp. 20-21). For the Grand Canyon, two dams and a diversion tunnel were planned. The actual structures would lie just outside the National Park boundary, but the river, "the superb mechanism that has created the Canyon," would diminish into a string of reservoirs. Wildlife would be wiped out, and the living force of the canyon destroyed. The impact of the construction and of the permanent maintenance activities would devastate the wilderness quality of the canyon (pp. 226-233).

Colin Fletcher's journey up the Colorado River was somewhat like an ant's traversal of a Gothic cathedral by proceeding aloft through the

¹³³ Two weeks' supply was sent by mule train to the Indian village of Supai and to the resort at Phantom Ranch; the other two units were planted just below the canyon's rim so that Fletcher, when hiking up to them, would not have to "break both the real and symbolic continuity" of his journey by having to see the panorama beyond the rim. The Man Who Walked through Time (New York: Knopf, 1968), p. 12.

complex of buttresses and arches. Lengthy sections of the river's inner gorge are inaccessible by foot, but with care a man can pick his way along the hanging terraces and rock platforms above. Much of the time Fletcher was hundreds or thousands of feet removed from the river--a chance to breathe in the silence and the immensity of the canyon. His encounters with the river generally meant traversing it--a tricky business for a diffident swimmer with a sixty-pound pack atop an air mattress. At such times the river took on the ominous, oppressive quality of which John Wesley Powell had written a century earlier. But passing this "test of body and spirit" brought exhilaration and renewed confidence.

Fletcher's reasons for being in the canyon went beyond technical achievement, beyond acquiring bits of knowledge. He wished to feel all the parts as a whole, to sense river, rock, lizard, and man, as a unity. The book is the odyssey of a mind trying to grasp the dimensions of what the senses tell it, stretching itself to understand the many-dimensional splendor that is the Grand Canyon. But before this quest could be fulfilled the physical challenges must be dealt with. One was the nagging uncertainty of crossing the river. Then came concern over blisters, water supplies, meeting air-drops--a smothering web of logistics and time, and a constant reminder of the world beyond the rim. At length the obstacles were surmounted, and fulfillment came.

It came at a place Fletcher called Beaver Sand Bar. Here the river could be seen as a living force which had wrought the canyon and created habitats for its creatures. The river could be seen in many roles: as a "wide, wave-crinkled" surface for beaver to swim "luxuriously in long, easy arcs"; as sustainer of the forest of willow stems for a deer mouse to scramble up and down; as repository for ten thousand seeps and their cargo

of sediment; as part of the rhythm of the canyon, creating new sand bars, sweeping out old detritus; the central thread which makes the interlocking rhythms meaningful and coherent.¹³⁴ At Beaver Sand Bar, by the river's edge, Fletcher was able to commune, "inmate by diffident inmate," with the denizens of the river and the riparian community: a beaver family, a mouse, a "gentlemanly," yawning rattlesnake, a toad, and even a sandfly. And the reward was there: a deep-down, more-than-intellectual recognition for the rhythm of nature (pp. 158-171).¹³⁵

Fletcher wrote:

. . . if you listen carefully--when you have immersed yourself long enough, physically and mentally, in enough space and enough solitude--you begin to detect, even though you are not looking for it, something faintly familiar about the rhythm. You remember hearing that beat before, point and counterpoint, pulsing through the inevitable forward movement of river and journey, of species and isolated Indian community, of lizard and of flowering plant. . . . (p. 142)

The Salmon-Kobuk river country must come about as close as one can get to absolute wilderness. McPhee supplies a framework for comparison. Streams of eastern America, he explains, ran clear in the sixteenth century before the vegetation was removed from the soil mantle. But for the Salmon River,

. . . the sixteenth century has not yet ended, nor the fifteenth, nor the fifth. The river flows, as it has since immemorial time, in balance with itself. The river and every rill that feeds it are in an unmodified natural state--opaque in flood, ordinarily clear, with levels that change within a closed cycle of the year and of the years. (p. 16)

¹³⁴ The gates of Glen Canyon Dam, though, had closed just four weeks before Fletcher entered the Grand Canyon in mid-April, 1963. Fletcher knew that the river's flood stages would be greatly diminished, and with this, its ability drastically to alter the shoreline features.

¹³⁵ The chapter "Life," pp. 145-173, records the high point of Fletcher's achievement of rapport with the natural world along the river.

What Fletcher poetically calls rhythms McPhee talks of as cycles. "The river cycle," he writes, "is only one of many hundreds of cycles--biological, meteorological--that coincide and blend here in the absence of intruding artifice" (pp. 15-16). The forest Eskimos, who live in five villages on the Kobuk, have fished the stream for thousands of years to extents that vary according to the cycles of supply. To them the river (and the expanses beyond) is not a vast entity but "a pageant of parts, and every bend and eddy has a name." The Eskimo name for the junction of the Kobuk and the Salmon rivers, for example, is Qalugruich paanga, "salmon mouth" (p. 23).

