

romantic travelers

in the adirondack wilderness

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Sometime in the 1840s Joel T. Headley—Protestant minister, popular historian, journalist, author of biographies of Napoleon and George Washington and a guide to Italy—took the first of several camping trips in the Adirondack wilderness. He later wrote that an “attack on the brain . . . drove me from the haunts of men to seek mental repose and physical strength in the woods,” thus affirming the romantic faith in the redemptive powers of nature. In 1849, he published *The Adirondack, Or Life in the Woods*, a book which was reissued, reprinted, expanded and plagiarized in numerous editions over the next thirty years: it was a prime example of one of the nineteenth century’s most popular genres, the illustrated volume of romantic travel literature. More exactly, Headley’s *Adirondack* typified a distinct type of romantic writing, books and magazine and journal articles devoted exclusively to the American wilderness. Headley’s book included all the standard apparatus of the Adirondack sporting and touring narrative—instructions on how to reach the woods and how to prepare for a camping trip, exciting descriptions of hunting and fishing, meditations on the meaning of life in the wilderness, stock responses to scenery, discoveries of the deity in nature and detailed accounts of day-to-day life in the woods with guides.¹

Expeditions like Headley’s and the many narratives they inspired were part of a cultural phenomenon. During the three or four decades before the Civil War, comfortably affluent, educated Easterners were fascinated with the wilderness. The intellectual climate of the day promoted nature as the place where modern man invigorated body and soul, where he restored his physical, mental and moral fortitude. And when educated men sat in their

drawing rooms on Washington Square and Beacon Hill and pondered nature, they apparently saw little distinction between nature and wilderness, assuming that wilderness was but the most natural of nature's possibilities. When the same men, however, sought the answer to their physical and spiritual needs in the wilderness—as many of them did—they found that wilderness as an actual place was far less appealing than the wild landscapes so glowingly depicted in romantic literature and art.

In this article I focus on the romantic response to a particular wilderness—the Adirondacks, one of the most popular camping grounds of the antebellum era; I am interested in seeing how a particular group of people—literate, Eastern men, who actually camped in and achieved intimacy with a wild landscape of mountains, forests, lakes and rivers—responded to the wilderness they encountered. My emphasis is on the experience of traveling in the wilderness for reasons other than exploration or emigration. How did the wilderness affect those men (before the Civil War, very few women went camping in the Adirondacks for recreation) who left their comfortable homes in New York or Philadelphia and spent a few weeks roughing it in the Adirondacks?² Certainly there were romantics to whom nature was important and whose thinking was affected by the notion of the wilderness, but who did not see fit to sleep on the ground and risk the unpleasantness of wet blankets and annoying insects. I will not address their approach to the wilderness.

For the most part, I will deal with popular romanticism and its written response to a specific wilderness. By popular romanticism I mean the loose collection of assumptions, ideas and values of culturally aware but not extraordinary men and women. Popular romanticism contains much that reminds us of the more complex thinking of men like Emerson or Thoreau, but it is not the same thing. I propose that environmental and cultural historians may have overemphasized the importance of the truly deep thinkers like Thoreau at the expense of writers like Headley whose response to nature was less complex than Thoreau's, but perhaps more representative of his day.³ To understand the development of American attitudes to all of nature, we must study the views of both the Thoreaus and the Headleys.

In studying the romantic response to the Adirondack wilderness we can examine both the popular romanticism of Headley and the high or complex romanticism of no less a figure than Ralph Waldo Emerson, who camped there for a few weeks in 1858. In both cases we find a profound ambivalence about the existence and the future value of wilderness. Although the depth of the negative side of the ambivalence in Emerson's reaction seems less pronounced than that of Headley and his ilk, Emerson was nonetheless unsure of the meaning of the wilderness and reluctant to extend his ostensible predilection for all of nature to an actual wilderness actually encountered. When Emerson came to the Adirondacks, he arrived, as did his romantic brethren, with preconceptions about the positive features of intimacy with nature in any form. While he was there, he began to reassess this view, and thus concluded that the proper response

to wilderness had to consider more than wild scenery and the redemptive powers of nature.

The scores of romantic travel narratives written about the Adirondacks before the Civil War are loaded with predictable ecstasies about the glories of nature, the invigorating pleasures of shooting deer and catching trout, the immanence of God in nature and the pictorial magnificence of the scenery. Leafing through the pages of any of the documents quoted or cited in this article, one will find endless and eventually tedious examples of the romantic appreciation of nature, but these positive responses surround and to a large extent disguise a less affirmative attitude, ranging from occasional outright fear and hostility to Emerson's detached irony. The romantic response to wilderness was far from an unqualified appreciation of untrammelled nature; virtually all romantic travelers, from kneejerk romantics like Headley to Emerson himself, felt constrained to erect some sort of mediating buffer between themselves and the stark reality of the wilderness. From nature where man's cultivating and taming influence was not apparent, romantic travelers, once they actually saw it, often recoiled in horror. Men persuaded by their culture's insistence that all of nature was physically and spiritually edifying became alarmed by the wilderness they personally encountered and thus faced a perplexing psychological dilemma.⁴ To reconcile conflicting impulses they needed an imaginative construct to protect them psychologically. Torn between the facile assumptions of popular romanticism and a deeper antipathy to the wilderness, most romantic travelers in the Adirondacks employed a variety of strategies to reconcile mutually antagonistic responses to this particular form of nature. The need to discover some way to tolerate the wilderness, of course, suggests that the hatred of wilderness displayed by earlier generations was dissipating, but it also emphasizes how this hostility persisted in the romantic mind.

