Wilderness and Civilization
Conflicting Concepts in William Faulkner's *Big Woods*

Wilderness—at once a concept and a physical reality—bears particular and obvious relevancy to the development of the American national character. The civilizers who journeyed to America transported an impression of wilderness evolved from primordial racial memory and tempered by the influence of thousands of years of civilization. In the presence of this incredibly vast and pristine continent, however, wilderness assumed a fresh import and urgency. As Roderick Nash wrote in the preface of his *Wilderness and the American Mind*: "Wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning."

William Faulkner focused on the significance of wilderness and man's relation to the land in his suitably titled novel, *Big Woods*. Faulkner's wilderness theme is a morally distinguished divergence from traditional Western attitude of antipathy. Specifically located with the American experience with wilderness in the South, *Big Woods* is a scathing indictment of man's avarice and arrogance. Faulkner, in moral outrage, condemns the rapacity of the civilizing process in America and implies a sense of corruption in the whole of Western civilization.

The traditional Western attitude of antipathy toward wilderness probably stems from a distant point in human development when the primates that eventually became men left their arboreal surroundings to adapt to a new way of life on the unobstructed grasslands. This shift is estimated to have occurred about fifteen
million years ago. As mankind's ancestors gradually came to pursue a life of hunting, they developed a keen sense of vision. This improved sight was an evolutionary advantage on the open grasslands, but the formerly familiar darkness of the forest had become antagonistic to the prehuman's increased reliance upon vision. Thus our predecessors came to avoid the dim forests and jungles with fear and abhorrence.

The mythology of primitive cultures further developed an unfavorable attitude toward wilderness. Primitive man, engaged in a daily struggle against wilderness for survival, dreamed of a garden-like paradise in which the environment was beneficent and hospitable to humanity. Leo Marx has referred to this condition as "the middle landscape," locating it in the center portion of a spectrum having wilderness and civilization as its poles. In this idealized, pastoral landscape, an equilibrium of man and nature was found. Wilderness, being uncontrolled and inhospitable nature, was regarded as an evil by early cultures.

The classic civilizations of Greece and Rome continued to idolize the middle state and revile the wilderness condition. Already the disquieting strains and pressures of civilized existence were causing men to seek a more restful and regenerating life in nature. The lifestyle commemorated by the classical poets, however, was to be pursued in the cultivated, pastoral geography. Titus Lucretius Carus, a first century B.C. poet of Rome, stated the classic view of the wilderness when he wrote of the "defect" in that most of the world was "greedily possessed by mountains and the forests of wild beasts" and "filled full of restless dread throughout her woods, her mighty mountains and deep forests." Due to the lack of utilitarian control in the wild environs, the classic influence on Western attitude toward wilderness was of an unfriendly sort.
The folklore of many cultures invested the wilderness with additional negative qualities. This was a result of unsophisticated man's proclivity for superstition. The absence of his kind's influence in the wilderness spawned a feeling of terror and a sense of loss in man. Out of these feelings arose the Greek legends of Pan, satyrs, and centaurs. Wild men, trolls, orges, and werewolves were ascribed to the forests by various European folk traditions of the medieval period. The Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf described the wilderness as dark and perilous, inhabited by huge monsters hateful of man. Thus again, at another level of society, wilderness was accorded an adverse connotation.

The Judeo-Christian tradition was probably the greatest persuasion toward the Western attitude of hostility. The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament regarded the arid, uninhabited regions of the Near East as wilderness, cursed by God, chaotic, and evil. As in the primitive cultures' paradise myths, wilderness is in opposition to Eden, the spiritual garden of the Lord where nature is hospitable to and in harmony with man.

