INTO THE WOODS: WILDERNESS IMAGERY AS REPRESENTATION

OF SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL TRANSITION

IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

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Wilderness landscape, a setting common in Romantic literature and painting, is generally overlooked in the art of the Middle Ages. While the medieval garden and the city are well mapped, the medieval wilderness remains relatively trackless. Yet the use of setting to represent interior experience may be traced back to the Neo-Platonic use of space and movement to define spiritual development. Separating themselves as far as possible from the material world, such writers as Origen and Plotinus avoided use of representational detail in their spatial models; however, both the visual artists and the authors who adopted the Neo-Platonic paradigm, elaborated their emotional spaces with the details of the classical *locus amoenus* and of the exegetical desert, while retaining the philosophical concern with spiritual transition. Analysis of wilderness as an image for spiritual and emotional transition in medieval literature and art relates the texts to an iconographic tradition which, along with motifs of city and garden, provides a spatial representation of interior progress, as the medieval dialectic process provides a paradigm for intellectual resolution. Such an analysis relates the motif to the core of medieval intellectual experience, and further suggests significant connections between medieval and modern narratives in regard to the representation of interior experience. *The Divine Comedy* and related Continental texts employ both classical and exegetical sources in the representation of psychological transition and spiritual conversion. Similar techniques

are also apparent in English texts such as *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon elegies, in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame*, and *Troilus and Criseyde,* and in the northern English *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These literary texts, further, include both ideas and techniques which are analogous to those of visual arts, where frescos and altarpieces show the wilderness as metaphor for transition, and where manuscript illuminations relate this visual concept to texts. Thus, the wilderness as a landscape of personal crisis becomes in the Middle Ages a significant part of the representation of interior experience in painting and in literature.

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CHAPTER I

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF WILDERNESS LANDSCAPE

"These are the Gardens of the Desert, these / The Unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful . . . " (1-2). To William Cullen Bryant, and to the landscape artists of the Hudson River School, partly inspired by Bryant's verse, nature was a sign of and a means to spiritual experience. Asher Durand's painting "Kindred Spirits" (1849) [Fig. 1] shows Bryant and the Hudson River landscape painter Thomas Cole in conversation on a bluff overlooking a wilderness vista sweeping away to the west. Durand uses the figure of wilderness space to represent the aspirations of a young nation, expecting the reader or viewer to *read* in the *text* of nature the promise of the New World (Novak 38-39). In his "Letters on Landscape Painting," Durand explains that the technique of representation is ". . . but the language and the rhetoric which expresses and enforces the doctrine" (66). Unlike the American romantics, medieval poets and painters rarely found charm or inspiration in an expanse of wilderness landscape. However, though different in their content, their *doctrine*, the romantic and medieval artists shared a similarity in representative concept: They viewed nature as a text to be read; they represented spiritual crisis in the icon of wilderness landscape; and they figured individual psychological development as movement within landscape.

Fig. 1. *Kindred Spirits*, Asher Durand. The New York Public Library. *Time: Special Issue*. Ed. Robert Hughes, Spring 1997, 11.

Just as American artists like Asher Durand, Frank Church, and Thomas Cole

produced paintings with symbolic as well as naturalistic elements, [1] medieval artists

assembled conventional scenic elements more for *sentence* than for realism. In *European*

Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, Ernst Robert Curtius says, "Medieval descriptions

of nature are not meant to represent reality" (183), further explaining that Romanesque art

does not conform to any concept of naturalistic representation. In fact, however,

representative naturalism only dominates the art and literatature of the mid-nineteenth

century, and even then naturalism requires selection, which implies both artifice and

interpretation. In the Renaissance, with its new "realism" of representation, does Sandor

Botticelli's *Venus Rising from the Foam* (c. 1500) represent a real woman (or even a real

goddess)? It is most unlikely that any such woman lived in his neighborhood, and if she

did, she certainly did not dress like that. Botticelli's painting represents an ideal of

feminine beauty which was only distantly related to "life" and was closely related to the

views and preconceptions of his day. Similar points could be made about Picasso's

Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) or Mattel's Barbie ™, both representations having little to

do with real women and everything to do with the artists' cultural notions. It is not,

therefore, surprising that the medieval artist or poet elected to omit some details in order

to reveal others, and to exaggerate some features to illuminate their ideas. In particular,

the medieval artist, as well as the medieval writer, was concerned almost exclusively with

interior experience. In a culture in which the state of the soul was of paramount

importance, the meticulous representation of physical details was beside the point, a

distraction. Rather than saying that the medieval artists or poets were uninterested in or

unable to represent reality, it would be more accurate to say that they were more interested in representing spiritual or emotional reality than in recording physical detail.

In pursuing this interest in the representation of interior experience, the artist or writer frequently resorted to dreams, visions, drolleries, grotesques, and fantastic animals. But most frequently he--or she--pictured interior experience in terms of space, and transition between one state and another as passage within or between spaces. Thus, the castle, the city, and the garden came to be the *loci* of emotional events represented in the guise of physical description, and description which had been manipulated in order to illuminate the emotional rather that the physical reality. Though less frequently remarked by scholars, the wilderness too became a significant icon for representing emotional or spiritual transition, and the evolution of that motif is the subject of this discussion.

Although the icon of wilderness is pervasive in medieval art and literature, the techniques of representation did not develop uniformly. As a general rule, the narrative description of landscape evolves before a corresponding development of detail in painting. [2] In the west, early manuscript illuminations actions and characters are conventionally represented against a solid background of gold or blue, or against a trellis or grid pattern, settings which center attention on the event or character without the use of a spatial setting. However, by 800, at the Carolingian School at Aachen, illuminators, in imitation of antique models, use architectural space defined by columns, arches, and windows to represent hierarchy and relationship. [3] Also part of the Carolingian tradition, the Utrecht Psalter (c. 820) uses wilderness elements--rocks, trees, and water--to define the space between one experience or one episode and another. [4] The use of wilderness as

boundary continues well into the fifteenth century, and in most instances, the development of representative detail in narrative precedes that development in painting. While Florentine frescos painted by Dante's contemporaries certainly reflect spatial ideas similar to those in *The Divine Comedy*, the richly detailed treatments of Fra Angelico and, in northern Europe, of Jan van Ecyk come nearly a hundred years after that poem. And the secular illumination of English patronage, the *Troilus* frontispiece, painted between 1400 and 1420, follows Chaucer's poem by more than a decade.

Since the terms "wilderness" and "landscape" are not usually associated with the medieval imagination, some definitions are in order. Natural forms--mountains, caves, trees, plants, water--are often part of medieval artifacts, both verbal and visual. Yet a skeptical colleague once asked, "So every time you see a few leaves or rocks, do you call it a wilderness?" The answer, of course, is no. Both medieval narrative and painting employ natural forms as background in various settings--gardens, for example, or farmlands--and neither of these spaces, however well supplied with flora and fauna, are representative of wilderness. To meet the conditions of the motif, the setting must be outside the castle or city and undomesticated. The space portrayed may be desert, forest, wasteland, or seascape. If such a scene is indicated either by author or artist, then it may be considered wilderness, whether it includes a few leaves and rocks or a fully developed scenic background. The idea of wilderness comes first; the degree of representative detail varies according to artist and period.

Similarly, the use of the word *landscape* in connection with the art of the Middle Ages is open to question, since the word does not occur in English until 1598, and

originates as a technical term referring to scenic painting. Beginning with the Dutch artists of the seventeenth century, *landscape* refers to a genre of painting which depicts woods and fields, and occasionally cities, ruins, or castles, for the purpose of representing a particular sensibility. These paintings sometimes include human figures, but even then the figures are secondary to the emotional content of the piece. The poetic use of landscape develops along much the same line. When Gray speaks of the "glimmering landscape" or Wordsworth describes the woods near Tintern Abbey, they both refer to vistas in which emotion is implicit in the natural details.

In the Middle Ages, however, writers and artists never present natural scenery apart from character and action. On the contrary, the scenic background of poem or painting is only a part of the work in so far as it illuminates some aspect of character or action. In this context, all background, natural or otherwise, is intended to be "read". The space in which action transpires serves as a gloss on the episode, relating an immediate event to a conventional interpretation. Just as a figure wearing a stole and keys will be identified with St. Peter or the papacy, a character in a wilderness setting will be seen in the process of trial or transition. In this discussion, therefore, I use the word *landscape* for natural scenery used as a setting for character and incident, bearing in mind that this use refers to scenery only as a gloss on the subject of a work. Though this use of the term is, strictly speaking, unconventional, it is, nevertheless useful; for in derivation the word means "land-shape." The seventeenth century artist *shapes* the land to produce a *mood* for a viewer. The medieval artist *shapes* the land to convey information about the action portrayed. Therefore, I use the term wilderness *landscape* to refer to a setting of

undomesticated natural scenery devised for the purpose of demonstrating a condition of spiritual or psychological change.

The use of space to represent emotional experience is, of course, not exclusive to the Middle Ages; variations on the motif can be found in Shakespeare and Sidney. For example, in his analysis of Renaissance poetry, Kenneth Cool examines "imaginative landscapes" as they permit the "anesthetization of a familiar environment" (85). More recently, in anthropology, Mercia Eliade traces the equation of space and religious experience, referring to the "quality of transparency" (117) which allows nature to reveal transcendence; and in her psychological essay on individuation in *Man and His Symbols*, Marie von Franz equates emotional growth to physical movement in a detailed analysis of dream motifs (159). The terms of anthropology and of psychology used in these instances are familiar enough that readers recognize easily the spatial metaphors. Likewise, in both medieval text and painting, the use of the wilderness image depends on the intent of the artist to address a psychological subject using emblems of wilderness, and on the reader's readiness to accept such a reading, often associating the immediate text with other narratives or paintings making related uses of the image. Both the intention of the writer and the receptivity of the reader derive from traditions of scriptural exegesis and from a rhetorical treatment of classical tropes and relate the narratives to the spiritual insights of the early Middle Ages as well as to the prevalent psychological models.

In literature, because it includes both the rhetorical and exegetical models, *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri is a paradigm of the wilderness motif, in the harsh

wood of the *Inferno* and the ancient wood at the top of Mount Purgatory. Earlier

narratives, however, reflect more limited and particular uses of the image. *Beowulf* and

the Anglo-Saxon elegies associate a frontier wilderness with personal heroism, with the

rigors of pilgrimage and exile, and with the evil from outside the boundaries of the

community or settlement. The French, English, and German romances associate the

forest and the waste land with trials of virtue and honor. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of

the Duchess, The House of Fame*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* equate wilderness with

personal crisis, adopting the motif from continental sources influenced by classical

models. *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, connecting time, space, and

movement, reflect the passages from one stage of life to the next and from life through

death to eternity. Other significant English uses of the motif occur in alliterative and

stanzaic romances, in the Corpus Christi cycle plays, in popular carols and ballads, and,

moving into the fifteenth century, in the Robin Hood ballads and in Thomas Mallory's *Le

Morte D'Arthur*.

The examination of wilderness as an image for spiritual and emotional transition

will provide three benefits to the student of medieval literature. First, an analysis of the

image as it appears in several instances of narrative and of landscape painting offers

models for the analysis of medieval texts within an iconographic tradition and yet not

bound by an adherence to a rigorous system of exegesis. Second, the movement between

city, garden, and wilderness provides a spatial representation of emotional experience, as

the medieval dialectic process provides a paradigm for intellectual resolution. Third,

such an analysis will, therefore, both relate the motif to the core of medieval intellectual

experience and further, will suggest significant connections between medieval and modern modes of narrative as they apply to the representation of interior psychological and spiritual experience through images of movement and physical space.

In addition, the instances of wilderness landscape as revealed in painting and narrative demonstrate that the icon both retains its character as a locus for transition and develops complexity in technique and in content. *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri is a central example of the wilderness icon, including as it does both the classical and the patristic strands of the tradition. In addition, I have chosen primarily English texts and manuscript illuminations related to English sources or patronage. I hope that the present study will provide the basis for further analysis of continental models as well as of the development of the motif in the Renaissance and beyond. Certainly the *Troilus* frontispiece and Durand's "Kindred Spirits" are far apart in time and in doctrine, yet the road between them is a fairly straight one. A similarity of intention exists and relates the visions of the two painters. This analysis of medieval wilderness will provide some maps for the subsequent exploration of the wilderness image.

END NOTES

[1] For example, Frederic E. Church's *Heart of the Andes* (1859) appears at first glance to be a landscape represented with abundant natural detail. Yet in this painting Church includes plants from different parts of the country and from different elevations, as well as plants which grow or bloom at different times of the year. Further, he includes a wayside shrine suggestive of an earlier period in Latin American history, as well as a village of a later date. While Church insisted on meticulous precision in the representation of each element, the painting as a whole is assembled in an artificial composition in order to reflect on the mysteries of time, change, and memory. The Hudson River School of artists frequently used such devices to represent philosophical concepts. For additional information about the iconography of American landscape painting, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture*, New York: Oxford UP, 1980.

[2] The sequence of motifs and techniques in European painting is complicated by the introduction of Byzantine artists and conventions into Germany during the tenth and eleventh centuries. The eastern artists,influenced by Greek and Roman models, had detailed techniques of representing natural scenery. These conventions found their way into western Europe initially in the trousseau of the Empress Theophanu, a Byzantine princess who married the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II (973 - 983). Thereafter, western painting was widely influenced by those eastern techniques.

³ For a more complete discussion of Bishop Ebbo and the scriptorium at Aachen, see Hans Hollander, *The Universe History of Art and Architecture: Early Medieval,* (New York: Universal Books, 1974). As a representative example of the architectural divisions of space, see the illumination of St. John from the Gospels of St-Medard-de-Soissons (Aachen, c. 800; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 8850, fol. 180) reproduced by Hollander on page 57. In this example, the figures and architectural details are derived from antique models, and the perspective is distorted for emphasis. The spaces marked by the dome and columns position the apostle in a theological hierarchy relative to other figures and concepts.

⁴ *The Utrecht Psalter* (Utrecht University Library Cod. 32) was probably produced under the patronage of Ebbo, Archbishop of Rheims, about 820. (Ebbo was also Charlemagne's chief librarian.) Although produced at Utrecht, the connections with English sources and patronage are significant. Some scholars have suggested that Alcuin, the English cleric at the Frankish court, was instrumental in the development of the manuscript and in the selection of additional texts inserted after the psalms. The psalter was, at an early date, a part of the Cotton Library (Claudius C. VII); the date of its removal is unknown. However, its design influenced several English copies, including the Eadwine Psalter, produced at Christ Church, Canterbury, in the early twelfth century. For an analysis of the Utrecht Psalter, see Francis Wormald, *The Utrecht Psalter* (a monograph), Utrecht, 1953 (now in the Morgan Library, New York).

CHAPTER 2

FROM CALYPSO'S ISLAND TO BRENDAN'S WHALE:

THE SOURCES OF WILDERNESS ICONOGRAPHY

The wilderness motif, as it occurs in medieval art and literature, derives from four

sources: from the Neo-Platonic model of the personality, represented by the schools of

Athens, Rome, and Alexandria, and by Philo Judaeus and Plotinus; from Greek and

Roman pastoral poetry from Homer and Theocritus to Ovid, Virgil and the poets of the

Silver Age; from the desert as a spiritual *locus*, as found in the Bible and as elaborated in

the writings of Origen of Alexandria and of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo; and finally,

from the events of conquest, conversion, and settlement in Europe. Of these factors, the

first three originate in written forms and are transmitted and adapted through the schools

of rhetoric and through allusions between written sources. The last, on the other hand,

originates in the experiences of upheaval as the remnants of the Roman Empire are

invaded and divided by the northern tribes, and as settlers from Mediterranean Europe

move into Britain and Germany. Although not at first recorded directly in literary

sources, these exposures to the hardships of frontier life without doubt colored the

imaginations of the settlers and their descendants, and therefore, the understanding of the

wilderness motif. These beginnings, representing a broad expanse of philosophical,

religious, and historical developments, combine to form spatial metaphors for the

personality and for the individual's progress toward perfection, ranging from simple

verbal references--*up, down, over-flowing*--to the metaphor of a ladder up which the soul

ascends--to fully detailed depictions of wilderness trial or journey. Evolving from these sources, by the seventh century the wilderness could be identified as an icon in both literature and in visual art, gathering complexity while retaining its essential shape and character.

In the Middle Ages both artists and writers share a three-part view of the human personality as body, mind, and spirit, or, in the formulations of the creeds, as heart, mind, and soul. Further, they often divide experience into various three part sequences--for example, youth, middle age, old age, or the purgative, illuminative, and unitive levels of spiritual progress. [1] Artists and writers generally represent both the aspects of the personality and the transitions between them in spatial metaphors. In painting or illumination, the space may be segmented in an hierarchical arrangement, whereas in literature, space is used as a context for character and action. In both cases, character and action are represented by means of spatial motifs. As components of this pattern, the icons of castle, city, and garden have been well explored by scholars, but the wilderness as a place of emotional transition is still relatively trackless. Yet consistently the wilderness serves as the image for transitions between levels of experience and, in a culture where spiritual progress is of the first consideration, a motif for the representation of that experience is of considerable importance.

Once noted, this concept of representation may be traced from the Patristic Period through the early Middle Ages, as the historical events of mission, settlement, and pilgrimage, as well as of the Crusades, shape the motif and fix it in the popular imagination. Tracing the evolution of the wilderness icon involves two steps: first, the

general development of space as a metaphor for personality, and second, the specific

development of wilderness as a space for transition. The spatial motifs derived from

Neo-Platonic descriptions of psychological and spiritual experience and were broadly

accepted in the ancient world around the Mediterranean. The writings of Plato were

hardly known directly in the early Middle Ages, but Edgar De Bruyne asserts that, "Plato

is unquestionably the philosophical source of medieval symbolism" (6). A few copies of

one dialogue, *The Timaeus*, circulated on a limited basis during the Middle Ages, and

Chalcidius' commentary on that dialogue was widely available. [2] In the centuries

following Plato's school in Athens, the eastern mystery religions encouraged the initiate

to abjure the material world and the body in order to ascend toward spiritual (i.e. not

physical) perfection. By the patristic period, the Neo-Platonists, deriving ultimately from

Athens, but best known from the schools of Rome and Alexandria, promoted a similar

division between purity of the intellect and the corruptions of the material world.

Associated with the schools of Greek philosophy in Alexandria, the Jewish

scholar Philo Judaeus (c. 30 BC - c. AD 45), eastern in his mysticism and western in his

elevation of the intellect over matter, was of considerable influence over the scriptural

commentators of the early Christian churches. "In Philo," as Allan Menzies points out,

"rabbinical and Greek learning met, and Scripture being a divine authority and having to

furnish evidence of Greek philosophical doctrines, the allegorical method of

interpretation was called to perform large services" (292). In his exegetical writing Philo

assumed a separation of both spirit and intellect from the physical world, describing this

separation through the medium of a spatial analogy. In his *Treatise on Dreams*, for

example, he refers to some souls making an earthward *descent* and other souls attaining a heavenly *ascent* (I. 135-140). [3]

Neo-Platonism, existing in several similar formulations, became the most pervasive philosophy during the Patristic Period and the early Middle Ages. Plotinus (c. AD 205 - 270) and his secretary Porphyry (AD 233 - c. 305), are of particular importance, both for the inclusiveness of their schema and for the breadth of their influence. [4] A Greek born in Egypt, Plotinus settled in Rome in AD 244, establishing there an informal school. Plotinus was not a professional teacher himself, nor did he begin to write until his early fifties, and then his writing reflected the relatively unstructured discussions of his classes. By the time he took Porphyry as his secretary, he had completed twenty-one treatises, all based on his teaching and class discussion.

After Plotinus died, Porphyry first wrote his biography, *The Life of Plotinus*, which included a list of all the treatises in chronological order. Later, he edited and arranged the treatises into nine books of six tractates each, *The Enneads*. The thinking in these books is Plotinus', and is inextricably linked to his classes and to his teaching methods. The divisions and sequences are the work of Porphyry. The sections proceed in orderly fashion from an analysis of the self and the sensible world through a description of the One or the Good. This order is illusory, however, since as Emilé Bréhier points out, each separate section "presupposes knowledge of the whole doctrine" (21), so that no section is clear in itself without knowledge of the others.

Plotinus fuses the Platonic concept of form with eastern mysticism and dualism. In a discussion of artistic representation, the significant factors in *The Enneads* are the

language and the analogies which establish spatial relationships between intellectual objects. In Book IV, dealing with the elements of psychology, Plotinus uses two related analogies, one organic, relating existence to a body with various parts, and the other spatial, relating psychological movement to physical movement. It should be noted right away that these are no more than analogies. Plotinus says that in use of language we are limited to analogies which approximate the realities we attempt to discuss. The issue is, he says, whether or not the parallel is "appropriate" (IV. 3. 2).

According to Plotinus, the universe consists of *hypostases* or levels of reality arranged vertically. The higher level gives substance to the lower by "over-flowing" downward (it is impossible to reproduce his argument without using spatial or directional terms). With each descent, some of the essence of the higher good is lost, so that the lower levels gradually become corrupt and debased. At the top of the *hypostases* three levels ascend to that element of reality which corresponds most closely to Plato's idea of The Good. First, The One (*hen*) overflows to Mind (*nous*). Mind is an imperfect reflection of the One, and derives its existence from the contemplation of the One, its source. Mind, in turn, overflows to Soul (*psyche*). Soul can not know the One directly or completely, since it can only contemplate objects in sequence. It is the sequential nature of Soul which creates time, space, and change, and thus generates the next lower level, Nature (*physis*).

The corresponding psychological model explained in *The Enneads*, Book IV, relates the hierarchy of the individual personality to that of the highest order of nature; that is, there is a correspondence between the structure of the hypostases and the structure

of the individual. The human being has Matter (the body), Nature (the will), Soul

(intelligence), and Mind (the ability to perceive or contemplate the One, though only

indirectly). Just as the One overflows *downward* toward Nature and then matter, the

human being has the capacity if he chooses to *ascend* toward knowledge of the One. In

this present discussion, the significant aspect of the scheme is that it is described in terms

of space: the One flows *down* and the individual climbs *up.*

Though the Neo-Platonic use of directional language is significant, the spatial

analogies are even more instructive. In one representative passage, Plotinus describes the

movement of the soul downward in order to be "embodied":

> · The souls of men . . . leap downward from the Supreme: yet even
>
> then they are not cut off from their origin, from the divine Intellect . . . .
>
> though they have descended to earth, yet their higher part holds forever
>
> above the heavens. (IV. 3. 12)

The verb to *leap down* along with the directional designations of up and down relate the

spiritual experience in terms of space. More important, spiritual transition is represented

as movement in space, with a dual movement as a metaphor for the individual's spiritual

transition:

> *Lifted* out of the body into myself [i.e. Mind] . . . stationed within It by
>
> having attained that activity, *poised above* whatsoever within the
>
> Intellectual is less than the Supreme: yet, there comes the *moment of*
>
> *descent* from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine,
>
> I ask myself how it happens that I can be *descending*, and how did the soul

ever enter into my body, the soul which, even within the body, is the *high thing* it has shown itself to be. (IV. 8. 1. 143) (Italics mine)

In this text it becomes apparent that not only does the soul descend into the body, but that once animating a body, the soul experiences spiritual movement, upward toward the One and downward toward physical existence. Again, the process of spiritual experience is represented in spatial terms.

For obvious reasons, the *space* of the Neo-Platonists is unadorned with physical detail, though both Plotinus, and earlier, Philo, speak of a "ladder of ascent." Their distaste for the material world works against any fully developed landscape for the representation of a spiritual journey. Nevertheless, this philosophical space provides a basis for the developments of metaphor which followed.

Chiefly because Neo-Platonism denied the goodness of creation and the possibility of the resurrection of the body, the Christian church rejected it as heresy. Nevertheless, both in Rome and in Alexandria, Christian scholars attended schools where Neo-Platonism, and especially the model of the personality, were assumed as a basis for further discussion. This does not mean that everyone in the schools of rhetoric agreed with Plotinus' model of the personality. It means that, by and large, they did not think about it at all. A similar modern instance is the assumption by modern scholars of a Freudian division of the psyche into id, ego, and super-ego. People may or may not actually agree with Freud's paradigm of the personality, but because of the pervasiveness of his concepts, they speak and write as if they do. In the third century and after, people made the same kind of assumption about Plotinus' model of the personality, especially in

its tripartite division and in the use of space to represent emotional movement. Further, this acceptance allowed the later rhetoricians to adorn the space with sensory detail. For not only did they relate emotional to spatial movement, but through allegorical exegesis they imposed this emotional movement upon the landscapes of epic and of pastoral poetry.

As A.C. Faireclough has pointed out, the appreciation of nature among the Greeks, "while vivid, sincere and deep, was . . . confined to a sentiment for what is lovely and charming to the eye" (7). Although this attitude becomes less certain among the Roman poets, in Homer, at least, the *locus amoenus* is a beautiful background to delight the senses, rather than a metaphor for emotional or spiritual action. Homer develops the natural landscape with a wealth of representative detail, including the sunny meadow with spring, surrounded by trees and carpeted with flowers and fragrant herbs, a location which harkens back to a mythic description of the holy wood and looks forward to an appreciation of nature in itself. In Homer's epics, however, such settings are devised to surround and support the narrative, a story of action and will rather than of introspection. As Erich Auerbach points out in "Odysseus' Scar," " . . . the basic impulse of the Homeric style is to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations" (6). The description of Calypso's island, for example, is luxurious in sensual detail: [5]

> A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves
>
> of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress.
>
> Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings--

horned owls, falcons, cormorants--long-tongued

beach combing birds, and followers of the sea.

Around the smooth walled cave a crooking vine

held purple clusters under ply of green;

and four springs, bubbling up near one another,

shallow and clear, took channels here and there

through beds of violets and tender parsley. (V. 69-78)

This scene is domestic, however, rather than wild. Calypso herself sings before her fireplace as she plies her golden shuttle. When Hermes appears at the door, she serves him a meal before they discuss Odysseus' future. The cave, and by extension the island, provide a domestic interlude in Odysseus' journey, and represent no significant emotional change in his character, but rather a period of emotional inertia. Action for Odysseus comes not from the *locus amoenus* of Calypso's island, but from the sea as he "sat apart, as a thousand times before, / and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet / scanning the bare horizon" (V. 86-89). These representations of landscape are in accordance with Homer's narrative emphasis on the emotional and physical foreground. Auerbach suggests that though Homer "delights in physical existence," the passages "conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret meaning . . . . Later allegorizing trends have tried their arts of interpretation on him, but to no avail" (13).

Auerbach and the rest of us may be delighted with Homer's bright surfaces, but Homer's more immediate successors were outraged by the scandalous behavior of his Olympians, and only allegorical readings which *revealed* the *mystery* could reconcile his

narratives to the Athenian philosophers. And perhaps because eventually Homer's poems themselves were inaccessible, while the allegorical interpretations were in general circulation, the allegorical reading of Homer became dominant, growing in elaboration over the years.

Homer alone, however, does not account for the development of Greek nature poetry. Theocritus of Syracuse (c. 330 BC) combined landscape with a philosophical and emotional agenda. His *Idylls* celebrating life in rural Sicily find delight in the shepherd's life "linked to nature and lover" (Curtius 187). [6] Like Homer also, Theocritus' representative techniques are related to a narrative or lyric posture, and, as in Homer, the lush natural settings are described in loving detail:

> High above our heads waved many a poplar, many an elm tree, while close
>
> at hand the sacred water from the nymphs' own cave welled forth with
>
> murmurs musical. On shadowy boughs the burnt cicadas kept their
>
> chattering toil, far off the little owl cried in the thick thorn brake, the larks
>
> and finches were singing, the ring dove moaned, the yellow bees were
>
> flitting about the springs. All breathed the scent of opulent summer.
>
> (Curtius 189; Andrew Lange translation)

Unlike Homer, however, Theocritus' representative techniques were associated with emotional states, and specifically with the need to retreat from the structured world of the city to a spot for reflection.

Manuscripts of Theocritus were not readily available to readers in the Middle Ages directly; his poetic vision was instead known through his influence on Virgil's

Eclogues and *Bucolics*, which imitated the Greek models. [7] By the time Virgil was

writing, of course, Sicily had long since ceased to be a place of wild and isolated

landscape. Virgil's fantasies are set in Arcadia, a distant province of Greece where he

had never been--suitably remote and unspoiled. Though more restrained in his

ornamentation, Virgil's debt to Theocritus is clear:

> Begin, since now we sit upon soft grass.
>
> Yes, now each field and every tree brings forth
>
> Now leaf the woods, now is the year at fairest. (Buc. III. 55-57)
>
> [Dicite, quandoquidem in molli consedimus herba, / et nunc omnia ager,
>
> nunc omnis parturit arbos, / nunc frondent silvae, nunc formonsissimus
>
> annus.]

As adopted from Virgil by the Roman schools of rhetoric, the *locus amoenus* became

what Curtius calls a "clearly distinguished nature topoi" (193). From Virgil and from his

imitators, Libasnius (314 - c. 393) lists six "charms" of landscape: springs, trees, breezes,

flowers, and bird song (Curtius 194). These qualities of an undomesticated landscape

became in the schools, both adjuncts to dialectic and ornaments of oratory.

Nearly contemporary with Virgil, Ovid also makes use of the Greek conventions

of the *locus amoenus*. As a rule, Ovid's pleasure in nature extends only to the beauty of

domesticated scene; when he traces the forms of the lovely wilderness spot, it is often as

a prelude to violence or despair. For example, in *Metamorphoses* he describes a sheltered

grove: [8]

. . . with a clear pool, with shining silver waters, where shepherds had
never made their way; no goats that pasture on the mountains, no cattle
had ever come there. Its peace was undisturbed by bird or beast or falling
branches. Around it was a grassy sward, kept ever green by the nearby
waters; encircling woods sheltered the spot from the fierce sun, and made
it always cool. (III. 406-411)

[Fons erat illimis, nitidis argenteus undis / Quem neque pastores neque
pastae monte capellae / Contigerant aliudve pecus, quem nulla volucris /
Gramen erat circa, quod proximus humor alebat, / Silvaque sole locum
passura tepescere nullo].

This would appear to be a perfect setting for amorous dalliance or poetic reflection, yet it

is rather the setting for the death of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection.

And especially in Ovid's narration, it is no accident that a violent emotional change

occurs within a wild setting. Other episodes in *Metamorphoses* associate the secluded

grove with the pleasures of the hunt--and with the dangers of sexual violence. [9] Thus

Ovid introduces irony to the *locus amoenus*. As Daniel Garrison points out, "[Ovid's]

lovely scenes are preludes to hideous action in a way we now associate with scary

movies" (100).

The Roman poets of the Silver Age who followed Ovid and Virgil also represent

wilderness as a *locus* for violence, and often for magic and sacrilege as well. Lucan

makes several uses of a blasted wood in his *Pharsalia*--for example, in the abode of the

witch Erichto and in the religious grove destroyed by Caesar (6. 508-568). [10] These

visions of dense and sunless forest, of unnatural fires, lights, and winds, are landscapes of

fear. Statius, also, in the *Thebaid*, sets Tiresias' dark doings in a "forest full of years and

bent with mighty age, its foliage forever uncut" (4. 419-421). [11] Garrison argues

convincingly that these and other similar passages derive in part from the experiences of

the Roman legions in the dank and uncanny forests of northern Europe, especially the

Ardennes and the Black Forest (105-108). Certainly grim descriptions of the Silver

poets, along with the fearful accounts of the Roman military historians, would contribute

to the dark view of the northern woods held by the early medieval Christian missionaries.

And in any case, as poets well known in the medieval world, Lucan and Statius would

contribute to the representation of wilderness as a scene for fear and often for

supernatural events.

Of even more interest to the present discussion is Virgil's contrasting descriptions

in *The Aeneid* of the Wood of Avernus and of the meadows of the Elysian Fields. [12] These

two locations are of particular importance, not only for their beauty, but because of their

structural importance and for their subsequent influence. Though the theology and the

sources of Book VI are both frequent topics for analysis by scholars, relatively little

comment has attended the sections relating directly to the landscape. Theodore M.