Beginning in the 1830s the Adirondack region of upstate New York attracted increasing numbers of Eastern men, who traveled for a spell in the summer wilderness and returned to their homes to write books and articles describing their experiences. The typical Adirondack camping trip of this period usually involved several weeks spent in the woods. Generally, a party consisted of a group of about three or four city sportsmen and the same number of guides, who were hired at the small settlements on the edge of the wilderness. The intricate system of connecting rivers and lakes provided easy access to the heart of the wilderness; romantic travelers seldom hiked. Arriving by boat at a pleasant spot on a lake or river, the party would establish a more or less permanent campsite. This involved the construction of a lean-to or shanty out of poles and spruce or hemlock bark. Once this base camp was ready, the sportsmen could spend their time hunting, fishing, meditating and admiring the scenery.

The reactions of romantic travelers to Adirondack scenery constituted an ostensibly lavish and enthusiastic appreciation of one of the more obvious features of the wilderness—its visual magnificence. They fill page after page of Adirondack travel narratives and suggest a genuine love of

wild scenery. And in a sense that love is there, but the descriptions of scenery also contain the most significant strategy whereby romantic travelers could accept the wilderness itself. The essential ingredient of this strategy was the conversion of the landscape from topographical, biological and geological reality into an object of aesthetic appreciation. Romantic travelers characteristically invoked the aesthetic vocabulary of Edmund Burke; they acknowledged Burke's definitions of the sublime and the beautiful, and they imposed Burke's response to nature on their descriptions of the Adirondacks. The Burkean aesthetic of the sublime and beautiful was a significant factor in the renewed interest in nature of the eighteenth century, and Burke's vocabulary and definitions continued to affect the romantic response to nature. But the Burkean aesthetic, in its emphasis on the scenic and pictorial, encouraged a distinction between scenery and wilderness, and we must not confuse repeated and eloquent appreciations of wild scenery with a positive response to wilderness as such. For when romantic travelers encountered landscapes which failed to fit the Burkean scheme, their disgust at discovering thick woods, dead trees and the ubiquitous Adirondack swamp emphasizes how the appeal of the cult of the sublime and beautiful was its usefulness in mediating between the romantic consciousness and the reality of nature.⁵

Testimonials to the grandeur of Adirondack scenery appear in virtually every account of visits to the region. While these descriptions typically reflect stock Burkean attitudes and while they often seem tediously similar, they nonetheless reveal an honest effort to address a magnificent landscape. Even from the otherwise skeptical pen of Thomas Bangs Thorpe, the Southwestern humorist, the Adirondacks elicited praise: after a camping trip that took him up the Fulton Chain in John Brown's Tract, Thorpe wrote, "I question if there is in the wide world a place where the natural scenery so strongly combines every possible variety of expression to gratify the eye and call forth admiration." And John Todd, a minister from Massachusetts who paid several visits to Long Lake and the central Adirondacks in the 1840s, predicted that the marvels of the Adirondack landscape would soon make the region a popular resort:

The scenery on these lakes is grand and beautiful beyond any thing of which I ever conceived. The lakes of Scotland have been celebrated of old in story and song; but the time will come, I doubt not, when these lakes will become the most interesting resort to be found in the country, for the great, the rich, the curious and the fashionable.

After the Civil War, Todd's prediction that the Adirondacks would become a playground of the wealthy would prove prescient.⁶

Although many of the writers who visited the Adirondacks in this period saw only the lake country accessible to boats, those who did make their way to the high peaks and Indian Pass responded to the scenery there in terms emphasizing the influence of the cult of the sublime. The great cliffs on Wallface at Indian Pass, which Headley called "the most

remarkable gorge in the country, if not in the world," particularly excited a consciousness of sublimity in the souls of those who saw it. Charles Fenno Hoffman wrote that Indian Pass "was one of the most savage and stupendous among the many wild and imposing scenes at the sources of the Hudson. . . . It is a tremendous ravine, cloven through the summit of a mountain." Headley's reaction was similar: "Majestic, solemn and silent, with the daylight from above pouring all over its dread form, it stood the impersonation of strength and grandeur." Standing at the height of the pass, Headley felt that "there was something fearful in that mysterious, profound silence." Likewise, Jervis McEntee, an artist who visited Indian Pass in 1851, explicitly underscored Burke's observation that one of the features of the sublime was its capacity to remind the viewer of the omnipotence of God: "It is one of those wild scenes so full of majesty and sublimity which the Creator has formed for us to look upon that we may the better comprehend his boundless power." In a description of the view from Mount Marcy, Headley emphasized another of Burke's points, that the response to a sublime scene is "founded on pain"; standing on the summit, Headley found himself

in the centre of a chaos of mountains, the like of which I never saw before. It was wholly different from the Alps. There were no snow peaks and shining glaciers; but all was grey, or green, or black, as far as the vision could extend . . . grand and gloomy . . . a background of mountains, and with nothing but the most savage scenery between—how mysterious—how awful it seemed!

