

CHAPTER 3

The Romantic Wilderness

How great are the advantages of solitude!—How sublime is the silence of nature's ever-active energies! There is something in the very name of wilderness, which charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man. There is religion in it.

Estwick Evans, 1818

APPRECIATION of wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy. The ideas of these literati determined their experience, because in large part they saw in wilderness what they wanted to see. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europeans laid the intellectual foundations for a favorable attitude. The concept of the sublime and picturesque led the way by enlisting aesthetics in wild country's behalf while deism associated nature and religion. Combined with the primitivistic idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement which had far-reaching implications for wilderness.

With the flowering of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wild country lost much of its repulsiveness. It was not that wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious, and chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted. European Romantics responded to the New World wilderness, and gradually a few Americans, in urban situations and with literary interests, began to adopt favorable attitudes. To be sure, indifference and hostility toward wilderness remained generally dominant. Even the enthusiasts of the wild found it difficult to discount the pioneer point of view completely. Yet by mid-nineteenth century a few Americans had vigorously stated the case for appreciation.

While people conceived of wild country as cursed and ungodly land, hostility followed as a matter of course; appreciation arose

with the association of God and wilderness. The change in attitude began with the breakthroughs of European astronomy and physics that marked the beginning of the Enlightenment.¹ As scientists revealed a universe that was at once vast, complex, and harmonious, they strengthened the belief that this majestic and marvelous creation had a divine source. In time the awe that increasing knowledge about the solar system engendered extended to the great physical features of the earth such as deserts and oceans. The upshot was a striking change in the concept of wild nature. Mountains, for example, had generally been regarded in the early seventeenth century as warts, pimples, blisters, and other ugly deformities on the earth's surface. Names of individual peaks such as the "Divels-Arse" in England, suggested the prevailing opinion.² But by the end of the century a contrary attitude appeared. Books with theses in their titles, as Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) and John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691), used elaborate theological and geographical arguments to raise the possibility that mountains might be the handiwork of God if not His very image. From the feeling that uncivilized regions bespoke God's influence rather than Satan's, it was just a step to perceiving a beauty and grandeur in wild scenery comparable to that of God.

To signify this new feeling about wild places the concept of sublimity gained widespread usage in the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic category the sublime dispelled the notion that beauty in nature was seen only in the comfortable, fruitful, and well-ordered. Vast, chaotic scenery could also please. According to the criteria of sublimity even the fear that wilderness inspired was not a liability. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1757, Edmund Burke formally expressed the idea that terror and horror in regard to nature stemmed from exultation, awe, and delight rather than from dread and loathing. Six years later Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of*

1. In the following analysis I have followed closely the pathbreaking study of Marjorie Hope Nicolson: *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1959).

2. For the use of this term and a description of the repulsiveness of the mountain in a 1613 account see Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, ed. J. William Hebel, Michael Drayton Tercentenary Edition (5 vols. Oxford, 1961), 4, 531. Konrad Gessner's 1543 essay, *On the Admiration of Mountains*, trans. H. B. D. Soulé (San Francisco, 1937), is a notable exception.

the Beautiful and the Sublime distinguished between the two sensations in such a way as to make it possible to regard the wilder features of the natural world—mountains, deserts, and storms, in particular—as aesthetically agreeable. Kant pursued these ideas further in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), while William Gilpin, an English aesthete, pioneered in defining the “picturesque” as the pleasing quality of nature’s roughness, irregularity, and intricacy. Such ideas greatly broadened the Classical conception of ordered, proportioned beauty. In 1792 Gilpin’s *Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views* inspired a rhetorical style for articulating appreciation of uncivilized nature. The wilderness remained the same, but a change in taste was altering attitudes toward it.³

Sublimity suggested the association of God and wild nature; deism, with its emphasis on the Creator or First Cause of the universe, used the relationship as the basis for religion. Of course, since the beginnings of thought men believed that natural objects and processes had spiritual significance, but “natural” evidence was usually secondary and supplemental to revelation. And wilderness, somewhat illogically, was excluded from the category of nature. The deists, however, based their entire faith in the existence of God on the application of reason to nature. Moreover, they accorded wilderness, as pure nature, special importance as the clearest medium through which God showed His power and excellency. Spiritual truths emerged most forcefully from the uninhabited landscape, whereas in cities or rural countryside man’s works were superimposed on those of God. Along with the sense of the sublime, deism helped lay the foundation for a striking intellectual about-face. By the mid-eighteenth century wilderness was associated with the beauty and godliness that previously had defined it by their absence. Men found it increasingly possible to praise, even to worship, what they had formerly detested.

3. J. T. Boulton’s extended introduction to *Burke’s Enquiry* (London, 1958) is a useful interpretation. Other secondary references include Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom*; Walter John Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth Century British Aesthetics* (Carbondale, Ill., 1957); Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London, 1927); Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1955); and Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitude* (Berkeley, Cal., 1957), pp. 11–12. David D. Zink, “The Beauty of the Alps: A Study of the Victorian Mountain Aesthetic” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1962) concerns a later period.

Although deism and the sublime sprang in large part from the Enlightenment, they contributed to a quite different conception of nature. “Romanticism” resists definition, but in general it implies an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious.⁴ Consequently in regard to nature Romantics preferred the wild. Rejecting the meticulously ordered gardens at Versailles, so attractive to the Enlightenment mind, they turned to the unkempt forest. Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation.

Primitivism was one of the more important ideas in the Romantic complex. Primitivists believed that man’s happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization. They idealized either contemporary cultures nearer to savagery or a previous age in which they believed all men led a simpler and better existence.⁵ Precedents for primitivistic and Romantic attraction to wildness exist well back into Western thought, and by the late Middle Ages there were a number of popular traditions about the noble savage.⁶ One concerned the mythical Wild Man whom medieval culture represented as having redeeming as well as repulsive characteristics (see Chapter 1). Captured in his wilderness retreats and brought back to civilization, the Wild Man supposedly made a better knight than ordinary persons. Contact with the wilds was believed to give him exceptional strength, ferocity, and hardi-

4. On the Romantic movement as a whole see Arthur O. Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms” in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1955), pp. 228–53; Lovejoy’s “The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2 (1941), 257–78; Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Romantic Quest* (New York, 1931); and Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (2nd ed. New York, 1951), pp. 238–42.