Anderson has related Virgil's use of space to emotional passages in sections dealing with

Dido's temple and with the physical arrangements of the games in Book V, but R. D.

Williams dismisses the dark wood as mere prologue, intended "to build up an aura of

solemnity and mystery" (193), chiefly because this passage reflects the influences of

"magic and folklore." It is precisely this association with mystery, however, which relates

Aeneas' journey to a passage of crisis both for himself, and for the tribe he represents. The wooded landscape, therefore, is not a "mere" prologue, but is for the hero a vital passage to deeper levels of knowledge and experience.

It is a truism that Aeneas represents both the remnant of Troy and the future nation of Rome. He is also an individual, however, a point too often overlooked. As Williams quite rightly points out, the *Aeneid* deals with a man's "character and resolutions, his experiences, past present, and future" (191). The use of movement through space and the contrasting details of Avernus and Elysium, are the narrative materials for representing Aeneas' progress, both personal and tribal. To Aeneas as an individual, the landscapes of the wood and the underworld represent the promise of rebirth, and therefore, the solution to the problem of death. To Troy, the descent to the underworld promises the rebirth in the city of Rome. And to Rome the encounter foretells the continuity and expansion of the empire.

In Book VI of the *Aenead*, Virgil arranges a succession of landscapes which are concentric in impression if not in actual topography. Aeneas' descent through these landscapes marks his progress toward self-knowledge and communal prophesy. Aeneas and his company land on the coast of Italy, the land which is to become home to the remnant of Troy. The landscape does not present itself to the travelers as a garden or a pleasantly domestic place. Rather, they discover a wild forest (*silva*), the home of wild beasts (*ferarum*). While the Trojans explore the shore, Aeneas himself seeks the shrine of Apollo and the cave of the Cumean Sibyl. The oracle is located in the cliffs above the shore in a second landscape, the grove of the shrine. He asks of the Sibyl passage through

Avernus and entry to the underworld to speak with his father, Anchaises. The Sibyl warns

him that the way lies through a forest and across the River Cocytus, so that only great

love (*amor*) and great desire (*cupido*) will aid the heart that is set on the quest (128-133).

Nevertheless, she agrees to guide him if he can procure a token, a golden bough, growing

in the center of a third landscape, a dark wood. Securing the token with the aid of his

mother's doves, Aeneas returns to the Sibyl, and together they brave the fourth landscape,

the forest at the entrance to the underworld.

The chilling description of the forest of Avernus is one of the primary landscapes

not only for classical but for medieval literature:

A deep, deep cave there was, its mouth enormously gaping,

Protected by the dark lake and the forest gloom:

Above it, no winged creatures could ever wing their way

With impunity, so lethal was the miasma which

Went fuming up from its black throat . . .

A path lies in a forest, when Jove has palled the sky

With gloom, and the night's blackness has bled the world of color. . . .

In the open a huge dark elm tree spreads wide its immemorial

Branches like arms, whereon, according to old wives' tales,

Roost the unsolid Dreams, clinging everywhere under its foliage. (237-

285)

[Spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu, / scrupea, tuta lacu nigro

nemorumque tenebris, / quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes

tendere iter pinnis: talis sese halitus atris / faucibus effundens supera ad

convexa ferebat. . . . est iter in silvas, ubi caelum condidit umbra / Iuppiter

et rebus nox abstulit altra colorem. /   . . . In medio ramos annosaque

bracchia pandit / ulmus opaca ingens, quam sedem Somnia volgo / vana

tenere ferunt foliisque sub omnibus haerent.]

This landscape includes all of the features of the pastoral glade, but distorted as in

an evil mirror. The wood is twisted, the waters deadly, the winds chilling, and the

atmosphere noxious. So poisonous is the miasma from the water that even the birds can

not fly over, lest they die. Both for Virgil and for subsequent writers, Avernus is the locus

of death and Aeneas' confronting the terrors of this landscape represents his

acknowledgment of death and his acceptance of the future, for himself, for the Trojans,

and for Rome. Book IV is the psychological and theological center of the *Aeneid*, and

Aeneas' acceptance of this quest is the heart of the book. The blasted landscape of

Avernus, integral to the meaning of the epic, becomes the basis for other landscapes as

loci of personal or tribal crisis.

Successfully negotiating this blasted wood and the darker recesses of the

underworld, Aeneas at last obtains entrance to the Elysian Fields, the fifth and final

landscape, and the obverse of the dark wood of Avernus . Elysium has all of the features

of Avernus--forest glades, winding river, and central tree. Yet the "Happy Place" is lit by

sun and stars of its own, and the graceful spirits reflect the beauty of the place. Having

braved the dark wood above, Aeneas becomes worthy of the insight offered in the sun-lit

groves below. [13] But he would have been unable to attain the one had he been unable to

pass the other. Furthermore, like Avernus, Elysium is a point of passage. The souls

awaiting rebirth pass their days in the Elysian Fields, prefiguring the Christian idea of

Purgatory (739 f.). In relating points of Book VI to analogous passages in Plato's

allegories, D.A. West posits that the Elysian Fields are also a point of transition for souls

released from earthly bondage and preparing for transition to the pure existence of the

good (226), and Anchises is Neo-Platonic in his teaching when he explains to Aeneas that

it is Mind which animates the universe.

Aeneas' passage through Elysium, though benign, represents another significant

personal crisis, as the quality of the landscape corresponds to his situation and

disposition. Thus, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the best known successor to Virgil's poem,

the poet "lost" passes through a harsh wood; after the purification of fire on the seventh

cornice, and now at last on the right path, he nevertheless still passes through a wood as

awful as it is beautiful, before he enters the Earthly Paradise.

Aeneas' encounter with his father in the Elysian Fields concludes that episode.

However, the experience does not mark the end of Aeneas' earthly pilgrimage, since he

will again, at least once, have to dare the woods of Avernus to gain the groves of

Elysium. And so he exits through the Gate of Ivory, the gate of "false dreams." Literally,

he exits through this ambiguous gate because as a living man, he is a "false shade." The

implication goes further, however. The Gate of Ivory suggests an incomplete or

ambiguous revelation, at best. The gods do not reveal everything, and what they do reveal

is sometimes difficult to discern. D. A. West notes the " skepticism . . . of humility and of

melancholy as the poet admits man's uncertainties about the ordinances of god" (238).

Thus while in *Eclogues* and *Bucolics* Virgil develops and transmits the *locus amoenus* of Homer and Theocritus to the Middle Ages, in the *Aenead* he designs the two mirrored landscapes which come to locate the transitions of human experience. The purpose of the *Aeneid* may have been to produce what Lewis Mumford has called a "usable history" [14] for Augustus' newly established empire, but since the narrative relates the experience of an individual, Aeneas, it must, perforce, be the story of individual growth as well. And as the historical circumstances become distant from the reader, the personal elements of the story become paramount.

The poem that Virgil wrote and the poem that we read are separated by two thousand years. At first we may think that we have scraped away the barnacles of Dante and Milton to find the original, but presently we discover that we have only done so in order to impose our own interpretations. No readers of Virgil since Augustus himself have done otherwise. Macrobius saw Virgil as the last gentleman, as a voice of silver from a society in decay. The medieval schoolmen saw him as the model of rhetoric, the perfect orator, and derived rules for composition from his narratives. Dante saw him as the ideal poet, Christopher Marlowe as the poet of fatal love, and Matthew Arnold as a "most delicate genius" with a "sweet, a touching sadness" (197). In whatever ways Virgil has affected his later readers, the impact of his landscapes remains consistent. Dominico Comparetti has traced his stature in the Middle Ages, pointing out that "under the influence of Neo-Platonism and still more of Christianity, [the reading] tended irresistibly toward symbolism, mysticism, and allegory" (73). Apart from Virgil's position in the schools of rhetoric, this assessment is true, and suggests a continuity in the reading of the

Aeneid in particular. What Arnold calls Virgil's "self-dissatisfied heart" (197) meets the

Christian "stranger and sojourner in a far country" precisely in the landscape details of

Avernus and Elysium. And for both ancient Roman and Christian the wilderness becomes

a central image for emotional and spiritual passage.

If the landscapes of the Roman poets lay between the green glades of Arcadia and

the emblematic vistas of Avernus and Elysium, the landscapes of scriptural exegesis lay

within the deserts of Sinai, Judea, and the Middle East. The two landscape traditions,

differing in source, reference, and means of representation, both inform the iconography

of the wilderness in the Middle Ages. Whereas the *locus amoenus* of classical poetry

represented a sensual background for epic or pastoral action, and the menacing forests of

the Silver Age suggested encounters with unseen peril and supernatural evil, the Judeo-

Christian desert was a place of trial and hardship, but also of conversion. Further, where

classical landscapes were rendered in such detail that the descriptions became a formal

trope of medieval rhetoric, the wilderness of the patristic writers is connected specifically

to scripture and is sometimes sketched in the barest of strokes. Associated as they were

with the Neo-Platonic schools of Rome and Alexandria, such writers as Origen and

Augustine viewed excessive description as a distraction to the senses, obscuring both the

intellect and the will.

The wilderness was an actual as well as a figurative location of early Christianity.

Believing retreat to the wilderness to be a worthy alternative to martyrdom, thousands of

men and women withdrew into the deserts of Egypt, North Africa, and the Middle East

after the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In Europe,

England, and Ireland, also, hermits withdrew into forest chapels for lives of prayer and solitude, or took to the sea in tiny boats on spiritual quests. In all parts of Christendom, as early as the fourth century, pilgrimage became a means to reenact sacred movement, while in both east and west, missionaries tested their faith against wilderness and heathen tribes. All of these wilderness experiences, however, drew their significance from interpretations of the wilderness passages in scripture.

The wilderness passages in Old and New Testament are both numerous and central to the narratives. Abraham is called to pass through a wilderness to the land of promise, the Hebrews wander for forty years in the wilderness, the Psalmist identifies wilderness with spiritual isolation, and in the synoptic gospels, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness after His baptism in the River Jordan (Genesis 12: 5; Exodus 14f.; Psalms 42, 63, 91, etc.; Matthew 4; Mark 1: 2; Luke 4: 1-13). [15] Both in scripture and in the related commentaries wilderness appears as a motif with both positive and negative connotations. In the Old Testament the desert is the home of the naturally religious man, the man untainted by the artifice of civilization. Seth and his son Enos, pastoral nomads, are the source of the earliest faith. Cain, on the other hand, the outcast who murdered his brother, is accounted the father of civilization, art, and craft (Genesis 4: 26; 4: 20-22). Later the Hebrews, having actually entered the land of promise, look back with nostalgia upon their days in the desert:

> To him which led his people through the wilderness, for his mercy
>
> endureth forever . . . who remembered us in our low estate . . . And hath
>
> redeemed us from our enemies . . . O give thanks to the God of heaven, for

his mercy endureth forever. (Psalm 136: 16, 23-24, 26)

[. . . qui duxit populum suum per desertum quoniam in aeternum

misericordia eius . . . quia in humilitate nostra memor fuit nostri . . . et

redemit nos ab inimicis nostris . . . confitemini Deo caeli quoniam in

aeternum misericordia eius. (Psalm 135: 16, 23-24, 26)]

And indeed, it is when, during the periods of the judges and the kings, the Hebrews

forsake their desert habits and consort with their more civilized neighbors, that they are

tempted to apostasy.

On the other hand, the wilderness was also a place of trial and danger for the

people led by Moses, and later for the prophets. When Moses is over-long away from

camp, the tribes complain to Aaron, "Up, make us gods . . . for as for this Moses, the man

that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him" (Exodus

32) [. . . surge fac nobis deos . . . Mosi enim huic viro qui nos aduxit de terra Awgypti

ignoramus quid acciderit. (32. 1). Even in Psalm 23, a poem of consolation, the comfort

is "in the presence of my enemies" (5) [. . . in conspectu meo mensam adversus . . . (22.

5)] and includes a passage through "the valley of the shadow of death" (4) [. . . in medis

umbrae mortis (22. 4)]. Beyond the dangers of the desert passage or retreat, the prophets

see the active threat of the wilderness which, as a punishment for sin, can overwhelm and

destroy the city: "I will take away the hedge thereof [the vineyard] and it shall be eaten

up; break down the wall thereof and it shall be trodden down, but there shall come up

briars and thorns . . ." (Isaiah 5. 5-6) [. . . et nunc ostendam vobis quid ego ficum vineae

meae auferam sepem eius et erit in direptionem diruam maceriam eius et erit in

conculcationem et ponam eam desertam non putabitur et non fodietur et ascendent vepres

et spinae (5: 5-6)]. As Jacques LeGoff points out in *The Medieval Imagination*, "Even

after the Hebrews had settled in towns and the urban symbolism of Jerusalem and Zion

had replaced the older symbolism of the desert, ambivalence toward desert values

persisted" (48).

In the New Testament also, the element of desert experience continues, and

becomes specifically associated with conversion. Like Moses (and like Aeneas), Jesus

passes through the wilderness, both as an individual and as a member of the covenant

community, before entering formally into his vocation. He came to the Jordan River to

be baptized by John (himself a "voice crying in the wilderness" (Matt 3: 13-17) [. . . vox

clamantis in deserto . . .]. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus retreats for "forty days"

into the wilderness, where he is tempted by Satan three times. In this instance, the desert

figures as an abode of demons and a place of trial, but it is also a place of spiritual

victory.

The wilderness as a place for test and conversion following baptism is further

developed by Paul in his letters to the missionary churches. Certainly influenced by the

Greek-speaking Jewish community in Alexandria, and perhaps influenced by Philo as

well, Paul incorporates the techniques of allegorical exegesis in his sermon structure. He

makes frequent use of wilderness and desert motifs from the Old Testament to interpret

the experiences of the church, connects the Christian experience of conversion with the

Hebrew experience in the desert. To the church in Corinth he writes:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye be ignorant, how that all our

fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were

baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea . . . but with many of them

God was not well pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

(1 Cor. 10: 1-5)

[. . . nolo enim vos ignorare fratres quoniam patres nostri onmes sub nube

fuerunt et omnes mare transierunt et omnes in Mose baptizati sunt in nube

et in mari . . . sed non in pluribus eorum beneptacitum est Deo nam

prostrati sunt in deserto. (5: 1-5)]

After the New Testament period, these three elements, desert exile and retreat,

trial and hardship, and victory or defeat, continue in the Christian representations of the

motif. Both literally and figuratively early Christians confronted the desert with equal

fear and desire. On the one hand, St. Anthony of Egypt (251? - 356) saw the desert as the

abode of demons and a place of spiritual combat, and St. Augustine of Hippo called the

desert "horrible and to be feared" though he adds that "nevertheless God has pitied us and

hath made a way for us in the desert." (OP 63. 6; 36. 261). On the other hand, St. Jerome

(342 - 420) said that entering the Syrian desert of Chalcis was to him like a second

baptism, so central was it to his spiritual progress. Nor was the use of the motif limited to

the monastic communities. The happily married St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330 - c. 395)

also saw in the Old Testament wilderness passages types for baptism and for the

Eucharist, as well as an actual locus for spiritual retreat and growth. [16]

The scriptural narratives of the desert thus become the basis of wilderness iconography in patristic writing, forming one of the most consistent of the allegorical motifs. From Philo and St. Paul to the schools of Alexandria to the commentaries of Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine, the allegorical and tropological methods of scriptural interpretation have been detailed at length by both Biblical and literary scholars. For purposes of the present discussion, however, three points are sufficient: First, the method included a reading of most passages on three levels, literal, moral, and allegorical. Even here in technical exegesis, the word *levels* implies a spatial relationship in which the allegorical level is *higher* than and therefore *superior* to the moral reading, and the moral reading is superior to the literal reading. These levels correspond to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of the spiritual life, and therefore to advancing stages of spiritual proficiency. Following the Hebrew scholar Philo Judaeus, Christian commentators represented spiritual experience in terms of space. Second, this approach to scripture is meditative and affective, intending to provide the reader with personal coherence within the context of an established tradition. As it developed through the Benedictine discipline of *lectio divina*, allegorical and typological readings of scripture stand in contrast to the other more objective methods of historical and textual criticism (methods of study also well known and widely practiced in the Middle Ages). [20] Third, through the popular media of sermons and visual art, the associations of allegorical interpretation eventually became embedded in popular imagination, so that not only scholars but also ordinary people could see an icon and make the appropriate connections.

Though the classical conventions of pastoral poetry were a significant influence on the rhetorical schools of the Middle Ages, the traditions of scriptural exegesis were of equal importance in the development of literary symbolism. As early as the third century, Origen's instruction to his "son" Gregory, Bishop of Caesera, summarizes the centrality of scripture, while also pointing to a particular concept of interpretation:

> Do you, then, sir, my son, study first of all the divine Scriptures. Study them, I say. For we require to study the divine writings deeply, lest we should speak of them faster than we think; and while you study these divine works with a believing and God-pleasing intention . . . seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages. . . (LOG 3; X. 296)

As suggested by this passage, scripture was studied from the beginning less for academic information than for "amendment of life." Further, a meditative study which harmonized diverse passages addressed the central issues of exegesis: to find a unified message in a collection of writing, to gloss distasteful or embarrassing passages, and to allow the scriptures to speak to the individual while maintaining the integrity of church teaching.

Among the patristic writers, two who are central to the understanding of wilderness in the Middle Ages were Origen of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo. Origen's work was accessible through his influence on other writers, including Augustine, and throughout the medieval period, Augustine's writings were available and widely respected. As The Rev. David Schley Shaff points out in his introduction to *De Doctrina Christiana*, "His exposition was looked upon as the highest authority; and a saying was

current, that, if one had Augustine on his side, it was sufficient (*Si Augustinus adest, sufficit ipse tibi*)" (I. vi). These two men, both pivotal to the development of Christian allegorical exegesis, also define the specifically Christian associations of the wilderness motif.

Origen (185-254), as one of the principle teachers in the schools of Alexandria was one of the first commentators to impose a system of reading through allegory as an aid to scriptural meditation. [17] He was also among the first to employ the wilderness as an icon for spiritual passage, including call, baptism, and conversion. Like Philo, and for much the same reason, Origin did not elaborate the landscapes of his commentaries with descriptive detail. Yet in Book IV of *De Principiis* , he connects the Old Testament passage of the Jordan River and the enacted covenant (Joshua 3) with the New Testament passage of the Jordan River where Jesus is baptized. In each of these passages Origen relates call and conversion to the trials of the desert, identifying Joshua as a type of Christ (whose given name Jesus in Hebrew is Joshua) (VI. I. 24-25; Vol. VI. 375). For Origen, the desert was an emblem for the transitions of conversion (*metanoia*) and baptism, as seen in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, showing John the Baptist as a wilderness guide who summons people to repentance:

> . . . come to the voice of him who cries in the wilderness . . . the voice which sounds beyond Jordan at the house of preparation, let them prepare themselves so that they may be in a state to receive the spiritual word, brought home to them by the enlightenment of the Spirit. (CJ IV. 26; X. 373)

For a precise understanding of Origen's use of the motif, it would be instructive to read his commentary on the temptation of Jesus as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew since that is the most detailed of the accounts in the synoptic gospels. Unfortunately, only the second book of that commentary still exists, beginning in the middle of the Beatitudes. The remaining passages do, however, include the themes of wilderness in the passage where Jesus withdraws to the desert for a space after the murder of John the Baptist (Matthew 10. 5. 3ff.). In this passage, Origen sees the wilderness literally as a place of safety from persecution, but figuratively as a place of trial and mission to Gentiles:

> The letter [of the gospel] teaches us to withdraw as far as it is in our power
> from those who persecute us . . . But since after the letter we must also
> investigate the place according to the mystical meaning, we must say that,
> when prophecy was plotted against . . . Jesus withdraws from the place in
> which prophecy was attacked and condemned; and He withdraws to the
> place which had been barren of God among the Gentiles, in order that the
> Word of God . . . might be among the Gentiles. (CM II. 23; X. 429)

Origen's levels of interpretation and his use of wilderness passages in connection with conversion and baptism become more explicit in the writings of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354 - 430). [18] According to Armand A. Maurer, "St. Augustine's approach . . . [was] a highly personal one. He was concerned with his own unhappiness, the fruit of his disordered thinking and moral life. Evil weighed heavily on him" (3). Even in his *Confessions* Augustine sees his experience as related to the poverty of the desert, using an image much like Dante's in the opening of the *Comedia*:

I went astray, O my God, yea, too much astray, from thee my Stay, in

these days of my youth, and I became to myself a land of want. (Conf. II.

10)

[defluxi abs te ego et erravi, deus meus, nimis devius ab stabilitate tua in

adulescentia et factus sum mihi regio egestatis.]

And later, speaking of his life before baptism, he adds:

Yet did I wander through the dark, and over the slippery [places], and I

groped out of myself after thee, but found not the God of my heart. (Conf.

VI. 1)

[et ambulabam per tenebras et lubricum, et quaerebam te foris a me, et non

inveniebam deum cordis mei.]

In view of the personal terms of his *Confessions*, it is not surprising that his view of

scripture is similarly personal and directed toward moral and spiritual growth. He says

that iterpretation should, without fail, "build up this two fold love of God and our

neighbor" (DDC I: 36. 40) [aedificet istam geminam charitatem Dei et proximi, nondum

intellexit (DCC 35. 40)], explaining that those aspects of scripture not literally tending

toward "purity of life" should be examined in the light of other clearer passages.

Though personal, however, Augustine's exegesis is never merely subjective. In

De Doctrina Christiana, for example, he shows more respect for the scriptural text than

Origen demonstrates, including attention to the literal meaning and to the related need

for the study of languages, along with some prudence and restraint in developing

symbolic interpretation. Augustine also supports the appropriate use of secular

disciplines and literature to refine and enrich the understanding of sacred reading. These principles of interpretation adopted in *De Doctrina Christiana* are embodied in his sermons and commentaries. Further, like Origen, Augustine represents spiritual growth in images of spatial movement, explaining that ". . . we are on the way, and that not a way that lies through space, but through a change of affections" (DDC 17. 16; 35. 527) [Porro quaniam in via sumus, nec via ista locorum est, sed affectuum. (DCC 17. 16; 34. 25)].

And finally, more than Origen, Augustine develops his analogies with some representational detail. For example, he likens our sins to a hedge of thorns which bars us from our heavenly home and speaks of the rocks, wild animals, and other dangers which bar our path. Especially in his *Commentary on the Psalms* he employs the image of wilderness passage, sometimes in ways that heighten the ambiguity of the motif. For example, in his interpretation of Psalm 63 ("my soul thirsteth for thee; my flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and thirsty land where no water is" (63: 1) [sitivit in te anima mea quam multipliciter tibi caro mea in terra deserta et invia et inaquosa (62: 2-3)]), he represents both the desolation of the desert and the potential there for refreshment:

> Evil is the desert, horrible, and to be feared: and nevertheless God hath
> pitied us, and hath made for us a way in the desert, Himself our Lord Jesus
> Christ: and hath made for us a consolation in the desert, in sending to us
> preachers of his Word: and hath given to us water in the desert, by
> fulfilling with the Holy Spirit his preachers, in order that there might be
> created in them a well of water springing up unto life everlasting. (OP 63.
> 6; 8. 260)

41

[Molum desertum, horribile et timendum! et tamen Deus misertus est

nostri, et fecit nobis viam in deserto, ipsum Dominum nostrum Jesum

Christum . . . et fecet nobis consolationem in deserto, mittendo ad nos

praedicatores verbi sui; et dedit nobis aquam in deserto, implens Spiritu

sancto praedicatores suos, ut fieret in eis fons salieutis in vitam aeternam.

(62. 6. 753; 36)]

Later, in his commentary on Psalm 91 Augustine further connects the desert

experiences of the Old and New Testaments, since this is the psalm which Satan quotes

in tempting Jesus in the wilderness (Matt 3-4). Augustine pursues a moral interpretation

of the psalm for the individual Christian and a prophetic interpretation in regard to the

church. This is, perhaps, most clear in his exegesis of verse 13 ("You will tread on the

asp and the basilisk; the lion and the dragon you will trample under foot" (91: 13) [. . .

super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis et conculcabis leonem et draconem (90:13)]).

These animals, especially the lion, later become recognized as emblematic beasts who

test the resolve of the desert sojourner.   In this passage, Augustine relates them to the

strength of the church through grace:

> Ye know who the serpent is, and how the Church treadeth upon him as she
>
> is not conquered, because she is on her guard against his cunning. And
>
> after what manner he is a lion and a dragon, I believe you know also,
>
> beloved. The lion openly rages, the dragon lies secretly in covert: the
>
> devil hath each of these forces and powers. When the Martyrs were being
>
> killed, it was the raging lion: when heretics are plotting, it is the dragon

creeping beneath us. Thou hast conquered the lion; conquer also the dragon. (OP 91.17; 8. 451)

[Quis sit serpens, nostris: quomodo super illum calcet Ecclesia, quae non vincitur, quia cavet astutias ipsius. Quemadmodum autem sit leo et draco, puto et hoc nosse Charitatem vestram. Leo aperti saevit; draco occulte insidiatur: ullramque vim et potestatem habet diabolus. Quando martyres occidebantur, leo erat saeviens: quando haeretici insidiantur, draco est suprepens. Vicisti leonem, vince et draconem . . . (90: 2. 9; 37. 1168)]

Finally, his commentary on Psalm 42 ("Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks...") he reflects that the hart "inflamed with thirst" by the serpents of vice, flees most keenly to the "Fountain of Truth." In addition to individual desire, the hart also represents the "blessed company" of the church:

> It is reported of stags . . . that when they wither wander in the herds or when they are swimming to reach some other parts of the earth, that they support the burdens of their heads on each other, in such a manner as that one takes the lead, and others follow, resting their heads upon him, as again others who follow do upon them, and others in succession to the very end of the herd; but the one who took the lead in bearing the burden of their heads, when tired, returns to the rear, and rests himself after his fatigue by supporting his head just as did the others; by thus supporting his head just as did the others; by thus supporting what is burdensome, each in turn, they all accomplish their journey, and do not abandon each other. . . .

(OP 42. 4; 24. 133)

[. . . dicuntur ergo cervi vel quando in agmine suo ambulat, vel quando

natando alias terrarum partes petunt, onera capitum suorum super se

invicem ponere, ita ut unus praecedat, et sequantur qui supra eum capita

ponant, et supra illos alii consequentes, et deinde alii, donec agmen

finiatur; ille autem unus qui pondus capitis in primatu portabat, fatigatus

redit ad posteriora, ut alius ci succedat, qui portet quod illi portabat, atque

ille fatigionem suam recreet posito capte, sicut et caeteri ponebant: ita

vicissim portando quod grave est, et viam peragunt, et invecem se non

deserunt. (41: 4; 36. 465)]

In both of these readings, with the hart as individual, and with the hart as a member of the

church, the interpretation associates wilderness space with the acts of conversion and

baptism. [19]

Thus the conventions of exegesis developed by Origen, Augustine and their

followers not only developed a meditative and symbolic way of reading scripture, but

also through interpretive passages laid the basis for wilderness as a consistent and

recognizable literary figure. As the *locus amoenus* derives from Homer and Theocritus

through Virgil and later from the schools of rhetoric, the desert comes from scripture first,

and then from the commentaries, into the popular media of preaching and the visual arts.

Both from classical and from exegetical sources, the representation of the image

arise naturally from the conditions of the particular narrative. As Augustine says, the

literal meaning should give rise to the figurative interpretations. And regardless of the

degree of detail in representation, in content the motif came to include three elements:
First the motif relates a choice of direction or vocation, often related to baptism by a
reference to springs or rivers. Second, a period of trial in the desert tests the firmness of
the choice or the conversion. Third, a sign validates the test at the end of the journey.

The use of the wilderness motif as an image for spiritual transition did not remain
the province of the eastern and North African commentators, however, nor was it an
exclusively literary device. From the end of the Empire, as Jacques LeGoff explains:

> The face of Christian Europe was a great cloak of forests and moorlands
>
> perforated by relatively fertile cultivated clearings . . . a collection,
>
> juxtaposed, of manors, castles, and towns arising out of the midst of
>
> stretches of lands which were uncultivated and deserted. (133)

Hermitage, land of exile, or abode of dragons, the forest was the edge of the picture and
the boundary which must be passed, a place of danger, of challenge, and perhaps of
victory.

As the literary traditions of classics and scripture formed the outlines of the
wilderness, the hermits, missionaries, and pilgrims colored the details in folklore and in
chronicle. Of particular importance, the English and Irish contributions to the motif are
apparent in three related areas: the development of an hermetical tradition related to the
monasteries, the missionary journeys into northern Europe, and the advent of pilgrimage
as a spiritual exercise. The hermetical movement was a central feature of the early Irish
and English church, where some hermits, usually men, withdrew to live lives of solitude
in the forest. In traveling north, the first missionaries translated the rigors of desert

asceticism into the heroism of frontier encounters on the border of settled land. And

beginning as early as the fourth century, pilgrimage allowed an imaginative participation

in the mysteries of the gospel.

The hermits in Ireland and later in England were a part of the Celtic monastic

system. Under the direction of a superior, the hermit undertook the discipline of solitude

in the forest or on the rocky sea shore. Only a small chapel, a cell, and perhaps a

vegetable plot separated the hermit from the wasteland. These men daily endured the

dangers of wilderness: inclement weather, dangerous animals, and marauding outlaws, as

well as the spiritual dangers of loneliness and boredom. For some the isolation of the

green chapel was a life-long vocation, though they might be under the nominal discipline

of a nearby abbot, with only hospitality to the occasional stranger and the contacts

required by sacraments and spiritual direction to interrupt the silence. Others, like their

eastern brothers Jerome and Anthony, undertook some time alone as a temporary retreat

from lives otherwise occupied with active work. Driven from his monastery by his lax

brethren, St. Ciaran of Clonmacnoise followed a stag (no doubt a relative of St.

Augustine's emblematic beast) through the wilderness to the spot for his retreat, and later

his new monastery. The Irish Abbot, St. Brendan (484 - 577 or 583) braved the ocean

storms in search of paradise at the same time that other more worldly travelers prayed for

deliverance from death at sea. Other English and Irish saints, such as Colomba and

Cuthbert, found spiritual challenge in the isolation of their monasteries. St. Colombanus

(550 - 615), an Irish missionary and a man of great influence in the early church,

eventually found repose in the quiet and relative solitude of the forest near Bobbio in

Italy. [20] These men and others all played a decisive role in the early church in Europe,

both in lore and in history. However, St. Cuthbert and St. Brendan, may serve to

represent two characteristic facets of the wilderness in the Irish and British traditions,

especially those of hermitage, mission, and quest.

St. Cuthbert (634 - 687), a teacher, administrator, and bishop, spent two protracted

periods of retreat on the relatively isolated island of Lindisfarne. His first biographer, a

unnamed monk of his community, concentrated on his desire for solitude and on the

miracles of his ministry. Though basing his account on this earlier source, the Venerable

Bede gives a rather more active account of the life of the saint. But in both reports,

Cuthbert emerges as a wilderness figure in his desire for solitude, in his confrontations

with "apparitions," and in his miracles associated with feeding and with wild animals. [21]

According to the monk of Lindisfarne, Cuthbert abandoned popular admiration

and worldly honor to live withdrawn on the island of Farne:

> . . . which is in the midst of the sea and surrounded on every side by water,
>
> a place where, before this, almost no one could remain alone for any
>
> length of time on account of the various illusions caused by devils (3. 3;
>
> 96-97)
>
> [. . . undique in medio mari fluctibus circumcinctam, solitariam uitam
>
> concupiscens conpetiuit. Ubi prius pene nullus potuit solus propter uarias
>
> demonum fantasias . . .]

Though he preferred to remain in this solitude, he was eventually elected bishop and

forced back into a more active life. In old age, he returned to Lindisfarne when he

foresaw his death.