The most potent symbol of the wildness of the Kobuk country is the grizzly. Like the jaguar of the Colorado River Delta his presence, seen or unseen, is constantly compelling. One's every act is weighed against the chance of meeting him. On a day's walk through the tundra which McPhee took with Alaska state habitat biologist Bob Fedeler and the Sierra Club's Alaskan representative, the three men sighted one. He was grazing on blueberries about a hundred steps away, but "not berries alone but whole bushes were going into the bear." His head was down, and an immense exposure of muscle "seemed to vibrate slowly." The bear was upwind from them and apparently never sensed their presence. They backed away through thickening brush and lost him. Later, with eyes closed, McPhee could still see him in color. The sight of the bear had stirred him

like nothing else the country could contain. What mattered was not so much the bear himself as what the bear implied. He was the predominant thing in that country, and for him to be in it at all meant that there had to be more country like it in every direction and more of the same kind of country all around that. He implied a world. He was an affirmation to the rest of the earth that his kind of place was extant. (pp. 56-60)

What comes through is the complete rightness, the "thereness," of the bear's presence. Both the bear and the river are tokens of the land's immensity.¹³⁶ "The country is wild," McPhee writes, "to the limits of the term. It would demean such a world to call it pre-Columbian. It is twenty times older than that, having its present form ten thousand years ago, with the melting of the Wisconsin ice" (p. 51). The river itself reflects the integrity of its surroundings. The Salmon, he writes, contains "the clearest, purest water I have ever seen flowing over rocks. . . . Its bed is as distinct as if the water were not there" (pp. 5-6). River and grizzly, and also moose, salmon, wolf, caribou, birch, willow, spongy tundra, and Eskimo--all bespeak the purity and wholeness of this last far-flung rampart of unaltered land; a land in which large-scale patterns can be seen and pondered; an ageless land, in balance with itself.

Both McPhee and Fletcher find reassurance, in delving into far corners of untouched nature, that the experience is still possible. But casual access is ruled out by the magnitude of the planning and expense. "'The proposals,'" says park planner John Kauffmann, one of the study team, "' . . . are for the future. . . . The day will come when people will want to visit such a wilderness--saving everything they have in order to see it, at whatever cost. We're talking fifty and more years hence, when there may be nowhere else to go to a place that is wild and unexplored'" (p. 27).¹³⁷ Neither McPhee nor Fletcher glosses over the

¹³⁶ Faulkner's bear (in "The Bear," from Go Down, Moses) evokes a similar awe: he, also, is "just there"--at once an ultimate natural being and an inexplicable entity. See Go Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1940).

¹³⁷ Kauffmann's own article, "The Noatak," appeared in the National Geographic of July, 1977 as part of the series, "Preserving the Nation's Wild Rivers" (pp. 52-59). In it he advocates the preservation of much

hardships and hazards of wilderness travel, or the indifference of nature to human comfort and survival. But both insist that the experience provides a knife-edge awareness, and, in McPhee's words, has "augmented the touch of life" (p. 89).

Richard Brautigan would cast a wry glance at the sign which confronts Edward Abbey and Ralph Newcomb at the end of their boat trip in Glen Canyon. It says

ATTENTION
 YOU ARE APPROACHING GLEN CANYON
 DAM SITE ALL BOATS MUST LEAVE
 RIVER AT KANE CREEK LANDING ONE
 MILE AHEAD ON RIGHT ABSOLUTELY
 NO BOATS ALLOWED IN CONSTRUCTION ZONE
 VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED
 U.S. BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

The foreknowledge that the sign, or some sign, will be there casts a shadow over their trip. It is what could be called a last-chance trip--the kind one undertakes knowing there will be no repeat.

Abbey and Newcomb try not to think about the dam which will inundate Glen Canyon and its maze of side canyons under hundreds of feet of slack water. They try not to, for ". . . if we did we'd be eating our hearts, chewing our entrails, consuming ourselves in the fury of helpless rage."¹³⁸ But thoughts of the desecration keep coming to cloud

of the Noatak River basin through a combination of national park and other protective designations. The Noatak is the next large river north of the Kobuk River.

¹³⁸ Abbey, Desert Solitaire, p. 185. The chapter, "Down the River," pp. 151-195, contains the story of the Glen Canyon river trip.

their canyon experience. Like Huck's journey, their river idyll is made ironic by the knowledge of the human artifice they must encounter ahead. So the narrative is punctuated with savage outcries against dam builders, against "Authorities . . . anxious to smother the wilderness under asphalt and reservoirs" (p. 156), against "slovbious americanus" and his sidekick industrial tourism which tends to reduce the natural world to a "museum-like diorama" (pp. 190-192). The dam itself he fantasizes blowing up at its dedication along with dignitaries "all in full regalia assembled" and naming the new rapids thus created "Floyd E. Dominy Falls, in honor of the chief of the Reclamation Bureau" (p. 165).¹³⁹ Like Brautigan's warehouse fantasy, the dam represents the hawking of a unique legacy, to subsidize, in this case, real estate speculators and agri-business through electrical generation.

But Abbey and Newcomb put aside their darker speculations long enough to enjoy the rewards of Glen Canyon. They tend to act on impulse: they light-heartedly banter; they gladly lose track of the days. Like John Powell and most travelers since, they shout at the canyon walls, and the echoes, "far off and fading, are so strange and lovely, transmuted by distance, that we fall into silence, enchanted" (p. 164). The river itself, the flowing Colorado with its green fringe of vegetation, is always the "vital element" in an otherwise "moon-dead landscape" (p. 182).

The sculptured side canyons, even more intimate and withdrawn, contain the greatest treasure. Past most of them, to their "everlasting

¹³⁹ The fantasy is a foretaste of the canyon country sabotage motif which dominates Abbey's later book The Monkey Wrench Gang (New York: Avon, 1975).

regret," the current sweeps their little boats before they can paddle to shore. But the convoluted canyon of the Escalante River is worth special effort. They try harder this time and put in at the canyon's entrance at dusk. Next morning Abbey meanders his way up the Escalante, "about six inches deep and six feet wide," leaving Newcomb (who has a lame leg) behind. He walks gazing up at natural bridges, cliff dwellings and surrealist tapestries in sandstone. He comes to a "dripping spring"--a seep high overhead where emerging water nourishes a hanging garden of moss, ferns and flowers. He stands below it "as in a fine shower, filling my canteen and soaking myself and drinking all at the same time." The narrative takes on a heightened intensity. The crystal water of the Escalante

flows toward me in shimmering S-curves, looping quietly over shining pebbles. . . . The canyon twists and turns, serpentine as its stream, and with each turn comes a dramatic and novel view of tapestried walls five hundred--a thousand?--feet high, of silvery driftwood wedged between boulders, of mysterious and inviting subcanyons to the side, within which I can see living stands of grass, cane, salt cedar, and sometimes the delicious magical green of a young cottonwood with its ten thousand exquisite leaves vibrating like spangles in the vivid air. The only sound is the whisper of the running water, the touch of my bare feet on the sand, and once or twice, out of the stillness, the clear song of a canyon wren.