Mount Colden, with its terrific precipices—Mount McIntyre with its bold, black, barren, monster-like head.⁷

In the less imposing, more gentle scenery around the lakes of the central Adirondacks romantic travelers discovered Burke's second landscape category—the beautiful. Headley's description of the scene at Forked Lake provides a revealing contrast to his account of the view from Marcy; from his boat

. . . all was wild but beautiful. The sun was stooping to the western mountains, whose sea of summits were calmly sleeping against the golden heavens: the cool breeze stirred a world of foliage on our right—green islands, beautiful as Elysian fields, rose out of the water as we advanced; the sparkling waves rolled as merrily under as bright a sky as ever bent over the earth, and for a moment I seemed to have been transported into a new world. I never was more struck by a scene in my life: its utter wildness, spread out there where the axe of civilization had never struck a blow—the evening—the sunset—the deep purple of the mountains—the silence and solitude of the shores, and the cry of birds in the distance, combined to render it one of enchantment to me.

In this passage Headley emphasized the serenity of the scene in an explicit counter to the menacing violence dormant in the high peaks. Amid the wilderness of Forked Lake Headley felt safe and peaceful. As he was rowed across the lake, Headley enjoyed the openness of the scene, having felt

threatened by the closeness of the cliffs of Indian Pass or the peaks surrounding Marcy. Indeed, one of the features of the lake country which appealed to Headley and others was the absence of the sense of claustrophobia they experienced in the high peaks. When the wilderness was too close, it seemed oppressive. When, on the other hand, Headley was able to view the high peaks from a distance, he could integrate their hard lines into a more pleasant perception; for example, from Owl's Head, a low mountain on the shore of Long Lake, he observed that, "to the left, shoot up into the heavens the massive peaks of the Adirondack chain, mellowed here, by the distance, into beauty."⁸

Although both sublime and beautiful landscapes evoked rapturous responses from romantic travelers, the beautiful was clearly preferred. Comparing the relative attributes of sublime and beautiful scenery, Headley wrote,

The gloomy gorge and savage precipice, or the sudden storm, seem to excite the surface only of one's feelings, while the sweet vale, with its cottages and herds and evening bells, blends itself in with our very thoughts and emotions, forming a part of our after existence. Such a scene sinks away into the heart like a gentle rain into the earth, while a rougher, nay, sublimer one, comes and goes like a sudden shower.⁹

This response suggests an important source of the preference for the beautiful. Although Headley elsewhere responded positively to the absence of marks of civilization and the opportunity to settle into a reverie of introspective solitude, here he indicates his faith in the likelihood or at least the possibility that the beautiful landscape—gentle, rolling, peaceful—could be turned into a cultivated middle landscape, thus eliminating the implicitly useless wilderness.

Romantic writers repeatedly suggested that a huge improvement in the Adirondacks would be effected by the emergence of a scene of farms and fields—a change seen as inevitable and positive. Todd explicitly stated that it was a sin against God's grand design for man's occupation of the earth not to subject the wilderness to the plow:

It is God's plan and will that the earth should be tilled and thus yield food for man and beast. Any people who fall in with this plan, and till the earth shall prosper. Any people who will not, shall perish.

Although Todd admired certain of the characteristics of the woodsmen he encountered in the Adirondacks, he eagerly predicted their disappearance as the region became more settled. Another observer, echoing Crèvecoeur, was less kind to the backwoodsmen who did not live by agriculture; finding a few homesteads at Raquette Lake, this man was appalled to learn that the inhabitants did not till their land but led lives characterized by "hunting and fishing rather than . . . farming."¹⁰

The predictions of the appearance of a middle landscape in the Adirondacks confirm the mythic quality of the middle-landscape ideal in

the American consciousness. The elimination of the wilderness was clearly part of the American mission to establish, even in “these glorious mountains” of the Adirondacks, “a virtuous, industrious and Christian population.” Then, according to S. H. Hammond, the Adirondacks would be a land of “beautiful and productive farms. Where meadows and green fields would stretch away from the river towards the hills, and where fine farm-houses and barns would be seen, and flocks and herds would be grazing in rich pastures.” In addition to reflecting the mythic significance of the middle landscape, Hammond’s prediction also suggests that a chief virtue of the evolution from wild to georgic was the scenic, visual change. When writers like Hammond imagined this alteration in the land, they commonly dwelt on its scenic elements. To the romantic traveler the notion of actual or imagined scenic vistas was more important than the reality of the wilderness itself, and the exercise of the visual imagination emerged as one of the critical strategies for taming the threatening character of the wilderness.¹¹

This is more than simply deeming the landscape picturesque. It involves the imposition of cultural, aesthetically defined standards on nature and reflects the need of the romantic traveler to reconcile his fear of the wilderness with his predisposition to love all of nature. It allowed him to isolate or at least distance himself from the physical reality of the wilderness. Romantic travelers often expressed a genuine appreciation of the wild scenery of the Adirondacks, but they were responding to *scenes*, to certain arrangements of natural elements—trees, rocks, mountains, water. As Burke’s popularizer, William Gilpin wrote, “*Picturesque beauty* is a phrase but little understood. We precisely mean by it that kind of beauty which *would look well in a picture*.”¹²