Though the monk speaks of Cuthbert's struggles to build a protective wall and hut on the island, according to Bede, the island was not deserted, but inhabited by a small group of rather undisciplined monks. Therefore, in addition to solitary prayer, Cuthbert was partly occupied with bringing the community into some order. Yet even though connected with a small community, his miracles during this period allude to relate his life to scriptural wilderness passages. On one occasion, he and his helper are fed with fish provided by an obliging eagle, and on one of his missionary journeys, when he and two brothers are marooned during a storm, they are fed with fresh, cleaned and washed dolphin steaks provided on a deserted beach. Once when he had been praying standing up to his armpits in the frigid Irish Sea, his feet were dried and warmed by the ministrations of "sea animals"--perhaps otters or seals. Both the monks of Lindisfarne and later, Bede, associated these events with scriptural wilderness passazges from the prophets.

The life of Cuthbert, related in comparatively objective historical sources, and moving between solitude and action, represents one aspect of wilderness in Celtic Christianity. Another is the religious romance of Abbot Brendan's mythic quest. Of course the spiritual allegory of the sea voyage was not peculiar to the Celts. Augustine speaks of the sailor who is:

> . . . the soul passing over the world in wood . . . and his own heart is the vessel in which each sails; not can he suffer shipwreck if his thoughts are only good (SNTL XIII. 1; 1. 6: 304)
>
> [Navigantes sunt animae ligno saeculum transeuntes . . . . et unus quisque

in corde suo navigat: nec facit naufragium si bona cogitat. (SS 63. 424;

42)]

Later he describes the spiritual wind which:

> . . . should drive us on, and stir up the affections of our souls . . . that we
> may sail on a tranquil sea, and so come to our country" (SNTL XIII. 3; 1.
> 4: 305).

> [Sed tamen quia homines sumus, si ventus impluerit, si affectum animae
> nostrae moverit, non desperemus: Christum excitemus, ut in tranquillo
> navigemus, et ad patriam veniamus. (63. 425; 42)]

St. Ephraim of the Desert combines sea and desert metaphors, real and metaphoric

journeys:

> In the voyage the ship encountered perils, first in a storm and afterwards
> from a sea monster, but [Ephriam] was delivered from both by his faith,
> which enabled him with words of power and the sign of the cross to
> rebuke the winds and the waves into calm, and to slay the monster. (NPNF
> VIII. 126)

The historical Brendan (486-575) was an Irish abbot remarkable for his monastic

foundations, his spiritual direction, and his energetic travels. [22] He founded monasteries

at Colfert, Annadown, Inishadroum, and Ardfert. He is believed to have visited Colomba

in Scotland, to have founded a monastery in Wales, and to have traveled as far afield as

Brittany (Farmer 11). By the ninth century his cult was active in Ireland and northern

England, and an anonymous biography, *The Acts of St. Brendan*, began to be circulated at

that time. Sometime in the late ninth or early tenth century, the better known *Voyage of St. Brendan* was written, probably by an Irish monk living in the Rhineland (Farmer 11-12). The *Voyage* was very popular during the Middle Ages; more than a hundred Latin manuscripts still exist, as well as translations into several European languages, including Old Norse.

The earlier biography is a conventional account of a saintly abbot, including foundations, teachings, miracles, and missionary travel. Though none of the episodes in the *Voyage* contradicts the *Acts*, the form and purpose of the later narrative is quite different, a spiritual romance and a quest for the Earthly Paradise. In substance, the account is an extended meditation on the nature of time and the passages of human life. After hearing a report from a monk and kinsman, Barinthus, of an island of delights, the Land of Promise, Brendan and a few of his monks embark in a small coracle to find the mystic place. In the ensuing seven year journey, they encounter icebergs, volcanos, storms at sea, and isolated communities on several islands. [23] On several occasions, Brendan orders the monks to slip their oars and allow the wind to blow them where it will. Yet the travel is far from random. The days are governed by the regular sequence of the monastic offices, while the year is marked by the major feasts of the Christian cycle from Christmas to Lent to Easter to Pentecost. Further, while the features of some of the once-visited islands are emblematic of doctrine or discipline, the islands where the monks return yearly for the major feasts suggest the stability of practice within the motion of the spiritual life. Each year, from Maundy Thursday until Holy Saturday, the monks rest on an island where they are fed by miraculous bread, an image for the

Eucharist. On Holy Saturday, the liturgical period of passage from death to resurrection, they pass the night on a mysterious small island out to sea. On their first visit here, they find an island "with no grass . . . very little wood, and no sand on the shore" 4. 127 [illa insula petrosa sine ulla herba. Silva rara erat ibi]. The monks spend the vigil in prayer, but Brendan stays in the boat. At Easter dawn, each monk says his mass, and then they try to build a fire--at which point the island pitches "like a wave" and the monks scatter to the coracle in fear. Brendan later explains to his followers that ". . . it was no island you were upon, but a fish, the largest of all that swim in the ocean . . . its name is Jasconius"(4. 127) [Insula non est, ubi fuimus, sed piscis, prior omnium natancium in oceano . . . Qui habet nomen Jasconius]. For Easter, they repair to another island with beautiful white birds, where they spend the season, and are "regaled with such spiritual viands until the octave of the Easter festival" (5.31) [Igitur sanctus Brendanus usque in octauum diem reficiebat fratres suos festiuitate Paschali]. Though they continue to travel, and to encounter wonders and adventure, every year they return to the island of bread, to the whale, and to the island of birds for the celebrations from Maundy Thursday through the Easter season.

In the narrative of the voyages, the motif of wilderness plays two roles. First, it is the boundary of every event, and the space through which Brendan and the monks must pass in order to move from one island to another. On one occasion near the beginning of Lent Brendan orders the monks . "Take in your oars and cast loose the sails, for the Lord will guide our boat whithersoever He willeth" (7. 143) [mitte remiges in nauim et laxate uela. Vbicumque uulte Deus enim gubernare illam, faciet]. At another time the coracle is

pursued by giant sea beasts (perhaps squid), and the monks are delivered through prayer by the intervention of a still bigger creature, probably a whale (8. 147). Several times they are forced to circle an island for days until the wind is favorable or a harbor appears. In each of these instances, the sea is, for the monks, an uninhabited and uncontrollable wilderness, a place through which they must pass in order to attain the visions on the various islands.

The second use of the motif is even more pointed in the repeated encounters with Jasconius the whale on every Holy Saturday. The vigil of Easter represents the most profound transition of the liturgical year, the move from death and the tomb to resurrection and life. From the exegetical reading of the Old Testament narrative of Jonah, Christians associated the whale with the movement from death to resurrection, since Jonah was "dead" in the whale's belly for three days before he was cast up on the beach, and Jesus was in the tomb from Friday until Sunday morning of the first Easter. In the *Voyage*, Brendan and his monks spend every Lent at sea, just as Jesus spent the forty days of his temptation in the desert, and after a short stay on one of the islands to celebrate Maundy Thursday, Brendan spends the vigil of Easter not only at sea, but on the back of a whale, a symbolic action which replicates the spiritual transition central to the season.

Brendan's journey is not only a quest, but also a pilgrimage, since he undertakes a ritual passage intended to reenact sacred time. But a broader reading would be as "the journey of this life," since when Brendan has finally attained the Island of Promise, a young man, probably an angel, tells him:

This is the land you have sought after for so long a time; but you could not

hitherto find it, because Christ our Lord wished first to display to you His

divers mysteries in this immense ocean. . . . the days of your earthly

pilgrimage must [soon] draw to a close, when you may rest among your

saintly brethren. (14. 174)

[Ecce terram quam quesisti per multum tempus. Ideo non potuisti statim

[illam] inuenire quia Deus uoliut tibi ostendere diuersa sua secreta in

oceano magno. . . . Appropinquant enim dies peregrinacionis tue, ut

dormias cum patribus tuis.]

The "wonders of the deep" are the heart of the journey, as the island of promise is its

earthly reward.

As the hermits and voyagers of Ireland and England chose wilderness solitude or

sea quest in pursuit of spiritual vision, other churchmen and women undertook voluntary

exile in the northern forests of Europe to extend the benefits of salvation to the Germanic

tribes. [24] These missionaries found their trials to be at least equal to those of the others.

As Gernot Wieland points out:

Since the 'paths of exile' . . . were so horrible, few would voluntarily give

up their parents, their homeland, and their friends . . . . Nonetheless, there

were a few who embraced the hardships of exile , monks and clerics who

went on a *peregrinatio Christi*, in the hope that by leaving their earthly

homeland they would gain the heavenly one. (193)

The English Bishop Wilfrid while on a journey to Rome, became one of the earliest

missionaries, when he established an outpost in Frisia in 678-679. He was followed by

Willibrord, whom Bede says was "outstandingly eminent as a priest in both rank and

merit" (V. 10; 129), and by Black Hewald and White Hewald, who were martyred by the

Saxons, their bodies cast into the Rhine (Bede V. 10; 250). [9] As all of these

missionaries spread into northern Europe, they crossed the stormy North Sea and camped

in the same cold and uncanny forest which had daunted the Roman legions. Like Paul and

the other New Testament missionaries, they found themselves in hard and difficult

places:

> In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers . . . in perils
>
> by the heathen . . . in perils in the wilderness, in perils at sea, in perils
>
> among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in
>
> hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. (II Cor. 11: 26-
>
> 27)
>
> [in itineribus saepe, periculis fluminum, periculis latronum, . . . periculis
>
> in solitudine, periculis mari, periculis in falsis fratribus; in labore et
>
> aerumna in vigiliis multis in fame et siti in ieiuniis multis in frigare et
>
> nuditate.]

Among the English missionaries, one of the most influential was St. Boniface

(born Winfirth, 680 - 754), who found a desert in the wilds of northern Europe. As a

young man of good family , he could be assured of a prestigious role in the English

church. Instead, he determined to preach to the northern tribes of Germany. Some of

these tribes were nominally Christian, as associates and allies of the Merovingien court,

but others had never lived under the influence of Roman civilization. Nor was he alone in this missionary effort, since, as Edward Kylie says, "English men and women . . . came at his invitation to transplant the bloom of their native piety and culture" (12).

Though much of Boniface's work was of a diplomatic sort, negotiating between court and papacy and attempting to reconcile the social customs of a foreign people with the canon law of Rome, he also spent years traveling the more isolated regions of the Rhine valley attempting to minister to people who still worshiped oak trees. Indeed, his pastoral act still most widely remembered is his destruction of the Druidical oak at Geismar. On this occasion, he was between a wild mob of pagans seeking to stone him, and the oak tree which was the center of their worship. Though the tree was huge, it fell fell neatly into four sections, at one blow of his ax, forming a cross. The heathens were converted on the spot, and Boniface used the wood of the forest religion to build a church dedicated to St. Peter.

Though he was at times connected with the Merovingen court, nevertheless, he and his correspondents, without fail describe his work, both diplomatic and missionary, in wilderness images. In a letter on the conversion of the German tribes, Bishop Daniel of Winchester speaks to him of "the stony and barren hearts of the pagans" and sees him as a "voice crying in the wilderness." (Greenaway 48). He himself speaks of his "earthly pilgrimage" in terms of wilderness journey in a letter to the Abbess Eadburga of Thanet:

> . . . for our sins, the way of our wandering is beset by tempests of many
>
> kinds. On every hand is struggle and grief, fighting without and fear
>
> within. (122)

Boniface even sees much of his work among the Merovingians as time in the wilderness. In another letter to Eadburga, he speaks of the Frankish court as a "lair" and the false clergy therein as "ravening wolves" (19).

Bede recounts that in 754 Bonifice, "also known as Winfrith, bishop of the Franks, with fifty two others, won the martyr's crown" (Continuations 754; Moore MS). He was stoned by a band of Frisians at a meeting near Dokkum, on the Rhine River, having foreseen his death at the beginning of the journey. Even after his death, his friends recalled his life in terms of wilderness and wandering. Writing to Boniface's successor, Bishop Lullus, Bishop Cuthbert of Canterbury says, ". . . the martyr Boniface of blessed memory, in the midst of pagan tormentors . . . [completed his] pilgrimage filled with cruel dangers, for love of [our] eternal home" (184). And another friend, Willibald of Wessex, said of him that "his heart was more often away in pilgrim places in some far country" (Greenaway 30).

It is hard for us to imagine a time when Europe was only sparsely settled, and yet Boniface spent much of his career as a missionary on a frontier--to put it in American terms, in "Indian country"--among tribes who had never known the influence of Rome or its empire. As W. Douglas Simpson points out:

> . . . not only did Boniface plant Christianity firmly in the soil of Germany, but he was responsible, more than any other man, for planting with it the Romano-Christian civilization of the early Middle Ages in lands where the Roman legions had never trod" (2).

When Boniface and the other missionaries went abroad, they went for life, accepting permanent exile in the northern wilderness. Other travelers, both lay and cleric, undertook more limited journeys combining spiritual discipline with thirst for adventure and variety, by going on pilgrimage. The object of a pilgrimage is to visit in person the scenes of Christ's life, or later, the scenes of saintly relics or miracles. There, through acts of devotion, the pilgrim could appropriate the sacred mysteries as a part of his or her own personal experience. According to Evelyn Underhill:

> Under this image of a pilgrimage--an image as concrete and practical, as remote from the romantic and picturesque, for the medieval writers who used it, as a symbolism of hotel and railway train would be to us--the mystics contrived to summarize and suggest much of the life history of the ascending soul, the development of spiritual consciousness. The necessary freedom and detachment of the traveler, his departure from his normal life and interests, the difficulties, enemies, and hardships encountered on the road, the length of the journey, the variety of the country, the dark night which overtakes him, the glimpses of destination far away--all these are seen more and more as we advance in knowledge to constitute a transparent allegory of the incidents of man's progress from the unreal to the real. (129)

While the monasteries and the missions were limited to the activities of a relatively small group, as early as the fourth century, pilgrimage to Jerusalem had become

a very popular combination of devotion and recreation, thereby adding the fourth element of the historical wilderness. Many newly converted or newly revitalized Christians began to travel to the Middle East to visit the holy places described in the New Testament. In 413 the English monk and heretic Pelagius traveled to Jerusalem, for example, where he was denounced by St. Jerome as "an old fool dulled by Scotch porridge" (Tuchman 27). Both Jerome and Augustine had a poor opinion of pilgrimage as an act of devotion, since many of the pilgrims behaved in decidedly worldly ways. Nevertheless, pilgrimage became a firmly established practice early in the Middle Ages. Eventually even St. Boniface advised the Abbess Bugga, ". . . if you can in no wise have freedom and a quiet mind at home on account of worldly men [then] you should obtain freedom of contemplation by means of a pilgrimage" (56).

Most countries could boast their own pilgrimage narratives; the first such account in England was that of the French Bishop Arculf who was shipwrecked in Scotland on his way home from the Holy Land about 690. He related his adventures to Abbot Adamnan of Iona, who wrote down his travelers tales and descriptions. Bede later refers to the account in his history, explaining that the story is "useful to many, and especially to those who live very far from the places where the patriarchs and apostles dwelt" (V. 15; 263). Because of this importance, Bede includes in his *History* selections from Arculf's tale, descriptions of Jesus' birthplace, the site of the passion and resurrection and the place of the ascension (V. 16-17; 263-266).

Adamnan's version of the story exists in several manuscripts, testimony of its popularity and general acceptance in a time when each word had to be copied by hand.

Arculf devotes much of his narrative to the various routes to Jerusalem (by land and sea) and to his experiences at the pilgrimage sites. Yet he also attests that he made this journey as a response to a call to stronger piety, and he devotes considerable space to the dangers of travel both on the sea and in the desert. It should be remembered that between cities and manors, throughout Europe and the Middle East, the land was wild and unpoliced. A pilgrimage might beentertaining, but, especially in the early Middle Ages, it was also a dangerous journey undertaken through wild country for the purpose of penance or as a response to conversion.

These, then, are the sources of wilderness iconography: the *locus amoenus* of pastoral and epic poetry and the harsh desert of patristic writing, the historical events related to monastery, mission, and pilgrimage. The classical motif is literary, rich in sensual detail, while the exegetical tradition, also largely literary, includes few representative details. The historical events surrounding the settlement of northern Europe connect the literary and exegetical devices to cultural memory in the written media of chronicle and romance, as well as in the popular traditions of oral history. In subsequent art and literature, the literary techniques merged with the historical events to produce an icon of landscape which was thematically significant and consistent. The Anglo Saxon materials particularly exhibit the elements of frontier heroism. Later, in romance, the forest appears as a place of trial for knightly honor. Eventually, the wilderness motif becomes a part of the representation of psychological and spiritual experience in the works of Dante, Chaucer, and the Pearl Poet. In substance, the

wilderness icon, which had its inception in the spatial metaphors of the Neo-Platonists, has become the link between the image of the city and the garden as part of the western representation of consciousness.

END NOTES

[1] The description of spiritual development as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive *ways*, a formulation which makes implicit use of a metaphor involving both space and movement, was first described in western ascetical theology by Dionysius, who was also one of the chief sources in the Middle Ages of a Neo-Platonic view of mystical theology.

[2] A Latin translation from medieval manuscripts and including Chalcidius' commentary has been edited by P.J. Jensen and J.H. Waszink (London: Warburg Institute, 1962).

[3] Philo Judaeus [of Alexandria]. *De Somnis* [*Treatise on Dreams*]. A parallel translation in French, Latin and Greek. No translator or editor cited (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962; Vol. 19).

[4] *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna (London: The Medici Society, 1917); Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, including his listing of the tractates, *Vita di plotino ed ordine dei suoi libri*; text in Greek, Latin, and Italian. Ed. Giovanni Publieso Carratelli (Naples: Biblioteca della Parola del passato 3, 1946). The works of Porphry were denounced as heresy by a church council in the fifth century. Although Plotinus does not

refer to Christianity directly himself, Porphry attacks the new church for its insistence on the resurrection of the body.

[5] English quotations from *The Odyssey* are from the Robert Fitzgerald translation (New York: Everyman Library, 1910).

[6] Except for the passage translated by Andrew Lange and cited by Curtius, the English quotations from *Idylls* are from a verse translation by Barriss Mills (West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 1950).

[7] English quotations from *Bucolics* are from the translation by Levi Hurt and V. R. Osborn (New York: Translation Publishing Co., 1961); the Latin text is from P. Vergili Maronis, *Opera: Vol. I: Bucolica et Georgica* (Rome: Typis Regiae Officinae Polygraphicae, 1961).

[8] English quotations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are from the translation by Mary M. Innes (New York: Penguin, 1955) . The Latin text is from P. Ovidii Nasonis, *Metamorphoseon*. Ed. Vitus Loers. (Lipsiae: Apud Fridericum, 1843).

[9] For a more detailed analysis of Ovid's landscape as a space for sexual violence, see Marcel Detienne's *Dionysos Slain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. She observes that "the hunter's terrain [becomes] the privileged place in myth for marginal sexual

behavior. . . . As a liminal place where socially dominant sexual relations are as if suspended, the land of the hunt is open to the subversion of amorous pursuits" (26).

[10] English quotations from Lucan's *Pharsalia* are from the translation by Jane Wilson Joyce (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Latin text is from the Loeb Classic Library dual-language edition translated and edited by J.D. Duff (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).

[11] Both Latin text and English translations of Statius' *Thebaid* are from J.H. Mozley's dual language edition, Loeb Classic Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).

[12] English quotations from *The Aeneid* are from C.Day Lewis' translation (Garden City: Doubleday, 1952); Latin text is from *Opera*, Vol. 2 (Rome: Typis Regiae Officianae Polygraphicae, 1961).

[13] It should be noted that the Elysian Fields of *The Aeneid* become Limbo in Dante's *Inferno*. The pleasant, bland, and slightly melancholy "Happy Place" which was as much as Virgil could hope for or the best he chose to imagine, becomes his resting place in Dante's Christian afterlife.

[14] See, for example, Mumford's *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926). Although Mumford's material relates directly to American culture, his theory that groups select incidents and myths from their historical past to shape a national identity has application beyond American studies.

[15] Most modern readers of English, even Roman Catholics, are most familiar with the King James Bible or one of the more recent translations. In the Middle Ages, however, the Latin Vulgate, prepared by Jerome in about A.D. 304 and following the canon of the Council of Jamnia (A.D. 99) was the usual text. The Jamnia canon differed in some respects from later versions, and therefore, the books, chapters, and verses of the Vulgate vary somewhat from the later English translations. The numbers for the psalms are especially confusing. As a general rule for Psalms 9 through 147 the Vulgate numbers are one higher than those of the King James ; that is, KJV Psalm 11 is Vulgate Psalm 12. This is not, however, a perfect rule.

Because the Vulgate passages often place different emphasis or interpretation on the translations, medieval scholars find it useful to at least refer to the Latin text along with the modern translation. For this reason, I include English translations from the KJV, with appropriate numbers, followed by the Vulgate passages with their numbers.

[16] For a detailed account of the early desert dwellers, see Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers: Translations from the Latin*, London, Collins, 1936.

[17] All quotations from the works of Origen are from the texts found in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* and are cited by those volume and page numbers.

[18] English quotations from the works of Augustine are taken from the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* and cited by volume and page number. Latin texts are from *Patrologia Latina,* and cited by volume and column number.

[19] Because of the conventional exegesis of Psalm 42 and because of the use of that psalm in the rite of baptism, the stag came to be a frequent icon in visual art associated with the baptistry. See, for example, the fifth century mosaic on the floor of the baptistry at Salona, Dalmatia. The pair of stags and the inscription "Sicut areola praeparata ad inrigationes aquarum sic anima mea praeparata est ad te Deus" [Like as the Hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O. Lord] (Psalm 41. 1) are placed at the entrance of the room--in fact, on the border between the world and the sacred space of the rite.

[20] Before the Rule of St. Benedict became the dominant monastic form in the British Isles, the Rule of Colombanus was the customary for both English monasteries and for the missionaries they sent to Europe.

[21] Citations are from the anonymous *Vita*, but with reference to Bede's account also. See *Two Lives of Cuthbert: A Life by and Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, a dual-language edition edited and translated by Bertram Colegrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[22] Brendan's travels probably included the Orkneys and the Hebrides. According to one legend, he went as far afield as Iceland, and even to North America. Timothy Severin demonstrated the possibility of navigating the North Sea in the small coracles as described by the *Navagatio*, and relates his own journey in *The Brendan Voyage* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978). English quotations are from Denis O'Donoghue's *Lives and Legends of St. Brendan the Voyager* (Dublin, 1893), and the Latin Text is from *Navagatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* edited by Carl Selmer (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1989).

[23] Many the details regarding the Anglo-Saxon missions are related in Bede's *History*. For additional information, see Peter Hunter Blair's *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, (Cambridge UP, 1977) and Gernot Wieland's "England in the German Legends of Anglo-Saxon Saints" in *Texts and Manuscripts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Helmut Gneuss on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday* (Ed: Michael Korhammer, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992).

[24] For a discussion of Boniface's missions and of the attendant historical situation, see J.M. Wallace-Hadrill's "A Background to St. Boniface's Mission" in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock.* (Ed: Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes, Cambridge: University Press, 1971).

[25] The citations from the letters of Boniface are from Ephraim Emerton, *The Letters of St. Boniface* (New York: NYU Press, 1978).

CHAPTER 3

"SONNY, WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE..."

THE MEMORY OF A FRONTIER WILDERNESS

The previous chapter covered several areas of European experience which have

shaped the conventional uses of wilderness landscape as a motif for spiritual or emotional

transition. The medieval reading of wilderness, though coming from such diverse sources

as Neo-Platonic philosophy and experience on the German frontier, results in an image

for emotional transition; however, both objects and techniques of representation vary

somewhat in detail from one period to another. In the visual art and literature of the tenth

and eleventh centuries, the object is often an actual frontier represented as space outside

the settlements, a location which comes to represent a psychological or spiritual

boundary as well. This space is sometimes elaborated with descriptive detail, but often

occurs simply as the designated setting for an episode. The narratives of a literal frontier,

the techniques for representing space and movement, and the related associations first

reflect an image for experience between settled life and the dangerous outlands and then

suggest the threatening but necessary movement from spiritual stasis to spiritual progress.

The medieval frontier, much like the frontier of the American West, is comprised

of harsh landscape, menacing natives, and often, a sense of supernatural danger. Further,

the line between settlement and wilderness is not static, first, because the pioneers push

the limits of settlement into the frontier and second, because the wilderness itself is aggressive toward settlement. A lapse in vigilance or a stroke of bad luck may easily allow the wilderness to overcome the homestead, manor, or village. Finally, in addition to the physical dangers, the emotional threats of loneliness, isolation, and fear challenged the wilderness traveler at every step.

The great German woods, the Ardennes and the Black Forest, which had daunted Caesar's legions and oppressed the early Christian missionaries, continued to haunt the imaginations of settlers and pilgrims. The Silver Age poet, Statius, writing after the early incursions of the Roman legions into northern Europe, describes the "feel" of such a forest in *The Thebaid:*

> A forest full of years and bent with mighty age, its foliage forever uncut, stands accessible to no sunlight; no winter storms have cut it back, no south wind rules, or Getic Boreas, driven by the Bear. Beneith is hidden quiet, and empty terror keeps the silences; the phantom of excluded light is scarcely pale. (4. 419-424)
>
> [Silva capax aevi validaque incurva senecta, aeternum intonsae frondis, stat pervia nullis solibus; haud illam brumae minuere, Notusve ius habet aut Getica Boreas impactus ab Ursa. subter operta quies, vacuusque silentia servat horror et exclusae pallet male lucis imago.]

By the time of the Roman Empire, the forests of the Mediterranean, when they remained at all, had been harvested for generations for firewood and timber. The spaces between the trees were open, light, and dry. The northern forests, on the other hand, were

wet, sometimes swampy. The evergreens and hard woods were surrounded by thick underbrush, with few trails and no landmarks. By day, these woods were dark. At night the silence was punctuated by strange sounds and misty lights. Probably the noises were caused by settling wood and underbrush, and the lights by bio-luminescence or foxfire. However, even for those of us who think we understand the physics of foxfire, the sight is unnerving. For early travelers, the sounds and lights seemed unnatural, rendering the forest the abode of demons, witches, ogres, and other emissaries of spiritual violence.

Even the human inhabitants of the forest were a danger to those who merely traveled there. The northern tribes, resisting the advances of the Roman legions and well familiar with the trails and terrain carried on an effective guerrilla campaign against the legions first and later the missionaries. Vellieus Paterculus describes the ambush of Varus and three Roman legions in the Teutoberg forest in 17 BC: [1]

> . . . the ground, which was slippery around the roots and the bases of the trunks, made their walking very treacherous, and the tree tops breaking off and falling down, threw them into confusion. Then, while the Romans were in such a helpless state, the barbarians, who were acquainted with the trails, suddenly surrounded them from all sides. (Garrison 56. 19-21)

Nor were these tactics confined to the forests of Germany. During the Roman invasion of Britain in 43 BC, Caesar's legions were indignant at being forced to fight ". . . outside the limits of the known world (Ellis 13). Their distress was well founded, for one modern historian describes the perils of Caesar's forest campaign in Britain against Caswallon and the Cassi thus:

The Romans pressed on grimly through an apparently deserted

countryside, but the woods were infested on every side by watchful

enemies, waiting to seize stragglers and scouting parties. (Ellis 131)

The collapse of the Roman Empire certainly did nothing to quell the dangers of

the forest. While campaigning in Spain, Charlemagne's rear guard is attacked by

Gascons in the wooded mountain passes of the Pyrenees in an encounter which became,

in the twelfth century, *Chanson de Roland*. [2] The ninth century historian Einhard had a

more direct account of the event:

While his army was marching in a long column, because of a narrow pass,

some Gascons lying in ambush at the top of the mountain--for the thick

woods which are very plentiful in that area afford a great opportunity for

sneak attacks--swoop down on the last elements of the baggage train and

on the rearguard protecting the main body of the army. They [the

Gascons] drive them back into the valley, join battle, and massacre every

one of them. Then, having looted the baggage train, they disperse under

cover of night which was falling. On this occasion, the Gascons had the

advantage of light armament and control of the terrain; the Franks were

greatly hindered by their heavy armament and lower position. . . . This

reverse could not be avenged immediately because the enemy, having

done this deed, dispersed in such a way that no one could even tell in

which direction they might have been sought. (Brault 2-3)

[Nam cum agmine longo, ut loci et angustiarum situs permittebat,

porrectus iret exercitus, Wascones in summi montis verice positis insidiis-

-est enim locus ex opacitate silvarum, quarum ibi maxima est copia,

insidiis ponendis oportunus--extremam inpedimentorum partem et eos

qui, novissimi agminis incedentes subsidio, praecedentes tuebantur

desuper incursantes in subjectam vallem deiciunt consertoque cum eis

proelio usque ad unum omnes interficiunt ac, direptis inpedimentis, noctis

beneficio quae jam instabat protecti, summa cum celeritate in diversa

disperguntur. Adjuvabat in hoc facto Wascones et levitas armorum et loci

iniquitas per omnia Wasconibus reddidit impares. ... Neque hoc factum

ad praesens vindicari poterat, quia hostis, re perpetrata, ita dispersus est ut

ne fama quidem remaneret ubinam gentium quaeri potuisset.]

Any of these encounters, Varus with Armenius, Caesar with Caswallon, or Roland

with the Gascons, would be instantly recognizable by the American frontier scout Daniel

Boone as fights in "Indian country." The Native American mastery of guerilla warfare

and skillful use of terrain made them formidable opponents, and the American colonists'

ability to emulate their tactics proved the downfall of the British at the Battle of

Lexington in 1775.

Even as the castles, manors, villages, and towns became footholds in the wild

places of Europe, the wilderness was ever ready to overcome the unwary. Partly relying

on the earlier historian Gildas (*De excidio Britanniae*), The Venerable Bede describes the

return of wilderness over the townships of the Britons after the Saxon attacks: [3]

Public and private buildings fell in ruins, priests were everywhere slain at

their altars, prelates and people alike perished by sword and fire,

regardless of rank, and there was no one left to bury those who had died a

cruel death. Some of the miserable remnant were captured in the

mountains and butchered indiscriminately . . . while others remained in

their own land and led a wretched existence, always in fear and dread,

among the mountains and woods and precipitous rocks. (1. 15)

[Hruran, 7 feollan cynelico getimbro 7 anlipie: 7 gehwær sacerdas 7

mæssepreostas betwih wibedum wæron slægene 7 swylmde: biscopas mid

folcum buton ænigre are sceawunge ætgædere mid iserne 7 lige fornumene

wæron.7 ne wæs ænig se ðe bebyrignysse sealde þan ðe swa hreowlice

acwælde wæron. 7 monige ðære earman lafe on westenum fanggene

wæron 7 heapmælum sticode. . . . sume forhtiende in eðle gebidon, 7

þearfende lif in wuda 7 in westenum 7 in hean cleofum sorgiendemode

symle dydon. (1. 15)]

Well familiar with the ruins of Roman towns and villas, the Anglo-Saxon poets spoke

movingly of the wilderness return: [4]

The wide walls fell, days of pestilence came, death swept away all the

bravery of men, their fortresses became waste places; the city fell to ruin.

[Crugon walo wide, cwoman woldagas,

swylt eall fornom secgrofra wera;

wurdon hyra wigsteal westen staþolas

brosnade burgsteall. (25-28)]

In this poem, "The Ruin," the wilderness is active in its assault. A city may be wrested from the wilderness, built, peopled, and sustained--but only for a space of time. Fate, in the form of plague or violence, eventually reduces the city to wasteland. "The Ruin," as Anne L. Klinick points out, reflects the "dislocation brought by death and time" (276). As the city falls apart, even the weather is a menace; Michael Swanton says that the frost is "the destructive agent attacking the cement of civilization itself" (124).