5. The best general treatments are Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), pp. ix, 1–22; George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948), pp. 1–14; and Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1934), pp. 7–68, along with Arthur O. Lovejoy’s foreword to the last. Frank Buckley’s “Trends in American Primitivism” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1939) is also valuable.

6. Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism in Antiquity*, pp. 287–367; Boas, *Primitivism in the Middle Ages*, pp. 129–53; Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York, 1928), pp. 1–56.

ness combined with innocence and an innate nobility. Moreover, the Wild Man's erotic prowess allegedly made civilized man's pale in comparison.⁷

The Wild-Man-as-superman tradition led to the idea of a beneficial retreat to the wilderness. German writers of the fifteenth century suggested that instead of taming the Wild Man, the inhabitants of cities would do well to seek his environment. An idyllic life presumably awaited those who entered the woods. Peace, love, and harmony, it was thought, would replace the immorality, conflict, and materialism of the towns. Another theme implied that the reversion to the primitive would release man from the social restraints that thwarted the full expression of his sensuality.⁸ Hans Sachs' *Lament of the Wild Men about the Unfaithful World* of 1530, for example, began with a catalog of the vices of the towns and went on to relate how, in protest, malcontents left civilization to dwell in caves in the wilderness. According to Sachs, they lived there in utmost simplicity, found tranquility, and waited for their civilized brethren to change their erring ways.

From Hans Sachs it was only a half century to Montaigne's essay *Of Cannibals*, marking the beginning of the flowering of European primitivism. After this seminal statement, enthusiasm for noble savages and for the wild in nature became increasingly popular literary conventions.⁹ By the early eighteenth century, they were widely used as tools for criticizing civilization. In England poets like the Wartons, Shaftesbury, and Pope attacked the "smoky cities" with their "luxury and pomp" while yearning for the uncorrupted "pathless wilds."¹⁰ More revealing of the general attitude was Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Published in 1719 and immediately an immense success, the story was inspired by the actual experiences of a mari-

7. Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, pp. 16-19, 121 ff.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 112-17, 147 ff.

9. The definitive work on pre-Romantic primitivism is Paul Van Tieghem, *Le sentiment de la Nature Prérromantisme Européen* (Paris, 1960).

10. Whitney, *Primitivism*; Margaret M. Fitzgerald, *First Follow Nature: Primitivism in English Poetry, 1725-50* (New York, 1947); Cecil A. Moore, "The Return to Nature in English Poetry of the 18th Century" in his *Backgrounds of English Literature, 1700-1760* (Minneapolis, 1953), pp. 53-103; Myra Reynolds, *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry between Pope and Wordsworth* (Chicago, 1896). The quotations are from Joseph Warton's "The Enthusiast or the Lover of Nature" of 1740: *The Three Wartons: A Choice of Their Verse*, ed. Eric Partridge (London, 1927), pp. 72, 75, 77.

ner who some years previously had found himself stranded on a deserted island off the Chilean coast. While Defoe left no doubt that the wilderness condition had some disadvantages, his book invested Crusoe's island life with a charm that implied the shortcomings of eighteenth-century England.¹¹

On the Continent the leading primitivist was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While he did not idealize a completely wild condition and expressed no personal desire to revert to the woods, Rousseau argued in *Emile* (1762) that modern man should incorporate primitive qualities into his presently distorted civilized life. And his *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) heaped such praise on the sublimity of wilderness scenes in the Alps that it stimulated a generation of artists and writers to adopt the Romantic mode.¹²

The New World, with its abundance of pathless forests and savages, intrigued the Romantic imagination.¹³ Some Europeans even made the journey across the ocean to indulge their enthusiasm for the primitive. Among the first of these visitors was François-René de Chateaubriand, who spent five months of the winter of 1791-92 in the United States. Traveling in the wilderness of northern New York, he reported that "a sort of delirium" seized him when, to his delight, he found an absence of roads, towns, laws, and kings. Chateaubriand concluded: "in vain does the imagination try to roam at large midst [Europe's] cultivated plains . . . but in this deserted region the soul delights to bury and lose itself amidst boundless forests . . . to mix and confound . . . with the wild sublimities of Nature." When he returned to France, he wrote two

11. James Sutherland, *Defoe* (Philadelphia, 1938), pp. 227-36; Maximilian E. Novak, *Defoe and the Nature of Man* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 25 ff.

12. Van Tieghem, *Sentiment de la Nature*, passim; Fairchild, *Noble Savage*, pp. 120-39; William Henry Hudson, *Rousseau and Naturalism in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh, 1903); Richard Ashley Rice, *Rousseau and the Poetry of Nature in Eighteenth Century France*, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages, 6 (Menasha, Wis., 1925); Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*," in *Essays*, pp. 14-37. Geoffroy Atkinson, *Le Sentiment de la Nature et le Retour a la Vie Simple, 1690-1740*, Société de Publications Romanes et Françaises, 66 (Paris, 1960) and René Gonnard, *Le Légende du Bon Sauvage*, Collection D'Histoire Economique, 4 (Paris, 1946) discuss the background and influence of some of Rousseau's ideas.

13. Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le Rêve Exotique dans la Littérature Française au XVII et au XVIII Siècle* (Paris, 1913); George R. Healy, "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 15 (1958), 143-67; Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1825* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), pp. 12, 32-33.

popular novelettes, *Atala* and *René*, which spread a Romantic glow over Indian life in "the magnificent wilds of Kentucky." The protagonist of these tales, an archetype Romantic hero searching for "something to fill the vast emptiness of my existence," found the freedom, excitement and novelty of the wilderness highly appealing.¹⁴

Following Chateaubriand, a succession of Europeans with Romantic tastes, including Alexis de Tocqueville (see Chapter 2), visited or wrote about the American wilderness. George Gordon, better known as Lord Byron, was one of the most outspoken and influential advocates of the wild. "From my youth upwards," one of his characters declares, "my spirit walk'd not with the souls of men . . . my griefs, my passions, and my powers, made me a stranger . . . my joy was in the Wilderness." As his heroes in other works Byron chose melancholy cynics whose disenchantment with civilization led them to value the solitude of wild places. His fascination with the theme of escape from society drew his attention to the wilderness of the New World and the men whom it absorbed. In a portion of *Don Juan* Byron celebrated Daniel Boone—as a Romantic hero, not a conquering pioneer. Byron's 1816 confession, taken by his generation to be a manifesto, read: "there is a pleasure in the pathless woods, / There is a rapture on the lonely shore. / There is a society where none intrudes . . . / I love not man the less, but nature more."¹⁵ The kind of nature Byron had in mind was wilderness, and his work climaxed European Romanticism's century-long achievement of creating an intellectual framework in which it could be favorably portrayed. The first Americans who appreciated wild country relied heavily on this tradition and vocabulary in articulating their ideas.