The Judeo-Christian heritage also contributed an ambiguous strain to the Western concept. Through interpretation of the forty year Exodus experience of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness, the Bible designated the wasteland as a crucible for salvation. Wilderness, as Roderick Nash writes, was "a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society. Secondly, wild country came to signify the environment in which to find and draw close to God. It also acquired meaning as a testing ground where a chosen people were purged, humbled, and made ready for the land of promise. Wilderness never lost its harsh and forbidding character. Indeed, precisely because of them it was unoccupied and could be a refuge as well as a disciplinary force. Paradoxically, one sought the wilderness as a way of being purified and hence delivered from it into a paradisical promised land. There was no fondness in the Hebraic tradition for wilderness itself."
Other figures of the Judco-Christian legacy followed the Exodus example. Prominently, Elijah and, in the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus sought the wilderness for spiritual enlightenment.

Until the Renaissance, the church proscribed earthly pleasure and enjoyment of the material world for Christians. Those desiring salvation were to direct their thoughts toward heaven. Such dogma was hardly conducive to an appreciation of the natural beauty of an unmodified landscape. The church's fictitious construct of the Great Chain of Being, which placed man in a God-given position above and apart from the rest of nature, encouraged man's efforts to physically subjugate the natural regions.

This, then, was the basis of a heritage of prejudice against wilderness that accompanied the European settlers to the New World. Sanded on the edge of a continent (the very size of which was unknown), the pioneers immediately engaged in a physical struggle for mere survival in the wilderness. These early Americans also lent symbolic qualities to their efforts. The Puritans strove to illuminate the Godless waste with the light of Christianity. That sacred mission was superseded in part during the nineteenth century, when material prosperity had become the be-all and end-all of American culture. Now the pioneer attacked the wilderness in the name of progress for the glory and advancement of the nation.

From the beginning in the seventeenth century, the goal of the American pioneer was the conversion of the wilderness into the familiar pastoral, or rural, state. Civilization required a utilitarian condition. Quoting Scripture and hailing progress, Americans advanced with ax and plow to ravish the untouched continent.

A visitor to early nineteenth century America, undoubtedly of a more objective frame of reference, summarized the American attitude: "...living in the wilds,
The pioneer only prizes the works of man. . ."9 Alexis de Toqueville further explained his comment in Democracy in America: "... in Europe people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight... the... march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature."10

This was the dominant attitude toward wilderness in our country. Most Americans viewed the virgin landscape as a reservoir of raw material, the stuff of future civilization, fuel for progress; few recognized good in and of wilderness itself. Wild country was another obstacle, like the red men who dwelt in it, to be overcome in America's fulfillment of her manifest destiny. To be sure, some voices raised in protest against this materialistic creed. But the Romantics, transcendentalists, deists, and others who found positive value in wilderness precisely because of its natural condition accomplished little in a practical sense. The present condition of America, product of a mere three-and-a-half centuries of "civilization," attests to that.

Faulkner's Big Woods is the antithesis of the dominant American attitude. Not only has Faulkner found moral and spiritual knowledge in the wilderness, but the thematic implication of the book also denies the supposed greater worth of the civilization that destroyed the woods. The continuous and constantly developed theme exposes the corruption and unworthiness of civilization as increasing in visibility while the physical area of valuable wilderness dwindles—a form of inverted relative proportions. In an allegoric simplification, wilderness is
the hero, man and his rapacious civilizing process the villain.

Faulkner develops the worth of the wilderness most extensively in the section entitled "The Bear."\(^{11}\) Here we learn of Ike McCaslin's "novitiate to the true wilderness" (p. 15). Faulkner labels Ike's wilderness experience variously as a "college" (p. 32) and an "apprenticeship" (p. 14), from which Ike develops the admirable and essential human qualities of humility, pride, courage, and endurance.

Faulkner doesn't disregard unpleasant facts of the wild (the presence of snakes, universal symbol of evil, throughout the story denotes that); but the quality of the wilderness experience is superior because of its naturalness. Hunting is portrayed as "the best game of all," "ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter. . ." (p. 11).

