

THE CULT OF WILDERNESS IN AMERICAN MYTH-MAKING

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Le culte du sauvage dans la création du mythe américain

Résumé *Le transcendantalisme américain se superpose comme période sur le processus de cristallisation de la conscience nationale. On s'est manifesté l'intérêt pour la nature une fois avec la colonisation du Nouveau Monde, mais ses nuances ont varié entre l'année 1620 et la période de la Guerre d'Indépendance. On se propose par cet article de montrer que cet intérêt fait partie du processus qui a eu comme résultat la définition d'une identité américaine, puisque le paysage américain – vu initialement comme un endroit sauvage – représente l'un des éléments clé qui composent le mythe américain.*

Mots clés *transcendantalisme, mythe, nature, terre, religion*

Rezumat *Transcendentalismul american se suprapune ca perioadă peste procesul de cristalizare a conștiinței naționale. Interesul pentru natură s-a manifestat odată cu colonizarea Lumii Noi, însă nuanțele lui au variat între momentul 1620 și perioada Războiului de Independență. Lucrarea își propune să arate că acest interes face parte din procesul care a avut ca rezultat definirea unei identități americane, deoarece peisajul American – inițial perceput ca sălbăticie – reprezintă unul dintre elementele cheie care compun mitul American.*

Cuvinte cheie transcendentalism, mit, natură, pământ, religie

One important feature in defining Americanism refers to the spatial dimension of this system of cultures. The crossing of the Atlantic Ocean was, for the English mind at least, a transition from the insular isolation of the lofty monarchy to the continental expanse of a democratic society. Had it not been for the land, the history of the colonies would have taken another course.

The concept of democracy in America has its origins in a religious dissent. When settling in the new land, the Puritans founded the first democratic institution, the town meeting, starting from the premise that communities are formed by covenants. The founders of the Federation-to-be sought in this a haven while running away from the old corrupt Europe in which the monarchs ruled over intolerant populations divided too deeply into few rich heirs and many poor common people, the latter category too little represented in the public life as a consequence of their lack of landly possessions. Unfortunately, the continent was limited and already divided among those who, in most of the cases, believed in God in the same way the ruling monarch did. Hunger, social oppression and fear of persecution drove away many communities of various nationalities in search for a cherished promise. The new land would offer opportunity, business, property, and, with it, virtue and dignity. They did find a continent across the Ocean, not entirely empty as a matter of fact, but still spacious enough for small groups to settle for a while. In a span of three hundred years the Pilgrims and their descendants managed to implement a variety of relationships with their land from utter wilderness to landscape, garden, and reservation. These represent facets of the land which, though hardly changed from the geographical point of view, triggered different attitudes in succeeding generations.

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Wilderness is the oldest stage which prevails in parallel with the later ones. It is what the colonists found as existing, what they shunned, used, admired and eventually learnt to preserve.

The concept of wilderness is perceived in different stages that do not exclude one another, but become superposed in time. The fact that the colonists came to admire nature does not mean that they had given up the practical use of their land. Moreover, the concept of wilderness has kept its primordial meaning even to this day: uninhabited stretches of land have the same impact on the human mind as they used to a few centuries ago. In fact, since faith accounts for a large part of the initial drive to “go west,” it makes sense to analyze the idea of land starting with the Bible and the Puritan view.

The Mayflower Compact that the first settlers drew on coming ashore at Cape Cod in 1620 is the starting point for a new model of law in that authority exists only if accepted by the governed individuals. (Basic readings, p. 11) It was the result of two traditions familiar to the Pilgrims through the Bible. One refers to the social contract, and the other to the covenant. Combined, these traditions reflect the belief in a conditioned agreement both between God and man and between man and man.