14. Chateaubriand, *Recollections of Italy, England and America* (Philadelphia, 1816), pp. 138–39, 144; Chateaubriand, "*Atala*" and "*René*," trans. Irving Putter (Berkeley, Cal., 1952), pp. 21, 96.

15. Lord Byron, *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem* (London, 1817), pp. 33–34; Child Harold's Pilgrimage, IV, clxxvii, as quoted in Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry* (New York, 1936), p. 35. Byron's variety of Romantic attraction to wilderness is discussed in Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 26 ff., and Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., *Byron, the Record of a Quest: Studies in a Poet's Concept and Treatment of Nature* (Austin, Texas, 1949), while his influence on American thought is the subject of William Ellery Leonard, *Byron and Byronism in America* (Boston, 1905).

Enthusiasm for wilderness based on Romanticism, deism, and the sense of the sublime developed among sophisticated Europeans surrounded by cities and books. So too in America the beginnings of appreciation are found among writers, artists, scientists, vacationers, gentlemen—people, in short, who did not face wilderness from the pioneer's perspective. William Byrd II is one of the earliest cases in point. A Virginian by birth, Byrd's formative years were spent in London, where he acquired the education and tastes of the English gentry. He returned to the colonies in 1705 to inherit Westover, the family's vast plantation, and to enter politics. But Byrd remained highly interested in English social and literary fashions, including the nascent Romantic delight in wildness.

In 1728 Byrd began work as Virginia's commissioner in a surveying operation to establish the boundary between his colony and North Carolina. The job took him well back into the southern Appalachian uplands and his description of the region in the *History of the Dividing Line* is the first extensive American commentary on wilderness that reveals a feeling other than hostility. Byrd portrayed the expedition into "this great Wilderness" as a delightful adventure. He reported that even when his party could have stayed in a planter's house, they preferred to sleep outdoors because "we took so much pleasure in that natural kind of Lodging." In the primitivistic manner he generalized that "Mankind are the great Losers by the Luxury of Feather-Beds and warm apartments."¹⁶

As the surveyors worked their way further west and out of the inhabited region, Byrd's excitement grew. On October 11, 1728, they caught sight for the first time of the Appalachian Mountains. Byrd described them as "Ranges of Blue Clouds rising one above another." Four days later the party camped in a "Charming Situation" from which the view was so spectacular "that we were perpetually climbing up to a Neighbouring eminence, that we might enjoy it in more Perfection." Once, when fog prevented a clear

16. *The Writings of 'Colonel William Byrd of Westover in Virginia Esqr', ed. John Spencer Bassett* (New York, 1901), pp. 48–49, 192. Biographical accounts are Bassett's "Introduction," *Ibid.*, pp. ix–lxxxviii; Richard Croom Beatty, *William Byrd of Westover* (Boston, 1932); and Louis B. Wright, "The Life of William Byrd of Virginia, 1674–1744" in Byrd, *The London Diary (1717–1721) and Other Writings*, ed. Wright and Marion Tinsling (New York, 1958), pp. 1–46.

view of the scenery, Byrd lamented "the loss of this wild Prospect." But in a short while the "smoak" lifted and "open'd this Roman-tick Scene to us all at once." Leaving the mountains after the survey, Byrd noted how he frequently turned in his saddle to observe them "as if unwilling to part with a Prospect, which at the same time, like some Rake's, was very wild and very Agreeable."¹⁷

Although his lack of a strong religious orientation helped, William Byrd enjoyed wilderness primarily because of his gentlemanly leanings. In the first place, he was familiar with the aesthetic and literary conventions regarding wild nature of which most of his colonial contemporaries were unaware. And Byrd was determined to demonstrate his sophistication by publicly subscribing to the latest fashion in taste and so resist the stigma of cultural provincialism. He deliberately contrived the *History of the Dividing Line* to reflect on its author's polish and refinement.¹⁸ In fact, the original journal, the so-called "Secret History," did not contain the passages celebrating the wild mountains. Byrd added them as embellishments a decade later when he prepared the manuscript for publication.¹⁹ Given the current state of European taste, such enthusiasm for wilderness made Byrd appear *au courant*. Another factor shaping Byrd's attitude toward wild country was the fact that he did not confront it as a pioneer but from an opulent plantation situation. For the squire of Westover, there was much less compulsion to attack and conquer wilderness than for the frontiersman. Moreover, as a well-lettered gentleman Byrd could afford to take delight in wilderness without feeling himself a barbarian or in danger of reverting to one. He was not, to be sure, oblivious to this possibility—in the backwoods he saw and deplored people who had absorbed the wildness of their surroundings. But he carefully distinguished his own relation to wilderness from theirs.

Byrd's experience also reveals that American appreciation of wilderness was seldom pure. The older pioneer antipathy did not yield easily; to some extent the Romantic enthusiasm was a cover

17. *Writings of Byrd*, pp. 135, 146, 163, 172, 186.

18. Support for this interpretation may be found in Kenneth S. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston, 1959), pp. 3-22; and Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia* (San Marino, Cal., 1940), pp. 312-47.