In the responses of some travelers this absorption in the visual led to accepting nature as more or less perfect according to the extent that it satisfied the criteria of landscape painting. Thomas Cole, the most important artist to visit the Adirondacks before the Civil War, wrote of the terrain in the Schroon Lake vicinity, “I do not remember to have seen in Italy a composition of mountains so beautiful or pictorial as this glorious range of the Adirondack.” Cole, despite the glowing tone of his description, was judging the landscape in a rather mechanical fashion, criticizing the “composition” of the peaks according to how well they would fit onto a canvas. Eventually it became possible for writers to judge the scenery according to the precise canons of the then current aesthetic school. A writer thus described a scene along the Saranac River: “One view particularly pleased us, soon after our departure from the Lake House: A graceful curve of the stream, lost at either end in woods with one dry jagged tree slanting athwart, the only sign of decay amid the overflowing life.” The curving river and the blasted tree are common elements in the paintings of romantic American landscape artists. This writer has unconsciously transferred the motifs of familiar paintings to the reality of the Adirondack wilderness and has found that reality most pleasing when it conformed to the conventions of those paintings.¹³

These writers often suggested, moreover, that the wilderness was in fact an impediment to the observer of fine vistas. Thomas Cole, wandering through the woods near Schroon Lake, looking for a good spot from which to paint Schroon Mountain, wished that the forest had been lumbered so that his view could be unobstructed. Likewise, Headley, on Owl's Head, "wanted to set fire to the trees on the summit of the mountain, so as to present an unobstructed view, but the foliage was too green to burn." Jervis McEntee observed that reaching Indian Pass required an arduous hike: "They who look upon it must endure no little toil for the privilege for its gateway is of the rugged rock and the tangled forest and the feet that pass through it are few as the hardly discernable path will attest." "He who sketches Indian Pass," further remarked McEntee, "will have to work for it[,] for it is a toilsome work to it." The solution to this difficulty, as proposed by T. A. Richards, author of an account of an Adirondack camping trip published in 1859, was to build a road through the pass, from which "the traveler may be able to see the wonders which now, in the denseness of the forest, he can only infer." Louis Noble, Cole's first biographer, who accompanied the artist on an 1846 trip to the Adirondacks, suggested that it was scenery not wilderness which attracted him and Cole:

It is not, perhaps, generally known that, to this day, a jaunt through the region of the State of New York will ordinarily subject the tourist to more privation and fatigue than almost any other he can take in the United States, this side of the Mississippi. The wilderness, haunted by the great moose, the wolf, the bear, the panther, seems almost interminable, and nearly houseless: the mountains, some of them reaching into the sky, ragged, rocky pinacles, and robed with savage grandeur, are pathless and inaccessible without a guide: the lakes, which are every where, and often strikingly beautiful, repel by the oppressive loneliness in which they slumber.

Noble undoubtedly exaggerated the hardships of Adirondack camping in order to show what perils his friend Cole was willing to endure in the name of art, but at the same time he clearly showed that he thought of wilderness itself as an irrelevant distraction or an actual peril.¹⁴

The growing taste evinced for wild scenery by Cole and others was, to be sure, a critical element in what eventually developed as the modern appreciation for wilderness itself, but it was most certainly not the same thing. The modern concept of wilderness promotes the appreciation of any area where the signs of human activity are substantially absent. While natural beauty is almost invariably associated with such an area, it is not the *sine qua non*. To the modern wilderness purist, natural beauty often derives simply from nature itself, from the fact that the elements of the natural environment appear unaffected by any human activity.

When romantic travelers found themselves in parts of the Adirondacks which conformed to neither the sublime nor the beautiful, they were unable to employ any mediating strategy and responded with nearly

unqualified hostility. In the swamps and thick forests away from the lakes and high peaks they discovered landscapes for which the Burkean aesthetic did not provide a ready-made vocabulary, and their descriptions of this part of the region are thus not couched in derivative words and phrases. The reactions of several romantic travelers to the area around the head of the Bog River, where they went searching for the even then rapidly disappearing moose, show particularly well how raw, untouched nature, when it failed the aesthetic test, horrified the romantic traveler. Because this region was accessible by boat from Tupper Lake, travelers were willing to visit it; but once there, they discovered a dark and forbidding terrain of thick timber and many marshes. The presence of dead and decaying trees particularly offended the senses of these men. S. B. Hammond noted both the absence of appealing scenery and the (to him) oppressive presence of process:

Of all the lakes I have visited in these northern wilds, this [Mud Lake] is the most gloomy . . . no tall mountain peaks, reaching their heads toward the clouds, overlooking the water, no ranges stretching away. . . . It is in truth, a gloomy place, typical of desolation . . . [with] so sepulchral an air of desolation all around, that it brings over the mind a strong feeling of sadness and gloom.

A. B. Street responded to this region in a similar way; it had, wrote Street, a “lonely and funereal aspect. In every direction, also, dead pines and hemlocks thrust up their pallid, rough raggedness, dripping with grey moss. . . . Over the whole brooded an air of utter loneliness, which, aided by the dull, heavy sky, rested with a depressing weight upon my spirits.”

Street reacted similarly to a cluster of small, isolated lakes west of Upper Saranac: “The scene . . . was as utterly lonely and desolate and wild as could be imagined. The shores, unlike those of the other lakes and ponds in this alpine region, were low, belted with swamp and disfigured with dead, ghastly trees.” Finally, wrote Street, “as this profoundly desolate scene smote my sight, I felt a weight deeper than I had ever experienced in the forest.”¹⁵ Not only was the absence of conventionally approved scenery repugnant to the romantic traveler, but the ubiquity of natural processes, wherein new life depended on death and decay, reminded mid-nineteenth-century man too much of his own mortality.