Nine years later, a prominent figure will remind his congregation on the *Arbella*, while still in the middle of the ocean, that the “city upon a hill” is only one side of the covenant, and that the contract between men is in fact a natural consequence of the higher one between God and men. John Winthrop’s sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* alludes to the terms of the covenant in the same prophetic (but not surprising) key as his statement prior to the voyage, “God will bring some heavy affliction upon the land, and that speedily.” God chose the colonists for the mission, it was His will to send them to a new land and He would keep them there to “love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk

in His ways and to keep His commandments and His ordinance and His laws, and the articles of our covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that our Lord may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it". (Winthrop, 1992: 283)

Winthrop uses the metaphor of the Canaan explicitly in his sermon, viewing the colonists as the legendary people of Israel, but by that time the land had shown its other face, too. The first celebration of Thanksgiving in 1621 found the small colony of Plymouth quite harshly tried. In one year the settlers found the differences between the American and the European scenery, climate, flora, fauna, and natural phenomena. In order to survive, many of them had to work the way they hadn't worked back home, they were pioneers after all. Some had died of cold, hunger and diseases. They can be regarded as a more recent version of Adam in his relationship with the land.

In the first two books of the Bible we find almost all the interpretations of the concept of land undifferentiated into landscape and artificial park. (Cocagnac, 1973: 85-87) At the beginning of creation, as said in the Book of Genesis, land is order, in clear opposition with water, which is chaos. It is the image of Paradise and God's gift to man, it is therefore essentially good. (Spidlik, 1998: 238) Man's duty is to take care of it. As a created entity, man does not possess the attributes of God and is only given the land in order to keep, toil, and preserve it in its good essence. Yet, it is in his power to alter it by sin. Not being eternally holy after the fall from Heaven, man cannot consecrate his land or make it holy again after he has sinned and spoiled it. Only God can do that. Indeed, the Flood and the burning of Sodoma and Gomorrah are examples of God's intervention on earth to purify it again. As land is part of the creation, too, it cannot curse itself, but the Lord does it in the same way He gives the blessing. Man's reward has been reflected upon the state of the land since Adam and Eve, as shown in the few examples below:

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And unto Adam he said, because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee saying. Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. (Genesis, 3, 17)

And Lamech lived an hundred eighty and two years, and begat a son. And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shalt comfort us concerning of work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord hath cursed. (Genesis, 5, 28-29)

And God said unto Noah, The end of all Flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Genesis, 6, 13)

This parallelism between the suffering of man and that of the land prevails in the other books of the Bible as well, and is suggested by great natural catastrophes. At the same time, the land itself is the instrument of punishment for man, strategically placed between him and God. On the one hand, God controls all creation but allows man to rule over the earth and take pleasure in it. On the other hand, man can create to a certain extent and be free as long as he maintains intact the element through which he is connected to God: the land is, after all, his own essence as, in the creationist perspective, he was made from dust. By extension of meaning, he himself is the land endowed with reason.

In the second book, Exodus, the land is the space of the law and education. God teaches slavery and freedom through it and uses it to give the Law to His chosen people, to show His grace and power. It is also the space of purification on two levels. It is used to cleanse the community, as in the case of the people of Israel forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all those of the old generation who had sinned or criticized God died. On the second level, purification through the land works for individuals, too. Wilderness often appears as a place of trial and testing which

generates temptations for the flesh and the spirit. Hermits retire here to fight these temptations in order to clean their spirit and thus become worthy and capable of contemplating God's glory. Jesus Christ Himself spent forty days in the wilderness to defeat temptation. Thus, the same wilderness leads to knowing God in its ambivalent nature: sterile and frightening without God, and glorious through Him.

As Winthrop shows in *A Model of Christian Charity*, one condition of the covenant is harmony, as that was a commandment given to men by God. Harmony should characterize the relationship between man and nature. In another biblical episode, Noah celebrates the new covenant with God only after he leaves the Ark to become again a worker of the land, as Adam had been at the beginning. But the first man was created and placed in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. He was invested with a power similar, though not identical, with that of his Creator, but he also must bear its responsibility through his actions and his individual quality, as he can bring both blessing and curse upon himself and his own. From this point of view, could the Pilgrims and their descendants have done anything wrong in their pretension to master nature as well as human nature, even other than their own (the Native Americans, for instance)?