19. The history of Byrd's *History* is told in the extensive introduction of *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line Between Virginia and North Carolina*, ed. William K. Boyd (Raleigh, 1929). This edition contains a useful juxtaposition of the finished account and earlier versions.

over contrary attitudes. It wore thin in Byrd's account when he referred to the "dolefull Wilderness" and when, at the end of his journey, he expressed gratitude that "we had, day by day, been fed by the Bountiful hand of Providence in the desolate Wilderness." And, in the frontiersman's manner, he idealized the useful, pastoral nature. At one point Byrd contemplated a wild valley and observed that it "wanted nothing but Cattle grazing in the Meadow, and Sheep and Goats feeding on the Hill, to make it a Compleat Rural LANDSCAPE."²⁰

The scientists who pushed into the colonial backcountry anxious to make discoveries also occupied a vantage point from which wilderness could be regarded with something other than hostility. At first the students of "natural history" shared the dominant point of view. John Josselyn, the foremost botanist of the seventeenth century, climbed Mt. Washington in 1663 and described the view of "rocky Hills . . . cloathed with infinite thick Woods" as "daunting terrible."²¹ Along with John Lawson, whose investigations took him into western North Carolina early in the eighteenth century, Josselyn often mixed fancy with fact and supplied the fuel with which the folk imagination built a conception of wilderness as the environment of weird and horrible monsters. But by mid-century a new note had sounded in descriptive, scientific writing. John Clayton, Peter Kalm, Andre Michoux, and the native, self-taught botanist, John Bartram, revealed considerable excitement about the American wilderness as a natural laboratory, not just as the raw material of civilization. Conquest was not their primary concern, and sometimes the naturalists even paused in their labors to admire the scenery.²² Building on the European conception of the natural

20. Boyd, ed., *Histories*, p. 245; Bassett, ed., *Writings of Byrd*, pp. 233, 242.

21. Josselyn, *New England's Rarities* (1672), ed. Edward Tuckerman (Boston, 1865), p. 36.

22. For example, John Bartram, *Observations on the Inhabitants, Climate, Soil, Rivers, Productions, Animals . . . from Pennsylvania to Onondago, Oswego and the Lake Ontario* (London, 1751), p. 16. Also relevant are Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, *The Reverend John Clayton, A Parson with a Scientific Mind: His Scientific Writings and Other Related Papers* (Charlottesville, Va., 1965) and their biography: *John Clayton: Pioneer of American Botany* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963); Peter Kalm, *The America of 1750*, ed. Adolph B. Benson (2 vols. New York, 1937); Donald Culross Peattie, *Green Laurels: The Lives and Achievements of the Great Naturalists* (New York, 1936), pp. 197 ff.; Philip Marshall Hicks, *The Development of the Natural History Essay in American Literature* (Philadelphia, 1924), pp. 7-38; and William Martin Smallwood, *Natural History and the American Mind* (New York, 1941), pp. 3-41.

world that gave rise to deism and the sense of the sublime, they assumed, as Mark Catesby put it, that in the wilderness they studied the "Glorious Works of the Creator."²³ From such a perspective the sinister motifs generally associated with wild country became increasingly untenable.

The second-generation botanist, William Bartram, articulated his impressions of wilderness to an exceptional degree. Born to a family which prized the life of the mind, Bartram was well versed in the Romantic outlook when, in 1773, he began extensive explorations in the unsettled regions of the Southeast. During the next four years he traveled some five thousand miles and kept a detailed journal. Previously botanists in the New World had been too engrossed in their studies to pay more than cursory attention to wilderness; Bartram frequently reversed this order. On one occasion in 1775 he climbed a mountain in northern Georgia "from whence I enjoyed a view inexpressibly magnificent and comprehensive . . . [of] the mountain wilderness through which I had lately traversed." Then he added: "my imagination thus wholly engaged in the contemplation of this magnificent landscape . . . I was almost insensible . . . of . . . a new species of *Rhododendron*."²⁴

What made William Bartram forget the rhododendron and rejoice in wilderness was its sublimity. His descriptions mark the first extensive use of that term in American letters. Instances appear on almost every page of his *Travels*. Camping beside Florida's Lake George, Bartram admitted being "seduced by these sublime enchanting scenes of primitive nature," and in the Carolina wilderness he "beheld with rapture and astonishment, a sublimely awful scene of power and magnificence, a world of mountains piled upon mountains." For him, as for the European aesthetes, the sublime in nature was linked with God's grandeur, and Bartram frequently praised "the supreme author of nature" whose "wisdom and power" were manifested in wilderness.²⁵

23. Catesby, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (2 vols. London, 1754), 1, iii. See also George Frederick Frick and Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Mark Catesby: The Colonial Audubon* (Urbana, Ill., 1961).

24. *The Travels of William Bartram: Naturalist's Edition*, ed. Francis Harper (New Haven, 1938), pp. 212-13. Secondary treatments are Ernest Earnest, *John and William Bartram: Botanists and Explorers* (Philadelphia, 1940), pp. 84 ff.; and N. Brylioni Fagin, *William Bartram: Interpreter of the American Landscape* (Baltimore, 1933).

25. William Bartram, *Travels*, pp. 69, 229; *Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.

Like William Byrd, William Bartram subscribed to the essentials of Romantic primitivism. "Our situation," he reported of one campsite in Florida, "was like that of the primitive state of man, peaceable, contented, and sociable." But, again like Byrd, Bartram's attitude toward wilderness was more complex. His most revealing comments came during a trip into the southern Appalachians. He planned to cross a sizeable stretch of wild, mountainous country and felt fortunate to find a traveling companion for the first fifteen miles. Then Bartram was alone and his solitary condition filled him with mixed emotions. The mountains seemed "dreary," even threatening. Bartram took the opportunity to observe that perhaps men were gregarious beings whose delight was in civilization. Recalling his recent pleasant stay in Charleston, he compared himself unhappily with Nebuchadnezzar who had been expelled from society "and constrained to roam in the mountains and wilderness, there to herd and feed with the wild beasts of the forest." While absorbed in these depressing thoughts, Bartram came to a cliff from which he could see the sweep of wilderness to the west. At once he put aside his fears and rapturously exclaimed at "this amazing prospect of grandeur."²⁶ Fears and doubts could not eclipse for long Bartram's love of the wild.

There were, to be sure, few Byrds and Bartrams in the colonies. Most of their contemporaries shared the pioneer aversion to wilderness, and even with them appreciation floated uneasily on an ocean of uncertainty. The new attitude coexisted with, rather than replaced, the old. Similarly, in the early national period the Romantic viewpoint was only a part, albeit a growing one, of the American estimation of wilderness.

Before the end of the eighteenth century a few Americans had discovered primitivism.²⁷ In 1781 and 1782 Philip Freneau published a series of essays under the running title "The Philosopher of the Forest" in which a hermit served as a mouthpiece for expressing the author's criticism of civilized society. Repeatedly the Phi-

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 227-29.