Is this at last the locus Dei? . . . Each time I look up one of the secretive little side canyons I half expect to see not only the cottonwood tree rising over its tiny spring--the leafy god, the desert's liquid eye--but also a rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence, about to speak my name. (pp. 174-176)

More than an exceptionally evocative rendition of natural features, the passage conveys a state of mind. Within a secretive little side canyon--a verdant alcove within a larger alcove within the cathedral of Glen Canyon--Abbey attains or at least glimpses his own epiphany, the core experience more often sought than realized. It emerges from the alembic

of solitude like Fletcher's vigil on Beaver Sand Bar or Eiseley's cosmic downstream drift; and, similarly, it reveals a bit of the reality concealed in the outward event. It is the more poignant because there will be no repeat, at least in this spot, but a residue of the experience will remain a vivid memory.

While Abbey's sacred haunts turn into watery catacombs, forever hidden--overhead, water skiers will be following official regulations to "SKI ONLY IN CLOCKWISE DIRECTION; LET'S ALL HAVE FUN TOGETHER!"--quite oblivious of the lost treasure beneath (p. 152). Thus emerges the vexing question of how wilderness is to be enjoyed. Mass recreation is an alleged fringe benefit of man-made reservoirs. But since it requires motorized access it is incompatible with wilderness. How are the "benefits" of one Abbey-type experience to be measured against the "benefits" derived by five hundred motorized users, all skiing clockwise? If only gross numbers are considered, mass recreation will always come out first. The correct balance for a given area--a balance between accessibility and the potential intensity of individual experience ("Is this at last the locus Dei?") which is ruled out by mass access--is very hard to determine. Public agencies respond to mass preferences by building roads and reservoirs; wilderness lovers like Abbey would prefer almost none, even if access is very difficult. Wallace Stegner writes, "Save a piece of country like that intact, and it does not matter in the slightest that only a few people every year will go into it. That is precisely its value. Roads would be a desecration, crowds would ruin it." If visitors can't reach that country by road, Stegner continues, ". . . they can simply contemplate the idea, take pleasure in the fact that such a timeless and uncontrolled part of earth is still there."

In its entirety Stegner's oft-quoted statement is an elegant, passionate, and rather transcendental argument for preserving the potential for high-quality wilderness experiences.¹⁴⁰ The query, Is it fair to deny me the right to drive into a beautiful area and enjoy it? and the counter-query, Is it fair to ruin my intense wilderness experience because your car (or motorboat) is there?--both are equally unanswerable by any mathematical formula, since enjoyment is not readily quantifiable. Clearly a balance should be arrived at which insures the potential for both options; but the wilderness advocate would argue that the ratio has long favored motorized usage through a fixation for sheer numbers. Like Thoreau and Muir, Abbey insists that wilderness is not merely "sentimental nostalgia for the lost America our forefathers knew." It is not, Abbey adds, "a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread" (pp. 166, 169).

As compared to non-fiction, fiction, through the author's creative invention or intervention, tends more towards intense psychological treatment of events and characters; and, relevant to this study, towards the imposing of layers of symbolism on natural features such as rivers. Three works of fiction are discussed below. For each, a brief synopsis of the plot precedes analysis. The first work to be discussed is James Dickey's Deliverance.

Four men plan a weekend canoe trip down an isolated stretch of the Cahulawassee River in northern Georgia, soon to be inundated by waters backed up behind a dam. The trip's master-mind, Lewis Medlock, is an ardent outdoor enthusiast and a competent woodsman and athlete. He is

¹⁴⁰ The Sound of Mountain Water (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 153.

fairly wealthy and has real estate interests. Drew Ballinger is a soft-drink sales supervisor. Bobby Trippe sells mutual funds. Ed Gentry, the narrator, is vice-president of Emerson Gentry, a graphic arts advertising studio. The four men are in early middle age and, except for Lewis' eccentric pursuits, lead conventional and fairly humdrum lives. The men regard the trip as a diversion except, again, for Lewis, who has his own well-developed mystique of the outdoors which he expounds to Gentry on the drive up to the river.

The three-day trip turns into a nightmare. Before it is over, one participant (Bobby) has been captured and sexually assaulted by two local backwoods men; another (Drew) drowns in a rapid after a shotgun wound; a third (Lewis) is severely injured and knocked out of the action in the same rapid. Before his injury Lewis kills one assailant by shooting an arrow through him. Gentry, despite superficial wounds, disposes of the other in like fashion after an all-night cliff climb. To deflect legal complications the bodies of the assailants are buried. Drew Ballinger, too, is weighted and thrown to the river-bottom, since the discovery of the bullet crease in his head would pry open the whole incident to investigation.