This made of existence surpasses the civilized type. Faulkner indicates this with General Compson's comparison of Ike and McCaslin:

> You've \(\sqrt{\text{McCaslin}}\) got one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank; you ain't even got a good hand-hold where this boy was already an old man long before you damned Sartorises and Edmondses invented farms and banks to keep yourselves from having to find out what this boy was born knowing and fearing too maybe but without being afraid, that could go ten miles on a compass because he wanted to look at a bear none of us had ever got near enough to put a bullet in and looked at the bear and came the ten miles back on the compass in the dark; maybe by God that's the why and the wherefore of farms and banks (p. 76).

The man of civilization receives the unfavorable end of this comparison. Indeed, civilization itself is depreciated throughout the novel. At times, Faulkner's imputation is subtle, such as this criticism of America's disgusting commercialism: "a land where neon flashes past us in the gray rain from the little countless towns and countless shining this-year's automobiles. . ." (pp. 201-2).
At other instants, Faulkner's vilification is far from subdued. For example, this final passage of Big Woods' opening section: "men's mouths were full of law and order, all men's mouths were round with the sound of money; one unanimous golden affirmation ululated the nations's boundless immeasureable forenoon: profit plus regimen equals security: a nation of commonwealths; that crumb, that dome, that gilded pustule, that idea risen now, suspended like a balloon or a portent or a thundercloud above what used to be wilderness, drawing, holding the eyes of all. . ." (p. 7). Faulkner's image of an unhealthy sore and the general tone of the passage are distinct and distant from the patriotic drivel that so often refers to the progression of American history—a "progression" that consumed a continent.

An idea of immortality as a facet of some universal cycle is presented in Big Woods. Faulkner's thought here is also removed from the traditional Western view. Faulkner discusses no heaven or paradise "because there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one. . ." (p. 94). The harmony engendered by this prose is akin to Eastern modes of thought rather than Western dogma.

Although Faulkner reviles the civilized destruction of America, the reader should not disregard a depressing sense of inevitability that the author grants to this course. Faulkner suggests this in several and various places, but the feeling is most clearly expressed in the moving final section of the novel. The land "is too rich for anything else, too rich and strong to have remained
wilderness—land so rich and strong that, as those who live in and by it say, it exhausts the life of a dog in one year, a mule in five and a man in twenty. . ." (p. 201).

Faulkner writes of another and, in the strictest context of man's quantum of history, more terrible inevitability. Expressing an ecological awareness of nature's delicate balance decades before any display of popular concern, Faulkner warns of the only possible result. This prophecy of doom, delivered through Ike's thoughts, concludes the book:

. . .now I can lie again in the empty tent, shaking, but only with the cold, since there is nothing left now ponderable enough to cause a man to tremble: only to remember and to grieve of this land which man has deswamped and denuded and delivered in two generations so that white men own plantations and commute every night to Memphis, and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive; this land where white men rent farms and live like niggers and Negroes crop on shares and live like animals; where cotton grows man-tall in the very cracks in the sidewalk, mortgaged before it is even planted and sold and the money spent before it is ever harvested, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which, or cares. . . .

This land, said the old hunter. No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution. The very people who destroyed them will accomplish their revenge (p. 212).

Thus William Faulkner concludes a sensitive and deeply felt exposition, acknowledging the "triumph" of a destructive and shortsighted civilization. Such ascendancy is shortlived and bears the charge for its own destruction, a fact that has become more obvious and widely admitted today than every before. Like the transcendentalists and Romantics of the preceding century, Faulkner's artistic expression is a weak voice in a howling storm and the reader must share in the sense of inevitable destruction. The American society continues its awesome consumption, finding no worth in the natural condition of wilderness, inexorably bound for its own destruction.
FOOTNOTES


2 Nash, p. ix. My following discussion of the development of the wilderness concept is drawn largely from Nash's work.

3 Nash, pp. 8-9.


7 Nash, p. 15.

8 Nash, p. 16.