Thoughts of the deep woods, away from the comforting shores of the larger central lakes, also evoked a terror of getting lost. Most people, of course, avoid losing their way in the wilderness, but the fears expressed by travelers of this period approach hysteria and show, beyond a reasonable apprehension about losing one’s way, the horror of the wilderness itself and an attribution to it of actively malicious powers. Meditating on the more isolated parts of the Adirondacks, Street wrote, “I was more and more impressed with the utter savageness of the scene, and my entire helplessness should I be left alone. The few paths, if not of deer, could only be of bear, wolf, or panther, and tended doubtless toward their fearful haunts.” John Todd displayed a similarly high-pitched fear of being alone

in the woods: "The sensation of being lost in this vast forest is horrific beyond description. No imagination can paint the bewilderment and terrific sensations which you feel when you are alone and fairly lost. . . . It is probably as near derangement as can be, if there is any difference."¹⁶

In one sense, the notion that the Adirondack wilderness was a place where a man could actually get lost and disappear was part of the attractiveness of the region. It was a function of the wilderness similar to the sublimity of mountain scenery, fascinating in its very terribleness. But the source of this fascination and of the fears expressed by writers like Street and Todd lay in the conviction that in the wilderness a man would be particularly likely to lose his mind, that the wilderness was a hostile environment where man's rationality might desert him in the face of irrational forces. Such suspicions reflect a vestigial subscription to the old Puritan fear that life in the wilderness can lead to mental or moral degeneration. With enthusiastic trust in its veracity Todd recounted a story told him at Long Lake about a man "of liberal education, and fine promise" who became lost in the woods and went insane. Todd offered this tale as proof of the pernicious effects of being alone in the woods without the protection of comrades against the wilderness's inherent malignity. Nor did a man have to be lost to suffer the loss of rationality. The artist William James Stillman, whose feelings toward the wilderness were generally far more positive than those of most of his contemporaries, observed that he could easily imagine a solitary life in the forest "leading to insanity."¹⁷

But romantic travelers did not venture into the wilderness alone, nor did they stay long enough to lose their sanity. And the brevity of the traveler's stay suggests the irrelevance of the wilderness to the progressive world which waited back home. The romantic traveler needed to remind himself of the permanence of the civilized, urban world beyond the wilderness, and he satisfied this need by surrounding himself with civilized artifacts like neckties and champagne. Such mementos of what he considered the real world supplied physical evidence that the traveler's important pursuits were those of his office in the city—the same world which produced fine wine and insisted on decorous clothing. Although travelers commonly rehearsed the familiar arguments about how an urban society demands the redemptive powers of nature, they also implied that they did not feel altogether comfortable with having abandoned, if only temporarily, the progressive reality of American life. Behind the pleasures of being away from ordinary responsibilities lies a reluctance to be too long away from the exciting world of politics, technology and all civilized activity. Headley described the unmasked enthusiasm with which he devoured a recent newspaper after a long trek through the wilderness: it put "into my hands again the links of the great chain of human events I had lost—rebinding me to my race and replacing me in the mighty movement that bears all things onward."¹⁸

The paradox inherent in a man's repairing to the wilderness for spiritual regeneration but simultaneously admiring the material and

scientific achievements of nineteenth-century technology apparently escaped Headley. But Emerson, who camped for several weeks on Follensby Pond near Long Lake in 1858, did not fail to note the ambivalence suggested by such a contradictory set of responses. Emerson's party, organized by the painter and journalist William James Stillman, also included the scientist Louis Agassiz, James Russell Lowell and others from the Concord-Cambridge axis. After returning home, Emerson wrote a long blank-verse poem describing his reactions to the Adirondack wilderness and to a startling event which took place while he was in the woods; the laying of the first trans-Atlantic cable, one of the premier achievements, in Emerson's view, of nineteenth-century American technology.¹⁹ Receiving this news, Emerson found himself in a situation analogous—but not identical—to that of other romantic travelers; although aware of the irony implicit in his reaction, he too needed some sort of imaginative mediation to reconcile antagonistic yet attractive impulses.

Emerson's response to the Adirondack wilderness is particularly important because he was, on the one hand, one of the purveyors of the romantic sensibility which so clearly influenced less creative men like Headley and other romantic travelers. On the other hand, Emerson's trip to the Adirondacks constituted the only extended experience of his life with genuine wilderness, and his reaction to what he saw and felt made him a romantic traveler in the wilderness for the first and only time in his life. Assessing Emerson's reaction to the Adirondack wilderness, we see that nature as concept and nature as place are not necessarily the same thing. To confuse them is to misinterpret Emerson, who uses the terms *nature* and *wilderness* interchangeably as philosophical concepts in his efforts to find meaning in the world—both material and ideal—around him: this he does in *Nature*, probably the most quoted, best known and most comprehensive of American transcendentalist manifestos.²⁰

In *Nature*, immediately after the famous “transparent eyeball” passage, Emerson writes, “In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets and villages.” He thus advances the familiar romantic distinction between the country and the city, affirming the romantic inclination to find virtue and meaning in the rural while deprecating the ostensible degradation of the urban. Emerson seems further to be insisting that a particular kind of natural setting—the wilderness, that landscape where man's impact is either nonexistent or at least unnoticeable—is most likely to possess the truths inherent in all of nature. But when he composed these words, he had never seen a wilderness; the word *wilderness* was to Emerson a philosophical abstraction, not a term denoting geographical reality. His experience with nature was limited to the tame woods around Concord—until he camped in the Adirondacks.²¹

In 1858 Follensby Pond was as isolated and untouched as nearly any spot east of the Mississippi River. Accessible only by boat or a tortuous hike across many miles of unmapped territory, it was surrounded by a vast tract of virgin timber and showed absolutely no trace of human activity.