Gentry, the only one unmaimed in some way, takes charge and pilots the other two survivors to their intended terminus at Ainty. He fabricates a story which reports Drew as having drowned, but at a location farther down the river than actually occurred, and which maintains that they did not encounter anyone else during the river trip. A sheriff's search team fails to find Drew's body or any other damaging evidence. The three men return to their regular lives with the hope that each passing day, as the waters rise behind the dam, makes detection of the incident less likely. Each man, though, has been changed in some fundamental way. Bobby

has psychological scars. Lewis mellows, but walks with a limp. The effects on Gentry are more complex, as will be seen in the discussion which follows.

Only on the most concrete level does the term "deliverance" signify escape from the physical hazards of the trip. Primarily, the release is from the constrictions of routine and habit, from the numbing of perceptions occasioned by a plastic existence filled with "gray affable men" and Muzak. Of even greater moment, deliverance is from the sheer inconsequentiality of life, something Gentry calls "the old mortal, helpless, time-terrified human feeling," akin to Thoreau's phrase "quiet desperation," and used in a similar context.¹⁴¹

For Ed Gentry, deliverance occurs through immersion. An immersion experience is intense rather than superficial or merely scenic. Its effects are both profound and lasting. Immersion is a mystic, not a rational process, requiring unconditional surrender: "I got on my back and poured with the river, sliding over the stones like a creature I had always contained but never released" (p. 144). The surrender is to the river, to the wilderness, to the ultimate forces uncontrolled by human agency--though both the reader and the participants know that these forces are about to be rendered impotent by the waters of a man-made reservoir.

On this particular weekend, though, Gentry has no intention of releasing the pent-up creature he has "always contained." He and the other two non-combatants are simply carried along by Lewis' persuasiveness. The outing shapes up as a casual venture, slightly unreal and

¹⁴¹ Deliverance, pp. 13-18.

improbable. There is an aura of excitement, but no prospect, or desire, for anything profoundly moving or significant. Gentry's ingrained indifference, fortunately, proves readily soluble in his first physical contact with the river:

It felt profound, its motion built into it by the composition of the earth for hundreds of miles upstream and down, and by thousands of years. The standing there was so good, so fresh and various and continuous, so vital and uncaring around my genitals, that I hated to leave it. (p. 75)

The vitality of the initial baptism soon translates into something deeper. The vocabulary teems with sensory, tactile references: the feel of the "cold reptilian" talons of an owl which perches atop and penetrates the tent during the first night's encampment; and "Intense needles of light [which] shook on the ripples, gold, hot enough to burn and almost solid enough to pick up from the surface like nails." As they proceed downstream the images suggest an ever-deeper penetration of an unfamiliar and vaguely sinister world, a backwoods-Georgia heart of darkness: the long-necked, desperate cry of a heron; a snake swimming with head high, crossing imperturbably just in front of them; a passage through a dim corridor of "enormous trees, conifers of some kind, spruce or fir. It was dark and heavy in there; the packed greenness seemed to suck the breath out of your lungs" (p. 105). The greatest compression of atmosphere and mind is felt as they haul a canoe containing the body of one of the assailants up a tributary creek, an "endless water-floored cave of leaves" where the water flowed "as untouchable as a shadow around my legs" (p. 132).

The river's full transforming effect is yet to be seen. After disposing of the body the men return to the river, and come to grief in the rapids below. Drew drowns. Lewis is incapacitated. Bobby comes through

in one piece but is incapable of action.

What happens to Ed Gentry is of greater consequence. He has been sucked under and thrown about like a piece of driftwood:

I was not breathing and was being beaten from all sides, being hit and hit at and brushed by in the most unlikely and unexpected places in my body, rushing forward to be kicked and stomped by everything in the river.

I turned over and over. I rolled, I tried to crawl along the flying bottom. Nothing worked. I was dead. I felt myself fading out into the unbelievable violence and brutality of the river, joining it. (pp. 143-144)

But he surfaces and learns to "pour with the river":

It was terrifyingly enjoyable, except that I hurt in so many places. The river would shoot me along; I'd see a big boulder looming up, raise my feet and slick over, crash down on my ass in a foaming pool, pick up speed and go on. I got banged on the back of the head a couple of times until I learned to bend forward as I was coming down off the rock, but after that nothing new hurt me. (p. 145; emphasis added)

Gentry lacks the spring-taut reflexes of a Lewis Medlock, but he is a fast learner and he survives. More remarkable, though it places some strain on credulity, is his inner growth. The river's pummelling is a coming-of-age ritual, a baptism which scours away the lassitude, the resigned feeling that nothing is of consequence. He comes out of it a new creature, a reborn Lewis Medlock, whose other self lies groaning in pain on the sand. Incredible tasks await him: the cliff climb, with bow slung over his shoulder in the blackness; eliminating the second assailant; getting his friends out of the gorge and away from the suspicious scrutiny of local officials.¹⁴²

142 Some reviewers have found their own credulity strained by some aspects of the narrative. "No single action," wrote one critic, "is impossible to believe, but the accumulation--it eventually involves his [Gentry's] singing a sort of victory song over the body and then lowering it from the edge of a cliff--is just a bit too much" (*Time*, April 20, 1970, p. 92). But the book received generally high marks from reviewers for the surging force of its river-impelled action.

Gentry's intense encounter with natural forces, the many-sided, purging intimacy with current and boulder, has opened a channel to some unknowable source. He comes out of the water possessed of an animal shrewdness, stamina, and a clear-headed sense of direction and authority he has never known before.