27. It would be inaccurate, however, to agree with Mary E. Woolley ["The Development of the Love of Romantic Scenery in America," *American Historical Review*, 3 (1897), 56-66] that a "new spirit of admiration for wild and romantic scenery became fully established" between 1780 and 1785. This was a time of uncertain beginnings rather than climaxes.

losopher contrasted his simple, moral life in the woods of Pennsylvania with the distorted existences of city-dwellers. A decade later Freneau turned to the same theme in the "Tomo-Cheeki Essays." Here he assumed the guise of an Indian who visited civilization and contrasted "the wild genius of the forest" with the "tawdry productions of art." In 1800 Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician, explicitly connected primitivism and wilderness by observing that "man is naturally a wild animal, and . . . taken from the woods, he is never happy . . . 'till he returns to them again."²⁸

While both Freneau and Rush expounded their primitivism in Philadelphia drawing rooms, a remarkable New Hampshire lawyer named Estwick Evans actually put his philosophy into practice. In the winter of 1818, Evans donned a buffalo robe trimmed with bearskin and moccasins and, in the company of two dogs, set forth on a four-thousand-mile "pedestrious tour" into the West. "I wished to acquire," he declared, "the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and imperfections of civilization . . . and to find amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more correct views of human nature and of the true interest of man." This was the essence of primitivism, and Evans followed it with a succession of tributes to the wilderness. While skirting the southern shore of Lake Erie, his feelings welled into a Romantic paean: "how great are the advantages of solitude!—How sublime is the silence of nature's ever-active energies! There is something in the very name of wilderness, which charms the ear, and soothes the spirit of man. There is religion in it."²⁹ In the sweep of Western thought, this was a relatively young idea, and one with revolutionary implications. If religion was identified with wilderness rather than opposed to it, as had traditionally been the case, the basis for appreciation, rather than hatred, was created.

When Estwick Evans declared that he deliberately made his tour in the winter months so that he "might experience the *pleasure* of suffering, and the *novelty* of danger," he suggested another

28. *The Prose of Philip Freneau*, ed. Philip M. Marsh (New Brunswick, N.J., 1955), pp. 196–202, 338; *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, ed., George W. Corner (Princeton, N.J., 1948), p. 72.

29. Evans, *A Pedestrious Tour of Four Thousand Miles through the Western States and Territories during the Winter and Spring of 1818* (Concord, N.H., 1819), pp. 6, 102.

reason why Americans of his generation could begin to look favorably at wilderness.³⁰ In the early nineteenth century, for the first time in American history, it was possible to live and even to travel widely without coming into contact with wild country. Increasingly people lived on established farms or in cities where they did not experience the hardships and fears of the wilderness. From the vantage point of comfortable farms, libraries, and city streets, wilderness assumed a far different character than from a pioneer's clearing. For Estwick Evans and other gentlemen of leisure and learning, wilderness had actually become a novelty which posed an exciting, temporary alternative to civilization.

While few emulated Evans, a number of his contemporaries with Romantic tastes began to take pleasure in wild country. As early as 1792 Jeremy Belknap, a Harvard graduate and Congregational minister at Dover, New Hampshire, published a descriptive tribute to the White Mountains. He noted that the region was a "thick wilderness," but was well worth the attention of "a contemplative mind." Explaining that "a poetic fancy may find full gratification amidst these wild and rugged scenes," Belknap singled out "aged mountains, stupendous elevations, rolling clouds, impending rocks, verdant woods . . . and the roaring torrent" as likely "to amaze, to soothe and to enrapture." He concluded that "almost everything in nature, which can be supposed capable of inspiring ideas of the sublime and beautiful, is here realized." Yet when Belknap revealed his conception of the ideal setting for the "happy society," wilderness had no place. The land in this utopia would be "well fenced and cultivated" and yeoman farmers would have created a thriving rural hamlet.³¹

Thaddeus Mason Harris also revealed an ambivalence toward wilderness in the journal of his 1803 tour into the upper Ohio Valley. Like Belknap, Harris was a Harvard man and a minister. He was described as sensitive, timid, and frail; recovery of his

30. Evans, *Pedestrious Tour*, p. 6. Italics supplied.

31. Belknap, *The History of New-Hampshire* (3 vols. Boston, 1792), 3, 40, 51, 73, 333–34. Belknap's journal account of an earlier trip on which the *History's* description was based has been published as *Journal of a Tour to the White Mountains in 1784*, ed. Charles Deane (Boston, 1876). The secondary literature includes Sidney Kaplan, "The History of New Hampshire: Jeremy Belknap as Literary Craftsman," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (1964), 18–39. Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New-England and New-York* (4 vols. New Haven, 1821–22), 2, 142, 297–300, reveals an identical ambivalence in regard to the same region and at the same time.

health, in fact, was an object of the western trip. Starting from Philadelphia, Harris was, on the one hand, impressed by the "romantic wildness" of the Alleghenies. He especially liked the vastness of the mountain scenes which thrilled him "with awe as well as admiration." Attempting to understand his feelings, Harris declared: "there is something which impresses the mind with awe in the shade and silence of these vast forests. In the deep solitude, alone with nature, we converse with God."³² As with the English originators of the idea of sublimity a century before, the immensity and grandeur of wild nature suggested similar qualities of the Creator.

Yet while Reverend Harris often delighted in the "romantic prospects" he encountered in the wilderness, his account also contained a quite different opinion. At times the "lonesome woods" were depressing and forbidding. "There is something very animating to the feelings," he declared, "when a traveller, after traversing a region without culture, emerges from the depths of solitude, and comes upon an open, pleasant, and cultivated country." Indeed the sight of wilderness becoming civilization excited Harris as much as wilderness itself. On the Ohio River near Wheeling he celebrated the peopling of a "solitary waste" and the erection of buildings "amidst the former retreats of wild beasts." The sight of settlements rising in the "desolate wilds" suggested Biblical rhetoric: man's efforts "can change the desert into a fruitful field." In conclusion, Harris reflected that "when we behold competence and plenty springing from the bosom of dreary forests—what a lesson is afforded of the benevolent intentions of Providence!"³³ In this attitude Harris was at one with the pioneer.