They looked upon Europe as the chosen people had looked upon the Egypt of their oppression long before them. They hoped to become a new model of society envied even by other neighboring colonies, to their pious pride. Diligent workers and virtuous in their austerity, they took up agriculture as the biblical patriarchs did, putting the land to good use. Wilderness was hard to tame in America, and it took its toll while yielding its crops. Passion was suspicious and nature would often have a pragmatic face: it represented a source of commodities without being one of luxury or art. If they thanked God, it was for the quantity and quality of the harvest rather than the mere beauty of the place,

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which is pardonable under the circumstances – they simply had to survive on anything they could find and knew how to use. Also, the history of their settling is in its largest part a sum of diaries, reports, letters, and sermons reporting on the economic situation of the colony and their moral evolution (John Smith, Thomas Morton, William Bradford, Roger Williams, Mary Rowlandson, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and later, Samuel Sewall, Cotton Mather, Sarah Kemble Knight, Robert Beverley, William Byrd, Jonathan Edwards, *etc.*) If they worried about their spiritual progress in the “howling wilderness” as John Smith first describes it not long before the Mayflower event (while in the colony of Jamestown, New England), the hostile environment served them the purpose, for that new nature had to be converted to Christianity and kept holy for both its own salvation and that of the community.

But the time comes for Nature to occupy an increasingly important place in the American thinking, at first in a timid compassion with the European landscape, as if America still owed something to the Old World. But, the philosophy of nature assumed a more promising shape gradually in the new transcendentalist thinking. There is a precedent to it in Puritanism, even though it ended up rejecting the much too rigid doctrine: John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” is a society living by the precepts of Christian charity, loving, aiding and forgiving friends and enemies alike. It verges on utopia in the idea that each person sacrifices his or her private concerns for the good of the community. But Puritanism does not have the same viewpoint on nature as Transcendentalism. According to the latter, the wild nature is a mother, teacher, shelter, source and residence of wisdom and of primordial mythologies of all nations as well. If the Puritans dreaded the perilous wilderness, transcendentalists revered it for being above Christianity. Again, while John Smith, in 1616, praises the discovery of “things unknown: erecting towns,

peopling countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things unjust, teaching virtue, and making a gain to our native mother country" (*A Description of New England*), transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau are eager to resort to the spirit of wilderness away from artificial communities. The new environmental culture presents the American mind with a favorable vision of nature in time with the advancement of the settlers to the West. Wilderness can be a home in spite of its unknown life and force.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is interested in studying various aspects of the harmonious relationship between man and nature, endeavoring to find out why man often fails to reach and keep this harmony which is one of his primordial duties. He undertakes pragmatic, religious, aesthetic, and scientific points of view to draw a rather skeptical conclusion as to the human apprehension of nature. Two of his essays are entitled *Nature*, one published in the collection *English Traits*, and the other in *Essays – the Second Series*. Both of them sum up uses of, and attitudes towards nature categorized in "one of the following classes: Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline." (*Essays*, 1969: 339) Commodity is the ensemble of the things man uses from nature to meet his needs. Beauty means to Emerson 1. the delight of the simple perception of natural forms, 2. "the mark God sets upon virtue", and 3. an object of the intellect. God's presence in the created world – also in human nature – constitutes a strong argument in favor of the superiority of this concept over wilderness as perceived by the early settlers.

For the first time in American mentality, the Transcendentalists unite nature and man in a parallelism of feeling. She is the empathic setting for man's action and thought provided that he be a special character: "Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. [...] A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the

central figure of the visible sphere.” (Emerson, 1969: 341) She also inspires the intellect: “The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind... This love of Beauty is Taste... The creation of beauty is Art.” (*Ibidem*: 344), which accounts for the diversity of impressions on people. Man is in the habit of giving verdicts when comparing landscapes and establishes degrees of beauty which do not exist in an objective, impartial Over-Soul. On the other hand, the deity called nature is able to compare the degrees of grace and virtue in man and reflect its judgment since, as in the Bible, it mirrors man’s morality and suffers its consequences along with him.

Language and discipline refer to other domains of human thinking - linguistics and natural sciences - in the same philosophy of order and diversity in unity, change and identity.