From the river Gentry learns how to attain union with natural forces, and the newly-gained rapport is extended to the cliff he has to climb. The cliff is another ultimate natural entity, vertical and unyielding; but its conquest can be achieved, paradoxically, only as Gentry learns to yield. He has become a creature of the river and the cliff, and "strength from the stone" flows into him--but only after total relinquishment of himself. After a moment of utter "helplessness and intimacy," his muscles giving out, his hands clawing at the marble-smooth wall, his fingers find a crack and he pulls himself up into a sitting position in a crevice. Panic and exaltation alternate; the panic he suppresses by becoming ultra-sensitive to the cliff, feeling more tenderness toward it. The language becomes apocalyptic, hallucinatory, the imagery recalling the medieval four elements, as he looks down:

The river had spread flat and filled with moonlight. It took up the whole of space under me, bearing in the center of itself a long coiling image of light, a chill, bending flame. I must have been seventy-five or a hundred feet above it, hanging poised over some kind of inescapable glory, a bright pit. (pp. 161-163)

So dazzling a vision is often ephemeral, but we are given to believe that its afterglow persists even after the return to suburbia, an enigmatic and enduring symbol: "The river underlies, in one way or another, everything I do. It is always finding a way to serve me . . ." (pp. 275-276).

For Gentry, though not for his friends, the ordeal in the gorge

comes across as essentially life-affirmative--despite the savage encounters with both man and nature. Yielding to primal forces (externalized as river, cliff, wilderness, etc.) has effected a mystic realignment; in touch with ultimate sources of action and volition, he has learned to act more freely and better cope with complexity. The image of the river has become part of his interior vision, and each night, by imaginative projection, he senses the water creeping up the cliff, "feeling for the handholds I had had, dragging itself up." And since the river itself is no more,

. . . it ran nowhere but in my head, but there it ran as though immortally. I could feel it--I can feel it--on different places on my body. It pleases me in some curious way that the river does not exist, and that I have it. In me it still is, and will be until I die, green, rocky, deep, fast, slow, and beautiful beyond reality. (p. 275)

A main theme of Deliverance is the fusing of fantasy and reality, the setting up of an image so vivid that it becomes believable even in the absence of the original. Thoreau would have felt at home with the notion that the river of the mind's eye is as substantial--in this case more so--than its "real" counterpart, and that it can be stowed away for reruns when needed. Doubtless, though, he would have objected strenuously to the obliteration of the original object. Gentry now retains the substance and integrity of his vision to draw from when needed: he can summon forth the quality of riveriness without requiring the river. Could more be asked of any religious or mystic perspective?

Whereas Deliverance depicts a man who must probe his own being for unsuspected depths, Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River"

presents one who does his best to avoid such a confrontation.

The story is one of a sequence in which Nick Adams is the central character. After experiencing the ravages of war, he has come back to Michigan to regain his physical and mental health. The narrative could be dismissed as nearly a non-story if its externals alone are considered. As critics have brought out, its significance lies largely in what Nick does not think and does not do. Outwardly the action is remarkably simple. Nick gets off a train in a forested region of Michigan to find that the railroad-stop hamlet of Seney and the surrounding countryside have been ravaged by fire. He walks through the burned-over area into the unburned pine forest. He prepares meals, fishes the river, and decides not to fish in a swamp. At that point the story ends.

Nick needs to reassure himself that he can function on a basic level of activity with no complexities, no pressing demands. He finds such reassurance just after he gets off the train.

[He] walked down the railroad track to the bridge over the river. The river was there. It swirled against the log spiles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

He watched them holding themselves with their noses into the current, many trout in deep, fast moving water, slightly distorted as he watched far down through the glassy convex surface of the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. At the bottom of the pool were the big trout. Nick did not see them at first. Then he saw them at the bottom of the pool, big trout looking to hold themselves on the gravel bottom in a varying mist of gravel and sand, raised in spurts by the current.¹⁴³

143 "Big, Two-Hearted River," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Scribner's, 1938), p. 209.

The river is there, and that is a great comfort. In the midst of the burned-out countryside it is still there, undamaged, just as Nick remembers it.

But the river is not just "there"; it is anything but inert. "Distorted," "convex," "pushing and swelling," "resistance"--all suggest a dynamic, living thing with inner forces and complexities. Nick loses himself in the river's impulsions, in the play of light against the refractive powers of water, and in the sight of the fish holding their positions against the current. We are reminded no less than four times in this passage that the fish have to keep or hold themselves "steady in the current"; they need to exert effort or be swept downstream. Nick finds their presence in the stream "very satisfactory" and begins his hike assured that the two things he was hoping to find, the fish and the river, are still there. From what can be guessed of Nick's state of mind it seems likely that he does not consciously relate the fish's situation, in any symbolic way, to his own.

As he walks on into the green section of the forest he does not walk along the river; he walks on higher ground to make better time, but he is happy with the thought that he knows how to get to the river, and that it will be there when he wants it. It is made clear that Nick hopes for a peaceful and relaxing time: "Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (p. 210). Nick fastidiously confines his activities and thoughts to the non-challenging and immediate present, focuses his concentration on the enormously magnified texture of present events. When his mind begins to think unbidden thoughts after dinner, "He knew he could

choke it because he was tired enough" (p. 218). He cannot allow his thoughts to drift into areas which might upset his fragile equilibrium. The routine of setting up camp, preparing dinner, and then fishing the stream is described in extreme detail most of which would be cloying in some other context. But it is precisely these rituals for which Nick has come and in which he immerses himself with an unhurried reverence which recalls Huck Finn's luxuriant days on the Mississippi.¹⁴⁴

The story ends with what seems like a non-event. Nick does not want to fish the swamp. It might be asked why he should; he has, after all, been catching fish elsewhere along the river. There are several clues: the episode's prominent placement at the end of the story; the detailed description of the swamp as a menacing, "tragic" place; and the importance which Nick, through his rationalizations, obviously attaches to fishing the swamp (p. 231). Nick contemplates but cannot bring himself to fish the swamp, a token of the dark, tragic reaches of his own mind. The implication is that Nick is indefinitely postponing the moment of truth, the confrontation with the darker side of his own nature.