Not merely a historical platitude or literary convention, the return of the wilderness as an aftermath of human violence was a fact of medieval life. In a passage written during the civil wars between Stephen and Matilda (1135-54), one of the last Peterborough Chroniclers describes the return of wilderness consequent upon the ravaging of the countryside by the warring parties: [5]

> They [Stephen's men] laid taxes upon the villages time after time and
> called it "protection." When the wretched men had no more to give, then
> they raided and burned all the villages, so that you could travel or a whole
> day's journey, yet would never find a man settled in a village, or land
> tilled. . . . the earth bore no corn, for the land was all destroyed by such
> deeds, and they said openly that Christ and His saints were sleeping.
> [Hi laeiden gaeildes on the tunes aevre umwile and clepeden it "tenserie."
> Tha the wrecce men ne hadden nan more to gyven, tha raeveden hi and
> brendon alle the tunes, that wel thu myhtes faren al a daeis fare, sculdest
> thu nevre finded man in tune sittende ne land tiled. . . . the erthe ne bar nan
> corn, for the land was al fordon mid swilce daedes, and hi saeden openlice

that Christ slep and his halechen.]

The woods of Europe, then, like the deserts of the Middle East, were harsh lands populated by dangerous people (at least), and a menace to any settlement or outpost. Nevertheless, the wilderness also provided an essential element in the lives of the medieval individual and community. On a literal level, the unsettled and therefore unowned lands of the north provided an opportunity for an enterprising pioneer. With strength, courage, and quick wits, a young man might dare the forest and win a fortune-- or at least a manor or homestead. In image, the wilderness came to represent that challenge of individuation and the transition to adulthood. When a young man sets out into the world to seek his fortune, the way leads through the forest. [6]

As the American frontier was one of the determining factors of our national identity, so the northern European frontiers were formative in the medieval imagination. Further, as the American West was a feature of both geography and myth, the medieval frontier existed equally in the pathless Ardennes Forest and on the misty moors of *Beowulf.* And as the American perception of the frontier was colored by our European religious and cultural backgrounds, the medieval frontier, at least in representation, was greatly affected by the historical contexts of scriptural exegesis and classical learning. Finally, as we grew distant from the actual frontier, we developed a nostalgic view of its heroes and events; the medieval writers, likewise, adopted a belief in a heroic past where strength and virtue conquered the wasteland. The Germans and the French have a rich tradition of wilderness iconography in the early Middle Ages, especially as related to the visual art and illuminated texts of the Merovingian court and schools. The Icelandic sagas

also develop wilderness as a space for heroic action. But perhaps the most complex

development of the motif occurs in the elegies of the Anglo-Saxons and in *Beowulf.*

Partly because of the enforced leisure of long winters and of the plentiful supply

of vellum, the Icelandic settlers produced a broad range of narrative literature, including

the poetry of the *Eddas* and the prose of the sagas. The sagas included narratives of

kings, saints, and mythic heroes, as well as re-tellings of European romances and

chansons de geste. [7] In a discussion of wilderness motifs, however, the family sagas

(*íslendinga sogur*) are of particular relevance, since in these narratives the wilderness is a

literal place for heroic action and comes to represent the emotional space of trial and

transition. While the sagas were written in the thirteenth century, much later than the

Anglo-Saxon material, the events described occur between 870 and 1050, the years in

which Norweigan pioneers established farms and homesteads in Iceland. This historical

period corresponds roughly to that of the Anglo-Saxon poems, and more important, the

Icelandic settlers were closely related to the Anglo-Saxons by blood, culture, and trade.

The close similarities between the two groups in use of historical material and folklore is

unmistakable.

The family sagas deal with the issues of a pioneer society of ranchers: land,

water, grazing rights, justice and personal safety. Far from the legal authority of Norway,

the Icelandic settlers devised a system of justice; however, as in our own frontier

communities, justice was often available only to the man who could enforce it himself.

In this context, wilderness takes three related forms: first, the island itself as a frontier in

relation to Norway; second, the undomesticated spaces in Iceland between farms,

including mountains, smaller islands, and the sea; and third, the physical and emotional space outside the bounds of family and community, the condition of the outlaw.

Well before other Europeans began to sail west in search of new lands, some individuals and families in Norway pulled up stakes and headed west for the small and inhospitable island of Iceland. These pioneers elected to leave their homes for much the same reasons as later immigrants: a difference of opinion with the local authority, a desire for land and for economic advancement, a yen for adventure. Iceland is located in the far North Atlantic and is partly covered by active volcanos which render much of the land uninhabitable. This location promises long winters and short growing seasons. The Norwegians were only able to farm on the west side of the island along the fjords and valleys. They grew chiefly hay to feed their flocks over the winter and lived by raising cattle and sheep. All wood had either to be imported or salvaged from driftwood. Wine, food, fabric, craft goods all had to be imported from Norway or acquired through trade or raiding in England and Ireland. Like the ranchers of our own high plains, the Icelanders were independent and tough, choosing the dangers of frontier life over the more secure but constricting ways of home.

Within the space of the island as a whole, the sagas make use of another degree of wilderness in the spaces between farms, including both land and sea. A farm might be domesticated for a few acres around the farmhouse and buildings, but even the grazing land would be relatively unprotected and the paths between farms quite desolate. A journey from one stead to another might result in dangers from falls or from sudden changes of weather or, more likely, from ambush by outlaws or feuding factions. Further,

the person who plots against a rival may use the cover of the land to stage an attack on the house. The wilderness between settlements thus comes to represent a space for violence and attack.

Finally, the saga writers recognize an emotional wilderness in the condition of outlawry. If the Althing, or judicial meeting, found against a person involved in a serious crime, that person might be sentenced to exile as an outlaw, either for a space of time, or for life. As an outlaw, the person could not rely on help from any of the other settlers (though help was sometimes given); he could not live openly at a settled farm; and if found, he could be attacked by anyone. The physical challenge of living alone in a climate such as Iceland's is daunting. Beyond that, however, the isolation could be devastating. Consider that when a character is introduced in a saga, he is presented with a full genealogy. The interlaced family relationships are the most basic elements of the culture. To be cut off from these relationships, even for a period of time, would try the emotional stability of the strongest hero.

These three degrees of wilderness occur in all of the family sagas, used first to represent physical hardship and then to test firmness of character. Two sagas which include contrasting characters are *The Saga of Gisli* and *Grettir's Saga*. Both cover events which occurred about 950 and after; both were written in Iceland between 1300 and 1325. But the heroes Gisli and Grettir differ in that Gisli is a man close to family and community, while Grettir is isolated from early childhood. [8]

Gisli is of good family; of him and his brothers it is said that there are "no more outstanding men to be found in the district" (2). Gisli becomes involved with a cycle of

revenge, when one of his brothers-in-law kills the other. When Gisli kills the survivor, the Althing sentences him to exile as an outlaw. From that time Gisli lives apart from a family and a community to which he is sincerely attached, dividing his time between people who agree to shelter him, his wife's farm at Geirthjofsfjord, and a cave hide-out in the hills. Some farmers agree to help him evade Eyjolf, the bounty hunter, and as often as possible he stays with Aud, his wife, but for the most part, he "remains in his hiding places, being wary for himself" (52). Finally, warned by a dream of Eyjolf's approach, he and Aud and their foster daughter Gudrid retreat into the wasteland to "cliffs where the vantage is best" (56). He makes a final stand on "a lone bluff called Einhamar" (57), and there dies, having first killed eight of his fourteen assailants. In the end, the saga writer says of Gisli that "there has not been such a powerful man as Gisli, nor one so courageous, and yet he was not lucky" (44).

In this saga, the wilderness is represented chiefly in terms of space for action, with little description. And yet the wilderness space--the space apart from family and community--reflects Gisli's physical hardships and emotional isolation. In pattern, *Grettir's Saga* seems similar, since Grettir also, after an affair of revenge, becomes an outlaw and ends his life in a wilderness hide-out. Yet these sagas differ in that while Gisli is by nature close to his community, Grettir is, even as a child, a loner.

In childhood, Grettir is described as "self-willed, taciturn, and harsh, sardonic and mischievous" (24), and later, as "not the best tempered of men" (24). In his epitaph, Sturla the Lawman says that he "was the strongest man of the land of his time, and more successful than any other in dealing with ghosts and monsters" (187). Yet he is proud,

obstinate, unwilling to compromise, and fatally easy to offend. In the film *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976), John Book (John Wayne), a gun fighter, says, "I won't be touched, I won't be lied to, and I won't be made light of." Grettir lives by a similar code, ends in a similar state of isolation, and dies at the hand of men who are violent but inferior to him in character and in respect for honor.

In this saga, the wilderness, especially Grettir's final retreat on Drang Island, becomes the external sign of his internal state. With somewhat more descriptive detail than in *Gisli*, the writer describes the small grassy island, completely cut off from land, and from all of the farms, "surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs which could not be scaled without the help of ladders" (145). To this desolate spot Grettir and his younger brother Illugi retreat, with only the screech of sea birds and the howling of Atlantic storms for company. The desolation of the landscape duplicates the interior life of the aging outlaw.

The Icelandic family sagas, then, represent the most direct use of wilderness space in the responses of historical characters to an actual frontier. A more abstract pattern of wilderness iconography is found in the manuscripts illuminated at the scriptorium at Aachen, especially the *Utrecht Psalter* and its English counterpart, the *Eadwine Psalter*. In the drawings of these two texts the elements of wilderness, rocks, trees, and water, form the boundaries between spiritual states, with techniques which imply not only space, but also movement. In the Utrecht drawings, the elements and figures occupy stylized spaces hemmed in by landscape elements. Yet within the spaces, movement is a chief element. As Francis Wormald points out, the figures in the drawings appear to be " living

in a world of ecstasy, tearing wind, and unceasing violence. These hectic scenes take place in a landscape composed of a series of receding hills" (Utrecht 8). Thus the illuminations include both stasis and motion.

Partly because of the probable connection between the English scholar Alcuin and the patronage of the manuscript, and partly because of similarities to other British illuminations, Wormald further suggests that the *Utrecht* artist may have been himself an Anglo-Saxon (8). [9] Though produced on the continent, probably in Rheims, the Utrecht Psalter was a part of English collections at least between 800 and 1000, inspiring several copies as well as the more elaborate Eadwine Psalter made at Christ Church, Canterbury in the twelfth century.

In addition to psalms, the manuscript includes several other documents, perhaps selected by Alcuin, which represent significant Old Testament wilderness passages. Both the script of the manuscript and the details of the drawings make use of techniques from late antique models. In separate but related articles in *Art Bulletin* Gertrude R. Benson and Dimitris T. Tselos have established the motifs of the manuscript, including the representations of landscape, as derived ultimately from Roman and Greek sources. While the connection with earlier church and classical sources in the manuscript demonstrates a continuity in the use of the wilderness motif, the specific use of wilderness elements as boundary relates to a similar use in Anglo Saxon poetry. In the Utrecht illumination for Psalm XXXV (36) (Fig. 2), for example, the Christ-Logos figure is seated within a globe-mandorla suspended over a deep abyss and surrounded by high mountains. Both the wicked and the good are separated from Christ and from one

NALOQUUNTURSUPERME
XSULTENTETLAETENTUR
QUIUOLUNTIUSTITIAM

MACNIFICETURDNS·
QUIUOLUNTPACESERUI
EIUS·

TURIUSTITIAMTUAM·
TOTADIELAUDEMTUAM;

xxxv INFINEM

SERUODNI

DAUID

IXITINIUSTUSUT
DELINQUATINSEMETIPSO·
NONESTTIMORDIANTE

DNEINCAELOMISERICOR
DIATUA ETUERITASTUA
USQUEADNUBES;

BERTATEDOMUSTUAE·
ETTORRENTEUOLUP TA
TISTUAEPOTABISEOS;

Fig. 2. Psalm XXXV (36), Folio 20 verso. *The Utrecht Psalter*. E.T. DeWald. *The Illustrations of The Utrecht Psalter*. Princeton: UP, 1932.

another and from the beasts by wilderness elements of mountains, rocks, and trees In

Psalm LVI (57) (Fig. 3) the speaker is in the wilderness ("My soul is among the lions...")

but hopes that God will "send from heaven and save. . .from reproach. . ." (4, 3). In the

drawing, the elements of natural landscape separate the psalmist both from the

"evildoers" and from God, while linking him visually with the lions, beasts both of

wilderness and of spiritual testing (ref. St. Jerome, Chapter 1). [10] The drawing for the

first canticle of Moses (Exodus 15: 1-19) (Fig. 4) indicates the tension between settled

and wilderness space, while showing the Hebrews entering the wilderness, the desert

space between Egypt (the old life) and Canaan (the land of promise).

Of most interest, however, for a discussion of Anglo-Saxon sources, is the

drawing with Psalm XLI (42) (Fig. 5), a psalm which in the Middle Ages usually served

as the introit for the rite of baptism. E. T. DeWald offers this description of the drawing:

> In the lower right a stag issuing from the woods is pursued by two dogs
>
> and rushes toward a spring . . . which gushes from the side of the mountain
>
> at the top of the picture, flows down into a lake in the center, and then
>
> flows out to the right again. (Folio 24 verso, 21).

In this drawing, not only do the wilderness features of mountain, forest, and water divide

elements of the action, but the stag and the hounds relate the drawing to other instances

of baptismal imagery and to the subsequent analogical passage in *Beowulf.* [11]

Taken together, these illuminations employ wilderness elements as a boundary or

frontier between both states and experiences. For representation of movement, literary

forms may be even more explicit. Indeed, the question of movement is near the heart of a

MEOS INDOSPERAUINON   AUITIBI POSUISTILACRI   REDDALAUDATIONESI
TIMEBOQUIDFACIATMI   MASMEASINCONSPECTU   CJMERIPUISTIANIMAMEA
HICARO   TUO   DEMORTE ETPEDESMEO
TOTADIEUERBAMEAEXSE   SICUTETINPROMISSIONE   DELAPSU UTPLACEAMCO
CRABANTURADUERSUME   TUA TUNCCONUERTENT   RADOINLUMINEUIUEN

Fig. 3. Psalm LVI (57), Folio 32 recto, *The Utrecht Psalter*. In E.T. DeWald.

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Fig. 4. Exodus 15. 1-9, Folio 32 recto, *The Utrecht Psalter*. In E.T. De Wald.
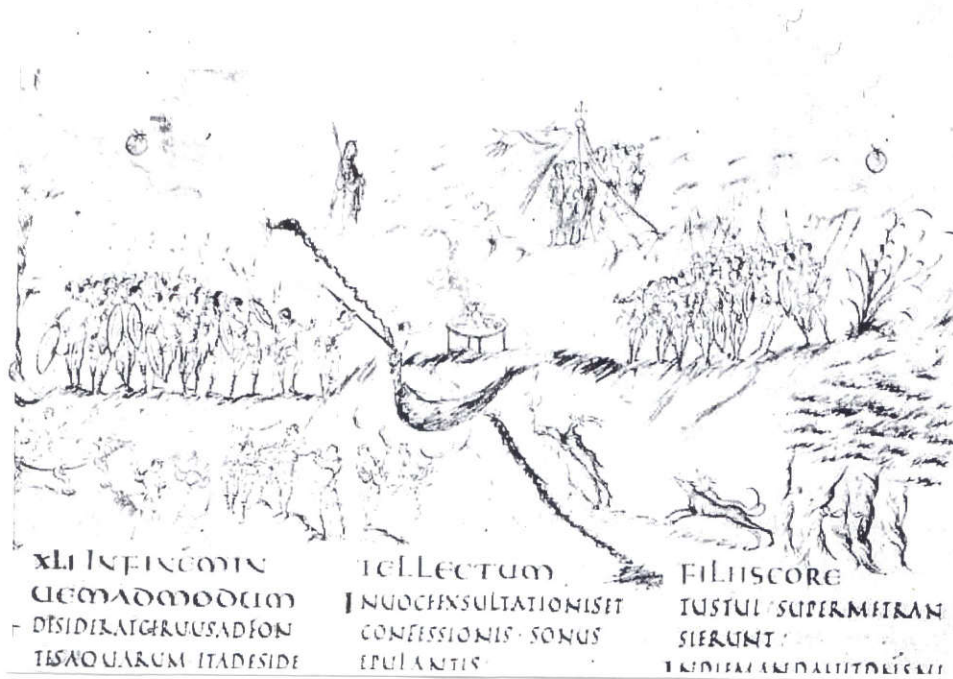
Fig. 5. Psalm XLI (42), Folio 24 recto, *The Utrecht Psalter*. In E.T. De. Wald.

discussion of the Anglo-Saxon elegies. One scholar, Alvin A. Lee, asserts that "The imaginative world that emerges in the major Anglo-Saxon poetic codices is caught in a peculiar stasis, so that where we might expect movement, change and envelopment, the poet gives instead successive and continuous states of being" (130-131). Michael Swanton, on the other hand, sees the action as ". . . a series of vivid pictorial splashes against an unstable moving background" (54). In the elegies, as in the drawings of the *Utrecht Psalter*, the figures are enclosedby the settings each episode, yet moving within the episode, and required to move from one state to the next in order to develop spiritually. The movement within and between spaces, literal in the sagas, and abstract in the psalter drawings, is developed with visual detail and allusion in the Anglo-Saxon sources, and it is in these sources that the motif is linked most clearly with the classical and scriptural traditions.

Though the features of the *locus amoenus* of classical tradition appear occasionally in Anglo Saxon prose and poetry, in, for example, descriptions of paradise, by far the dominant aspect of the wilderness motif in elegy is that of the wasteland rendered as stormy seascapes, treacherous moors, dark crags, and ominous waters. While it is true that some analogous elements of Virgilian landscape do occur in *Beowulf*, both the content and the representational details of the Anglo-Saxon motif derive more consistently from patristic and exegetical sources as a response to wilderness experience. Like patristic writers, the Anglo-Saxons described social, emotional, and spiritual experience in terms of space and of movement within and between spaces. Their action was divided between settled and unsettled areas, the hall versus the outlands, yet these

spaces were not static; the wilderness might be claimed for farm or township; the hall

might be destroyed and sink into ruin. Further, the description of the world as a wasteland

outside of the hall of heaven was common, as was the portrayal of Adam as an exile, a

view represented in the opening lines of Alcuin's poem lamenting the destruction of

Lindinsfarne (Fell 178). [12] Within the world a dialectic of creation and decay continues

until the end of time and the permanence of heaven, and the transitional aspect of this

dialectic is represented by wilderness.

Although the wilderness motif is an important element of the imaginative

landscape throughout Europe during the early Middle Ages, the English examples are of

particular importance for their complexity and for their influence in subsequent

representation. Beginning as early as the fourth century, England had become a meeting

place for the classical learning of southern Europe and even Greece and the heroic and

legendary narratives of Germany and Scandinavia. The English had classical and

exegetical manuscripts through the monastic libraries, well trained teachers and students

at established schools of rhetoric, and the literary and oratorical forms of the courts. The

great English scholar and educator Alcuin, in praising the accomplishments of the kings

and churchmen of northern England, catalogues Ælbert's library at York, a collection

which amply demonstrates the breadth of classical and patristic learning from Jerome and

Augustine to Virgil, Statius and Lucan. And Alcuin's praise of this library and of

Ælbert's wisdom in gathering it, leaves little doubt as to the value of classical learning in

England:

There you will find the legacy of the ancient fathers:

all the Roman possessed in the Latin world,

whatever famous Greece has transmitted to the Latins,

draughts of the Hebrew race from Heaven's showers,

and what Africa has spread abroad in streams of light . (123)

[Illic invenies veterum vestigia patrum: / quicquid habet per se Latio

Romanus in orbe, / Graecia vel quicquid transmisit clara Latinis, /

Hebraicus vel quod populos bibit imbre superno, / Africa lucifluo vel

quicquid lumine sparsit (1536-1540)]

The libraries of York were impressive, as were the related schools of rhetoric and

the other arts. Alcuin's innovations in these schools led Charlemagne to invite him to

Aachen to restructure and revitalize the learning of his court, a key feature of the

Carolingian renaissance. Although Alcuin himself was skeptical of the value of secular

studies, he was aware of the need for effective rhetoric in religious discourse. His

principles of rhetoric, derived from classical orators, including Cicero, are outlined in his

Art of Rhetoric, supposed to have been written with Charlemagne, and in his *De anima*

ratione. Based primarily on Alcuin's analysis of principles, John Gardner summarizes the

Anglo Saxon understanding of rhetoric:

Classical rhetoric, as preserved by medieval rhetoricians [who were]

accessible in Anglo-Saxon England, divided the process of composition

into three stages, which can be described (somewhat over-simply) as:

inventio, the choice of material and subject matter; *dispositio*, the

arrangement of materials chosen; and *elocutio* (or *amplificatio*), the

development of this material. (8)

In an analysis of wilderness iconography, *inventio* corresponds to the choice of subject,

spiritual or emotional transition; *dispositio* relates to the choice of object and action to

represent the subject, and *elocutio* relates to the use of detail in description, as well as to

figure and allusion relating the object to a broader tradition.

The images of wilderness are not, however, derived exclusively from classical or

exegetical sources. Anglo Saxon authors wed frontier experience and Germanic heroism

to classical rhetoric and the Judeo-Christian themes of exile to produce a literary model

of the wilderness motif which both continues the earlier Germanic, classical and patristic

models and extends them to metaphors for transience. This synthesis of wilderness

images, both in content and in detail of representation, is associated with patterns of

change in the community and in the life of the individual, and the representational details

derive from physical and historical circumstance as well as from philosophical and

theological development.

The extent of this synthesis of traditions is not only apparent in the "high culture"

represented by monastic and courtly literature and manuscript illumination, but also in

popular culture as represented by vernacular sermons. In this passage from one of the

Blicking Homilies, the preacher connects the wasteland (*westen*) to Jesus' temptation in

the desert, the central desert motif of the exegetical tradition: [13]

> For three reasons the Savior went into the wilderness--because he would
>
> invite the devil to fight with him and [to] deliver Adam from his long

banishment, and [to] show to mankind that the accursed spirit contendeth

with those whom he sees hastening to God.

[For þrim þingum Hælend eode on westen; forþon þe he wolde deoful

gelaþian to campe wið hine, & Adám gefreolsain of þam langan wræch, &

mannum gecyþan þæt se awyrgda gast æfestgaþ on þa þe he gesylþ to

Gode higian (Blicking; Lent I; I. 29)]

Even in this brief passage the preacher connects the scriptural exegesis of Augustine with

the northern heroic tradition of conquest. The reference relates not only to the general

transitions represented by temptation, but also to the specific transformation resulting

from baptism, and therefore to the corresponding patristic and apostolic renunciations of

the flesh, the world, and the devil..

In Anglo-Saxon literature the element of frontier, the space on the edge or

between settled and unsettled land, is critical, representing the anxiety attendant upon

change from one state to another, and this image was as critical for communities as for

individuals. The individual grew from youth to old age, in passages which were often

violent or desolating. Similarly, the community passed from establishment to success to

dissolution. The world itself, called by God from chaos, would eventually return to chaos

because of the corruption of sin. Reflecting equally on the life of the individual, the

community, and the world itself, a tenth century preacher asks, "What else is the life of

this world but a little interval or delay of death?" [Hwæt is þæt lif elles þysses

middangeardes buton lytelu ylding þæs deaþes? (Blicking; Lent V; I. 59)]. Only heroes,

saintly or otherwise, elected to confront the dangers of the wilderness in defiance of

earthly dissolution to attain heavenly security, or at least earthly *dom*. Though the wilderness might be represented with various degrees of realism and detail, all of these transitions are represented by the motif of wilderness, by the action of wilderness journey or quest, and by the return to individual or to the hall of wilderness after disaster. However represented, the wilderness setting was a nearly inevitable icon for spiritual and emotional transition.

In the Anglo-Saxon elegies the motif of wilderness uses vivid description of seascapes, wild weather, and bleak landscape encroaching on abandoned settlements to explore their views of heroism and mutability. The landscape (or seascape) represents the natural changes in life and such isolating events as loss and exile. In "The Wanderer" the exile laments his life apart from the companionship of the hall, seeing in stormy seas and ruins the reflection of his spiritual desolation. "The Seafarer," on the other hand, embraces the wilderness journey, for the sake of spiritual progress. *Beowulf* employs wilderness landscape in connection with the monster battles, with significant development of representational detail. The wilderness passages of that poem relate directly to the hero's spiritual and emotional progress, on the one hand, and to the mutability of the community on the other.

As they appear in the Anglo-Saxon elegies, both the content and some of the representative details of the wilderness motif derive from the Venerable Bede's account of the conversion of the Northumbrian king, Edwin, where one of Edwin's counselors poses this image:

This present life of men on earth seems to me like this. It is as if you are
sitting to a feast with your chief men and thegns in wintertime; the fire is
burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all is warm inside,
while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and there
comes a sparrow flying swiftly through the hall. It comes in at one door
and quickly goes out through the other. for the time it is inside it is not
touched by the winter's tempest, but after the barest moment of calm it is
lost to sight; straightway it passes from winter, and to winter returns. In
the same way man's life appears but a moment; what follows, or what
went before, we don't know. (Swanton 9)

[Þyslic me is gesewen, þu cyning, þis anwearde lif mana on eorðan to
wiðmetenesse þære tide, þe us uncuð is, swylc swa þu æt swæsendum sitte
mid þinum ealdormannum 7 þegnum on wintertide, 7 sie fýr onælæd 7 þin
heall gewyrmed, 7 hit rine 7 sniwe 7 styrme ute; cume an spearwa 7
hrædlice þæt hus þurhfleo, cume þurh oþre duru in, þurh oþre ut gweite.
Hwæt he on þa tid, þe he inne bið, ne bið hrinen mid þy storme þæs
wintres; ac þæt bið an eagan bryhtm 7 þæt læsste fæc, ac he sona of wintra
on þone winter eft cymeð. Swa þonne þis monna lif to medmiclum fæce
ætyweð; hwæt þær foregange, oððe hwæt þær æfterfylige, we ne cunnun.
(II. 13)]

In this passage, the warmth, order, and safety of the hall and the wintry blasts outside
reflect the tension between settlement and wilderness. The world outside the hall is cold,

dark, and violent, testing the individual and threatening the community. As Michael Swanton has pointed out, "The Wanderer" takes up directly the question posed by the advisor (105), what follows and what went before, and this question is also asked indirectly in "The Ruin" and "The Seafarer." [14]

In "The Wanderer," the movement of time and decay is both social and individual, and the wilderness journey tests the strength of the *eard-stappa*, the speaker in the poem, and at the same time shows the mutability of society. The elements of cold, storm, darkness, and isolation from the hall, implicit in the reflections of Edwin's counselor, are explicit in the elegy in three successive passages. The first relates the physical hardship of the exile alone on the seas, the second relates the emotional suffering of the exile separated from the hall joys, and the third relates the general fate of the community when "þonne eall þisse weorolde wela wēste standeþ" (74) [. . . when all the world's wealth stands waste]. In the first two of these instances, the wanderer experiences the life of the sparrow *after* it leaves the hall. In the third, he reflects on the fate of the hall itself in the course of time. Only when wanderer has negotiated the wilderness and relinquished the earthly city--and many scholars have argued that, in fact, he does no such thing--may he attain the security of heaven. But whether or not he succeeds in *passing through* the wilderness, the wilderness is the *location* of his test, both physical and spiritual. The condition of exile and the loss of the hall joys to the winter wasteland, define the latter portion of his life; this loss was always a fear if not always a reality for Anglo-Saxons. As Swanton points out:

The figure of the exile haunts the Anglo-Saxon imagination as a constant nagging fear of the possibility, even likelihood, of the dispersal of the comitatus consequent on internal dissension or external attack. . . . Outside those known bounds lay an alien and hostile world in which even the best of men might well be incapable of establishing new relationships. (106)

The first component of this loss is the physical hardship. Rowing across icy and storm-tossed seas the wanderer suffers danger and hardship seldom matched by the settled life on land. As the exile traverses the waste, in this instance, the sea, he is equally aware of the physical pain and danger--if he is hurt or wrecked, there will be no one to help--and of the emotional loss of friends to whom no return is possible. Alone on the dark sea he dreams of or imagines his Lord and friends, whose figures appear among the winds, the ice, the sea birds, only to melt into the mist leaving him even more acutely aware of his loneliness.

In these passages, the wanderer is in some ways similar to the figures in the Utrecht psalter in that he is frozen by his grief in a single location, both physically and emotionally. As Lee says, " . . . he is on the whole a static figure of confinement and introspection, a man almost frozen in body and soul who sits deep in thought" (139). Yet the sea, the cliffs, the moldering ruins all seem to be in motion behind him, forming a picture of the world in immediate disintegration even as he reflects on his personal loss. In these two instances, physical hardship and emotional isolation, the wise man must confront without complaint the heroic ideal even outside the support of the hall :

The wise man should be patient / should never be too rash or too hasty of

speech, / neither weak nor heedless in battle / nor fearful nor rash, nor

greedy for wealth / nor eager for boasting ere he readily knows.

The warrior should wait to speak his boast / until the stout heart knows

fully / where the mind will lead.

[Wita sceal ġeþyldiġ,

nē sceal nā tō hāt-heort   nē tō hræd-wyrde

nē tō wāc wīga   nē tō wan-hyġdiġ

nē tō forht nē tō fæġen   nē tō feoh-ġīfre

nē næfre gielpes tō georn   ær hē ġeare cunne.

Beorn sceal ġebīdan   þonne hē bēot spriċeþ,

oþ-þæt collen-ferhþ   cunne ġearwe

hwider hreðra ġehyġd hweorfan wille. (65-72)]

As Lee says, this passage reflects the wanderer's holding action rather than his conquest

(138). Within the poem itself, conquest may not even be possible since all of this world's

good things are *læne*. The use of *læne*, often translated as *transitory*, but actually meaning

lent, implies the possibility of a turn from the world toward heaven, as do the last two

lines referring to heaven. But it is not clear that the wanderer actually makes this turn

himself. His attention may be so fixed in his grief for the past that he is unable to

relinquish those memories. In any case, the possible fate of the exile is the certain fate of

the community; it is passing into decay. Swanton links the loss of the exile and the

dissolution of the community to the historical losses of Europe:

Heroic poetry celebrates mere episodes in the lives of men caught up in a constant process of disintegration and dissolution. The sudden reversal of fortune which is an ever-present theme of heroic literature had its model in reality, in the total eclipse not merely of an individual comitatus but of the greatest European powers: the destruction of the Hunnish Empire after the death of Attila, of the Vandals after Genseric, or the Ostrogoths after Theodoric (64)

If "The Wanderer" questions the possibility of a turning from the wasteland of the world toward the permanence of heaven, "The Seafarer" implies a more active acceptance, even seeking, of the wilderness in the form of a sea journey out of sight of the shore. As Christine Fell points out in her essay "Perceptions of Transience":

The poet [in "The Seafarer"] draws a careful distinction between life on earth (*læne*), life after death (*ece*), and the voyage or voyages of his persona which represent rejection of all secular pleasures and values of the one in search of the other. (174)

Lee develops this idea further, explaining that the Seafarer's exile is " . . . self-imposed, in line with his conviction that the rigors of seafaring are preferable to the peaceful delights and prosperity which could be his, at least temporarily, on land" (144). And as Margaret Goldsmith says, the Seafarer is a man " . . . who puts his hope in *ece rædas* [eternal counsel], not in earthly possessions. He . . . knows that this world is not his true home; he is on a journey elsewhere, and this world to him is an inn where he sojourns for a while" (87). Though questions persist regarding the journey as a real pilgrimage or as a

figurative passage through *þis læne lif* [this transitory life], and regarding the degree of enthusiasm with which the pilgrim embraces the journey, it is beyond doubt that he sees the journey in terms of a wilderness passage, and that he views both the danger and the reward of his quest in contrast to the settled luxury of the city-dwellers.

