Wilderness as Idea
“Wilderness is. . . The creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history.” (Cronon)
Wilderness Defined

- Basic Old English (wild(d)eornes) and Germanic word (MLG and MHG wilt(e)nisse)
- Meanings wilderness without an article
- “wild or uncultivated land” not like a desert that can’t be lived in 1200 a.d. *Trinity College Homilies* : p 161 “Weste is cleped That londe, that is longe titde atleien and wildernes...”
- 1400 A. D. Sir John Maundeville “A grete party of this cuntree es waste and wilderness and not inhabited”
- O. E. D. p. 124
Definitions: b)(with article or other defining word) A wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals; ‘a tract of solitude and savageness’
Definitions: b) (with article or other defining word) A wild or uncultivated region or tract of land, uninhabited, or inhabited only by wild animals; ‘a tract of solitude and savageness’
c) A piece of ground in a large garden or park, planted with trees, and laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth.
Wilderness in the Bible

- Numbers 32:13 “And the LORD'S anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation, that had done evil in the sight of the LORD, was consumed.”
- Matthew 4:1 “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.”
John Milton
1608-1674

• “By forcing that upon us as the remedy of solitude, which wraps us in a misery worse then any wilderness.”
John Milton
1608-1674

• the border comes
  Of *Eden*, where delicious Paradise,
  Now nearer, Crowns with her enclosure green,
  As with a rural mound the champain head
  Of a steep *wilderness*, whose hairie sides [ 135 ]
  With thicket overgrown, grottesque and wilde,
  Access deni'd; and over head up grew
  Insuperable hight of loftiest shade,
  Cedar, and Pine, and Firr, and branching Palm
  A Silvan Scene, and as the ranks ascend [ 140

• About them frisking playd [ 340 ]
  All Beasts of th' Earth, since wilde, and of all chase
  In Wood or *Wilderness*, Forrest or Den;
  Sporting the Lion rampd, and in his paw
  Dandl'd the Kid; Bears, Tygers, Ounces, Pards
  Gambold before them,

• *Paradise Lost* Book 4
Wilderness

- Generally seen as a waste
- Generally seen as something to fear
- The “antithesis” of the order of civilization
- “But by the end of the nineteenth century, all this had changed.” (Cronon)
Causes of the Change

• Sublime
• frontier
Sublime

- “Inspiring awe or admiration through grandeur, beauty, etc.” (Webster’s 1426)
- See God in nature
- At first awe inspiring almost “terror” (Cronon)
- Later more sentimentalized
- Nature as a guide
William Wordsworth  
1770-1850

- “I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility”
- “Poetry is the image of man and nature.”
- Picture from © National Portrait Gallery, London
The World is too Much With Us

- THE world is too much with us; late and soon,
- Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
- Little we see in Nature that is ours;
- We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
- The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
- The winds that will be howling at all hours,
- And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
- For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
- It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
- A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
- So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
- Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
- Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
- Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

1806.
William Cullen Bryant
1794-1878

- “Thanatopsis” 1813 or 1814
- Norton Anthology says he had “international recognition” because of his poetry on “nature” 1044
Thanatopsis

- O him who in the love of Nature holds Communion with her visible forms, she speaks A various language;

- When thoughts Of the last bitter hour come like a blight Over thy spirit, and sad images Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall, And breathless darkness, and the narrow house, Make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart;-- Go forth, under the open sky, and list To Nature's teachings,

- Norton 1045-1046
Henry David Thoreau
1817-1862

- American Transcendentalist, Naturalist
- I cut my way first through... a foot of ice, and open a window under my feet, ... there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet is well as over our heads (Thoreau 190).
Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing-reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men, who instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen. . . . His life itself passes deeper in nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate; himself a subject for the naturalist. The latter raises the moss and bark gently with his knife in search of insects; the former lays open logs to their core with his axe, and moss and bark fly far and wide. He gets his living by barking trees. Such a man has some right to fish, and I love to see nature carried out in him. The perch swallows the grub-worm, the pickerel swallows the perch, and the fisher-man swallows the pickerel; and so all the chinks in the scale of being are filled (190-191).
Frontier Writers

• James Fenimore Cooper (1789 –1851)
• *The Leatherstocking Tales*
• Natti Bumpo
Frontier Writers

• Owen Wister (1860-1938)
• *The Virginian* (1902)
• The hero’s noble nature contrasted with the decadence of civilization
Frontier Writers

- Teddy Roosevelt
- Roosevelt from Cronon: “Brave, hospitable, hard, and adventurous, he is the grim pioneer of our race; he prepares the way for the civilization from before whose face he must himself disappear. Hard and dangerous though his existence is, it has a yet a wild attraction that strongly draws to it his bold free spirit.”
Sublime and Frontier

Sublime Wilderness
- Sacred
- Place to meet God
- Awe later sentimentalized
- Mountain as cathedral
- Ignored less majestic area like swamps/ plains
- Attraction of primitivism

Frontier Wilderness
- Rugged individualism
- Place for manliness
- National renewal
- Resistance to modern
- Modern seen as evil
- Goodness of old days needs preserving
Early Post-Frontier

• Place to rejuvenate
• Generally for wealthy elite (Roosevelt)
• Ignored the people making a living on the land
• Ignored the historical fact that to make the land uninhabited native populations were removed to reservations
Problem

• Problem is not setting aside tracts of land as wilderness but our concept of the term.
• “There is nothing natural about the concept of Wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear” (Cronon).
• The concept of wilderness as other creates “dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural” (Cronon).
Wilderness as Other

• “Wilderness as the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world” (Cronon)

• “Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul” (Cronon).
Wilderness as Other

- “Wilderness represents a flight from history” (Cronon).
- Previous attitudes about wilderness
- Previous and present human inhabitants of wilderness areas
Wilderness as Other

• “Wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility” (Cronon).
• “Idealizing the a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live. . .” (Cronon).
• “By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit” (Cronon).
Which tree is more valuable?
Suggestions

• “We need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural.” (Cronon)
• See wonder close to home; both trees have wonder
• Use wilderness to teach us humility and respect as we confront other people and the earth
Suggestions

• Recognize that which we “kill” or affect to make our home and the other that which we don’t “kill” or affect to make our home, and recognize we are responsible for the management of both.
Final suggestion

• “It means never imagining that we can flee into a mythical wilderness to escape history and the obligation to take responsibility for our own actions that history inescapably entails . . . not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both” (Cronon).
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• **William Wordsworth.** by Benjamin Robert Haydon oil on canvas, 1842. 49 in. x 39 in. (1245 mm x 991 mm) Bequeathed by John Fisher Wordsworth, 1920 *Primary Collection*

• William Cullen Bryant Pictures and Photos. April 14, 2013