Leo Marx has suggested that the terrain which Nick crosses corresponds with three stages of Nick's own feelings:

First, the burned-over land, identified with machines and war, and with Nick's anxious sense of threatening, repressive, wounding forces; then the camp in the meadow, a good safe place midway between the world of collective imperatives and raw nature, represented by the third sector of the landscape, the swamp identified with darker, impulse-ridden, unknown life that is both attractive and frightening. Nature in

¹⁴⁴ Tony Tanner writes, ". . . Nick Adams, like Huck, has moments when he reaches that fading rapport with nature, and then the prose of their creators sheds all complexity of thought and follows the naive, wondering eye as it enters into a reverent communion with the earth that abideth forever." The Reign of Wonder, p. 257.

Hemingway's world is at once benign and menacing--it is, like the river, two-hearted.¹⁴⁵

Like Ed Gentry, Nick Adams will take back with him a reassuring memory of painstakingly and lovingly explored terrain. But Nick has confined his search to the river's benign aspects. Jackson Benson suggests that

. . . his mere endurance at this point involves some courage. The old forms are enough to secure for him one half of the "two-hearts"--but to be complete, to secure the other half of himself, he must press his courage to the sticking point. He must move from the heart of light, and the security of the insulation that life offers in mere procedure, to the heart of darkness. Nick's tragedy is that he cannot again face tragedy. He cannot regain himself entire.¹⁴⁶

Nick finds comfort and renewal in the river's flow, in its sunny, open stretches, in the simple rhythms of camping chores and of day and night. But while Ed Gentry is compelled to grapple with the darker reaches of both man and nature, Nick postpones the issue, not trusting to hold himself steady in complex currents and deep waters.

A. B. Guthrie's first novel, The Big Sky, shares with the preceding two works the theme of nature as mentor, of encounters with earth's natural forces as stepping stones to mature wisdom. But compared with the brief though intense visitations of Ed Gentry and Nick Adams, Boone Caudill's wilderness sojourn is more expansive.

Boone, seventeen, runs away from his ham-fisted father in Kentucky. He joins a French trapper, Jourdonnais, as a crew member on the keelboat Mandan on the way up the Missouri River to beaver and "buffler" country. The year is 1830. The country of the upper Missouri is much like that

¹⁴⁵ "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles," in Western Man and Environmental Ethics, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley, 1973), p. 106.

¹⁴⁶ Hemingway: The Writer's Art of Self-Defense (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 139-140.

which Lewis and Clark saw twenty-five years before, and Boone, having also grown up in the humid eastern forests, is dazzled by the same sweeping vistas and distances and the abundance of wildlife. The party is attacked and massacred by Indians; only Boone and two friends, Richard Summers and Jim Deakins, escape. They roam through Indian country as mountain men, trapping beaver and killing buffalo. From Summers, an old hand in the mountains, Caudill and Deakins learn to survive and breathe with the country. Summers pulls out to take up the duller but more dependable routine of farming. Boone takes Teal Eye, a Blackfoot Indian girl, as his wife, is accepted in her village, and settles into an idyllic life in a mountain valley. But from a misunderstanding he impulsively shoots his best friend, Deakins, and has to leave. He visits his people in Kentucky, cannot stand it there, but cannot go back to his primitive life. At thirty, Boone is a misfit who belongs to neither society.

Boone's contacts with his uncle Zeb Calloway prefigure his own transformation. Zeb, one of the early mountain men, returned once to regale his sister's family with glowing tales of the West. The seed was planted, and when Boone decides to leave he heads west into Indian country. When Jourdonnais's party reaches Fort Union, Boone looks up his uncle. The meeting is a disappointment. Zeb no longer roams free. He still hunts game as an employee of the fort, but the old spark has left him. "'She's gone, goddam it! Gone!'" he says upon hearing that they plan to make out as mountain men:

"Forts all up and down the river, and folk everywhere a man might think to lay a trap. And greenhorns comin' up, a heap of 'em--greenhorns on every boat, hornin' in and sp'ilin' the fun. Christ sake! Why'n't they stay to home? Why'n't they leave it to us as found it? . . . God, she was purty onc't. Purty and new, and not a man track, savin' Injuns', on the whole scoop of her. . . . The beaver's nigh gone now.

Buffler's next. Won't be even a goddam poor bull fifty years ahead. You'll see plows comin' across the plains, and people settin' out to farm."¹⁴⁷

An era is on its way out. Or is it just the complainings of a tired old man? Boone is to find out for himself.

Boone's two trips on the Missouri River--to Indian country and back, thirteen years apart--mirror the changes in the terrain and within himself. The river of his youthful ascent is an open door to freedom and "buffler" and big sky country. It is

Banks sliding by, sunup and noon and sundown, and the river leading on, flanked by the pale green of new leaves. Pelicans flapping over at twilight, a passel of them, flying wedge-shaped to the north. Wild geese along the shore in the cool mornings, with tiny goslings strung along behind, making quiet V's in the water. Whippoorwills calling. An eagle's nest high in an old tree, and Indian hunting wigwams, empty and falling down. And always the line or poles or oars and sometimes the sail, on and on, on a river without an end, on a river that flowed under them and led ahead, to Council Bluffs, to the Yellowstone, to the Blackfeet, to buffler, catching the sky at evening and winding on like a silver sheet. (p. 103)

The river is full of meanness, too. It gouges and tears at its clay banks and runs "full of silt and drift and rotting buffalo" (p. 127). Boone and the crew feel the meanness on their shoulders and in their lungs as they tug the Mandan against the twisting, tearing current and the wind, "a cold bully of a wind, full of devilment and power." And in the time of spring flood, when they encounter it, the Missouri is

a devil of a river; it was a rolling wall that reared against the Mandan and broke around her and reared against her again; it was no river at all but a great loose water that leaped from the mountains and tore through the plains, wild to get to the sea. (p. 90)

¹⁴⁷ A. B. Guthrie, The Big Sky, fwd. Wallace Stegner, 1965 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), pp. 150-151.