In spite of these reservations, Thaddeus Harris ultimately preferred the wild. On June 17, 1803, on a shoulder of North Mountain, farmland surrounded him but in the distance he could see uncut forest. This juxtaposition caused him to speculate on the comparative merits of the two kinds of landscape. Speaking first for the pastoral, he pointed out that pastures, ripening fields, and gar-

32. Harris, *The Journal of a Tour into the Territory Northwest of the Allegheny Mountains* (Boston, 1805), pp. 14, 21, 60. A biographical sketch of Harris appears in the *Dictionary of American Biography* which may be supplemented with Nathaniel L. Frothingham's "Memoir of Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris, D.D.," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2 (1854), pp. 130-55.

33. Harris, *Journal of a Tour*, pp. 27, 51-52.

dens full of flowers could provide "pleasant recreation." But "the majestic features of the uncultivated wilderness" produced "an expansion of fancy and an elevation of thought more dignified and noble." According to Harris, as the eye takes in the immensity of wilderness, the mind expands to comprehend its own dignity and power. "THE SUBLIME IN NATURE," he wrote in summary, "captivates while it awes, and charms while it elevates and expands the soul."³⁴

The double-mindedness of Harris in regard to wilderness also appeared in many other early nineteenth-century reports. There is James Hall, for example. Like most of those who first expressed appreciation of the wilds, Hall's background was genteel.³⁵ He came from an upper-class Philadelphia family, and his mother, Sarah Ewing Hall, wrote for the elegant *Port Folio*. Young Hall developed a Romantic temperament, and when he moved in 1820 to Illinois he was prepared to regard wilderness favorably. The frontier situation and pioneer values, however, partially offset Hall's Romantic enthusiasm. As a result inconsistencies on the subject of wilderness abound in his writing. It was possible for Hall, as spokesman of the pioneer, to compose tributes to an advancing civilization. "From this land, so lately a wilderness," he wrote in 1828, "the savage has been expelled; towns and colleges have arisen; farms have been made; the mechanic arts cherished; the necessaries of life abound, and many of its luxuries are enjoyed." This transformation seemed to him to be the "beautiful consummation of that promise, 'thou shalt have dominion over all the earth.'" Yet Hall also saw wilderness in another light. A few pages before celebrating the conversion of the Ohio Valley "from a desert to a paradise," he declared: "I know of nothing more splendid than a forest of the west, standing in its original integrity, adorned with the exuberant beauties of a powerful vegetation, and crowned with the honors of a venerable age." Hall, the Romantic, was glad that the West was wild because "the forest is seen in its majesty; the pomp and pride of the wilderness is here. Here is nature unspoiled, and silence undisturbed."³⁶

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

35. For the details of Hall's life see John T. Flanagan, *James Hall: Literary Pioneer of the Ohio Valley* (Minneapolis, 1941) and Randolph C. Randall, *James Hall: Spokesman of the New West* (Columbus, Ohio, 1964).

36. Hall, *Letters from the West* (London, 1828), p. 165; Hall, "Chase's Statutes of Ohio," *Western Monthly Magazine*, 5 (1836), 631-32; Hall, *Notes on the Western States* (Philadelphia, 1838), pp. 55, 54.

With the spread of the Romantic mood, the appreciation of wilderness became a literary genre. By the 1840s it was commonplace for literati of the major Eastern cities to make periodic excursions into the wilds, collect "impressions," and return to their desks to write descriptive essays which dripped love of scenery and solitude in the grand Romantic manner. The capacity to appreciate wilderness was, in fact, deemed one of the qualities of a gentleman. Invariably the essayists associated enjoyment of wild nature with refinement and good breeding. One author, who identified himself only as "a gentleman of Boston," remarked in the course of describing an 1833 excursion to New Hampshire that if parents desired to cultivate their children's taste, "let them look at, and become familiar with the woods, the wilds, and the mountains." He further declared that anyone aspiring to connoisseurship must first steep himself in nature "by living in the midst of her magnificence, by frequenting her romantic wildernesses; by surveying her picturesque and animated scenery."³⁷ Romantic writers like this represented themselves as a particular social type whose "sensibilities" were superior to those who brought only economic criteria to wild country. Enjoyment of wilderness, for them, was a function of gentility.

In spite of the premium Romanticism placed on the individual, Romantic celebration of wilderness in the early nineteenth century followed a predictable pattern in both style and language. Typical was an anonymous contribution to the fashionable *American Monthly Magazine* in 1833 that was concerned with "the tender feelings, which are almost invariably called forth by a lonely ramble in some sequestered glade." Sprinkling quotations from Byron and others into his prose, the writer declared "that even in our present state of refinement, there is still a hankering after the wild sports and wilder perils of the wilderness." There were references to the advantages of nature, which "speaks directly to the heart," over the "artificial" cities. Wilderness was a sanctuary both from "the turmoil, the anxieties, and the hollowness of society" and from "the busy haunts of sordid, money-making business."³⁸ Such ideas, the stock in trade of Romantic devotees of wilderness,

37. [Nathan Hale], *Notes made During an Excursion to the Highlands of New Hampshire and Lake Winnipiseogee* (Andover, Mass., 1833), p. 54.

38. Anonymous, "Rural Enjoyment," *American Monthly Magazine*, 6 (1833), 397.

appeared regularly in periodicals, "scenery" albums, literary "annuals," and other elegant, parlor literature of the time. The adjectives "sublime" and "picturesque" were applied so indiscriminately as to lose meaning.³⁹

Charles Fenno Hoffman, a New York writer and editor, represented the gentlemen who contributed to the growing interest in wilderness. Seeking literary raw material, he embarked in 1833 on a trip to the Mississippi Valley. The letters he sent back to the *New York American*, later collected into a book, reveal a man enthralled with the "perfect wilderness" he encountered. While admitting with an "Alas!" that most people lacked a sense of "beauty and majesty," Hoffman pointed out that for him there was a "singular joyousness in a wilderness." His travels had taken him to places that required neither cultivation nor companionship to make them appealing. "I have felt," he reported, "among some scenes a kind of selfish pleasure, a wild delight, that the spot so lovely and so lonely . . . bloomed alone for me."⁴⁰ After his excursion into the West, Hoffman assumed the editorship of the *American Monthly* in New York City, but he continued to seek the wilderness on his vacations. He was, in fact, one of the first to extol the Adirondack Mountains as a mecca for lovers of wild scenery. For New Yorkers who could not get so far afield, Hoffman included in his magazine such articles as "Wild Scenes Near Home; or Hints for a Summer Tourist."⁴¹