The conclusion of both essays contrasts with what the Pilgrims had set as a moral task: nature cannot be entirely known or mastered as it is not even felt completely due to our limited reason and perception. Moreover, Emerson builds a paradox between the aesthetic and pragmatic values of nature in an attempt to draw it closer to the purposes of urban communities. Art and luxury fail to mean anything to the people who can afford them: paintings and sculpture, he says, do not give a rich man the noble image he wants as much as nature does, and so, he will have a park and natural flowers on the table.

The nobleness of natural beauty is also Henry David Thoreau’s concern. A number of essays like *Walden*, *Journal* and *Walking* contain references to nature and make Thoreau one of the promoters of the Conservation movement. *Walden* (a comprised history of his stay near the lake of Walden) is Thoreau’s most famous work, a collection of *pensées* on varying subjects as the wild life, social criticism, attitudes towards age and work, but it also represents a testament to the need of respect and preservation of nature. The latter becomes a thesis of conservationism in itself in the essay *Walking*: “In Wilderness is the preservation of the

World,” (Thoreau, 1964: 246) which comprises both wilderness in terms of uncultivated or uninhabited land, and wildness as a state of living, not subject to any kind of order. Thoreau thinks that civilization is an illusion and endorses Emerson’s statement that Nature can be seen as a “city of God”, due to its very lack of citizens. Again, while Thoreau attacks the illusion of civilization understood as a set of man-made codes that only function within education and have for a purpose the acceptance of the individual in a community, Emerson rises above the illusion of evil as being also man-made and therefore temporary, and making no real place for tragedy in our life.

The fallacy of civilization consists in accepting too small a number of variations in nature. In an attempt to put a new order in things – which is always blocked at the theoretical level – man sets laws about his life which restrain nature without actually mastering it. Thoreau calls them a circle of “don’t do” and “do because otherwise you’ll be shunned by them” that results in a behavior of self mortification. This idea crosses through his writings in a larger argument against anything that is an artificial law, rule, or even beauty: “Yes, you may think me perverse, if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a Dismal Swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp. How vain, then, have been all your labors, citizens, for me!” (*Ibidem*: 613)

In *Journal*, appears the motif of mirroring under the form of the parable (much as in *Walking*, too, and in Emerson’s essays as well). Here Thoreau uses the image of trees as exponents of the natural world and reflection of men. The interpretation of Nature as mother gains a philosophical value. Proliferation in nature means, among other things, gaining space, expansion from the “mother place”. Trees send their roots farther and farther from themselves and thus the species travels in the space and history of its evolution. In the human world the process of growth and

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maturation involves expansion of the mind and perspective on the world. At a higher level, this parable warns against the danger of a self-stifling centralized system, namely a state or a government, the theme for another famous essay – *Civil Disobedience*.

The Transcendentalists manage to restore what the Puritans had lost in their interpretation of the Adamic duty – to keep the nature in good state as received from the Creator, to stay in the nature instead of withdrawing from it, and, why not, to preserve the inner nature intact as well.

It was only natural that a new concern arose among friends of the wilderness in what regards its protection and preservation. The concept of landscape faced a concrete threat coming from the Great Movement towards the Pacific coast. A misuse of freedom and power, or simply practical sense? Maybe both. The rule was, broadly, that whatever one found belonged to him and one had every right to use his land as he saw fit. This policy risked abusive exploitation of the landscape. In terms of mentality, it served many people's purposes. It was considered common sense to make money from the land, water and forest. Otherwise, the landscape took up a new value: it became a continental garden (of Eden?) that pushed the limits of productivity higher and higher. (Smith, Nash, 1978: 124) If the Mississippi Valley saw its future in agriculture by the mid 1770's, this myth will change with the passing of time. In the same way, the Wild West will cease to exist once the migration comes to an end at the shore of the Pacific and as a result of the inevitable industrialization.

The earlier biblical references pointed to an Adam invested with power but not allowed to alter his eternal garden, only to eat from it (within limits) and look after it. After the optimistic view of man's relationship with nature as provided by Emerson and Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne proposes an illusion of a reversed Adamic character in the negative counterpart of his Garden.