The wilderness motif is outlined in the opening passage with details of cold, violent weather, stark cliffs, and screaming birds; in lines 12-33 the author presents both the details of landscape and the hardships of the exile, whether voluntary of enforced. The physical discomforts and emotional isolation in this passage are in contrast to the secure life of the city, to ". . . this dead life, brief on land" [þis dēade līf / læne on lande (65-66)]. The fact that the settled life on land is *deade* suggests that true life (*ece lif*) is to be found by moving away from the apparent security of the town or hall. The hall is a place of stagnation; the wilderness, dark and dangerous though it may be, is the necessary path to glory. Indeed, the hardships of the wilderness are the very tests which purify the soul for its heavenly home. Therefore, the speaker rejects the settled life to pursue the isolation of the wilderness, in order to attain the glory of heaven:

> Let us consider where we have a home, / and let us think how we may come there; / and we should strive always that we might go thither / to that eternal happiness / where life is inseparable from the love of God, / bliss in heaven.
>
> [Wuton wē hycgan   hwær wē hām āgen,
>
> and þonne ġeþenċan   hū wē þider cumen;
>
> and wē þonne ēac tilien   þæt wē tō mōten

on þā ēċan   ēadiġnesse

þær is līf ġelang   on lufan Dryhtnes,

hyht on heofonum" (117-122)]

Whether or not the speaker in "The Seafarer" is speaking literally or figuratively, the transitions from sin to grace, from life to death, and from this world to the next are all seen in terms of a wilderness passage. In undertaking this self-imposed exile, the Seafarer, as Lee points out, " . . . has progressed on the road to grace by his denial of the very world idealized by the Wanderer" (146).

The elegies develop the passages of individual and social life through the development of wilderness motifs. *Beowulf*, however, relates specifically to the passages within both the life of the individual and the life of the community. At least since the publication of J.R.R. Tolkein's "The Monsters and the Critics," scholars have questioned the structure, the organization of the poem. Tolkein's view that the poem represents the trials of youth and of old age is, perhaps, the most pervasive, and both L.L. Schücking and Robert Kaske have argued that the three battles represent three stages in the development of Beowulf from youthful hero to aged king. In recent years, John Leyerle has developed a scheme of organization based on *wordum wrixlan*, word weaving, in which the interrelated episodes and reflections question the values of the heroic society. It is my own view that these interpretations and others are not necessarily either definitive or mutually exclusive, and that all contribute to a rich understanding of the poem. One aspect, however, of the poem's development remains the same regardless of choice in readings. The historical parallels and analogues used as commentary on the hero's

character are generally developed to reflect his exterior behavior, on his relationship with the comitatus, and on his relationship to the community. For example, in the passage often referred to as "Hrothgar's Sermon" the king relates the story of the hero Heremod who "grēow brēosthord blōdrēow " (1718-1719) [grew savage and blood-thirsty] as a result of overweening greed. His downfall was not his alone, but also doomed his people to poverty and exile. Hrothgar intends this as a cautionary tale to the younger man, warning him against the grasping behavior which is socially and personally destructive. While the social and political events of the poem relate to the hero's exterior behavior and are presented in historically parallel events, the sources of his personal development --his spiritual and psychological being--are presented through the monster battles. First both the hero and his society see his confrontation with the monsters as validation of his virtue. He is *able* to fight monsters *because* he is a worthy hero. These fights usually occur when the hero is alone, in the dark, or in a "tight spot," suggesting to a medieval reader the unnatural evils of the forest, to a religious reader, the perversity of hell, and to a modern reader, an association with preconsciousness. Second, the hero confronts, in the monsters, beings who are more powerful than the human adversaries of the super-ego. Their haunts are outside the settlements, making them creatures of the wilderness, and their powers are uncanny, separating them from the natural order. A king who conducts wars successfully and rules justly is a *gode cyning*. A hero's quality, on the other hand, must come first from a conquest within himself (waging war against "powers, principalities, and spiritual wickedness in high places"), and then his action may impute heroism vicariously to the community as well. As Kemp Malone has pointed out:

Beowulf fights as the champion of mankind, against monstrous

embodiments of the forces of evil, adversaries so formidable that only the

greatest of heroes could possibly cope with them. Our Christian poet

makes much of the hero as a monster-queller, not only because a fight with

a monster in the nature of the case is more dangerous and therefore more

heroic than a fight with another man, but also, and chiefly, because of the

struggle between good and evil in our earthly life. Mere man-to-man

fighting lends itself far less readily to treatment in terms of right and

wrong, and the poet accordingly makes little of his hero's military career.

(143)

Margaret Goldsmith further develops this reading, viewing the monster battles

" . . . historically [that is, literally], with the giant and the serpent; morally, with envy,

hate, pride, and greed; eschatologically [that is, allegorically], with the race of Cain and

the Ancient Serpent, who is the Enemy till Doomsday (90). If these are viable readings

of the poem, then it is clear that the personal and interior development of the hero is

developed within the context of a wilderness motif, because each of the monsters is a

creature of wilderness in origin, in habitation, and in nature, and the hero's confrontation

comes either alone in the wilderness or alone to repel the intrusion of wilderness.

In *Beowulf* the wilderness is represented by the monsters, by their habitations, and

by their locations in relation to the established community. The Anglo-Saxons were

always aware of the nearness of both the actual and mythical wilderness. As Michael

Swanton says, they were "closely surrounded by the whole paraphernalia of common

pagan fear: hobgoblins, trolls, elves, things that go bump in the night, which dwelt in the

wastelands, swamps, and deep forests, approaching human awareness only at night in

darkness--and against which the warmth of the hall and its society offered the only

security" (55). To this pagan anxiety was added the Christian conflict between heaven

and hell, Jerusalem and Babylon, and the hall and the wasteland. As Alvin A. Lee

suggests, "Out of these antithetical *dryhts* arise most of the possibilities of narrative . . .

as man's middle position in the cosmos involves him in two possible kinds of action,

either ascent to the eternal, unchanging *dryht* of heaven or descent 'down under the

headlands' into the joyless hall of Satan" (133).

The position of wilderness in *Beowulf* follows this pattern, contrasting the

wasteland outside the boundaries of the settled lands with the security of the hall, first

Heorot and later the guest hall of the Geats. Heorot was a "medoærn micel men

gewyrcean" (69) [A great meadhall, crafted by men] [13] where Hrothgar ruled wisely and

generously. Alvin Lee sees the contrast between the hall and the wilderness as

emblematic of the instability of the community:

> . . . the metaphor [is] of the created world as the mighty *dryhtsele* of God,
>
> a magnificent edifice in which the Deity doles out to men the gifts that
>
> symbolize his love for his creatures. . . . But the physical world of the
>
> cycles of nature--within which, after Adam's treachery, sacred history
>
> unfolds and earthly kings dispense their gifts--exists in a double aspect,
>
> with the result that the *dryht* of middle-earth may be represented in a
>
> particular poem either as the ideal golden one or as a society of fratricidal

acts paralyzed by pride and enslaved to a wolf-hearted tyrant like

Nebuchadnezzar. (132-133)

In contrast, Grendel, the creature from outside the marches, suffered pain to hear

the sounds of revel, music, and song from Heorot. A beast of the wasteland, of moor and

fen, Grendel is nevertheless an immediate danger; described as a *mearc-stapa*, march-

stepper, he lives in the wilderness and, when he invades Heorot, he brings wilderness into

the hall. Further, as he is a creature of the physical wilderness, he is also of the spiritual

wilderness. As *Caines cynne* and an *out*law and *out*cast, he lurks on the borders of moral

and spiritual chaos. In detail, the descriptive passages regarding Grendel represent both

physical and spiritual wilderness. As Lee points out, Grendel is " perverted or fallen man,

a parody of the human form as it was created. . . . like other fallen men he treads exile

paths . . . he is the symbolic antithesis of a Christian hero" (182-183). The contrasts

between cold and warmth and between light and darkness are especially evocative. In

both guises, physical and spiritual, he poses a threat to the settled community of the hall.

Indeed, before the arrival of the hero to reassert order, the wilderness prevails over the

hall:

So (Grendel) held sway, and warred with right / one against all, until stood

idle / The best of houses.

[Swā rīxode   ond wiŏ rihte wan

āna wiŏ eallum,   oŏ þæt īdel stōd

hūsa sēlest. (144-146)]

In the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel, the confrontation between hall and wilderness is extended from community to individual. The community, led by an aging king, has all but been overcome by the wilderness in the person of Grendel. As the frosts destroyed the mortar of the walls in "The Ruin" Grendel's attacks have weakened the bonds of the comitatus; hall-joys are dimmed, and men seek excuses to sleep elsewhere. For the individual as well, the wilderness is a dangerous threat; Grendel is, to date, Beowulf's most powerful adversary. But beyond mere menace, Grendel represents a trial of Beowulf's judgement and strength.

First, Beowulf leaves home to confront the monster; his judgement is a central issue in undertaking the quest. Swanton says that he " . . . stands, both literally and emotionally, on the threshold of dangerous possibilities--at his back what is secure and known, in front of him only an uncertain and violent world" (48). His discernment and his strength affect not only his own *lof* [glory] and *dom* [reputation], but also the survival of the Danish community and of his chosen companions. And as the Wanderer says, a man should be careful of his boast, being neither rash nor cowardly. In his youth, Beowulf has made foolish boasts, as represented by the swimming contest with Breca, which he acknowledges as a "boy's boast." The contest, enacted in a wilderness setting, (the sea, with sea monsters), is a successful demonstration of strength and skill, but since it was enacted on a dare and uselessly endangered both boys, it gained nothing for the community, a failure in judgement. The encounter with Grendel on the other hand, represents a test of adult judgement.

First, he chooses to leave home and go to Denmark to meet the danger, a foe of great menace, but whom he believes he can defeat. He understands this challenge in search of *lof* and *dom*, certainly, but also in aid of a king to whom he owes family obligations. And though he takes companions, one of whom is killed, there is no foolish risk of life. Finally, his boast is made not as a dare, but in aid of a community against the creature of the marshes and fens:"I shall perform with manly courage or else my last day in this meadhall will serve." [Ic gefremman sceal / eorlīc ellen oþðe endedæg / on þisse meoduhealle mīnne gebīdan" (636-638)].   Second, the young Beowulf elects to meet Grendel on his own terms, unarmed. He clearly sees the battle as a test of his worth: ". . . and thereupon the holy Lord will on whichever hand [side] award fame as to him may seem proper." [ond siþðan wītig God / on swā hwæþere hond hālig Dryhten / mæro dēme, swā him gemet þince " (685-687)]. The battle itself is represented in terms of contrast between the wilderness and the hall. Grendel the creature of outer darkness, comes stalking through the marshes until he confronts the golden hall. As he bursts open the doors, the wilderness enters the place of community, and the battle begins. The monster and the hero meet directly, without armor or weapons, wrestling. Beowulf grasps Grendel's arm and twists it, holding on though the very walls of Heorot are shaken. In the event, he rips off the arm, and the monster flees back to the marshes. From the point of view of the community, the wilderness has been repulsed--but only for a time. From the point of view of the individual, the wilderness serves as a trial of judgement and an indication of strength, though as with the community, the individual can not repel the wilderness forever. The chaos which Beowulf defeats as a young man, he must confront

again as an old man.

After the battle with Grendel, the Danes celebrate, refurbishing Heorot for the victory feast. The descriptive detail of this passage--tapestries, gold, weavings, pictures, light--again establish the hall in opposition to the wilderness. And again, the wilderness intrudes in the person of Grendel's mother, the *āglǣc-wif* [monster woman] . Coming from the terrible waters and icy streams, she too connects the physical wilderness of the boundary with the emotional wilderness of Cain's kin. Though less greedy than her son-- she takes only one *thegn*, Hrothgar's friend Æschere--her intrusion is still a wilderness assault on the hall. Indeed, the extent of her connection to the world outside may be seen in Hrothgar's description of the outlaws and their lairs. Both Grendel and his mother have been reported as " . . . march-steppers who keep to the moors" [micle mearc-stapan mōras healdan (1348)] and as "ellor-gæstas" [alien spirits] (1349) and Hrothgar identifies them as beings who follow the "wræc-lāstas" [exile-paths] (1352). The descriptions of the mere and its environs are even more closely related to the representation of wilderness:

> . . . This mysterious land / they guard, wolf slopes, windy cliffs, / dangerous fen-paths, there mountain streams / under bluffs like mist go down / flood under earth. Not that far hence, / measured in miles, that mere stands; / over it hang frost-covered groves, / woods fast rooted overhang the water. / There each night may one see a fearful wonder, / fire on the water. Never the old lived, / of children of men, who knew the bottom. / Although the heath-stepper [stag] pressed by hounds, / hart with

strong horns seeks the wood, / pursued from afar, sooner he gives up [his]

life / always on the bank, ere he will in / to save his head; that is not a safe

place! / Thence surging water stirred up / dark to clouds, when wind stirs /

hateful storms, until that air becomes gloomy / heaven weeps.

[. . . Hīe dygel lond

warigeað wulfhleoþu, windige næssas,

frēcne fengelād, ðær fyrgenstrēam

under næssa genipu niþer gewīteð,

flōd under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon

mīlgemearces,   þæt se mere standeð;

ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,

wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.

Þær mæg nihta gehwæm nīðwundor sēon,

fyr on flōde. Nō þæs frōd leofað

gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite.

Ðēah þe hæðstapa hundum geswenced,

heorot honum trum holtwudu sēce,

feorran geflymed, ær hē foerh seleð,

aldor on ōfre, ær hē in wille,

hafelan [beorgan]; nis þæt hērou stōw!

Þonon yðgeblond up āstīgeð

won tō wolcnum, þonne wind stryeþ

lāð gewidru,   oð þæt lyft drysmaþ,

roderas rēotað.   (1357-1376)]

Thus the poet gives us Hrothgar's description in such a way as to point to the realm of the

supernatural, which, thus evoked, allows for a mode of language and thought which is

ideally suited for expressing the poet's prime concern: the collective terror of men in the

face of the unknown. The purpose of the poet is less to describe a particular topography

than it is to communicate some sense of men's imaginative and psychological response to

Grendel (Butts 113).

The details of windy cliffs, twisting fens with no sure track, crags and mountain

torrents merge with the even more sinister references to cloud, darkness, and mysterious

lights to convey a sense of isolation, horror, and danger. The Rev. R. Morris, an early

editor of the *Blicking Homilies* noted an analogous passage which he believed to be a

"direct reminiscence" (vii) of the passage in Beowulf, and which describes the frontier

between earth and Hell:

> As St. Paul was looking towards the northern region of the earth, from
>
> whence all waters pass down, he saw above the water a hoary stone; and
>
> north of the stone had grown woods very rimy. And there were dark mists;
>
> and under the stone was the dwelling place of monsters and evil creatures.
>
> And he saw hanging on the cliff opposite to the woods, many black souls
>
> with their hands bound.
>
> [Swa Sanctus Paulus wæs gesonde on norðanwearde þisne middangeard,

þær ealle wætero niðergewitað, & he þær geseah ofer ðæm wætere sumne

harne stán; & wæron norð of ðæm stáne awexne swiðe hrimige bearwas,

& þær wæron þystro-genipo, & under þæm stáne wæs niccra eardung &

wearga. & he geseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm is gean

bearwum manige swearte saula be heora handum gebundne. (The

dedication of St. Michael's Church, Blicking Homilies, 209)]

Further spiritual danger is apparent in the passage in the reference to the stag who

gives up his life rather than plunge into the mere. This passage is precisely opposite to the

use of the stag in Psalm 42. In this psalm, usually the introit for the rite of baptism, shows

the stag desiring the water associated typologically with the Jordan river and with Jesus'

trials in the desert. The contrast is further heightened by comparison with the Utrecht

illumination for Plsm 42 which shows the stag fleeing *toward* a mountain lake (Ill. 4).

Further, the *wynlēasne wudu* [joyless wood] connects the passage to the

transitional passage in Book VI of *The Aeneid*, where Aeneas confronts the dark waters of

the Avernus, and where, like the stag, the birds refuse to fly. As Alan Renoir points out,

the passage from Virgil is "awesome and remote" while the Anglo-Saxon scene is

"terrifying and immediate" (Terror 154). Yet both passages use landscape motifs to

delineate a passage of emotional significance to the hero. These passages, in their

similarities of detail and of content, relate *Beowulf* to classical and Christian traditions.

The wilderness, then, here appears as the space outside the hall and very nearly

outside of nature. The techniques of representation include descriptive details of

landscape (swamps, cliffs, mist), unnatural elements (frost and foxfire), and the rejection

of perversity by nature in the figure of the stag. These techniques place the passage in a context which includes both the psychological and active transitions of Aeneas confronting Avernus and the spiritual passage of baptism and trial in the wilderness. So the object (the corrupt wilderness) is related by representative technique to a context which includes both classical and scriptural transitions.

The arrival of the hero in this landscape symbolizes his decision to stake everything, *aldres orwena* [despairing of life], if need be, to win this battle once and for all. No more temporary victories on the surface, but a "life-or-death fight in the yet unvisited depths of the haunted mere with the mother evil" (Nagler 155). Little wonder that Hrothgar tells Beowulf, "sēc gif þū dyrre" [seek if you dare] (1379), hinting at the possibility--a possibility of which Hrothgar himself may be unaware--that the fiend Beowulf must face is as much within as without. (Butts 120-121). Only if the hero is a hero indeed, in strength and in purity of intention, may he confront the demon of the wilderness and receive his reward. If he is weak--or unlucky--he will die, and die outside the shelter of the community. In either case, the expedition and the battle will represent a significant passage for the hero and for the community as well.

As the troop and Beowulf approach the mere, Hrothgar's description comes to life before them with " . . . mountain trees over gray stone leaning, joyless wood " [frygen bēamas / ofer hārne stān hleonian funde, / wyn-lēasne wudu (1414-1416)]. The aura of gloom is complete with the overcast and chill, the eerie water snakes, and Æschere's head left on the edge of the cliff. In this second battle, far from the hall, Beowulf dons armor and leaps into the mere. This second battle is located within three concentric wilderness

topi: the marshes, the mere, and the underwater cave. Beowulf's courage to confront the dangers of the water and the strength and ingenuity which allow him to slay the she-monster have the effect of cleansing the mere and removing the horror from the wilderness.

The safety of Heorot which Beowulf wins in these two encounters is short-lived; the hall is always at the mercy of treachery and violence. The victory lasts longer for the hero himself, but even he is subject to the changes and chances of life. Fifty years later, as an old king, he fights his final battle, a monster battle in a wilderness setting, reflecting a final transition in the life of the community and in the life of the hero.

In this encounter, also, the object is a wilderness landscape, the techniques are both descriptive of nature (cave, beach, wood) and suggestive of social decay (gold, ruin, barrow). These techniques relate the space--and Beowulf's action there--to a Christian context. In Christian iconography, the dragon of the third battle represents Satan, the angel who rebelled against God, as Grendel was associated with Cain, a man who rebelled against God. Also like Grendel, the dragon lives in a ruin far outside the settled lands of the Geats. Though with less detail than Hrothgar's landscape, the dragon's lair is described as a wilderness. He lives in a "stānbeorh stēapne" (2213) [high stone barrow], "eorðsele . . . holmwylme nēh" (2410-2411) [a cave . . . near the surge of the sea] with a nearby wood (2599). Clearly the dragon lives in the physical wilderness, but further, as a ruin-dweller, he lives on the frontier between civilization and decay, and as a barrow-dweller, he lives on the frontier between life and death; truly a creature who represents life outside the "warmth of the hall."

But whereas the dragon, like Grendel, lives outside the settled areas and represents both attack against the community and rebellion against God, the dragon also guards a treasure, the "legacy" of a noble race long departed. In other words, the dragon is a creature of the wilderness which *has* overrun a community. Further, the dragon's wrath is not, like Grendel's, provoked by the joys of the hall; instead, he is awakened instead by a thief, a *secg synbysig* (2226) [sin-troubled man] driven from the settled areas, himself an outlaw and an exile. Thus the wrath of the wilderness is incurred when the wilderness is violated.

As there are both parallels and differences between the dragon and the marsh monsters, so there are also parallels and differences between the battles. The initial attacks of the dragon threaten the continuity of the settlements, as Grendel's attacks threaten the survival of the Heorot. Beowulf confronts the dragon in the wilderness, as he did the merewif, and as in that instance, he wears armor and carries not only a sword but also an iron shield. In addition to the preparation of the iron shield, however, there are three important differences between the dragon fight and the earlier battles. First, Beowulf's mood is somber, less hopeful, than that of the young hero. Second, he goes dutifully to battle, but he has no battle boast: "I am firm in mind that I against this war-flyer forbear to boast" [Ic eom on mōde from, / þæt ic wið þone gūðflogan gylp ofersitte (2527-2528)]. And third, in the battle itself, he ultimately requires the help of his kinsman Wiglaf to dispatch the dragon. These changes, I believe, suggest both a change in attitude on the part of the hero and a change in the nature of the threat to the community. The

transitions of old age and death have, if nothing more, a greater finality than earlier passages.

The significance of these last passages has been the subject of debate, but Alan Renoir suggests a balanced view which clearly relates the battle to social and individual old age:

> [Beowulf]. . . has bridged the gap between foolhardiness and true courage in the Aristotelian sense. In so doing, he has raised his claim to fame above that of Hrothgar himself; Like the old king in Heorot, he has learned to reflect and listen to the voice of wisdom before making decisions. Unlike him, however, he has retained the will to act, so that he has become an embodiment of the ideal union of wisdom and action, and we have witnessed the process whereby the brash young man who enters near the beginning of the poem turns into the wise and formidable old warrior whom the conclusion praises as the best of all earthly kings (Contextual 111)

In the Anglo-Saxon period, then, the classical and Christian aspects of the wilderness landscape become associated with the heroic material of elegy and epic. The *locus amoenus*, either literal or literary, finds little scope in this period. Rather, the classical modes are apparent in the representational use of cold and darkness, sea and storm, and the other-world gloom of Avernus. The Christian motifs are more clearly presented in the wilderness locus as a place of trial, as well as the ambivalence about wilderness as a locus of chaos on the one hand and of virtuous asceticism on the other.

But in all instances, the wilderness motif extends the use of space to represent emotional experience, the division of space into settlement, frontier and wilderness, and the consistent use of wilderness to represent significant transitions both for individuals and for the community.

Moving from homesteads to heroism on the spiritual frontier, the narratives of the early Middle Ages connected the dangers of the expanding settlements to the interior challenges of the "journey of this life." Grettir and Gisli become heroes when their strength is tested by isolation from the community, and in the case of Grettir, at least, the human predators are sometimes eclipsed by the supernatural monsters. The furious little figures of the Utrecht Psalter are penned in and defined by their positions in the natural features of rock, wood, and water. In *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon elegies the characters meet their tests in wilderness places, represented with techniques which generally include descriptive detail and allude to classical and scriptural analogues. In each of these instances, the object of wilderness space related to historical movement, is developed with descriptions which enrich the object within the poem and locate it within a larger tradition of psychological and spiritual representation. The movement from literal to emotional frontier presented in connection with broader traditions prepares for the more intricate representations of interior experience developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

END NOTES

[1] The reference toVellieus Paterculus is found in Daniel Garrison, "The *Locus Inamoenus*: Another Part of the Forest." (*Arion* 3 (1992): 98-114).

[2] Both the Einhard passage and the translation are from Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition* [Dual language (University Park PA: Penn State UP, 1978).

[3] For citations from the works of The Venerable Bede, see *History of the English People*, dual-language English and Latin, translated by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) and *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Part I*, edited by Thomas Miller (London: EETS 1890 II. 13).

[4] The text for "The Ruin" is from *The Exeter Book*, edited by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, a Collective Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

[5] The passage from the *Peterborough Chronicle* is from "The Anarchy of King Stephen," *Middle English Literature*, Ed. Charles W. Dunn and Edward T. Byrnes. New York: Garland Press, 1990.

[6] For a fuller description of the frontier in northern Europe, see *Medieval Civilization: 400-1500* by Jacques LeGoff, translated by Julia Barrow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

[7] For additional information about the development of the sagas, see Theodore Anderson's "The Icelandic Sagas," in *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics* edited by Felix J. Oinas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989: 144-171).

[8] The references toThe Saga of Gisli are from George Johnson's translation (Toronto: UP, 1963). Those to Grettir's Saga are from the translation by Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto: UP, 1977).

[9] For a fuller analysis of Alcuin's probable role in the design of the *Utrecht Psalter*, see *The Utrecht Psalter*, a critical analysis by Francis Wormald (Utrecht: Utrecht Institute of Art History, 1953).

[10] For additional information about the iconographic significance of animals as elements of moral or spiritual tests, see *Blind Beasts* by Beryl Rowland (Oxford: UP, 1970) and an unpublished essay, "Cretien in the Lion's Den" by Sherron Lux presented at the Southeastern Medieval Association, September 1994.

[11] The stag in this passage of Beowulf is clearly a reflection of the stag in Augustine's exposition of Psalm 42, relating the passage directly to the rite of baptism.

[12] For additional analysis of the tension between the hall and the wilderness as well as of the hall being overtaken by wilderness, see *The Guest-Hall of Eden* by Alvin A. Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

[13] Texts for *The Blicking Homilies* are from *The Blicking Homilies of the Tenth Century from the Marquis of Lothian's Unique Manuscript, AS 971*, edited by the Rev. R. Morris (EETS 1874); the translations are my own.

[14] Passages from "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" are from the edition prepared by John C. Pope, *Seven Old English Poems* (New York: Norton, 1981); the translations are my own.

[15] Passages from *Beowulf* are from the F.R. Klaeber edition (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1989); translations are my own.

CHAPTER 4

THE ANCIENT FOREST AND THE DARK WOOD:

THE WILDERNESS OF THIS LIFE

In the early Middle Ages, the narratives and images of wilderness, though often

used to represent an interior experience, nonetheless came partly from encounters with an

actual frontier. Eventually, as urban centers began to dominate western culture, the

wilderness moved from the frontier (which might be settled and brought into order) to the

margins (those spaces between, though permanently outside of the established orders). [1]

The narratives of exile, pilgrimage, mission, and settlement often reflected actual change

in the physical circumstances of the individual or the community, as well as conversion

and change in vocation of the individual. Certainly the narrative and the visual arts of the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries retain these elements of wilderness, yet the later uses of

the motif in ascetical treatises and literary romances also develop forest and wasteland as

a space between episodes where the individual confronts the interior experience of

psychological trial and transition. Although the substance of these wilderness motifs

remains consistent in both secular and religious narratives, writers and painters also

expand the uses of the metaphor to include explicitly interior spiritual or emotional

transitions. In his *Cosmographia* (c. 1147) Bernard Sylvester, following the neo-platonic

scheme of matter and spirit, describes creation and the development of self-knowledge in

terms of journey and of ascent and descent, while adding details of description and dialogue. Retaining some elements of the neo-platonic dualism, Bernard of Clairvaux, in his sermons, further connects the experience of conversion (*conversio*) with the desert passages of Isaiah, Exodus and Psalms, although Bernard's deserts are more apparent in the allusion than in any specific description. In *The Journey of the Soul to God* (1259) Bonaventure, while invoking Pseudo-Dionysius, nevertheless departs from the neo-platonic model of experience to relate the soul's journey in desert terms drawn from Exodus, and makes the beginning of the journey an appreciation of the visible world. Finally, the romances of the courts and of the jongleurs extend the use of the wilderness metaphor from representations of spiritual journey to psychological movement in narratives which include description of character and action within wilderness space.

While in content the motif continues to portray transition and conversion, as artists begin to employ realistic detail, their narratives include, in addition to desert, sea and forest, descriptions of darkness, isolation, and psychological danger. The depiction of wilderness includes three techniques. First, especially in spiritual genres, authors establish a wilderness context with references to scripture. The university sermons and other academic or theological writings associate conversion, contemplation, and spiritual transformation specifically with the desert passages of scripture, and the complexity of the representation is achieved almost entirely through the web of allusions, with little additional description of setting. In secular writing, on the other hand, the wilderness space which provides the setting to the action may be fully described with visual detail. Popular romances use techniques of realism while extending the wilderness motif to

transitions of character occurring in well-defined wilderness settings. Finally, the dark

and uncanny forest, especially drawn from Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as from the nature

poetry of Silver Age poets like Lucan and Statius, recurs in the romance where

characters encounter supernatural good and evil. [2] These techniques converge in forms of

popular narrative which might be characterized as religious romance. Continuing from

such early works as St. Brendan's *Navagatio*, these narratives relate lives of saints,

supernatural visions, and miraculous events. Also narrative in nature, such visual forms

as frescos, processions, and dramas, use representational elaborations to bridge the gap

between theological instruction and popular imagination. In each of these genres, the

sermon or treatise, the romance and the religious romance, the wilderness setting comes

to represent and emotional transition. Whether representing hell or "this naughty world"

the wilderness passage depicts interior movement and change. The comment of Silva

Ruffo-Fiore in regard to Dante's *Inferno* extends to other medieval representations of

wilderness as well:

> The dominant features of Hell are descent, darkness, despair, degradation,
>
> disobedience, and disorder, qualities also deemed necessary by modern
>
> psychological thinkers for knowledge of Self. Freud's psychodynamics
>
> involve a penetration into the deepest recesses of the id in order to realize,
>
> understand, and accept the tyrannical evils of the unconscious. (5)

Without a doubt, the pivotal literary synthesis of scriptural allusion, classical

context, and representational detail is Dante Alighieri's *Comedia*. However, Dante's

intricacy is more easily appreciated after some reflection on the more limited sermons,

romances, and saints' lives which immediately preceded the *Comedy*. The general

outlines of the wilderness iconography appear in Bernard's sermon *On Conversion* as

well as in romances reflecting Cisterican patronage, in St. Bonaventure's *Journey of the*

Soul to God, Tree of Life, and *The Life of St. Francis*, in the romances of Tristan, and in

the episode of the stigmata in the Franciscan narratives and paintings. These three groups

of examples encompass the various aspects of the image which are synthesized in the

works of Dante and of later artists in the fourteenth century.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was one of the reformers of the twelfth century

monastic movement, the founder of the Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux, and one of the

most influential spokesmen for the church of his day. While his personality was harsh and

demanding, his spirituality was primarily apophatic and affective; rarely did he resort to

the sensual appeal of narrative or imagery. When he invokes the wilderness directly, it is

nearly always a rhetorical device only. For example, in his letter to Ailred of Rievaulx

(523), in which he encourages Ailred to write his spiritual treatise despite reservations, he

says, "I am not put off by what you say about the steepness of the mountains or the

cragginess of the rocks or the plunging valleys . . . " (288). However, most of

Bernard's discourse is based on direct allusion to scripture. His *Sermons on the Song of*

Songs, which describe the sweetness of spiritual union, do so not through narrative or

lyric, but through quotation of the garden and city passages in the *Canticle* itself.

One of his academic sermons, *On Conversion*, offers both an example of his

allusive style and an example of his use of wilderness to portray the experience of

conversio. Given publicly in Paris in 1140, the sermon is unusual both in venue and in

audience. Bernard's aggressive manner and affective spirituality had often placed him at cross purposes with the schools of Paris; his controversy with Peter Abelard is notorious, for example. On this occasion, however, he spoke at the cloister of Notre Dame to the students from Notre Dame, St Geneviève, and St. Victor and to a congregation which included both Geoffrey, his biographer, and Peter Lombard (LeClercq 65). [3] The immediate effectiveness of the sermon may be judged by the fact that more than twenty of the students were "converted" and returned immediately with Bernard to Clairvaux to take religious vocations, but the subsequent influence of the sermon comes from its appeal to the worldly baptized Christian.