Like nearly all sporting parties of the day, Emerson and his comrades reached their campsite by boat, rowing from Saranac Lake via the Raquette River. After describing their journey and the construction of their crude shelter, Emerson proceeded to run through the characteristic romantic litany of the virtues of nature and a life close to it. He and his friends adopted the rigorous regimen of farmers, rising with the dawn and dining on hearty, simple fare. Beyond the reach of letters, visitors, advertisements and all of the commercial intrusions of urban life, they “were made freemen of the forest laws.” Observing the woodcraft of the Saranac Lake guides, Emerson concluded (perhaps ironically) that his own intellectual prowess was inferior to the practical knowledge of men who lived in the bosom of nature:

Look to yourselves, ye polished gentlemen!
No city airs or arts pass current here.
Your rank is all reversed; let men of cloth
Bow to the stalwart churls in overalls:
They are the doctors of the wilderness,
And we the low-prized laymen.²²

As his stay in the wilderness lengthened, Emerson reacted more and more positively to it, finding there a peace and freedom which his life back home denied him:

Bounded by dawn and sunset, and the day
Rounded by hours where each outdid the last
In miracles of pomp, we must be proud,
As if associates of the sylvan gods.
We seemed the dwellers of the zodiac,
So pure the Alpine element we breathed,
So light, so lofty pictures came and went.
We trode on air, contemned the distant town,
Its timorous ways, big trifles. . . .

Sinking into a reverie of introspection prompted by nature’s “visitings of graver thought,” Emerson found spiritual truths in the wilderness:

Nature spoke
To each apart, lifting her lovely shows
To spiritual lessons pointed home,
And as through dreams in watches of the night,
So through all creatures in their form and ways
Some mystic hint accosts the vigilant,
Not clearly voiced, but waking a new sense
Inviting to new knowledge, one with old.

But one day some of his party rowed to Tupper Lake to examine the scenery and encountered another group of men, who had word of a remarkable event. Thus was the news of the transatlantic cable relayed to Emerson, who suddenly waxed ecstatic about the powers of technological society to control nature. From the entire party a great shout arose to celebrate this most recent evidence of man’s continuing triumph over

nature. The announcement of this accomplishment had a profound impact on Emerson: "We have a few moments in the longest life/ Of such delight and wonder." The news of such a triumph of civilization suggested that his earlier musings on the spirituality of the wilderness were insignificant in the grand scheme of American progress. The mission of American civilization was to subdue nature:

The lightning has run masterless too long;
He must to school and learn his verb and noun
And teach his nimbleness to earn his wage,
Spelling with guided tongue man's messages
Shot through the weltering pit of the salt sea.

Emerson began to rethink his earlier response to the wilderness; the guides do well enough in their element, but the men truly important are scientists like Agassiz:

We flee away from cities, but we bring
The best of cities with us, these learned classifiers,
Men knowing what they seek, armed eyes of experts.
We praise the guide, we praise the forest life:
But will we sacrifice our dear-bought lore
Of books and art and trained experiment,
Or count the Sioux a match for Agassiz?
O no, not we!

Emerson thus found himself faced with the same dilemma which confronted other romantic travelers. Preconceptions emphasized the positive features of the wilderness experience, and Emerson himself initially adhered to a conventional response. Then, though for reasons different from those of ordinary romantic travelers, he subsequently discovered some reason for deprecating the wilderness. In order to deal with these conflicting demands Emerson too employed a mediating strategy. The nature of his strategy, though, shows that he was not repelled by wilderness to the extent that other romantic travelers often were. Indeed, when he saw the flat, visually unexciting marshes surrounding the route into Follensby Pond, he described the scene in relatively neutral terms quite different from the responses of romantic travelers to similar terrain: the outlet of Follensby was

a small tortuous pass
Winding through grassy shallows in and out,
Two creeping miles of rushes, pads, and sponge.

Nonetheless Emerson needed to reconcile ostensibly contradictory attitudes toward the wilderness. His solution was the conceit that the wilderness understood the joyous shout which greeted the news of man's technological achievement, that such exultation was not "unsuited to that solitude." The wilderness itself, according to this strategy, acknowledged man's accomplishment and conceived its own

burst of joy, as if we told the fact
To ears intelligent; as if gray rock

And cedar grove and cliff and lake should know
This feat of wit, this triumph of mankind;
As if we men were talking in a vein
Of sympathy so large, that ours was theirs,
And a prime end of the most subtle element
Were fairly reached at last. Wake, echoing caves!
Bend nearer, faint day-moon! Yon thundertops,
Let them hear well! 'tis theirs as much as ours.

The news of the transatlantic cable was only one of the reminders of the relative virtues of civilization compared with the wilderness; on another day Emerson was rowing with his guide on the Raquette River and was startled to hear the wilderness silence broken by the strains of a Beethoven composition. Near the river was a log cabin inhabited by a man of evident education and other genteel attributes, who had managed to drag a piano to his wilderness retreat. The sound of the music was similar to the news of the cable: both confirmed man's need to employ art, science or whatever mediation was effective in eliminating those features of nature which seemed menacing or irrelevant to a progressive age. On hearing the Beethoven, the listener cries,

Well done! . . . the bear is kept at bay,
The lynx, the rattlesnake, the flood, the fire;
All our fierce enemies, ague, hunger, cold. . . .