After Charles Fenno Hoffman had "discovered" the Adirondacks, they gained popularity as a resort for wilderness enthusiasts. Joel T. Headley's *The Adirondack: or Life in the Woods of 1849* described the pleasures a cultivated vacationer might find in the region. A prolific author and reporter for the *New York Tribune*, Headley employed all the standard conventions in praise of wilderness. The mountains manifested "vagueness, terror, sublimity, strength, and beauty" and were, in the deistic sense, God's

39. For the growing vogue of wild nature in literature see Huth, *Nature*, pp. 30 ff.; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (New York, 1930), pp. 119 ff.; Ralph Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books* (New York, 1936); Ola Elizabeth Winslow, "Books for the Lady Reader," in *Romanticism in America*, ed. George Boas (New York, 1961), pp. 89 ff.

40. Hoffman, *A Winter in the West* (2 vols. New York, 1835), 2, 225, 316, 317. Homer F. Barnes, *Charles Fenno Hoffman* (New York, 1930) is the best biographical source.

41. *American Monthly Magazine*, 8 (1836), 469-78.

creation and "a symbol of His omnipotence." For a "man of sensibility," Headley asserted, there was "enchantment" in finding in the wilderness escape from "the strifes of men and the discords of life." As for himself: "I love the freedom of the wilderness and the absence of conventional forms there. I love the long stretch through the forest on foot, and the thrilling, glorious prospect from some hoary mountain top. I love it, and I know it is better for me than the thronged city, aye, better for soul and body both." Headley concluded his book with "Directions to the Traveler." Equipped with strong legs, a stout heart, and "a love for the wild, and free" anyone could enjoy an Adirondack vacation "and come back to civilized life a healthier and a better man."⁴²

While Hoffman and Headley drowned most of their doubts about wilderness in a deluge of Romantic euphoria, Charles Lanman demonstrated that even the literati were not immune to the darker wind of the pioneer past. An editor, librarian, and landscape painter, Lanman began a series of summertime trips in the 1830s to places as widespread as northern Maine and northern Minnesota. Returning with bulging notebooks, he produced volumes of elegant essays, bearing such titles as *A Summer in the Wilderness* and *Letters from the Allegheny Mountains*, that described the joys of forests primeval. The woods became "those glorious forests, the homes of solitude and silence, where I was wont to be so happy alone with my God." In 1846 Lanman described the "wild and silent wilderness" near Lake Superior as "beautiful beyond any thing I had imagined to exist in any country on the globe." On the other hand, he subscribed to older attitudes. An Indian medicine dance at Leech Lake, Minnesota reminded him that wilderness was the fearsome environment of evil and unearthly creatures. In writing about the Michigan wilderness Lanman's ambivalence appeared on a single page. First he praised "nature in her primitive beauty and strength"; immediately following was an expression of delight that "instead of the howl of the wolf, the songs of husbandmen now echo through . . . vales, where may be found many comfortable dwellings."⁴³

42. Headley, *The Adirondack: or Life in the Woods* (New York, 1849), pp. 45-46, 63, 167, 217, 288.

43. Lanman, *Letters from a Landscape Painter* (Boston, 1845), p. 264; Lanman, *A Summer in the Wilderness: Embracing a Canoe Voyage up the Mississippi and Around Lake Superior* (New York, 1847), pp. 105, 126, 171.

Those whose business it was to explore, trap, farm and otherwise conquer the wilderness were less susceptible than urban sophisticates and vacationers to the Romantic posture. Yet its occasional appearance in frontiersmen's reports testified to the potency of this opinion. As early as 1784 Daniel Boone's alleged "autobiography" (it was mostly the work of a fellow Kentuckian, John Filson⁴⁴) revealed a new motif alongside the usual condemnation of wild country. It began with the standard references to a "howling wilderness" suitable only for conversion into a "fruitful field." But the account also revealed Boone's "astonishing delight" in wild scenery. The view from one ridge turned pioneer into primitivistic philosopher. "No populous city," Boone declared, "with all the varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here." Even when Boone concluded his narrative with a reference to himself as "an instrument ordained to settle the wilderness," he left the impression that he performed this role somewhat reluctantly.⁴⁵ Regardless of whether these were Boone's actual sentiments, it was significant that they could be attributed to the archetypal pioneer.

A growing number of frontiersmen after Boone subscribed at times to the idea that wilderness had aesthetic values. To be sure, most of the response of ordinary Americans to wilderness went unrecorded (any pioneer who wrote down his impressions was, by that fact, exceptional) but a few traces suggest probabilities.⁴⁶ For instance, James Ohio Pattie, the son of a frontier family and himself a trapper in the trans-Missouri West, noted in his journal that "I have seen much that is beautiful, interesting, and commanding in the wild scenery of nature."⁴⁷ Osbourne Russell, another trapper, was more specific. On August 20, 1836, he camped in the

44. Apparently Filson wrote the "autobiography" after receiving oral information from Boone and other Kentucky pioneers: John Walton, *John Filson of Kentucke* (Lexington, Ky., 1956), pp. 50 ff.; Reuben T. Durrett, *John Filson, the First Historian of Kentucky*, Filson Club Publications, 1 (Cincinnati, 1884).

45. *The Discovery, Settlement and present State of Kentucky by John Filson*, ed. William H. Masterson (New York, 1962), pp. 49, 50, 54-56, 81.

46. Lucy L. Hazard, *The Frontier in American Literature* (New York, 1927), p. 113, rightly points out the difficulty of assessing "campfire" opinion.

47. *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie*, ed. Timothy Flint (Cincinnati, 1831), p. 14. Flint assured the reader that in editing Pattie's account he had not interjected his own opinions but merely punctuated and clarified.