The sermon is a network of scriptural allusion and emotional appeal. Bernard, taking his text from Psalm 28, opens with the voice of God, calling for the conversion: " . . . a voice of magnificence and power, . . . rolling through the desert, . . . revealing secrets, shaking souls free of sluggishness" (I. 2 67). He continues by associating present sin to the obstinate behavior of the Hebrew tribes in the desert, saying that God has been " . . . Forty years long . . . [with] . . . this generation, and . . . they err constantly in their hearts" (II. 3 67). Bernard questions, ". . . do you wonder that you cannot *be brought to face yourself* without being aware of sin, without disturbance, without confusion?" [italics mine] (II. 3 68). In these passages, Bernard not only relates the individual call to conversion to the scriptural history of the covenant community, but he also locates that scriptural desert *within* the human heart; conversion is an interior transition as well as an exterior *metanoia*. Unlike sermons of the kataphatic tradition which make an appeal to the senses through narrative and description--as, for example, the verse sermons of the

Pearl Poet--*On Conversion* appeals directly to the individual, to feelings of guilt, doubt

and confusion, with the only imaginative support coming from the scriptural deserts of

Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus himself.

Although the sermon begins with Psalms and draws from a wide range of

scriptural sources, the allusions from the first sections come primarily from Isaiah and

from the related baptismal narratives in Matthew and Luke. The Old Testament passages

relate in context to the conversion of the covenant community. The gospel passages do

extend the conversion from the old to the new covenant, but they also move from

communal to individual conversion. These three layers of scriptural allusion relate the old

to new covenant community, the community to the individual, and the scriptural audience

to the present congregation, reflecting conversion on all of these levels by means of

wilderness trial and passage.

In his call to conversion, Bernard adopts terms which he continues to use in his

description of the spiritual journey after conversion. A central element of Bernard's

spiritual dynamic may be summarized as the knowledge of self and the knowledge of

God, not two activities, but one activity with parallel development. In *Cantica*

Canticorum, he says, "I wish then that the soul should first of all begin by knowing itself,

as it is required both by rational order and by usefulness" [Volo proinde animam primo

omnium scire se ipsam, quod id postulet ratio et utilitatis, et ordinis (ICC 34. 5)]. The

corresponding growth in knowledge of God is equally essential to growth, and for

Bernard, this growth may sometimes occur in "leaps" during contemplation. Robert P.

Stepsis has explained this element of Bernard's spiritual progress in terms drawn from

Abraham Maslow's discussion of "peak experience": [4]

> [Maslow's] 'peak experience' is defined as 'an episode or spurt in which
>
> the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and
>
> intensely enjoyable way' and thus is comparable to Bernard's mystical
>
> insights and experiences in which he describes himself as feeling at the
>
> height of his powers. (360)

For Bernard, these "leaps" transpire most often when the individual is alone in prayer and

meditation, periods of contemplation which he defines by allusions to desert solitude and

retreat of the Old Testament.

St. Bernard, who occasionally warned his sons against the vanity of "lying

fables," would seem an unlikely progenitor for romance. Nevertheless, the influence of

the Cistercian order on subsequent romance is undeniable. While Bernard and his

Cistercian "sons" are not always precisely the same, yet as Pauline Matarasso points out,

" . . . one can speak of a Cistercian theology or *schola amoris* in the sense that there exists

a deep unity of thought and sometimes of expression between the leading religious

thinkers of the order" (14-15). An example of Cistercian influence relevant to the

discussion of wilderness is the old French *Queste del Saint Graal.* [5]

Written about 1220-1225 as part of the prose Vulgate collection of Arthurian

stories, *The Quest for the Holy Grail* relates the adventures of the knights Perceval, Bors,

Galahad, and Lancelot. Unlike the other sections of the Vulgate, *Quest* is explicitly

religious in tone and subject matter, combining scripture recast into vernacular narrative,

allegorical analysis of events, and an account of the spiritual growth of the knights. [6]

Loosely divided between Perceval's and Galahad's spiritual journey and Lancelot's search for expiation, the narrative is believed by most scholars to have been written by a Cistercian, for a Cistercian patron or audience, or at the very least, under heavy Cistercian influence. The evidence for this connection is almost entirely internal and occasionally problematic; but it is nearly universally accepted. As Pauline Matarasso points out, " . . . no voice has been raised to deny the reality of the Cistercian influence in the *Queste*, not even that of the Cistercians who might properly have objected to having a changeling foisted on them" (14). [7]

The primary evidence is based on internal structures and on interpretations of scripture within the text, which reveal a Cistercian value system favoring the withdrawal from active life to a life of contemplation, with a secondary theme of the value of friendship and the corrupting effects of sensual love (Quinn 179). Of this evidence, the most relevant for a discussion of wilderness motif are the knights' temptations in the forests, Lancelot's penance in the forest, and the position of the hermit, a forest dweller, as interpreter of the narrative. [8] In each of these instances, the events of the romance reflect the pattern of wilderness as a locus for test, spiritual retreat, and conversion.

In the *Quest*, as in many romances, the forest is the space between courtly or social episodes, the setting through which the knights must go to get to the next act. Yet its function is not merely that of a simple transition. In the episodes regarding the young knight Meliant, for example, the elements of the action mirror Jesus' trial in the desert after his baptism. The day after Galahad dubs him a knight, Meliant travels with Galahad until they encounter a fork in the road marked by a cross and this sign:

To the knight who seeks adventure, you find here two paths--one to the

right, the other to the left. I forbid you to take the left path. Only a very

worthy man can enter there and escape alive. (13)

Meliant insists that he be allowed to follow the left path in order to test his new knightly

powers; the path leads him directly to an "ancient forest" where he promptly fails a test of

his humility and is wounded. The monk (likely a Cistercian!) who heals his wound also

interprets the forest as "hell" where the devil has tested the knight's virtue and resolve.

As in Bernard's sermons, the demonic attack occurs outside the structured security of the

community and immediately after a conversion experience (vigil, confession, knighting).

Like Jesus after his baptism, Meliant is "led into the wilderness," but unlike Jesus, he

fails the test, and is only saved by his determination to return to the abbey where he can

be shriven and receive communion and spiritual direction.

While Meliant's testing is only a single instance, the episodes with Lancelot form

a pattern of retreat, spiritual direction, and repentance. In this series of episodes

Lancelot's journey may be seen as that of Everyman, in which he tries to conform his will

and emotions to the perceptions of his intellect. The pattern is such that after each period

of action, Lancelot is forced by circumstances into the forest, where he reflects on his sins

and is admonished and advised by the hermit. While Meliant's experience in the forest is

a single test of conversion, Lancelot's experiences form a series of wilderness retreats. In

one episode, Lancelot, alone in a ruined chapel in the midst of a forest, dreams of a knight

healed by the grail, but he himself is unable to move. In interpreting this dream, the

hermit urges him to reject his passion for the queen and describes him as " . . . harder than

a stone, more bitter that wood, more barren than a fig tree" (125). The Cistercian

influence is apparent in this rejection of romantic love. As Esther C. Quinn points out:

> In using the image of the barren fig tree to describe the condition of
>
> Lancelot's soul, the Cistercian author is suggesting the barrenness of
>
> courtly lovers; in caring only for each other, they serve neither nature nor
>
> society. (204)

Finally, the hermit appears regularly as an interpreter of the action both to the

other characters and to the reader. As a hermit, he lives alone in the forest, taking a

position of danger on the front line between good and evil. As a wilderness figure he also

stands as a messenger between the order of this world and the order of the next. As

commentator, the hermit offers explanations which invite withdrawal into a life of

contemplation and away from the potential corruption of active life. In her introduction to

a new translation of the romance, Jane Burns summarized the role of the Hermit:

> Although the hermits are asked typically to provide the *vérité* or truth of a
>
> preceding adventure or to relate the *senefiance* or meaning of chivalric
>
> exploits, they most often simply recast the initial event in another
>
> narrative register, evoking a parallel tale from the Biblical or chivalric
>
> past. (1. xxx)

A central instance of this narrative interpretation occurs shortly before the knights enter

the grail castle for the last time, when this hermit explains their shared vision of a white stag in

terms which allude both to Psalm 42 and to St. Augustine's exegesis of it:

> Just as the stag is reborn in part by leaving behind its skin and fur,

so too was Our Lord reborn after death. He left behind his earthly skin,

his human flesh that he has acquired in the belly of the blessed Virgin.

And because there was never any human sin inside the blessed Virgin, the

Lord reappeared in the form of a white stag without blemish. (74)

Thus while Bernard himself avoided the lures of secular narrative, the influence

of his teachings and those of later Cistercians are reflected in the values of romance, as

well as in their use of wilderness imagery. A very different tradition appears in the

writings of the Franciscan movement. Where the Cistercians were rural, monastic, and

solitary, the Franciscans were urban and gregarious. Where Cistercians minimized the

use elaborate description and narrative, the Franciscans celebrated those very qualities.

And yet, for all of their differences, Franciscans employed a similar interpretation of

wilderness, with at least some similarity of allusive technique.

The Franciscan practices of visual and narrative representation come first

from the founder's appreciation of natural beauty. As Edward A. Armstrong has pointed

out, Francis saw " . . . the lark and the wild flower as sacramental and all nature singing

out to man to join in adoration of the Creator" (34). [9] Francis' ministry alternated

between active preaching and contemplative solitude The wilderness episodes of his life

represented primarily by his retreat to Mt. Alverna, reflect both the pleasures of natural

beauty and the dangers of the forest isolation. On the one hand, both Francis himself and

his friend Brother Leo are aware of the wild beauty of the Alverna retreat, with its

woods, chasms, and waterfalls. Yet the dangers were equally apparent, from injury, wild

animals, and outlaws, as well as from spiritual ennui.

Significantly, Francis, according to Bonaventure's *Legenda*, composed the

"Canticle of the Sun" in the period of painful illness after he received the stigmata. He

apparently wished to balance the rigors of asceticism with the praise of creation, that,

as he says, " . . . even the bones which you have broken may rejoice." [10] According to

one account, he says:

> I wish to compose a new hymn about the Lord's creatures, of which we
>
> make daily use, without which we cannot live, and through which the
>
> human race greatly offends its creator. (Armstrong 37-38)

Francis' praise in this lyric extends from sun and moon, wind, fire and water, to the

transition of natural death:

> Praised be you, My Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom
>
> living no man can escape . . . Blessed are those whom death will find in
>
> your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm. (12-13)

Francis' love of the natural world, implicit in the "Canticle," is made explicit in the

systematic treatment of Bonaventure, the great Franciscan theologian:

> Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened by such splendor of created
>
> things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf;
>
> whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb;
>
> whoever does not discover the First Principle from such clear signs is a
>
> fool. (JSG I. 15)

In the works of the Cistercians and indeed, of most early Christian writers, the

movement of spirit is from the Good down, with a corresponding corruption of spiritual

purity. However, both in the lyrics of Francis and the treatises of Bonaventure, the change in attitude toward nature, and toward the representation of nature is apparent: the individual spirit is not corrupted by the material world, but rather is lifted by means of nature toward a life of grace.

As suggested above, what Francis implied in his poetry, Bonaventure (1217-1274) supplied with order and system. [11] With regard to wilderness motifs, Bonaventure's chief works include *Itinerarium mentis in deus* (*A Soul's Journey to God*, c. 1259), *Lignum vitae* (*The Tree of Life*, 1262), and *Legenda Maior* (The Life of St. Francis, 1260). In these three best known of his spiritual writings, Bonaventure relates the wilderness transition to scriptural sources and extends it toward narrative description.

In *The Journey of the Soul to God* Bonaventure opens with an invocation drawn from Dionysius' *De mystica theologia*. [12] Yet while beginning with this neo-platonic model, nevertheless Bonaventure goes further to relate the mystical journey both to scripture and to individual experience, while maintaining a positive view of nature and of the value of the created world. His scheme is arranged following the pattern of the week of creation [13], with two days for each stage of development and a final Sabbath of union. As does Dionysius, he uses the image of Jacob's ladder (in itself a wilderness metaphor) but quickly moves toward Moses, the Passover and the journey into the desert. His first reference (I. 3) is to Exodus 3. 18, in which God commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask that the Hebrews be allowed to journey into the wilderness to make a sacrifice. At this point in the Exodus narrative, the Hebrews are not going to

be allowed to go anywhere, as both God and Moses know. Using this text, however, Bonaventure makes it clear that conversion is not begun without a specific call from God or without divine aid in the journey. Then almost immediately, he relates the present individual experience with the scriptural narrative, both from Exodus and from its interpreters in the New Testament:

> Thus we shall be true Hebrews passing over from Egypt to the land promised to their fathers (Exodus 13. 3f); we shall also be Christians passing over with Christ *from this world to the Father* (John 13. 1); we shall be lovers of wisdom, which calls to us and says: *Pass over to me all who long for me and be filled with my fruits* (Eccles. 24. 26). (I. 9)

This web of desert allusions, then, equates the experience of conversion with the experience of both individual and tribe in the wilderness.

In *The Tree of Life* Bonaventure continues to make use of the imagery from Exodus, and extends it to the New Testament baptismal narratives (chiefly that of Matthew 4). *The Tree of Life* is an extended meditation on virtue, and specifically on virtue as an imitation of Christ; therefore each of the virtues is related to an incident from the gospels. In sections nine and ten Bonaventure sees baptism as ". . . the doorway of the sacraments and the foundation of virtues" (III. 9). As Christ resisted the temptations in the desert, so the believer who imitates Christ is able to resist temptation through humility:

> By humbly enduring the enemy's attacks, he would make us humble;

and by winning a victory, he would make us courageous. He firmly

took up a life that was hard and solitary so that he might arouse the

souls of the faithful to strive toward perfection and strengthen them to

endure hardships. (III. 10)

Further, Bonaventure sees this imitation in the pattern of a desert experience for the

believer as well as for Christ:

Come now, disciple of Christ, search into the secrets of solitude with

your loving teacher, so that having become a companion of wild beasts,

you may become an imitator and sharer of the hidden silence, the devout

prayer, the day long fasting, and the three encounters with the clever

enemy. And so you will learn to have recourse to him in every crisis of

temptation. (III. 10)

Finally, perhaps Bonaventure's most telling use of wilderness as a natural setting for

spiritual transition is found in *The Life of St. Francis*, and particularly in the sections

relating to Francis' reception of the stigmata while making a retreat in the forest

solitude of Mt. Alverna. Since this is the most sensational passage in Bonaventure's

work, for he rarely placed much emphasis on miracles, I prefer to treat these passages

later, in connection with the religious romances they partly inspired. First, however, I

would like to explore some of the forests of the secular romance.

While the religious writers relate the wilderness motif directly to the deserts of

scripture and use it to describe spiritual conversion and transition, the secular writers of

the same period drew from the experience of actual forests to develop images for

personal trials, for life outside the established order, and even for madness and distraction. It would be possible to list many romances which make use of the wilderness. In *Yvain*, the knight meets the trial of the lion and has his chivalry tested in the dense forest of Broceliande. In the chantefable *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the forest is the space for the lovers, outside the bounds--both physical and social--of the city and the court. And in perhaps the most famous romance of all, Lancelot goes mad and lives as a wild man in the forest after being accused of faithlessness by Guenevere. However, the romances dealing with the love affair between Tristan and Isolde include all of the elements of romance wilderness together, and so for the sake of brevity, I shall limit my discussion to these..

According to J. Bédier, the romances of Tristan may be traced either to the twelfth century narratives of Eilhart von Oberg or Thomas d'Angleterre, or to a French prose romance of the thirteenth century. 'Only an incomplete poem by Beroul and an anonymous poem entitled "The Madness of Tristan" may be older. The fact that the narratives are always set in Celtic regions (Cornwall, Wales, Brittany, Ireland) and involve characters with Celtic names (Tristan, Iseult, Mark, Brangain) suggests a connection with older Celtic material, but although Drystan (Tristan) is mentioned in several early Welch manuscripts, no early Celtic versions of the love plot have been discovered. Many readers have seen in the disastrous love of Tristan and Iseult the very paradigm of romantic love, and indeed, in all of the versions, the relationship of the lovers holds pride of place. However, the accounts place considerable emphasis also on Tristan's development as a knight, including significant accounts of his emotional

progress. As R. Howard Bloch has pointed out, the narrative in addition to romantic love, " . . . embodies another important myth of origin: the birth of subjective consciousness" (61). It may be said that the modern novel has as its center the representation of consciousness. If that is so, the narratives of Tristan are among its origins. Bloch continues, " . . . the romanesque genre becomes the narrative form of subjective vision" (81).

In the representation of Tristan's consciousness, the wilderness plays a pivotal role, since all of the significant emotional transitions in the narratives occur in a forest (or in one instance, the episode of the love potion, on the sea). As he appears in all of the narratives, Tristan, though the most courtly of knights, is a man of the wilderness, since he was born in the forest and is early exiled from his father's court. Further, the landscapes of Tristan's romances are typical of the actual medieval topography, as Jacques LeGoff points out:

> King Mark's country was not a legendary land dreamed up by the
> troubadour. It was the physical reality of the medieval west. The face of
> Christian Europe was a great cloak of forests and moorlands, perforated
> by relatively fertile cultivated clearings. . . . For long the medieval west
> remained a collection, juxtaposed, of manors, castles, and towns arising
> out of the midst of stretches of land which were uncultivated and
> deserted. (MEC 131)

In the romances of Tristan, three episodes, common to most of the versions, represent the usual secular uses of the wilderness motif: the island battle with the

Morholt as a location of test, the interlude with Iseult in the Forest of Morroiz as space outside the established order, and Tristan's madness, with the forest the setting for frenzy and distraction.

The encounter with the Morholt, the King of Ireland, is Tristan's first single combat as a knight. It both establishes him as a knight of the first rank and also shows him as a knight far beyond the worth of King Mark's other retainers. In the von Strassburg narrative, the description of the negotiations, the arming, and the combat are detailed and vivid. Tristan, newly arrived at his uncle's court, shames the knights of Cornwall because they consent to offer tribute to Ireland rather than to defend themselves, King Mark, or the kingdom with war or with single combat:

> You lords, one and all . . . are you not ashamed of the disgrace you are bringing on this land? Brave as you always are in all things, every one of you, you ought by rights to make yourselves and your country honoured and respected, and advance its glory! But you have laid your freedom at the hands and feet of your enemy by means of this shameful tribute.
>
> (123)

Since Tristan has only recently been knighted, and since he has never participated in single combat, the battle with the Morholt is a daring test of his prowess, but the von Strasbourg narrative places almost equal emphasis on the test offered to the older knights who are seen as cowardly. The French prose romance, on the other hand, places the emphasis on the test of the young knight himself. This narrative, more direct and less detailed than the other, features the action of Tristan, as young and untried in

battle, needing to prove his value both to King Mark and to himself. When his tutor Gorvenal begs him to avoid the combat, Tristan says, "This is the test, sir . . . If I fail in this undertaking, don't ever have any hope for me again" (32).

In both the von Strasbourg and the French versions, the Morholt chooses the site of the battle, away from the castle and its environs. He chooses a small wooded island off the coast, near enough that the assembled court could watch, but far enough away that he and Tristan face each other alone. It is a brutal combat; both knights are wounded at the first clash, and the fighting goes on for several hours, until both are bleeding profusely. Unknown to anyone, Tristan has been wounded by the Morholt's poisoned spear at the first meeting, and so, without the proper treatment, he is doomed. However, he continues to fight, and eventually, he hits the Irish knight so hard on the head that his sword breaks off, leaving a bit of the point in the wound. The wound is fatal for the Morholt, though he survives long enough to return to Ireland. But though the court received Tristan back at the castle with great joy, he fails to recover from his wound, and grows weaker every day.

As a test, this encounter has several significant points. First, he accepts a challenge which the older knights have been afraid to confront. Second, on a wooded island, apart from the city and castle, he meets and defeats the Irish king, a much stronger and more experienced knight, and a knight who is exacting tribute from Mark's kingdom of Cornwall. In these episodes of the story, Tristan appears as a national hero, and in von Strassberg's version, the battle is represented explicitly as "pleasing to God." Quinn explains:

Here is a conception of the Deity is revealed which resembles that found

in the Old Testament and in the *chansons de geste*. . . . The episode is

cast in the mold of the judicial combat with many references to Cornwall

as right and Ireland as wrong, and Tristan as God's champion. Like

Beowulf defeating Grendel and ridding Denmark of the terror, Tristan

delivers Cornwall from the enemy. Like David, in his combat with

Goliath, Tristan is young and innocent and the instrument of God's will

against the huge and evil oppressor. (181-182)

Both Tristan and the Morholt retain injuries from this meeting which have future

significance for the younger knight. Tristan, of course, has the poisoned wound which

eventually is cured by Iseult the Blonde--a fatal meeting for them both. And the piece

of Tristan's sword which was lodged in the Morholt's wound was the evidence which

revealed his identity to Iseult's mother (the Morholt's sister) and caused Tristan's exile

from the Irish court before his relationship with Iseult might take a natural course.

Although Tristan passes other wilderness tests in the various romances, in battle, in

stealth, and in hunting, the island combat with the Morholt is the first and the one

which defines his subsequent character.

The second significant wilderness incident occurs after Mark is forced to

acknowledge that Tristan and Iseult are having an affair. In most versions, the lovers are

betrayed by a knight jealous of Tristan's power and reputation, but unlike King Arthur

under similar circumstances, Mark was already suspicious and hostile. In the French

romance, the lovers, having escaped the king, hide in the forest of Morroiz, as a place

free of the limitations of the court. Tristan explains that the forest represents a space of freedom between the orders of the community:

> If we go to the Kingdom of Logres amongst all the brave knights, . . . I shall be branded a traitor because of my love for you and you will be called a disloyal and wicked queen, since you left your husband for Tristan's sake. . . . If on the other hand I go to Leonois . . . both the foolish and the wise will say that I am living with my uncle's wife in sin. . . . [However] The forest we're in is the most exquisite, the most enjoyable, the most pleasant in the world . . . [here] we would be so secluded there that no one would ever chance upon us who would reproach us with anything. There we could be together day and night; there we could have our pleasure and our delight and our joy, just as we would wish. (164-165)

The lovers, attended by Gorvenal and a maidservant, set up housekeeping in an abandoned manor, and live comfortably, with Tristan supplying their food by hunting. The forest in this instance proves a refuge from the order and the intrusions of city and court; it is free of rules, free of people to comment or criticize. Until Mark and the knights of the court find them and destroy their idyll, the lovers enjoy freedom in the forest.

In the version by Beroul the interlude in the forest is more challenging for the lovers. As in the French romance, they escape into the forest after Mark discovers their affair. However, they do not live happily in a deserted manor. Instead, they camp out,

never sleeping twice in the same place. Although Tristan's skill as a hunter provides them with meat, and Governal is able to cook and make camp, they have no milk, no salt, and most of all, no security in this forest:

> They were very short of bread in the wood, they lived on flesh and nothing else. How could they help losing their colour? Their clothes were ragged, for branches tore them. They were a long time in the forest of Morrois. Each of them was suffering equal hardship. (85)

In the same text, while the lovers are free of the censure of the court, they suffer trial and hardship in living apart from the settled community. Further, this version adds a moral dimension to the lovers' seclusion in the person of the hermit Ogrin.

On their first meeting, Ogrin urges the lovers to repent of their adultery. Tristan and Iseult both argue that since they are unwilling victims of a love potion, and therefore not sinning through an act of the will, they can not be held responsible for their actions. Weeping, Iseult says to the hermit, "'Sir, by Almighty God, he loves me and I love him only because of a draught that I drank and that he drank. That was our misfortune. Because of this the king has driven us out'" (79). Three years later, weary and hard-pressed by Mark and his agents, the lovers return to the hermit's retreat. Ogrin again admonishes them:

> 'Exiles, what great suffering love forces on you! How long will this madness last? You have been leading this life for too long, and I beg you to repent." (99)

In this greeting, the hermit associates the exterior forest with the interior

wilderness of passion, and with the distraction which comes from the loss of personal order. After their hardships in the forest, Tristan and Iseult, while not denying their love, agree to separate, Iseult to return to Mark and Tristan to leave court and go abroad. This resolution is in line with the moral view of the age, where the sin lies not in the passion but in succumbing to the passion. When Tristan and Iseult agree to separate, they return to the established moral order, and hence, they leave the forest.

The third instance is one which has parallels with the Lancelot-Guinevere narratives of the Arthurian cycle, the episodes of Tristan's madness. The element of madness represents a significant departure from the trial-conversion motifs of the religious metaphor and introduces a specifically psychological view of wilderness which parallel some of the instances of forest madness in Statius and Lucan discussed in the previous chapter. In the romances which include this episode Tristan's madness is a result of his belief that Iseult has been unfaithful to him with the knight Kaherdin. The Beroul version has Tristan feigning madness in order to gain entrance to Mark's court. And whereas he journeys back to Cornwall through wilderness, suffering many hardships, and whereas the madness may be considered an image for his ungoverned passion for the queen, nevertheless, since feigned, the madness plays a secondary role in this instance of the wilderness motif. However, in the French romance, as in the Arthurian cycles, the madness resulting from Tristan's belief in Iseult's unfaithfulness is genuine, and he lives for a considerable period as a wild man in the wood. Without giving her an opportunity to explain, Tristan rushes off in a fit of despair:

Lady, since you have betrayed my love, I no longer wish to live, but long for my death. I want to die, that's all I ask for, that's my most ardent desire. And in order to put an end to my great grief without delay, I shall kill myself with my own two hands. (205)

Thus the madness begins as a result of Tristan's ungoverned love for the Queen, and his distraction is such that he is unwilling to listen to her explanation, but instead determines to kill himself, adding to the sin of adultery the sin of despair. Declaring himself "mortally struck by a twofold ill" (213), Tristan discards his armor and flees to the wood where he lives as a wild man. Though a young girl sent from Palamedes into Cornwall tries to look after Tristan, he continues to wander in the forest without eating or drinking. Although he briefly found some respite from raving through playing the harp and singing, in his grief, he " went running about through the Forest of Morroiz, now here, now there, crying and shrieking like a mad animal" (233). It is worthy of note here that the forest of Morroiz is the same place where Tristan and Iseult earlier hid together from King Mark. For the lovers together, the forest is a place of retreat; for one lover alone it is a setting for frenzy.

Eventually Mark and his huntsmen encounter Tristan and without recognizing him, they take him back to Tintigal, treating him as a fool:

The people of Tintagel saw him morning and night, but none of them had any idea it was Tristan. They jostled him; some hit him others beat him; they caused him great shame and treated him in a most unseemly fashion (296).

Only after he is recognized by his hound Hudenc, does the rest of the court, including

Mark, know him. Mark has him placed in private roomed and cared for, even by the

Queen herself, until he begins to recover. Only when he returned to court, and to the

Queen is he restored to sanity.

Thus in the secular romances of Tristan, the authors retain in the wilderness

motif the scriptural element of spiritual or emotional test, and the tension between

order and disorder, while adding dimensions of psychological transition as well. Indeed,

all of the versions of the story place remarkable emphasis on the psychological states of

the central characters. Except for the love potion which begins the lovers' passion, there

are virtually no instances of magic in these narratives, although the elements of

religious influence are clear enough. The narrative details of the romances and the

scriptural allusions of religious writers converge in what may be called religious

romances. In *The Theory of Literature*, Rene Wellek says of romance that it is "poetic

or epic: we should now call it mythic" (216). He further says that the form may " . . .

neglect verisimilitude of detail . . . addressing itself to a higher reality, a deeper

psychology" (216). With regard to setting, he refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's prefaces

to *The House of Seven Gables* and *The Marble Fawn,* where Hawthorne sees the setting

for romance as " . . . a sort of poetic precinct" (216). The Franciscans, following the

enthusiasms of their founder, used romance in the service of teaching and preaching in

a way which validated those secular techniques for religious use. The relationship

between the art and literature of the so-called twelfth century renaissance and the

iconography of the Franciscans is the subject of a study in itself. However, for the

purpose of a discussion of wilderness, an analysis of the motifs surrounding St. Francis' reception of the stigmata from his biographies and in related paintings will be most instructive.

This event, which occurred on Mt. Alverna about two years before the death of Francis is recorded in all of the earliest biographies of the saint--including *Vita prima* (c. 1228) of Thomas of Celano, *Legenda Maior* (1260) of Bonaventure, *Actus* (c.1320) of Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria, and *Il Fioretti* (c. 1350) by an anonymous Italian friar. The event is further represented in early Franciscan paintings, including those produced by Bonaventura Berlinghieri and Giotto, among many others. And finally, the reception of the stigmata was a culturally significant event which included all of the elements of the wilderness icon and which continues to be an influential element in literary and artistic representation in the later Middle Ages.

The lengthy biographical sketches of Thomas of Celano were the earliest Franciscan accounts of the life of the founder, and because of their length in 1260 the general chapter requested Bonaventure, then Chapter General, to write a shorter and more focused version, *Vita St. Francis* or *Legenda Maior* which became the official biography of the order. Bonaventure omitted many of the popular stories of Francis' life, choosing instead a spare narrative stressing Francis' imitation of Christ in the passion. Ugolino in the Latin Actus sought to record this significant oral tradition traceable to the original group of brothers. In 1330 an anonymous friar translated thirty of these "acts" into Italian, *Il Fioretti*, or *The Little Flowers*, and further appended the "Considerations on the Holy Stigmata," apparently a partial translation of a lost

manuscript along with some original material. In each of these four sources the outline of the episode of the stigmata is consistent, although they differ in type and in amount of descriptive detail.

A wealthy benefactor, Count Orlando di Chiusi of Tuscany, gave Francis a mountain near his estate, a place " . . . very solitary and wild and perfectly suited for someone who . . . wants to live a solitary life" (CHS 173). Francis and three friars vowed to make a forty day retreat in this isolated spot. Near the end of the retreat, in an event partly witnessed by Brother Leo--whom Francis called Brother Lamb--Francis experienced rays of light from a vision of the Six Winged Seraph after which he discovered that he had been granted the stigmata as a reward for his devotion to Christ in his passion. The wounds not only continued to bleed, but they still had the nails, making it nearly impossible for Francis to walk. This visitation had the three-fold effect of confirming Francis' spiritual transformation, enabling him to effect healing miracles, and relating the passion to the spiritual journey for subsequent generations, both in and outside the order. In other words, it was a personal transformation in a wilderness space which connected the individual with scriptural and iconic tradition in a way which remains significant for modern readers.

In the opening sections of Chapter 13 ("On His Sacred Stigmata") Bonaventure casts Francis' experience in a scriptural context which relates to the deserts of the Old and New Testaments. The initial Old Testament reference is to Jacob's wilderness dream wherein God establishes with him a covenant:

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top is it

reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and

descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the

Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac; the land whereon

thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be as

the dust of the earth . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth be

blessed" (Gen 28: 12-14).

Bonaventure relates Francis' vision to this dream in that it demonstrates a bond

between heaven and earth, and further as it teaches a balance between contemplation

and action. Francis, as he says, " . . . either *ascended* to God or *descended* to his

neighbor"   (13. 1).

In the body of the chapter, Bonaventure extends this element of balance between

contemplation and action by associating Francis' retreat to Mt. Alverna with Jesus'

Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, and with Moses' reception of the law on Mt. Sinai. In

the first instance, he introduces the qualities of spiritual retreat and spiritual

transformation, accomplished in a wilderness apart from the communal demands of the

city, although witnessed in both cases by chosen disciples. In the second, he alludes to

the continuation of the active life and the ability to impart the knowledge gained

through contemplation to the community. By relating Alverna to Tabor and to Sinai,

Bonaventure interprets wilderness contemplation as a continuing aspect of the spiritual

journey, significant both to the individual and to the order.

In describing the actual experience of the stigmata, Bonaventure proceeds with little description: " On a certain morning about the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross [Sept. 17], while Francis was praying on a mountain side . . . " (13. 2)--the opening comes directly to the point, and presents the wilderness setting more in terms of scripture than in terms of visual detail. And lest the reader attend more to the sensational nature of the event than to its significance, Bonaventure is careful to append an interpretation to the vision: that Francis was transformed " . . . not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the fire of his love consuming his soul" (13. 3). In closing the chapter, Bonaventure again asserts the desert images of Mt. Tabor and of Mt Sinai. The import is clear. The event is established as a wilderness transition by the location. briefly, but by reference to scripture deserts throughout. The experience portends both personal transformation and healing of the community.