Science and art—these are the truly significant discoveries of man, not spirituality in the wilderness.

After suggesting that the wilderness approves of human accomplishments which continuously diminish both its power and extent, Emerson retreated further from his earlier sense of transcendence. He too invoked the notion that camping in the wilderness is somehow failing to participate in the momentous achievements of modern life. On the one hand, Emerson's description of his departure from the wilderness seems to affirm the traditional view that urban life is antagonistic to the peace of nature. But at the same time, since he has just written so eloquently about technology and progress, he implies a need to get back home before something else important happens:

The holidays were fruitful, but must end;
One August evening had a cooler breath;
Into each mind intruding duties crept;
Under the cinders burned the fires of home;
Nay, letters found us in our paradise.

Stillman too noted the transient nature of the idyll on Follensby Pond and observed that Emerson particularly perceived the need to return to the pressing demands of Concord:

Our paradise was no Eden. The world that played bo-peep with us
across the mountains came for us when the play-spell was over; this
summer dream, unique in the record of poesy, melted like a cloud-

castle, and Emerson was one of the first to turn back to the sterner use of time.²³

Although Emerson was less hostile to the wilderness than were most of his contemporaries, his reluctance to extend the romantic love of nature to an acceptance of the wilderness as such is useful to our understanding of modern attitudes. All the romantic travelers invoked one strategy or another to disguise or alter the reality of untrammelled nature. Behind their occasional distaste for wilderness as such was the assumption, which Emerson suggests, that it had no future in a bustling, modern, progressive, technological nation. The popular belief in the therapeutic or redemptive powers of all of nature notwithstanding, the romantic traveler foresaw the disappearance of the wilderness—in the East, anyway—as inevitable. The suspicion that wilderness was irrelevant, an engaging (when not outright threatening) entity one might as well see while it lasted, informs the response to the Adirondacks of both Emerson and popular writers like Headley.

Although I have emphasized the more or less negative features of the romantic response to wilderness, I recognize that these are but one side of a dual response, an ambivalence. Both Emerson and Headley were representatives of a busy, progressive age; to discover their participation in the enthusiastic anticipation of a technologically oriented future should come as no surprise. Likewise, to discover that an American romantic shared his ancestors' fears of the malignant or depriving aspects of wilderness is no shock. In the long run, what is remarkable is that men like Headley kept returning—and he did, throughout the 1840s and '50s. Compromised as his attitude was, it nonetheless contains a perception of the power of the wilderness. The response to scenery may have been a meticulously constructed strategy for making the wilderness tolerable, but the very necessity for effecting the strategy in the first place shows that the romantic traveler did suspect that God actually dwelt in the landscape. Hammond and Street may have been repulsed by the swampy terrain around the Bog River, but they both returned to the Adirondacks on many subsequent camping trips. The failure of one particular part of the landscape to satisfy their overall expectations did not eliminate the inherent capacity of the wilderness to work its mystical medicine.

Although neither Headley nor Emerson, despite the romantic predisposition to see virtue in all of nature, could fully accept the imposing reality of wilderness as such, both did perceive positive values there. In describing their efforts to maintain their cultural equilibrium, I have thus stressed the strategies which they established in response to features of the wilderness which seemed threatening; I have done this because I think that cultural historians have not paid sufficient attention to this aspect of both popular and complex romanticism. But I conclude, as have others, that the chief characteristic of the romantic response to wilderness is its ambivalence, an endlessly interesting mixture of sympathy and fear, of love and hostility, of the impulse to embrace and the equally powerful urge to

flee. The whole elaborate effort to make the wilderness tolerable helped lay the foundation for the later, more consistently positive response to wilderness of men like John Muir and Aldo Leopold.

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notes

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1. Joel T. Headley, *The Adirondacks, Or Life in the Woods* (New York, 1849), i. On the subsequent editions and expansions of Headley see my Introduction to the latest reprint (Harrison, New York: Harbor Hill Books, 1982). On romantic travel literature see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967), 60-66; Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley, 1957), 71-86.

2. For an account of the typical camping trip see Philip G. Terrie, "Urban Man Confronts the Wilderness: The Nineteenth-Century Sportsman in the Adirondacks," *Journal of Sport History*, 5 (Winter, 1978), 7-20.

3. Nash, for example, does mention Headley but only briefly and without significant analysis of Headley's perhaps hidden response to the wilderness; Thoreau, on the other hand, gets a whole chapter, 61-62, 116, 84-95.

4. My reading of the responses of romantic travelers to the Adirondack wilderness differs from Nash's (61-62); Nash, examining many of the same sources I use, finds a mostly positive attitude toward wilderness.

5. Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited with introduction and notes by J. T. Boulton (New York, 1958). For analyses of Burke see Boulton's introduction, xv-cxxvii; Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor, 1960); Huth, 11-12; Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (New York, 1980), 34-44; Earl A. Powell, "Luminism and the American Sublime," in *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875*, edited by John Wilmerding (Washington, 1980), 69-94. The Burkean aesthetic considered many matters besides landscape—ranging from poetry to painting and the entire compass of human perceptions and emotions. In terms of the landscape, the principal issue here, Burke advanced a distinction between two main types of terrain. The sublime, characteristically composed of towering cliffs, threatening precipices, dark mountains, etc., reminded the viewer of his insignificance and powerlessness compared to the omnipotence and majesty of God. The beautiful landscape, on the other hand, composed of gentle lines, curving rivers, rolling hills and peaceful woods and fields, soothed the consciousness of the viewer and put him at peace with God. Despite the apparently menacing aspect of the sublime when compared with the beautiful, both types of terrain were eagerly sought after by the connoisseur of fine scenery.

6. Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "A Visit to 'John Brown's Tract,'" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (June-November, 1859), 170. John Todd, *Long Lake* (Pittsfield, 1845), 22-23. On post Civil War developments, see Frank Graham, Jr., *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* (New York, 1978), 31-44, and Harvey H. Kaiser, *Great Camps of the Adirondacks* (Boston, 1982), *passim*.

7. Headley, 60-61, 67, 71-72; Charles Fenno Hoffman, *Wild Scenes in the Forest and Prairie* (London, 1839), 36; Jarvis McEntee, *Diary of 1851 summer spent in the Adirondacks*, MS 67-19, Adirondack Museum, no pagination; Burke, 124.

8. Headley, 145, 174.

9. Headley, 181-182.

10. Todd, 29, 92; Henry J. Raymond, "A Week in the Wilderness," *New York Times*, June 26, 1855. Raymond was the editor of the recently established *Times*.

11. S. H. Hammond, *Hills, Lakes and Forest Streams* (New York, 1854), 175. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, 1950) and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (London, 1964) are the loci classici on the middle landscape ideal. See also John R. Stilgoe, "Fair Fields and Blasted Rock: American Land Classification Systems and Landscape Aesthetics," *American Studies*, 32 (Spring, 1981), 21-22, and Cecelia Tichi, *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature From the Puritans to Whitman* (New Haven, 1979). The ideal of the middle landscape is a much discussed phenomenon in American cultural history. I use the term to indicate the landscape of agriculture, land between the wilderness and the city, possessing the virtue of being more or less "natural," but without the negative characteristics of either wilderness (deprivation, savage men and animals, the possibility that a man could be seduced from progressive pursuits) or city (crime, poverty, exploitation and all sorts of vices and woes). Probably the best known statement of the middle landscape ideal is in Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (in the Viking Portable, 216-217).

12. William Gilpin, *Observations on the Western Parts of England, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (London, 1798), 328, emphasis in original.

13. Thomas Cole, personal journal, quoted in Louis Legrand, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, edited by Elliot S. Vesell (Cambridge, 1964), 177; A. B. Street, *Woods and Waters* (New York, 31). For illustrative examples of the common use of this motif see the works by Sanford Gifford, Frederick Church, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, George Caleb Bingham, Thomas Doughty, Homer Dodge Martin and Jasper Francis Cropsey in *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950*, edited by Kynaston McSine (New York, 1976), 21, 38, 49, 58, 61-62, 71, 91-92, 96. This book was published to accompany a major exhibition of American nature painting.

14. Cole (in Noble), 179; Headley, 146; McEntee diary; T. Addison Richards, "A Forest Story," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 19 (June-November, 1859), 466; Noble, 280.

15. Hammond, 143-144; Street, 43, 238-239, 285-286.

16. Street, 302; Todd, *Long Lake*, 64.

17. Todd, 65-68. William James Stillman, *The Autobiography of a Journalist* (Boston, 1901), I, 214; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1973), 122ff; Peter Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness* (New York and London, 1969), 11, 74-75, 111-114; Nash, 33-38.

18. For evidence of the importation of civilized paraphernalia into the wilderness, see the Adirondack paintings of Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, many of which are reproduced in *A. F. Tait: Artist in the Adirondacks* (exhibition catalog, Blue Mountain Lake, New York, 1974), especially *A Good Time Coming*. For a discussion of this painting and its significance, see Terrie, 16; Headley, 44, where the pronouns are second person, for the sake of readability I have changed them to first person.

19. This camping trip, a famous episode in Adirondack history, is best described in Stillman, I, 239-281; see also Alfred L. Donaldson, *A History of the Adirondacks* (New York, 1921), I, 172-189; Paul F. Jamieson, "Emerson in the Adirondacks," *New York History*, 39 (July, 1958), 215-237; Joseph Jones, "Thought's New-Found Path and the Wilderness: 'The Adirondacs,'" in Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect* (Harvard English Studies, Cambridge, 1982), 105-119. Curiously, Emerson's stay in the Adirondack wilderness has been paid little attention by his biographers; e.g., Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1981), the most recent study of Emerson, briefly discusses Emerson's use of blank verse in the poem he wrote about the trip and incorrectly asserts that the party stayed in Stillman's "hunting lodge" (635-637). In fact, they camped in a temporary shelter constructed of saplings and spruce bark. Stillman memorialized the trip with a large painting, which now hangs in the Concord, Massachusetts, Free Public Library.

20. Emerson's visit to Yosemite in 1871 and his encounter there with John Muir are well known, but since Emerson refused Muir's invitation to join him on a camping trip and stayed in a comfortable inn, we can hardly call this a genuine wilderness experience. Allen, 650-651; see also Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston, 1981), 4-6.

21. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Centenary Edition, Boston, 1903-1904), I,

10. Nash, 86, quotes this very sentence as evidence of Emerson's positive response to wilderness.

22. "The Adirondacs [sic]: A Journal Dedicated to My Fellow Travellers in August, 1858," *Works*, VI, 182-194; all subsequent quotations from Emerson come from this poem.

23. William James Stillman, *The Old Rome and the New and Other Studies* (London, 1897), 293.