But the country keeps

getting freer and bigger until sometimes, looking out over it from a rise, Boone felt he was everywhere on it, like the air or the light.

"Goddam, Jim!" he said.

"What?"

"It's slick, ain't it?"

"What?"

"This here. Everything." (p. 127)

This is as close as the tongue-tied Boone can come to self-revelation.

Guthrie's sensitive, idiomatic narrative fills in the rest. He conveys the expansive effect of such freedom on soul and body:

From the top Boone could see forever and ever, nearly any way he looked. It was open country, bald and open, without an end. It spread away, flat now and then rolling, going on clear to the sky. A man wouldn't think the whole world was so much. It made the heart come up. It made a man little and still big, like a king looking out. It occurred to Boone that this was the way a bird must feel, free and loose, with the world to choose from. (p. 108)

The contrast in Boone's outlook between his initial and return trips presents an irony. His journey with the Mandan brought unrelenting challenges: while afloat, snags and devilish winds; while afoot, insects and prickly pear; and the constant potential (finally fulfilled) of Indian attack. From surmounting the river's blustery ways, from its boundless views, and from living as mountain man and paleface Indian he derived obvious exhilaration. The return trip, thirteen years late, which poses no physical challenge for Boone, is unrelievedly gloomy. He cannot return to the wilderness, to Teal Eye, to the village. He can only sit brooding, thinking to even the score with the sheriff in Louisville who whipped him when he was seventeen and trying to escape from his pa. The river seems to catch his feeling.

[It] looped through the long land of the Assiniboines, striking one way and another like a hurt snake that couldn't remember to

make for a hole. It ran aimless and cold among the hills, leaving a muddy suds along the banks. It ran like a river lost, hunting a way to the sea, brown as old leather by day and black against the bleached slopes by night. (p. 345)

During the years in between, the lashing river has changed its own course and configurations, eroding banks and creating new sandbars, so that Boone can not be sure exactly where he has been. Only the hills remain reliable landmarks. The human changes along the river are more remarkable. No longer is there a need to keep a hair-trigger alert for Indians. Most have been wiped out by smallpox or are straggling about, demoralized. These things also the Missouri seems to echo:

The river hunted through the hills and turned sharp as if it had found the way at last and streamed south to the old country of the Mandans and the Rees. . . . and the villages of both were fallen and rotted, with bushes growing where men had sat solemn in palaver. . . . It was only the hills that remained, only the river. . . . Past the Grand the river went, past the Moreau and the Cheyenne, deep into the country of the Sioux, past old forts weathered down and pulled apart for steamer wood, past new ones, past forts going up and the sound of hammers knocking and hails from the shore, and all sliding by and being lost to sight and hearing as if they never had been. (p. 346)

Boone's days as a mountain man are over. His wildness is too brittle. He can not change with the changes. He caught the first wave just past its crest--the era of beaver trapping and of a self-sufficient but risky freedom--and rode it down to the froth of its dissolution. For him it was perfect, but it will not recur.

The shift in the river's "mood" reflects an aging of the human spirit. On the 1830 trip into Indian country the river and its surroundings are bathed in boundlessness, a shining, newly-minted feeling; on the return trip the river runs aimless and gloomy, as if projecting Boone's frame of mind. When westward bound for adventure and escape, he found the

country as glorious and pristine as he could hope, adopted its ways and lived with its people, only to find the assault by a new wave of "greenhorns" and entrepreneurs about to begin, and himself soured by experience and an outcast both from his own and from his adopted people. As Zeb Calloway has gone, so has Boone--and so have most writers who have pursued the vein of the lost glory of the American West.

The river of Boone's youth was his path to a free life and an unspoiled land, "purty and new." Now it is the sluice-gate for people who are transforming his land beyond recognition. It has become an agent of dizzying change. Beaver and buffalo are vanishing. Entire Indian tribes have faded away. The country is swinging open to settlement and trade. Dick Summers knew all along, one suspects, that Zeb Calloway was right, that the glory days were about over, but he wanted the two younger men to have the same chance to frolic and fight in a wild country, and so, in a fatherly fashion, he held back. He discerned that the days of free roaming, of lonesome streams and beaver and rendezvous time were about to be pinched out. He was rooted to the land and its way of life, and he "had seen the best of the mountains when the time was best," so when the time came to leave he "wanted to look separately at every tree and rock and run of water and to say goodbye to each and to tuck the pictures of them away so's they wouldn't ever be quite lost to him" (p. 195).