Lamar Valley of northwestern Wyoming, a region later included in Yellowstone National Park, and wrote:

There is something in the wild romantic scenery of this valley which I cannot . . . describe but the impression made upon my mind while gazing from a high eminence on the surrounding landscape one evening as the sun was gently gliding behind the western mountain and casting its gigantic shadows across [sic] the vale were such as time can never efface from my memory but as I am neither Poet Painter or Romance writer I must content myself to be what I am a humble journalist and leave this beautiful Vale in Obscurity until visited by some more skillful admirer of the beauties of nature.⁴⁸

Russell's struggle to express his feelings resulted in turgid prose, but it testified to the presence, even in an unaffected backwoodsman, of the capacity to recognize aesthetic qualities in wilderness.

Romanticism softened the opinions of those for whom the necessity of battling wild country might otherwise have produced unmitigated hostility. Slogging through the Everglades in pursuit of Seminole Indians in the late 1830s, an army surgeon temporarily set aside his discomfort and "gazed with a mingled emotion of delight and awe" at "the wild romance of nature." John C. Fremont's journal of an 1842 trip to Wyoming's Wind River Mountains is replete with references to "grand," "magnificent," and "romantic" scenery. Even when the Fremont party upset in a rapids on the Platte River and lost their equipment, he could report that "the scenery was extremely picturesque, and notwithstanding our forlorn condition, we were frequently obliged to stop and admire it."⁴⁹

For some pioneers the opportunity wilderness afforded for freedom and adventure made it appealing. At the conclusion of a series

48. Russell, *Journal of a Trapper*, ed. Aubrey L. Haines (Portland, Ore., 1955), p. 46. This edition was published from the original manuscript in the William Robertson Coe collection at Yale University. Haines has written a biographical sketch of Russell in *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (2 vols. Glendale, Cal., 1965), 2, 305-16.

49. Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Field during the Creek and Seminole Wars, 1836-1838*, ed. James F. Sunderland (Gainesville, Fla., 1953), p. 192; Fremont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842* (New York, 1846), pp. 40, 42, 50.

of explorations in the Rocky Mountains in the 1830s, Benjamin L. E. Bonneville observed that returning to civilization displeased "those of us whose whole lives had been spent in the stirring excitement and perpetual watchfulness of adventures in the wilderness." He concluded that he would gladly turn from "the splendors and gayeties of the metropolis, and plunge again amidst the hardships and perils of the wilderness."⁵⁰ Josiah Gregg agreed. One of the first of the Santa Fe traders, Gregg made his final trip in 1839 and settled down. But he could not tolerate "the even tenor of civilized life" after his "high excitements" in the wilderness. Explaining his attachment to the prairies, Gregg dwelt on the "perfect freedom" of this environment. After such liberty, he found it difficult to live where his "physical and moral freedom are invaded at every turn by the complicated machinery of social institutions." The only solution, Gregg decided, was to return to the wilds.⁵¹

In spite of such sentiments Romantic enthusiasm for wilderness never seriously challenged the aversion in the pioneer mind. Appreciation, rather, resulted from a momentary relaxation of the dominant antipathy. A surprising number of fur traders, for instance, were acquainted with the noble savage convention and occasionally used Indian virtues as a foil for society's shortcomings, but they did not accept the idea as literal truth. Contact with the red man served to undermine their Romantic hopes.⁵² Pioneer response to wild country was also complicated. Edwin Bryant, emigrating to California in 1846, employed the rhetoric of appreciation and repulsion with equal facility. On crossing the Rocky Mountains he declared "it is scarcely possible to imagine a landscape blending more variety, beauty, and sublimity, than is here presented," and later he confessed to having never seen anything in nature "more wild, more rugged, more grand, more romantic, and

50. *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville USA in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West, digested from his Journal by Washington Irving*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman, Okla., 1961), p. 371. In this instance Irving was quoting directly from Bonneville's manuscript version of his travels.

51. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader* (2 vols. New York, 1845), 2, 156, 158. But for an indication that wilderness adventure sometimes became terrifying, see Gregg's impression of Indians: Chapter 2, p. 28.

52. Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (Seattle, 1965), pp. 91 ff., 280 ff., and his "The Fur Trader and the Noble Savage," *American Quarterly*, 15 (1963), 554-71. Fred A. Crane, "The Noble Savage in America, 1815-1860" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1952) agrees that enthusiasm for noble savages was largely restricted to Eastern literati.

more enchantingly picturesque and beautiful" than the uncivilized West. But Bryant was also deeply distressed at leaving "civilization" behind and trepidatious about the prospect of "a weary journey through a desolate wilderness." When he finally reached California settlements, he gave thanks to God for being able "to sleep once more within the boundaries of civilization."⁵³

To Bryant's ambivalence could be added that of many other early nineteenth-century Americans. Opinion was in a state of transition. While appreciation of wild country existed, it was seldom unqualified. Romanticism, including deism and the aesthetics of the wild, had cleared away enough of the old assumptions to permit a favorable attitude toward wilderness without entirely eliminating the instinctive fear and hostility a wilderness condition had produced.

53. Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California . . . in the Years 1846, 1847* (New York, 1848), pp. 155-56, 228, 48, 247. A similar ambivalence appears in Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour beyond the Rocky Mountains . . . in the Years 1835, 1836, and 1837* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1838): compare pages 47-48 with page 87 and, in the third edition of 1842, page 146.

CHAPTER 4

The *American* Wilderness

Though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe . . . the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.

Thomas Cole, 1836

WHILE Romanticism was creating a climate of opinion in the new American nation in which wilderness could be appreciated, the fact of independence gave rise to a second major source of enthusiasm. It was widely assumed that America's primary task was the justification of its newly won freedom. This entailed more than building a flourishing economy or even a stable government. Creation of a distinctive culture was thought to be the mark of true nationhood. Americans sought something uniquely "American," yet valuable enough to transform embarrassed provincials into proud and confident citizens. Difficulties appeared at once. The nation's short history, weak traditions, and minor literary and artistic achievements seemed negligible compared to those of Europe. But in at least one respect Americans sensed that their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World.

Seizing on this distinction and adding to it deistic and Romantic assumptions about the value of wild country, nationalists argued that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually an American asset. Of course, pride continued to stem from the *conquest* of wild country (see Chapter 2), but by the middle decades of the nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem.

Immediately after independence nationalists began investigating the significances of nature. At first they ignored wild scenery in preference for specific natural objects of unusual size or character. Thus Philip Freneau, searching in the early 1780s for ways to