The account in "Considerations" is developed with much more detail, demonstrating the more elaborate visual techniques which were partly a result of the Franciscan movement's pleasure in the created world. In this version, when the Count first sends the friars to Mr. Alverna, he sends with them fifty armed men, " . . . perhaps to protect them from wild animals" (173). Despite the dangers, the friars found the place to be " . . . very solitary and suitable for contemplation" (174).

Although Bonaventure does not specify a witness, in the later account, Brother Leo witnesses the vision and the stigmata in a place in the woods isolated even from the solitary cells of the friars. The effect on Francis was immediate and lasting, as Leo says, "And from that time St. Francis began to taste and feel more abundantly the sweetness

of divine contemplation" (190). But here again the effect was not for Francis only, but

for the order and for the church, resulting especially in miracles of healing. The

author's interpretation of Francis' wounds alludes to a passage in Isaiah, and thus to

Jesus' suffering of the Passion:

> Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did
>
> esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded
>
> for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement
>
> of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah
>
> 53: 4-5)

The elaboration of narrative with descriptive detail is also apparent in the

paintings of the period, where, as Jeryldene Wood points out, the Franciscans ". . . not

only acknowledged their veneration for a holy relic [specifically, a crucifix] associated

with the founder of the Franciscan order, they also registered their belief in the efficacy

of images" (301). The physical reality of the suffering Christ, and of Francis'

miraculous association as an *alter Christus* remains a central theme in the paintings as it

had been in the biographies; thus the reception of the stigmata forms a significant

episode in the paintings of Franciscan patronage. Further, the emphasis on active virtue

in the community as a result of contemplation in solitude developed in the biographical

narratives continues in the related visual art. In an essay on the iconography of the

Magdalen Chapel at Assisi, Lorraine Schwartz notes that, " . . . the pairing of the scene

of the Stigmatisation of Francis with that of the Magdalen communing with angels

parallels [not only the] penitents but also the practitioners of the contemplative life"

(33), a pairing which occurs also in paintings by Cimabue and Giotto. [19] Most important, the contemplative experiences of both saints are accomplished apart from the established order and within a wilderness solitude. While some iconography in these paintings varies [20], the element of wilderness is constant in all. the visual development of the theme is apparent in the St. Francis Altarpiece of Bonaventura Berlinghieri (1235) and in the later panel painting by the school of Giotto (early 14th century).

The single panel altarpiece, of the sort called a gabled dossal, was painted in Pesci, Tuscany, only about nine years after Francis' death (Fig. 6). The central portrait shows an austere view of the saint. As Thomas Cole points out:

> . . . the central image of Francis is very different from our romanticized
>
> and often saccharine ideal of his fabled figure. Instead, in a hard,
>
> abstracted style, Bonaventura depicts the saint as gaunt, ascetic, and
>
> looming. Here is not the sweet, sunny Francis who happily wanders in
>
> Umbria, but an iconic, powerful holy man. (91)

The panel representing the reception of the stigmata (upper left panel) also reflects this severe style. The saint kneels on a sharp out-cropping of rock; the mountain crags loom above him. A single tree and some rough gorse form the only softening elements in the composition. The mountain, the seraph, and the figure of Francis are located between two towers, architectural elements which represent the settled space of the community. The wilderness is the "no man's land" outside the walls. The implication is that direct

spiritual experience occurs not in the social orders of church and city, but outside the confines of the rational and predictable life.

Nearly a hundred years later, Giotto Bondone (1267-1337), whose school had painted or designed many of the frescos of the church in Assisi, painted a panel of the same scene . Both in style and design, the panel painting reflects several differences from the earlier painting (Fig. 7). First the figure of the saint is rounded, with robe falling in soft, natural folds . Second, rather than a Sereph, the crucifix is the source of the light, reflecting a shift in the iconography of the stigmata as a motif. As in the earlier panel, the saint kneels on a rugged mountainside, but trees and bushes add detail to the landscape. And again, as in the other panel, the wilderness is located between the city structures of wall and tower. Although the iconography of the vision has changed, the spiritual transformation remains an event outside of the established community, apart from ordinary expectations.

Thus in the spiritual and theological treatises, the courtly and religious romances, artists retain the scriptural and classical readings of wilderness as space for trial, conversion, contemplation, and spiritual transformation. Further, especially in the courtly literature, writers extended the classical wilderness as a threatening and sometimes magical space of passage to represent the psychological experiences of growth and individuation. And finally, by equating the exterior wilderness with interior transitions, both artists and writers began to develop wilderness as a metaphor for the changes and chances of life outside the established order.

Fig. 6. *St. Francis Altarpiece*, Bonaventura Berlinghieri, San Francisco, Peacia,

Tuscany. *The World of Giotto: C. 1267-1337*, by Sarel Eimerl (New York: Time Life

Library of Art, 1967, 24).

Fig. 7. *The Stigmatization of St. Francis,* Musee du Louvre, Paris. Giotto, Francesca

d'Arcais (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1995, 72).

All of these elements of wilderness landscape come together in the work of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), and especially in his encyclopedic *Comedy* (completed about 1320). Though not unique in his use of the individual techniques, Dante is unique in his synthesis of those techniques in order to produce a narrative representation of consciousness. Earlier examples may draw their strength from the immediate reality of frontier experience. *Beowulf* sees the menace of monsters outside the borders of settled life; the author figures trials and temptations as threats from outside the hero or the community which must be met, conquered, and surpassed in order to achieve the safety of the community as well as next level of personal experience or understanding. In the *Comedia*, on the other hand, Dante uses the wilderness as an explicitly interior space, the undomesticated thickets of the heart which must be known in order to be transcended.

In his use of wilderness, as in most of the rest of the poem, Dante uses a fictional narrative represented with realistic detail to depict spiritual life within individual and social experience. Although some critics maintain that Dante is the "last" of the medieval Italians (because of his religious certainty), his radical originality should not be underestimated. Indeed, Dante is innovative about the representation of consciousness in much the same degree as James Joyce was 600 years later. In using the "stream of consciousness" narrative to represent unconscious and pre-conscious experience, Joyce certainly expanded the available techniques of the novel form, but more to the point, he made a judgement regarding which parts of human experience are most important. Dante made the same kind of change in medieval narrative. In

embedding a spiritual narrative in a realistically represented work of fiction, Dante expanded the available techniques of narrative, and he also made a judgement about the relationship between the spiritual journey and "everyday life." This relationship between technique and content is the meat of the *Comedy* as a whole; the particular use of the wilderness metaphor is no more than one significant example.

For clarity, the analysis of technique and content of the wilderness motif should distinguish a metaphor in a religious piece from a similar metaphor in secular narrative. A piece such as the *Ancren Rieule* uses narrative passages as illustrations of ascetical points: the story of the Kingly Wooer, for example, represents the relationship between Christ and the soul. In addition to exempla of this sort, the work has instruction, encouragement, and explanation. It was produced by a religious author for a religious audience, both pre-occupied with specifically religious issues and both determined to impose religious categories on daily experience. In contrast, though written by an author of unquestioned Christian conviction, and for an audience at least nominally Christian, the *Comedy* is a secular narrative. First, it is written in Italian, directing it to a broad audience and separating it from the Latin rhetoric of the church and the university. Second, although it includes expositions and abstract allegorical visions, the main body of the work deals with a fictional narrative intended for pleasure as well as for edification of a general audience. Third, whereas a specifically religious medieval narrative begins with an ideal and imposes that ideal on behavior or experience, the Comedia begins with experience--psychological, romantic, social and political--and through that experience seeks to reveal a pattern of existence as it may

correspond to theological categories. As Aristotle held that the ideal forms were only present in the particular objects, so Dante saw system as only present in the acts and the choices of human life.

In order to consider Dante's use of wilderness in more detail, it will be necessary to look at the dynamics of the key scenes as well as at other allusions within the movement of the journey. Some of the characters Dante meets on his journey allude to wilderness as a metaphor for personal isolation and for political disaster. The Wood of the Suicides is a notable example in the Inferno, and in the Purgatory, the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer refers to the "harsh wood of this world," as an image of personal isolation. Perhaps the most fully developed of these instances is Sordello's extended reference to Italy as being reduced to wilderness and barbarism by political and religious corruption (Purgatorio VI - VII). It is, however, in the defining transitional scenes of the Inferno and the Purgatorio that Dante uses wilderness as a locus for conversion and for spiritual transition.

These uses of wilderness include three aspects of representation. First the subject represented by wilderness is, on the level of the individual, a spiritual or emotional transition entailing conversion, expanded self-knowledge, and renewed comprehension of the divine plan as it is reflected in ordinary life. Second, the technique includes use of realistic representation of character, action, and scene to represent spiritual movement. That is, Dante employs the descriptive devices of fiction to present an imitation of real interior experience. The pilgrim feels the sun and wind, grows weary, interacts with Virgil and with people he meets. The reality of the spiritual

journey is represented through these details of the spiritual journey. Third, therefore, Dante unites idea with technique in a structure which is architectural, stressing overall pattern rather than lyrical detail, yet personal, stressing the experience of the pilgrim. Within these choices of subject and technique, Dante's use of wilderness landscape both conforms to his schema and unites the classical and scriptural conventions of the motif and even includes some aspects of the earlier frontier wilderness.

As a whole narrative, the *Comedia* is a work of fiction representing a journey begun in a dark wood and ended in the suburbs of heaven. Propounding what even he sees as a "desperate comparison," Charles Singleton relates the *Comedy* to *Paradise Lost* as "literal and historical" (61). In doing this Singleton attempts to stress the mimetic quality of the narrative, but he need not have been driven to such extremes. The fact is, Dante did not *dream* the story, he did not *live* the story, but he *made up* the story. He made it of characters walking, climbing, scrambling, talking. He made it with structure, with a beginning, middle, and end, with plenty of imitation of action. The use of the word "fiction" in this context is bothersome to medievalists and to modernists alike, but fiction it unmistakably is.

At the same time, the *Comedy* also represents "the journey of this life," a spiritual journey of the soul's progress from sin to salvation. The narrative does this not by means of allegory, but by means of details which both are themselves within the narrative, and at the same time suggest or allude to other ideas and events outside the construct. As Singleton says, "The particular, the individual, the concrete, the fleshed, the incarnate, is everywhere with the strength of reality and the irreducibility of reality

itself" (60). In uniting the techniques of fiction with the content of the spiritual journey,

Dante made a specific judgement both about technique and content: that the techniques

of fiction were appropriate for religious subjects *because* religion in this world occurs

not as abstraction, but as the very matter of human experience.

With these general statements regarding technique and content in mind, let us

turn to the specific wilderness scenes in the Inferno and the Purgatorio. The three

passages are at the beginning of Hell, the beginning of Purgatory, and the beginning of

the Earthly Paradise, in each case, a point of change for the traveler. The first two of

these are, in fact, the same landscape seen from different points of view. In details, the

first two scenes begin with "dangerous waters" and desert shores, and continue with a

dark wood, a mountain, and wild animals on the one hand and a lonely plain, a

mountain, and a guide on the other. In both scenes, the traveler turns from a former

pursuit, finds his way blocked, and is aided by a guide. The third scene begins not with

water but with fire--the final purgation through which Dante must pass. After the fire,

however, the pattern is similar--a wood, a turn from the mountain below, a stream

blocking the way, and a guide. In all three scenes, the features of undomesticated

landscape are rendered with verisimilitude.

In content, the three scenes represent conversion, turning point, spiritual test, and

beginning again--in fact, all of the aspects of the spiritual life associated with

wilderness landscape of scriptural and classical models. The *Comedy* as a whole

represents three stages of Christian spiritual experience--the purgative, illuminative and

unitive levels of the conversion process. These levels of conversion, whether described

by Bernard or Bonaventure, are by the late thirteenth century, truisms of spiritual

experience, and their development has generally been described in terms of movement

through space--a journey or pilgrimage. In presenting these three "ways" in the guise

of a fully developed fiction, Dante insists that the journey exists not as an abstract

scheme, but rather in the daily life and experience. the individual. As Bonaventure in

The Journey of the Soul to God sees the "journey of this life" as beginning in the

realities of experience, so Dante works up from experience toward spiritual knowledge,

and in doing so, he has finally and for all time tacked Plotinus' neo-platonic toes to the

floor. The wilderness passages occurring in the Inferno and the Purgatorio represent

the transitions between and within those stages of spiritual experience, using all of the

aspects of the wilderness motif--desert, forest, darkness, seascape, danger, beasts-- as

well as the *locus amoenus* of classical literature. In language and allusion, these

landscapes connect specific spiritual experiences with the physical details of

representation, because the spiritual experience *arises from* the material world.

In a sense all of the Inferno can be called wilderness, since the disorder of its

inmates has corrupted and defaced the natural order of the place. But the traveler's first

experience of the dark wood represents the beginning of the conversion experience. [22]

In subject matter these cantos represent the protagonist's realization that he is without

the knowledge or strength to continue in his present course. It is an experience which

in modern parlance might be called a "mid-life crisis." Indeed, in her book *Passages*

Gail Sheehy equates Dante's experience directly with psychological analysis of

transitional experience (147).

When the traveler realizes that he is lost, the experience of confusion and despair is represented by the harsh and trackless wood, not as an allegorical equation (dark wood = sin / error, for example) but as the human experience of being lost in a "dark wood" where "the right way is wholly lost and gone . . . " Though this first wilderness landscape is developed with descriptive detail, Dante's choice of key vocabulary explicitly links the passages to scriptural, classical and mystical sources, conveying in compact form the interior transition as one of self-knowledge and of conversion. the wood (*selva*) is dark (*obscura*) as well as wild, rugged, and harsh (*selvaggia, aspra, forte*). The landscape also features dangerous waters (*pelagio a la riva*) and a desert strand or shore (*piaggia diserta*), as well as a vast desert (*gran diserto*) and even the rather general wild place (*loco selvaggio*). The journey begins upon a deep and savage way (*commino alto e silvestro*). This choice of vocabulary reenforces a sense of danger and trial which derives partly from the simple denotation and partly from the relevant allusions.

Charles Singleton has thoroughly documented the scriptural allusions of this vocabulary (1-7). The most overt reference is to the wilderness passage in Exodus, where the Hebrews are driven from former security in Egypt through the trials of the desert in search of the land of promise. However other passages from Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel document the similar Old Testament use of wilderness as a place of testing between former stagnation (security?) and future promise. In Exodus in the wilderness passages, Moses is tested and prepared for his vocation.. Similarly, the Hebrews, following Moses, must move into the desert, away from Egypt (status quo)

and toward Canaan (land of promise). While in the desert they suffer trials and hardships as they are forced to reconstruct their tribal identity as "chosen" people. These scriptural passages are reflected in the experience of Dante's traveler who discovers himself in a wild place through which he must pass to attain the heaven promised.

Early Christian exegesis of Exodus extended the experience of the Hebrews as a tribe to reflect the interior experience of an individual and to link that experience with the New Testament passages relating to baptism and to testing in the wilderness. (In every scriptural instance, conversion and baptism are *followed* by testing.) Augustine of Hippo speaks of a soul adrift in "so vast a wilderness, so full of snares and dangers" (tam immense silva plena indidiarum et periculorum. Conf. X. 35) and later associates this image of wilderness both with Baptism, with conversion, and with subsequent testing. Indeed, in Exodus, in *The Confessions* and in the *Commedia*, it is the use of "mythical space" to represent experience that connects the works, for as Shirley J. Paolini has pointed out, "the desert spaces, sea voyages, and Exodus figures . . . [represent] the lost regions of the soul, or the region of unlikeness where [the past] experiences a lapse from his inner vision" (565).

It may be, as Singleton, says that the scriptural allusions are central to Dante's use of the wilderness landscape. However, the echos of classical sources, especially from Virgil's *Aeneid*, sound in the *Comedy*. Indeed, early commentators saw Dante's protagonist as a Christian Aeneas whose prophetic calling was to re-found Rome, free of the taint of violence from the Romulus and Remus narrative. Be that as it may,

Dante's experience of the dark wood reflects some of Aeneas' melancholy at Avernus. In seeking the Golden Bough, for example, the token which admits the hero to the underworld, he "ponders with his own sad heart, gazing on the boundless forest" (Singleton, 4; *Aeneid* VI. 179-185-88)

These passages of the *Aeneid* are also glossed by Bernard Sylvester with allegorical references, associating the wilderness both with the wasteland of this world and the obscurity of the sinful soul. Bernard goes so far as to relate the specific sins to the qualities of wild animals, including, among other things, the rapacious malice of wolves. [24] But while Bernard, a neo-platonist, renders the *Aeneid* into allegorical abstractions, Dante maintains the allusions and still grounds his traveler in the real experience of this world.

Although echos of Exodus and of the *Aeneid* are ever present to the reader, the narrative representation is that of a particular individual with name and history, not of a generic "mankind." On the level of narrative, this landscape represents the harsh wilderness which actually existed outside of the walls of Florence. Further, no Giant Despair haunts this forest, no fabulous monsters--dragons, chimeras, basilisks, but rather real animals--leopard, lion and wolf. And while each of these creatures represents classical and scriptural sources, they are first in the narrative as dangerous wild animals. At the same time, Dante makes clear that the dark forest is an interior and universal wood as well as a real thicket. Because of the allusions, the traveler's *turn* is seen as a conversion, his barriers as sins, and his guide as Reason. He turns away from the uncertainties of the world and toward the moral clarity which comes from the

clear knowledge of sin.

The opening cantos of the Purgatory parallel the structure of the beginning of the Inferno. First, Dante turns away from the squalor of the Inferno and toward Purgatory. Though Shirley J. Paolini has seen these two passages as representing a failed and a successful conversion (568), it would perhaps be more accurate to see them as opposite ends of the same experience, since they mark the beginning and end of the purgative way and the entrance to the illuminative way. Second, Dante's way is blocked by Cato until his guide Virgil accounts for their presence and continues to show him the way. And third, this turning represents a second beginning, this time a beginning of the practice of virtue.   In content, the scene completes the conversion experience begun in Canto I of the Purgatory, and represents the poet's passage from the purification of the intellect to the purification of the will. Again, these movements transpire in a wilderness landscape, the lonely and undomesticated *lito diserto* (desert strand) between the ocean and Mt. Purgatory. As in the opening of the Inferno, the landscape here is represented with physical details -- dawn and sea, lonely plain, dew, grass, and pliant rushes. And as before, these details both comprise the meaning of experience and represent the experience. In fact, the wilderness landscape is neither a second landscape nor a completion of the first, but rather, it is the same landscape, the wasteland between the encircling ocean and the mountain of Purgatory, seen after the thickets of sin are cleared away.

Indeed, the differences in descriptive detail result from the Pilgrim's difference in point of view. In the first scene, landscape is harsh and almost crowded, as the

traveler beset by the confusion of the world must *feel* crowded. In the second, with his intellect purified by true knowledge of sin, the traveler experiences the space as open, almost agoraphobic. Knowledge has cleared away the brush, but knowledge alone is not enough to rescue the soul from the wasteland of the desert shore. He has crossed the Red Sea and come out of Egypt, but he still wanders in the wilderness outside the Promised Land.

The third passage in Cantos XXVII - XXIII of the Purgatory, represents for the protagonist, the final transition from purification to the way of union. The ancient forest between the fiery circle of purification and the rivers bounding the earthly paradise represents the space from which the unfallen man would have undertaken his upward journey; even from Eden, the way up leads through the forest. Some critics treat the whole of the landscape on top of Mt. Purgatory as the Garden of Eden; however, the space between the final cornice and the river is described as "forest," and is clearly separated from the garden within the river. Further, Dante is unable to cross the river until he has witnessed the procession of sacred history, and has been confronted by Beatrice. This landscape is clearly of another order than the others, being "above the air of the world." And yet Dante's passage here has parallels with the first two.

Instead of the dark and dangerous waters, he must now pass the fiery circle. Though beautiful and light, the *divina foresta* on the top of the mountain still offers no clear path; the trees seem to open before the traveler, and close behind him, so that even if he wished to do so, he could not turn back. Here his way is barred not by the animals

but by the waters of the stream. And as before he needed Virgil to act as guide and teacher, here he must have first Matilda and then Beatrice. This final passage through a forest is another transition, and therefore, a wilderness experience. Further, because the unitive way, though a delight, is still a mystery, the parallels are more with the dark wood than with the desert strand. Or, from another point of view, the ancient forest contains all of the elements of both desert strand and dark wood, but in the proper order and relationship, free of both sin and the stain of sin.

These three landscapes, then, taken together, reveal the movement of the soul from sin, through purgation and toward the vision of God. But they are represented not as abstract allegory but as phases of a fictional journey and are connected firmly by sensual detail to the experience of a particular and individual individual traveler. In adapting this technique, Dante moves the representation of spiritual experience from the allegorical presentation of an abstract ideal to a presentation of experience which can only occur within the passages of an actual life in a real time and place.

By placing these reflections at mid-life rather than at the more conventional end of life, Dante shifts the focus from accomplished journey to journey in process, with the attendant urgency of an immediate event. Further, this journey is no "walk in the park." From some point of relative security, the narrator finds himself lost in a dark and menacing wood with no idea of "the direct way," reflecting both the fear and the instability of an emotional crisis. Peter Hawkins sees in this passage a "confusion of his [Dante's] spiritual lostness, a tacit admission at the very outset that he was (to quote Jerome's gloss on Isaiah 38: 10 : 'in the shadow of errors that lead to hell'" (121).

Finally, as Charles Singleton has pointed out, the use of the pronoun *nostra* (we) and the verb *retrovai* (rather than *trovai*) suggests general application and interior awareness and "the dawning of light in the conscience" (4). Thus even in the first three lines of the poem, it is clear that the journey is inward as well as outward, and that it will proceed through uncharted, undomesticated, and dangerous territory.

As Dorothy L. Sayers has pointed out, the best way to read the *Comedy* would be to begin at the beginning and read straight through, enjoying the speed and adventure and sparing the analysis of footnotes (7). The wilderness passages on a purely literal level, produce narrative excitement of the terrors of the dark wood, the fresh outdoorness of the shore, and the delectable mystery of the ancient forest. Yet vocabulary alone suggests the addition of an interior reading, and the scriptural, classical, and theological allusions develop a complex network of spiritual and psychological transitions. In that context the reader is free to reflect on the sophistication of Dante's self-knowledge, paralleling the medieval models of the personality as passions, memory, and intellect or of intellect, will and affection. Or he may read the journey as a conversion narrative in which the poet navigates the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways of the spiritual journey. It is even possible to read the poem as a Christian quest wherein the traveler returns with knowledge vital to the community. In each of these readings, however, it is clear that Dante develops the physical elements of wilderness metaphor from scriptural, classical, and mystical sources in order to represent the specific psychological and spiritual experiences of transition. As Peter Hawkins points out, in Dante's art, "theology generates landscape.

. . . No space is neutral. Rather, it becomes the occasion for the Christian doctrine to take on a local habitation and a name" (197).

END NOTES

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the predominant wilderness between castle and city, see Jacques LeGoff, *Medieval Civilization: 400-1500,* (Trans. Julia Barrow, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

[2] In fact, these representations of the wild forest come equally from the actual poetry and from the descriptions of the rhetorical forms described in the schools.

[3] At this time, since most people were baptized as infants, the word *conversion* (*conversio*) usually referred to the decision to join a religious order. As Jean LeClercq points out, however, for Bernard it was also a "conversion of the heart" (65), a move from nominal to active commitment.

[4] Stepsis refers to Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality,* New York, 1954, 210-211.

[5] For a full discussion of the Cistercian antecedents of *The Quest for the Holy Grail,* see Sister Isabel Mary SLG, "The Knights of God: Citeaux and the Quest for the Holy Grail" (*The Influence of St. Bernard: Anglican Essays,* with an Introduction by Jacques LeClercq OSB, edited by Sister Benedicta Ward; Oxford: SLG Press, 1976).

[6] For a more detailed account of the "order" of knighthood as a vocation, see Colin Morris, "Equestris Ordo: Chivalry as a Vocation in the Twelfth Century" (*Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, edited by Derek Baker. Ecclesiastical History Society 15. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978). Morris says:

> The definition of knighthood as an order was part of a conscious attempt
> to win the military classes for Christ, and it was directed against two other
> ways of thinking about chivalry. On the one hand it represented an
> abandonment of the insistence that in order to be saved a knight must
> become a monk. . . . While affirming the value of true chivalry in God's
> sight, the new way of thinking also opposed the secular values which were
> being expressed among the knights.   (89-90)

[7] Again, see Sister Isabel Mary's essay, above.

[8] There may be, as Jane Burns asserts, that there are several hermits, but be that as it may, all of the hermits represent the same "voice" or point of view.

[9] Alan de Lille says "Every Creature of this earth is like a picture or a book: it is a mirror of ourselves,. It is a faithful mark of our life and of our death, of our condition and our fate." [Omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum; / nostrae vitae, nostratae mortis, / nostri status, nostrae sortis, / fidele signaculum.] *De*

Incarnatione Christi (Rhythmus Alter) (PL 210, col. 579).

[10] Psalm 22.

[11] In fact, Bonaventure may have supplied more "system and order" than Francis would have liked. In trying to steer a course of moderation between the Spirituals and the Academics, Bonaventure managed to please no one.

[12] Pseudo-Dionysius was a neo-platonic mystical theologian of wide influence, though dubious theology. He was responsible for one of the early statements regarding the tree ways of the spiritual journey, and he also described the orders of angels and of heavenly spheres which Dante drew on for his imagery. Bonaventure's citation of one of his verses does not, I believe, imply an agreement with his whole system.

[13] Genesis 1-3.

CHAPTER 5

THE THICKETS OF THE HEART

In the literary works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the scriptural desert or

the classical *locus amoenus*--or both--are present in all wilderness motifs. The

connection may be explicit, as in the Franciscan writings, or implicit, as in the romances,

but these two traditions define the wild landscape. Whether the landscape is rendered in

detail or by suggestion, the reader fills in the blank spaces with passages of scripture or

from the Roman poets. The effect on the wilderness landscape motif (as with many other

medieval icons) is that the symbolism rests indirectly on nature, but directly on other

books, [1] so that a landscape in one of the Tristan romances begins in the Forest of Moritz,

but it recedes through other landscapes, other locales, even other times. It is less a

particular forest for these particular lovers, and more the most immediate representative

of "high time and due season in the place appointed." The literary techniques related to

these landscapes are capable of rich variety and economical expression; a lion walks

across the page, and lo, the whole forces of Judah are with him. At the same time, this is

a book-related symbolism, deriving almost entirely from allusion to other books. As

Beryl Rowland points out, " . . . the tropes and figures of speech recommended by the

rhetoricians, while they may illustrate some central truth, are ornamental devices,

arranged and patterned to a formal prescription in language traditionally regarded as most

suitable to the subject" (104). And while I would question whether the figures are only "ornamental" the fact of their literary basis is undeniable. This connection between book and figure pertains even in the popular media of sermon, procession, and drama, and in the visual media of stained glass, sculpture, and painting. The "pelican in her piety," for example, whether she stands in a window, a poem or a painting, is an icon which alludes to text, which is transmitted ultimately through text, and is afforded meaning by its relationship with other related texts. In his study of medieval aesthetics, Robert Jordan refers to " . . . the idea of a poem as an edifice composed of prefabricated parts" (43). If the observation of nature reveals that the pelican does not, in fact, nourish her nestlings on her own heart's blood, that fact is irrelevant. The significance of the image derives not from nature but from text. As Jordan points out, "This inorganic conception of art, with its concentration of quality and structure, does not sit well with the modern interest in vital inner relations and organic interpretations" (43). True. But this is merest prejudice based on what we as modern readers are accustomed to. The fact is that both nature and text provide a wealth of material for motif, each body valuable in its own way.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also, forces were at work which would shift the emphasis from text to nature, providing the basis for more naturalistic representation. The Crusades introduced new manuscripts of medicine, mathematics, and natural science, as well as poetry, while both Crusade and pilgrimage brought new manuscripts and new science into Western Europe. The rise of scholasticism infused the intellectual community with a renewed enthusiasm for inquiry. And as related in the previous chapter, the rise of the mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans, stressed a mode of

teaching which began with nature and natural representation. Francis himself discouraged books and encouraged bird watching. And while his anti-intellectual bias was fairly well ignored by most of his followers, such Franciscans as Francis Bacon and Duns Scotus, both of whom taught at Oxford, taught something very much like scientific method.

In the fourteenth century these two elements, the reliance on text and the rise of naturalism, contributed to the complexity of the wilderness motif, both in technique and ultimately in content. And though the effect was similar in both instances, the icon diverged in religious and secular writing, as those two types themselves became more distinct.

The fourteenth century religious writers, related to Benedictine tradition and especially to the Cistercian reforms, retained the scriptural motif of the desert as a locus of conversion and trial. Since such authors as Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton are primarily apophatic and affective, their use of metaphor is scant, and their references to wilderness generally limited to scriptural allusion. Their use of wilderness was not so much in their writing as in their lives, as they elected to live as solitary hermits, often in cells or chapels in the woods or on the Yorkshire moors.

On the other hand, such writers as Geoffrey Chaucer and the Pearl poet, continuing in the way laid out by Dante, wrote in the vernacular language, English, and wrote secular fictions intended to please as well as to instruct. Their characters, drawn from life, reflect a broad social spectrum and reveal realistic and highly individual psychology. *Sir Gawain*, for example, makes a three-part journey which might easily

have been made to conform to the three-fold ways of the spiritual life--purgation, illumination, and union. But it does not. Instead, while it treats religious and moral issues with a rich and perceptive complexity, the issues are Gawain's first, and only by extension do they form a general paradigm. [2] And even when the narrative reveals interior experience, it is the naturalistic experience of individuation rather than the formal pattern of conversion.

In the narrative of the fourteenth century, both religious and secular, no space is neutral; neither is it "merely" setting; and seldom is it simple allegory. The use of space and movement within space as an analogy for interior progress which began with the Greek neo-platonists, takes on both descriptive detail and complexity in the classical and scriptural city / garden/ wilderness models of the early Middle Ages. Within the traditions of the romance these spatial motifs become a device for the representation of consciousness. Literature and art of the fourteenth century begin both in secular and religious narrative to stress the psychological and interior experience of the characters.

In this more naturalistic mode, does the wilderness become mere "setting"? No. The motif retains the outline of the scriptural and classical loci as places of test and transition. But the use of detailed description and of character response to natural setting expands the motif from the strictly religious transition to the more general--and varied--psychological changes. In fact, the narratives form the bridge between the formal text-based wilderness of the early Middle Ages and the open challenges of wilderness in the Renaissance and beyond.

Such religious writers as Richard Rolle, the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing,* and Walter Hilton represent the continued use of the wilderness motif in religious writing. First, they continue the use of the scriptural tradition of desert as metaphor for conversion. To this, they add wilderness as a metaphor for contemplation, both because it is apart from the worldly concerns of the city and the erotic connotations of the garden, and also in that wilderness is unpredictable space, even as contemplation is unpredictable experience. Yet as part of the apophatic tradition generated by Dionysius, not much metaphor appears in these writings. Instead, they demonstrated in their experience. [3]

The scriptural allusions to wilderness undergo a subtle change in the works of Rolle, Hilton, and the Cloud author. All of these men were writing as spiritual directors for monastic communities, and as such, they had less need than, say, Bernard to evangelize. Instead, these writers see the wilderness as a space for contemplation apart from the demands of the world and of active life. For example, in *The Fire of Love,* Rolle says:

> Some truly are taught by God to desire (the) wilderness for Christ, and to hold a singular purpose; the which forthwith, that they may more freely and devoutly serve God, forsaking the common clothing of the world, despise all transitory things, and cast away temporal things; and excelling in height of mind the desire only for everlasting joy, and are only given to devotion and contemplation and every effort of their life they cease not to give to the love of Christ (59).

This ermetical tradition had, of course, persisted in the church from the earliest days. In the social disarray of the fourteenth century, however, the dangers and privations of wood and moor seemed to many preferable to the dangers of city and court.