Rappaccini's Daughter is a very subtle and complex parable that uses the same motif of the mirror. The garden resembles the primordial one: there is a well in the middle, but in ruins, there is a shrub in the place of the tree of life, but it is poisonous. The flowers are beautiful and well attended, though unnatural. Everything in the garden, including Rappaccini's daughter herself, is a terrible experiment of life and death, of power over nature and artificial beauty at the same time. The authors of the experiment are depicted as monsters, mutants, sinners, and victims eventually against the background of their own pride and vanity. The garden boasts an "evil mockery of beauty". The only thing true to its nature is the sparkling spring in the middle of the ruined fountain as a sign of a perpetual divine presence that reminds us of the Transcendentalist idea of Over-Soul. Hawthorne is only one American author who concocts a world of artifice to transmit a sad message to the ambitious public. Literature (not only American, and not only in the 19th century) abounds in both implicit and explicit warnings to all men gloating over their exhausted utopian garden.

The more modern relationship between man and nature is concentrated in the reservation. What a marvelous coincidence is in the fact that the biblical word *paradise* originates in an ancient Iranian word meaning enclosed *park*! It is true, we live with the nostalgia of paradise, the rich try to compensate their fallacy as saints by investing in parks and Thoreau was right. There is even a mentality that artificial gardens and parks demonstrate skill, power, education, and benevolence on the part of the rulers. But the preservationists insist that nature is a balanced garden herself rather than aleatory wilderness.

The following definition of environment strikes by its complexity and non-pragmatic orientation. It is "the total complex of elements and forces which surrounds and impinges upon each unit of life throughout its span. Environment for each living unit

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thus includes other living units (men, animals, plants), the inorganic world above and below, nature as a vast structure of self-propelled and self-adjusting processes, and society as a human creation subjected to human decisions". (Eckbo, 1969: 30) Since men appear to be part of the garden, it should be clear whether they and nature can be partners in the same perimeter or separately. The American mind struggles in the modern economic dilemma whether it is better to take care of the environment while living in it and using its resources, or simply to leave the land empty and unexploited. This new conflict of ideas made two people famous at the turn of the century: John Muir and Gifford Pinchot.

Gifford Pinchot was a German-trained forester. He was convinced that sustained yield of timber (annual cutting should never exceed growth) could enable trees to be cut and the forest preserved at one and the same time provided that waste materials are used, too, and that the forest is protected from disease and fire.

The Scottish-born Naturalist and writer, John Muir, endorsed Pinchot's efforts in persuading the government to protect the environment against abuse but in 1906-1913, the Hetch-Hetchy dispute resulted in a clear divergence of opinions. The dam at Hetch-Hetchy was necessary to ensure the water supply for the growing city of San Francisco. But the only place where the dam could be built was a valley parallel to the Yosemite National Park. The valley was facing an uncertain future: it could be preserved untouched or be wisely used to serve human needs. Pinchot was in favor of the dam and he won eventually.

The debate is important because it finally split the two concepts of preservation and conservation and, on the other hand, it resulted in the creation of a government agency for preservation – The National Park Service. It was a branch of the Department of the Interior, created in 1916 under President Woodrow Wilson. Efforts of preserving limited territories had been made before. In

1890 President Benjamin Harrison signed the Yosemite National Park Bill into a law. In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt set aside a lot of federal land and created the first national wildlife refuge at Florida's Pelican Island. But it was not until 1964 that the Preservation System was actually passed into a law by Congress as the Wilderness Act which defined wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain"³⁹. This definition suggests a final tone as to the out-fashioned contrast between the Puritan and the Transcendentalist representations of wilderness.

The newly-acquired "cult" of wilderness, in conclusion, is quite strict about the human presence in nature. *Conservationism* is only a compromise and remains within the boundaries of human civilization in one way or another. *Preservationism* remains, thus, the only trend that continues the tradition of the Adamic task the Transcendentalists understood to carry out.

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³⁹ *** *National Wilderness Preservation System*: <http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact?print=yes> (accessed on 15. 04. 2013).

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