Dick Summers' premonitions, and his nostalgia, were akin to those of George Catlin and Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in and of the 1830s--the decade depicted by Guthrie in The Big Sky. Each one gazed at a stretch of unturned turf, looked into "futuraity," and sensed the thunder

of change. "One sees the solitudes of America with a melancholy pleasure," Tocqueville had written; "one is in some sort of hurry to admire them." Most westward-bound folk yearned for the change and wanted to be part of it. Most regarded the taming of the wilderness as unquestionably right and inevitable. For the mountain men, who disliked crowds, their coming was cause for dismay. Some, like Boone Caudill, simply faded out. Others learned to ride the waves as they came. In Guthrie's next novel, The Way West, the same Dick Summers, a gentler and less intractable man than Caudill, leaves his Missouri farm to hire out as a guide to an Oregon-bound wagon train, thus becoming a logical link between two eras. By so doing he hastens the change which, as a mountain man, a few years earlier, he would have resented.¹⁴⁸ Summers' expedient switch in role foreshadows the ambivalent national tendency to commend nature's bounties while at the same time squeezing them for profit.¹⁴⁹

The land's bread-and-butter potential was not to be denied. Yet to be pondered was the incompatibility between wilderness as wilderness and wilderness as "garden." The teeming wildlife which had excited rapt admiration and imparted an aura of inexhaustibility would be seen, in the second wave of settlement, as an impediment to practical use of the land that must be quickly eliminated. The wilderness-as-garden concept--a weighing of its economic potential--thus poses a built-in paradox not dissimilar to the one which confronted Adam and Eve. Could they, without constraints, enjoy the garden's full resources and remain as residents?

148 The Way West (New York: Sloane, 1949).

149 Leo Marx deals with this theme at great length in The Machine in the Garden.

The biblical answer is negative. The Garden of the World, as seen in the American landscape, was to offer a similar contradiction in terms, of which an awareness is just beginning to dawn.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ The idea that nature itself might be finite or substantially vulnerable to human impact first received widespread notice with the publication in 1864 of Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action, by George Perkins Marsh.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In The Big Sky Guthrie taps a vein of nostalgia which characterizes much twentieth century narrative writing about nature. The book is a logical thematic connector: a contemporary novel set in the 1830s which chronicles a theme--the movement toward nostalgia--which has been detectible in literature of American rivers for one hundred fifty years.

The nostalgia is heightened, and made more poignant, by the book's splendid evocation of the boundless skies and bright promise of the new land--all of which seems to fade away toward the end. On a larger canvas, the nostalgia is directed at the precarious treasures both of one's youth and of a beleaguered natural world. In this instance Boone's depression of spirit prefigures the nation's later uneasiness over its prodigal use of resources. The book's conclusion thus portends a gloomy outlook for the quality which Guthrie celebrates: a spacious and untrammelled freedom.

In this vein Leo Marx has discerned a "striking convergence of the literary and the ecological views of America's dominant institutions."¹⁵¹ There exists, he maintains, a substantial current within American literature which "has consistently criticized American life from a vantage

¹⁵¹ From "American Institutions and the Ecological Ideal," a lecture which Marx presented at the general symposium on "Human Settlements and Environmental Design" at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Boston, Mass., 1969.

like that of ecology." This element encompasses both "classic" American writers (Cooper, Emerson, Melville, Whitman, and Twain) and contemporary writers. Elsewhere, extending his line of reasoning a step farther, Marx makes a strong case for preserving the distinctness of three sectors of our environment: the city, the rural countryside, and the wilderness. He contends that our literature

supports the idea that each of these performs an important role in our psychic economy, and that quite apart from nostalgia, sentiment, or any narrow measures of utility, either economic or recreational, each offers indispensable satisfactions. Hence the prospect of the disappearance of any one of them, as in the spread of suburbia, would be an intolerable loss. The literary pastoral emphasizes the value of contrast as a mental resource, and seems to endorse the views of those ecologists who define the relation between the urban and the extra-urban environments as a form of symbiosis.¹⁵²

The wild river, as one of earth's archetypal and distinct features, and as a medium which can be enjoyed or contemplated in manifold ways, surely deserves the protection implicit in Marx's statement. Several writers discussed in Chapter 4 of this study, whose works date from the mid-1960s into the 1970s, fall within the tradition of which Marx speaks, and coincide with the wave of environmental awareness: Fletcher, McPhee, Abbey, Dickey, Brautigan. The works by Hemingway, Eiseley, and Leopold substantially predate it. But all of them share an innate regard for nature's integrity, and convey their concern that the experiences they cherish are about to pass from the scene. Collectively, they constitute a potent argument for the preservation of wild rivers.

The intensity, the immersive value, of the experience seems to correspond to the integrity of the ambient wilderness, and to the absence

¹⁵² "Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles," in Western Man and Environmental Ethics, pp. 111-112.

of complex distractions. Both Huck Finn and Boone Caudill, for instance, are at their best when collective imperatives are least evident. Both flee oppressive circumstances and find solace in the river's openness and its provision for spontaneous behavior. Neither can abide permanently in a primitive state, but both feel out of step when compelled to go back. But not all river adventurers exit as misfits. Both the fictional Ed Gentry and the actual Colin Fletcher capture a whiff of wild river habitat and emerge better able to cope with everyday affairs.

The writers here discussed share with the environmental movement an awareness of nature's vulnerability to human impact. Their voices make up a ringing chorus, though the individual tones may have the detachment of a John McPhee, the satirical ring of a Richard Brautigan, or the nostalgic resonance of a Tocqueville or a Guthrie. In their sensitivity over the treatment of a favorite spot is seen a more general conviction that we are pushing nature too hard--that our bearing toward an undefiled river basin, be it the Colorado, the Kobuk, or the Cahulawassee, is a litmus test of mankind's ability to coexist with rather than trample on nature.

With all their diversity, the works included here have much in common: a keen awareness of the natural values of rivers and their habitats, and of the fulfillment to be found there by the traveler; an urge for adventure, even in the most thoroughly planned trips; and a pervasive concern for the integrity of the experience. A desire to educate, or at least to touch the reader's conscience, is present in most of the works. As a whole, they are a blend of nostalgia, foreboding, delight, adventure, and social consciousness evoked by that increasingly rare circumstance: the chance leisurely to experience an undefiled river and its surroundings.

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