Each of these men lived adult lives as solitary contemplatives, passing most of their time in cell or hermitage. Although in their writings, they made little use of figure, wilderness or otherwise, they enacted in their lives the metaphor of wilderness, and while their solitude was in some sense a trial where they confronted temptations, it was also a respite from the hectic world--an attitude which prefigures the modern bias concerning the values of wilderness.

While like the Cloud author and Hilton, Rolle wrote spiritual direction for a community, a substantial portion of his work is pure autobiography, and for that reason, we may see in Rolle's writing the enactment of the wilderness metaphor. While a student at Oxford, Rolle experienced a religious conversion resulting in a desire for a life as a hermit. This event may have been an authentic call to a religious vocation, a distaste for the frivolity of college life, or an unfortunate sexual encounter. Rolle is not explicit, and elements of each are apparent in his account. In any case, returning to his home, Rolle asks his sister to bring two of her dresses, one grey and one white, and to meet him in the woods near the farm. When she complies, he takes the dresses apart and reassembles them in the likeness of a hermit's habit. When he returns to model the result for his sister, she cries, "My brother is mad!" Whether she objects to his cutting up her clothes, to his apparent cross-dressing, or to his choice of vocation is not clear to us; perhaps it was not clear to Rolle either. But dismayed by her reaction, he left her

there and ran away into the woods. After a period of solitude under the patronage of

John de Dalton, a neighboring squire, he was established as a hermit connected to a

nearby Cistercian house.

Modern readers sometimes attribute to Rolle the misogyny common to that

period, but reading all of *The Fire of Love*, rather than just selected quotes, reveals a

more complex attitude, that of a man both attracted to but also tempted by women. He

says:

> Yet, forsooth, friendship betwixt men and women may be perilous, for fair
>
> beauty lightly cherishes a frail soul, and temptation seen sets fleshly desire
>
> on fire and ofttimes brings in the sin of body and soul; and so the company
>
> of women with men is wont to happen to the destruction of virtue. And
>
> yet this friendship is not unlawful but meedful; it be had with good soul,
>
> and if it be loved for God and not for the sweetness of the flesh (173)

After whatever experience he had at Oxford, Rolle apparently found it safer to maintain

his balance of charity in solitude:

> I had great liking to sit in wilderness that I might sing more
>
> sweetly far from noise, and with quickness of heart I might feel sweetest
>
> praise; the which doubtless I received of His gift whom above all things I
>
> have wonderfully loved. (141)

This surely must be one of the earliest medieval passages viewing wilderness as a

haven from city life. In emotional content, if not in motivation, Rolle's impulse to

wilderness resembles that of Yeats: "For I shall get some peace there." In doing so, he

marks a change in attitude toward wilderness not only for the religious, but for everyone who grows disenchanted with the urban chaos.

At the same time the apophatic tradition dominated much of spiritual writing, secular writing, even with religious content, becomes more detailed and naturalistic, using space to represent both movement and consciousness. In this regard, two poets, Geoffrey Chaucer and the Pearl poet, represent the range of wilderness motif. In Chaucer's works *The House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* reflect the most complete development of the motif as a structural transition, of a setting between emotional states and reflecting both prior and following experiences. In these poems wilderness signals change, though little action takes place within that specific setting. In *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, the wilderness not only represents movement from one state to another, but it also represents the characters' action of change within that setting.

Chaucer's enigmatic and probably unfinished *House of Fame* was written about 1379-80, after his first trip to Italy in 1378. The structural similarities between this poem and Dante's *Commedia* have been much discussed; nineteenth century criticism generally dismissed it as a parody of Dante's poem. In fact, the similarities in structure reflect, in addition to simple admiration, a similar action, that of change. But whereas Dante's transition is spiritual, Chaucer's is primarily intellectual, moving from the Palace of Glass (romantic love) to the equally ephemeral House of Fame (reputation). In this structure, the desert serves as a structural transition:

> Then saugh I but a large feld,
>
> As fer as that I myghte see,
>
> Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
>
> Or bush, or grass or eryd lond;
>
> For al the feld man but of sond
>
> As smal as man may se yet lye
>
> In the desert of Lybye.
>
> Ne no maner creature
>
> That ys yformed be Nature
>
> Ne sawgh I, me to fede or wisse. (480-491)

This landscape is empty, sterile, and unnatural--that is, contrary to the "law of kinde." [4] In this space the poet prays to be delivered from phantoms and illusions, the mirages of the desert sand that trick the senses and the reason. Perhaps in response to this prayer, he is rescued by a chatty and well-read eagle, a dual image borrowed from Dante (among others) for thought and contemplation. As John M. Steadman explains, in medieval literature, " . . . the interpretations of the eagle as a contemplative symbol . . . ranged from spiritual to secular . . . [and] it had also been explained as the intellect and as Philosophy in general" (157). Yet this particular Chaucerian eagle is also a figure of fun, sent by Jove (a pagan god), full of sententious book learning, and transporting Chaucer not to heaven but to the House of Fame, a place at least as shifty as Venus' palace.

Some critics have tried to see the movement in House of Fame as from confusion to certainly or from passion to reason. Of these, one of the best, Shirley Delany says:

The progression in both books [divisions of the poem] from invocation to prayer--from classical to Christian deity, from public to private mode of address--parallels the movement expressed in the structure of each division of the poem so far: a movement from traditions that are relative, feigned, or flawed to a truth which is absolute, eternal, and perfect. (86)

Delany's explication certainly sees the three part structure of the poem, with desert as transition, but the House of Fame, with its names written in melting ice, its whirling house of rumor, and Fame herself handing out honors and reputation with utter disregard for "goode werkes,"offers no more certainty than the Palace of Glass. Intellectual and artistic attainments are no more reliable than the passions of Venus. As Karla Taylor asserts, "The journey of tidings through imagination and memory, far from resolving the impasse at the end of Book I, seems rather to magnify its troubling suggestion that reading and writing result in nothing but 'fantome and illusion'" (33). If the poem offers a truth which is "absolute, eternal and perfect," it must arrive at the point where the poem breaks off, with the man of great authority. [5] As the poem stands, without a definite ending, it offers a vision of two kinds of illusion with a sterile desert in between.

An earlier poem, *The Book of the Duchess* is a dream vision, an elegy written in honor of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt. The subject matter of this elegy is the inevitability of love and death and the possibility of acceptance as a first step in consolation. Chaucer was aware as we are that barring accidents, lovers do not usually die at the same time. One person dies, and the other is left to grieve. The poem may have been directed to Chaucer's patron, or conceived as a part of an elaborate

memorial service for Blanche. But as a later poet points out, "sorrows springs are all the same." The subjects of love, grief, and consolation are universal.

In framing the elegy as a dream, Chaucer chooses to deal with only one character. In a dream, all elements of the experience reflect aspects of the dreamer's psyche. [7] Thus the dreamer, the hunters, and the Black Knight are all a part of the narrator, and their interactions reflect his experience. Further, as in Dante's *Commedia* salvation begins with correct knowledge, so in Chaucer's vision, consolation begins with the acceptance of correct knowledge. Finally, he frames the terms of the problem in connection with texts and their relative values to the reader in terms of knowledge. As Dieter Mehl points out, *The Book of the Duchess* expresses " . . . the elusive relationship between theoretical knowledge contained in books and the reality of our daily experience." (25).

The poem falls into two sections, an introduction and the dream itself. In the introduction, the narrator, a sad and solitary bookworm full of "sorrowful imagination" reads a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. When he falls asleep, his dream is scarcely less literary, since virtually every line alludes to another book; and further more, the dream ends with the dreamer waking up, book still in hand, and resolving to write up his experience in a poem for the benefit of other readers. Since as Charles P.R. Tisdale points out, the "matters" of both parts are nearly identical, " . . . the movement of elegy from despair to hope rests in the readjustment of certain disordered modes of perception" (366). Further, the space between one emotional state and another in both sections is represented in vividly detailed wilderness landscape--bleak and sterile in the first, and lush and verdant in the second.

The first wilderness landscape occurs in the story being read, and surrounds the cave of Morpheus, located in a desolate valley:

This messenger [from Juno] tok leve and wente

Upon hys wey, and never ne stente

Til he com to the derke valeye

That stant betwixe roches tweye

Ther never yet grew corn ne gras,

Ne tre, ne noght that ought was,

Beste, ne man ne noght elles,

Save there were a few welles

Came rennynge from the clyves adoun,

That made a dedly seepynge soun,

And ronnen doun ryght by a cave

That was under a tokke ygrave

Amydde the valey, wonder depe. (153-165)

The darkness of this description is more detailed than that of Ovid's original, and Robert R. Edwards, in *The Dream of Chaucer*, sees this extended description, with the absence of vegetation, the darkness, and the "dedly slepynge soun" of the water as the "geographical analogue to distraction, the poetic emblem of the self-enclosed imagination" (77). Through this landscape Juno's messenger goes to Morpheus' cave to ask for a dream for Alcione. Morpheus, in turn, causes the drowned body of Seys to appear to Alcione, saying, "'farewel, swete . . . To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!'" (209-

211). This dream is not healing for Alcione; "'Alas!' quod she for sorwe, / And deyede within the thridde morwe" (213-214). The sterile landscape corresponds with the sterile knowledge which brings not healing but despair. The use of the messenger to seek the dream for Alcione further serves to distance the experience of the journey from Alcione, since she asks Juno for comfort, but is unable or unwilling to seek it for herself.

Chaucer's version of Ovid's story omits several details of the original, including the discovery of Seys' body and the lovers' transformation into sea birds. Instead, the emphasis is on the fact of death and the lack of acceptance. Seys says, " . . . in your sorrwe ther lyth no red; / For certes, swete, I am but dead" (202-203), in lines that prefigure the conclusion of the Black Knight's debate in the second section. But unlike the knight--and the narrator--Alcione is not able to accept the judgement of fate. "Allas" she says, and dies herself rather than accept the death of her husband.

This story as related includes the information which the narrator needs: Death is a fact which must be accepted if life is to continue. It was a message lost on the character Alcione; hence, the desolation of the transitional landscape. And although the narrator does not reject the message out-right, neither is he able to appropriate it for himself directly from the book. Instead, the message is transformed for him in the medium of his dream. In her article about *The Book of the Duchess* and the "ubi sunt" tradition, Anne Rooney outlines the contrast between the first and second landscapes:

> The part of the forest into which the Dreamer is led contrasts completely
>
> with the landscape around Morpheus' cave. . . . Where one had no
>
> vegetation or beasts, only rocks and a 'dedly' sounding stream, the other

has abundant wild life of all types. The contrast is significant. . . . [for]

while death prevails in that section, life and hope are offered in the dream.

(311)

While Rooney's point is well drawn, we may further say that while the message of

acceptance is virtually identical in both sections, the content of the second has "life"

because of the narrator's acceptance of the message in his conversation with the Black

Knight. Like the narrator (and like Alcione) the knight is grieving for a lost love. He

reads and re-reads a love poem, and the only future he envisions is suicide. His faculty of

memory is frozen in a way which paralyzes his will rather than enabling him to cherish

the recollection of "Fair White" while going forward with the duties of his life. As R.A.

Shoaf explains, the knight's " . . . most serious error is to try to live *in* the past--not *with*

it--by stopping the present, and finally by preventing the future" (164). In this, his state is

similar to that of Alcione, who rejects the present and prevents the future rather than

accept the fact of Seys' death. And as the Black Knight is identified with Alcione, so he

is also a part of the narrator who has spent eight years in "ydle thought" weighed down

by " . . . Such fantasies ben in by hede / So I *know* not what is best to doo" (28-29)

[italics mine]. As Tisdale says, it is quite possible to see " . . . the Black Knight as the

personification of the narrator's sorrow, or, what is better, the faculty within his psyche

that has been dominant and is in dire need of a cure" (368), a cure which is effected by

the *knowledge* that is brought to consciousness in the dream conversation. When the

knight (and the narrator) acknowledge "'She ys ded!'" (1309), the hunt ends and the

castle bells sound, returning the dreamer to the present. And, as Tisdale asserts, " Since

the Black Knight is the personification of the wounded faculty of the original narrator, then his curing is one and the same with the narrator's. As he [the narrator] awakens, the Black Knight simply dissolves within him" (370). Further, since the meeting and the knowledge are fruitful, resulting in the dreamer's restoration to mental health, the transition is figured in the lush landscape of the "litel used" ancient forest.

Chaucer's use of landscape is significant as a narrative device, because description of the landscape serves as a locus for the listener to visualize and remember the subject matter (Kolve 49), and because the associations reflect traditional structures involving wilderness landscape. Further, the physical landscape becomes an image for the spiritual and emotional boundary which both limits and challenges the traveler. The literary conventions of landscape connect the narrative to text, to interpretation, and finally to creation, for the poem ends with the narrator's resolution to write the poem; in other words, the alchemy of love, grief, and acceptance transmute grief into art. And if love and life are transitory, art has at least the appearance of permanence. As Robert R. Edwards says, the narrator resolves " . . . not in a climax of fictional dialogue but in the creation of the art work . . . [which] will impose a formal order on imagination" (91), [6] reflecting and "fixing" the order restored in the narrator's psyche.

Perhaps Chaucer's most complex use of landscape as a metaphor for limit and for transition is one which he has little described and most implied in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In this, one of Chaucer's greatest works, out-of-door space is hardly described. Instead, the space is interior and architectural, and is employed to represent the characters' enclosure within the limits of their decisions. Indeed, Criseyde's movement from garden

to chamber to privy "closet" is nearly claustrophobic. [7] And yet the wilderness is ever present to the characters and to the reader as that space between Troy and the Greek camp--no-man's land. This space first appears directly when Troilus accompanies Criseyde toward the Greek camp. "With hawke on honde and with a huge route" (V 65) he goes with her, "Passyng al the valeye fer withoute" (V67). Though the space is not described, it is significant as the transition for Criseyde and as the limit between Troilus and his love. As every inch of Troy reminds him of Criseyde, so every inch of the wilderness between city and camp reminds him of her loss. Similarly, Criseyde looks across the waste toward the city: "Ful rewfully she loked upon Troie, / Biheld the tours heigh . . . " V729-730).

Troilus dreams of meeting Criseyde in a forest outside the city, only to see her in the "arms" of a wild boar (iconic metaphor for lascivious lust), and knows he has been betrayed. This dream forest, however briefly, reflects his realization that she is gone forever (V 1232-1244). For both Troilus and Criseyde the space outside the city reflects the movement from love to loss and from truth to faithlessness, and for Troilus, ultimately, from life to death. Upon receiving her letter, he despairs, and is shortly thereafter killed in battle by "the fierse Achille" (V 1806).

The liminal landscape implied in the narrative of *Troilus and Criseyde* becomes visible in the miniature painting of the frontispiece in an early manuscript (Corpus Christi 61) which depicts landscape as the boundary between the Greek and Trojan camps, and also between the narrative and the "auctor" and his listeners (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Frontispiece, *Troilus and Criseyde* (Corpus Christi MS 61)

The Troilus frontispiece is unique in English medieval painting, showing the influence of the Limbourg brothers and of the so-called Boracault Master, though the individual painter can not be identified. If the volume had been finished, it would have been the most elaborate secular manuscript produced in England. Ninety spaces for illuminations were allowed in the text, as well as room for borders and ornamentation. The tradition which holds that the painting shows Chaucer reading to the court of Richard II is doubtful; however, the composition of the reader is similar to the preaching models found in several of the Limbourg pattern books. The lector stands at a pulpit and reads to a courtly audience of graceful and generally attentive listeners. The painting is divided diagonally by a landscape of rocks and trees, suggestive of a woodland park rather than a garden (Salter 268-269).

The top portion of the painting illustrates the scene from *Troilus and Criseyde* in which Troilus and the knights of Troy escort Criseyde from the city (V. 57-70). [8] As Elizabeth Salter has noted, this portion of the painting bears a striking similarity to the Limbourg *Itinerary* paintings for a prayer book made for Jean, Duc du Berry (268-269). The French miniatures were used to illustrate prayers for safe journey and home coming; thus the use of the form in the context of *Troilus and Criseyde* is ironic, since the poem has no safe arrivals for any of the characters included in the illustration.

In the upper right corner of the painting stand the white towers of Troy. In the upper left, a darker and less elaborate castle represents the camp of the Greeks. Between the city and the camp the two processions pass through a wilderness valley with rock outcroppings and woodlands--in other words, a no-man's land. The group on the right

represents Troilus and Criseyde and their retinue; the group on the left comes from the Greek camp to collect Criseyde. Neither Chaucer nor the manuscript painter were concerned with historical accuracy. The city and the camp are both European in design; the courtiers are dressed in fashionable court costume.

Through this landscape, Troilus conducts Criseyde, who moves from her relationship with Troilus to a life first with her father and then with Diomedes. Further, this wilderness for the rest of the poem separates Troilus from his love. In the illustration the two groups pass through the landscape in journeys which change all their lives. In the poem, this same wilderness is the boundary separating Troilus and Criseyde from one another and from what they both believe to be their true happiness. In the scene where Troilus stands on the walls awaiting Criseyde's return on the appointed day, the separation represented by wilderness is clear when the warden calls everyone in for the night:

> The warden of the yates gan to calle
>
> The folk which that withoute the yates were,
>
> And bod hem dryven in her bestes alle
>
> Or al the nyghte they most bleven there (V. 1177-1180)

John Scattergood has observed that "The warden's proper sense that there are occasions when that which is within the city has to stay in and that which is outside has to stay out provides a powerful analogy for the separation of the lovers" (145). Since, as Scattergood continues, " . . . the cities were the earthly embodiment of cosmic order" (146), the space outside the city is the imaginative equivalent of "outer darkness." Thus

both in illustration and in text, this wilderness represents change, loss, and despair.

The boundary between the Greeks and the city of Troy in the illustration is echoed in the landscape boundary between the narrative and the artist and his audience. The rocks and forest separating the listeners and the lector from the story represent a horizontal wilderness through which the listener must pass in imagination, in order to penetrate the narrative, and through which the narrative must pass to inform the reader. And although the landscape forms a barrier between reality and imagination, the diagonal composition suggests that reality reaches up into the imagination, and imagination extends down into reality.

Chaucer's landscapes function structurally as transitions between parts of the poem (as in *House of Fame*), between emotional states (as in *The Book of the Duchess*), and between emotional and spiritual changes (as in *Troilus and Criseyde*). His immediate details, where they are included, are drawn from French love poetry, although echos of patristic and classical wild space appear also. These wilderness spaces serve as a sign of change, but the actual consciousness of change occurs on either side of the landscape. The desert in *House of Fame*, for example, is a space through which the narrator passes, and in which he is aware of fear and ill-ease. He does not react to or interact with the space. And in the Limbourg *Itinerariem* miniatures, the space of departure and the space of arrival are of more narrative importance to the representation of character than the wild space in between.

It is otherwise with the narratives of the Pearl-poet (Cotton Nero X. 5 Art. E, British Library). In both *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the movement

in space itself becomes a central part of the character's development. While drawing

from sources similar to Chaucer's, the Pearl-poet makes the characters' movements

through wilderness space an essential component of their emotional development. As

they react to the settings and interact with them, the characters reveal much of the process

of their inner transitions. Like *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Pearl* deals with love,

death, and acceptance, though its terms are more complex. *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight relates a young man's movement from youth to adult life. In both of these poems

crucial segments of action occur in the wilderness.

The action in *The Pearl* involves three settings: the garden, the forest, and the

celestial city across the river. The dreamer's movement is circular, beginning and ending

in the garden. He begins in mourning and ends with an ordered detachment, and , as one

editor points out, "Juxtaposition of these two states of mind is encouraged by the poem's

form" (Andrew, Waldron 30), as it is by the poem's movement and setting.

The poem opens with the narrator in a garden, a conventional enough medieval

setting. Yet the poet introduces several unusual details. First, rather than April or May,

the poem occurs in the late summer--"Augsote in a hy3 seysoun" (39). Elizabeth Petroff

identifies this season with the middle of August, and more specifically, with the Feast of

the Assumption of the Virgin (August 15). As she explains:

> The spiritual importance of such holidays is that they depict
>
> iconographically the relationship between the human and the divine, life
>
> and death. August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin,

was a celebration of the absolute continuity between heaven and earth,

nature and the supernatural. (181)

Further, the garden contains flowers, but also herbs and spices of medicinal value. But

in this earthly garden, "such rychez to rot is runne" (26); and in keeping with that

somber note, the garden includes a grave. This garden reflects the natural course of

human life, and the reference to the seed which must die to be reborn reflects a

conventional scriptural image for the resurrection. As with the book in the opening of

The Book of the Duchess, the garden contains all of the knowledge needed for the

healing of the dreamer, but like the narrator in the previous poem, the dreamer can not

appropriate that knowledge directly:

> Of goud vche goude is ay bygonne;
>
> So semly a sede [as the pearl] moȝt fayly not . . . (33-34)

In his grief, the dreamer is impervious to such comfort and deaf to reason.

Now the truth is that in such a state of grief the dreamer does not really want

"reasons." He wants the pain removed and the change rescinded. Therefore, when he

falls asleep and is transported to another place, the second landscape has an anesthetic

quality. The supernatural beauty of the forest distracts him so that he can see (and hear)

the Pearl Maiden, in much the same way as a doctor deadens a broken leg before he sets

it.

This second landscape has, as Petroff says, " . . . a kind of wildness suggested by

the omission of symmetry and orderliness" (184). The open country, the rich trees and

the delicate play of light release the dreamer from the enclosure of his grief and allow

his spirit to go "In auenture þer merualez meun" (64). In passing through the landscape

he is prepared for the healing of the dialogue:

> Blyde in me blys, abated my balez
>
> Fordidden my stresse, dystryued my paynez. (123-124)

The dreamer's passage through the landscape, in reducing his pain and shifting his

attention, initiates the spiritual change which is completed by his encounter with the

maiden.

The change effected in the poem is, as Petroff says, ". . . more than he had

desired and also very different from what he had desired" (191). His grief is still there;

the child is still dead. Yet as Petroff continues, ". . . the pain that the narrator feels now,

finding himself back in the *erber* is pain that is a just and rightful part of the human

condition" (191). Through the grace experienced in that supernatural wilderness, he has

attained resignation and detachment: "Now al be to þat Pryncez pays" (1176).

At first glance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a romance in which religious

themes are subordinate to the adventure, is a very different sort of narrative from *The

Pearl*. It is, among other things, a romance of movement in which both temporal change

and personal development are represented by movement through space. Folk belief

moves through cycles of nature and season, the knight moves through levels of skill and

social perfection, and the Christian moves through levels of virtue and self-knowledge.

In *Sir Gawain* these transitions are given visual location in the poet's description of the

seasons, weather, and landscape. Gawain's individual quest is set within contexts of

historical movement, and his interior progress is mapped by the geography of his

journey. This complex use of spatial metaphor relates the medieval motifs of pilgrimage and spiritual progress to modern concepts of individuation and psychological growth.

Though the romance centers on Gawain's individual progress, the narrative opens with references to historical and social movement. With references to Aeneas' flight from Troy and founding of Rome and Brutus' departure from Italy and founding of Britain, the Britons are established as a people on the move--away from disaster and toward a god-inspired destiny. Similarly, the immediate social context of Arthur's court suggests travel, since Britain's noblest king can not sit down to Christmas dinner until some adventure is proposed. The knights' quests entail leaving the security of the court and traveling into the wilds to search for "all good adventure." Both the historical and the social contexts define identity through movement: where people come from and where they are going. Only within this constant movement is anyone "at home." Though the northern Wales of the romance is far in space and time from the desert of Sinai, the Britons, like the Hebrews, define their cultural identity as a "pilgrim people."

The narrative begins with the glittering celebration of Christmas at Camelot, establishing the tension between two value systems. First, " . . . the kyng was cummen with knyghtes into the halle, / The chauntré cheved to an ende" (62-63), cementing not only the religious character of the holiday but also the specific connection between courtly festivity and the sacramental celebration. [9] The knights and ladies leave church and immediately repair to the feast, where they engage in games of gift-giving and exchange of kisses. As the church year and the daily and weekly sacraments repeat the pattern of ritual, so the court repeats the patterns of the chivalric game; and in the

event, the two sets of patterns are not always harmonious. In the Christmas season at Bercilak's castle, the games of kisses and gifts figure as parts of a trap   In fact, the potential for contradiction between the two systems, and the need for a value system that allows him to prioritize is the essence of Gawain's quest. His growing understanding of this question and the related moral choices is related in three journeys, one beginning on All Souls Day and moving him to Bercilak's castle, one leading from Bercilak's castle to the "green chapel"--actually a barrow--and a third leading from the chapel back to his place at court. Each of these journeys begins on a liturgical or sacramental occasion, moves through wilderness with tests, and concludes with Gawain's response.

The first journey begins on November 2, the Feast of All Souls. All Souls is devoted to prayers for the faithful departed of the community; the daily propers are those appropriate for a requiem. Coming at the end of "ordinary time" the mass and office propers for November address prayers for the departed, and further, focus on individual preparation for death. A Franciscan spiritual exercise for November entails an elaborate preparation for death in which the individual completes all "old business," sets his affairs in order, makes a well-prepared confession, and finally bids farewell to any possessions or individuals. Thus, the first mass of Advent, the New Year's Day" of the liturgical year, represents for the penitent a resurrection.

The connection between this liturgical season and Gawain's beginning of his quest is apparent. First, he puts all of his affairs in order, and takes leave of his friends as a man who expects to die in the process of the quest. Then, armed with his good works and his good character as much as with his elaborate armor, he sets forth into the

northern wilds. Significantly, though no one has told him to do so, he travels north, the direction in Germanic lore of Hell and the place of the dead.

As in the Franciscan exercise, Gawain's journey also occupies the time from All Souls through the liturgical season of Advent. The weather is cold and forbidding, with rain, sleet, and snow. The landscape includes rocky crags, dark oak forests, and streams with the fords guarded by dragons, monsters, and wodwoses. In the realm of folk belief, these elements suggest winter and the death of the natural cycle. This season was associated by the Druids with haunting and supernatural experience. In the knightly scheme, this passage represents a journey where Gawain's skill and strength are tested both in endurance of the cold and the difficult journey and in his battles with the monsters encountered on the way. The Christian passage is also suggested by the time of year, set aside for meditation on the four last things, death, judgement, heaven, and hell. The mass propers for the last Sunday in Advent center on the final judgement of the world. Gawain's passage through the wilderness landscape in winter knits together the three disparate elements of the narrative.

His journey has hardships of three kinds, physical discomfort, violence, and spiritual menace. First, traveling north in the winter, he encounters rain and sleet as he climbs cliffs and fords streams. No shelter is available in this wilderness-- "Ner sayn wyth slete he sleped in his yrnes"(729) Even more threatening were the various adversaries he was forced to battle on the way, "At unche warthe wothe water there the wyye passes / He fonde a foo hymbyfore" (715-716). Finally, he enters the forest, old, dark and nearly impassable, fearing not only for his safety but for his soul, since the day

was Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day was one of the two feasts on which all Christians were expected to receive Communion. Though well able to take care of wandering wodwoses, he can not, for himself, provide the sacraments, and so he prays to Christ and to His "myldest moder so dere" some harbor where he might hear mass.

Almost immediately, in the middle of the dark forest, and far from all other human habitation, he spies a castle built in a meadow and surrounded by a park. On the one hand, the castle seems to Gawain an answer to prayers, especially since his welcome is prompt and hearty. On the other hand, he never says to himself, "Gee, that's a funny place to build a castle." Bercilak's castle may appear to offer warmth and holiday festivity, in addition to the sacraments of mass and confession, but it proves to be as unnatural as its location. It is, in fact, a trap, as the ever-narrowing enclosures, from hall to chamber, to curtained bed attest.

His experiences in the court of Bercilak test his knightly courtesy as the wilderness has tested his strength. His exchange of gifts with Bercilak and of course, with Bercilak's wife, both test the quality of his courtly courtesy and demonstrate its limits. At the end of his visit he has succeeded in avoiding fornication with his host's wife, but he has succumbed to keeping the talisman which he hopes will preserve him from death. The precise nature of his failure here has been debated in tedious detail in other places. For purposes of this present discussion, let this suffice. He is not perfect in courtesy or in virtue, because either through ignorance or neglect he has no value system which allows him to choose between one set of rules and another. In the exchanges of the castle, when the rules of the games come into conflict, he does not know how to

assign the appropriate priority. That is, when the rules of chivalry conflict with the rules of self-preservation, or when the rules of self-preservation conflict with the rules of the sacramental life (i.e. when he makes his confession), he has no means by which to resolve these conflicts; whatever he does, he is wrong according to at least one of the games.

Though he has passed the first test of knightly virtue--the wilderness passage-- and at least partly failed the second test of courtesy--the gift exchange--he sets out on his second wilderness journey determined to confront the Green Knight and only partly convinced that the green girdle will offer him any protection. This journey begins on New Years Day in a snow storm, and leads through a wood, across streams, down into a valley with steep rocky sides, and ends at a cave or barrow, the Green Chapel. The weather and the wild landscape, well outside the order of court and castle, both place Gawain beyond the support of the community. In addition, the storm and isolation repeat Gawain's inner turmoil resulting from his guilty conscience at having sought by secret means to save his life. Seen from this point of view, the setting locates the game not only outside the castle, but also outside the imposed limitations of the courtly community.

Here, he has no wild men or beasts to deal with. Instead, the test is human, in the figure of the guide. Whether the guide was a mere by-stander or a tool of Bercilak is immaterial; in either event, he tests Gawain by suggesting that he simply keep on going, promising that he will never tell a soul. Gawain responds:

> 'Wel worth the, that woldes my gode,
>
> And that lelly me layne I leve wel thou woldes.
>
> Bot helde thou hit never so holde, and I here passed,
>
> Founded for ferde for the fle, in the fourme that thou telles,
>
> I were a knyght kowarde, I myght not be excused.' (2126-2131)

In the scene at Arthur's court, his knightly behavior received the support and approbation of the assembled knights and ladies. Here, however, there is no audience. Clearly he must answer the man--and answer rightly--without the moral imperatives of an expectant audience. There is no one here to be impressed, and he must do well anyway. This journey is both literally and figuratively down hill, since after his guide departs, Gawain, who has been climbing cliffs, starts to descend into a steep narrow valley, ending in a barrow. He travels through deep snow down into a valley with a grave at the bottom, where he confronts his mortality. In this regard, Gawain's acceptance of the test represents both his immediate death to self-interest and self-importance but also of his ultimate death at the end of his days. Seen in this light, his survival beside the barrow may be seen as an image for resurrection.

The third journey describes Gawain's return to court. This travel, unlike the first two passages, is not described in detail, but he apparently returned by a different route, since he stayed in houses as well as sleeping out, and had other adventures, too many to describe. The last journey is neither wholly wild nor wholly alone. When he arrives back at court, he earnestly confesses his fault:

> Corsed worth cowarddyse and covetyse bothe!

In yow is vylany and vyse that dertue disstryes.

. . . .

Lo! Ther the fassying, foule not it falle!

For care of thy knokke cowardyse me taght

To acord me with covetuse, my kyne to forsake [*kynde*=nature]

That is largfles and lewte that longes to knythtes.

Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben ever;

Of trecherye and untrawthe bothe bityde sorwe and care. (2374-2384)

The knitting together of disparate elements in *Sir Gawain* receives a narrative

focus in the two landscape passages. The wealth of detail in description of time,

weather, and scenery provides the reader with a strong visual referent and at the same

time, through use of associative detail, the description ties the folk, courtly, and

Christian passages together in a single emotional journey. And through these passages,

and their related trials, Gawain loses his youthful braggadocio for a more mature self-

knowledge.

In his autobiographical material, Richard Rolle reveals his psychological trials

and resolution partly through the enacted metaphor of a solitary life in the wilderness. In

The House of Fame, The Book of the Duchess, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer uses

details borrowed from French love poetry to reveal wilderness as a structural space

between emotional changes. And the Pearl-poet depicts characters whose emotions are

revealed in the process of their wilderness passages. Thus the wilderness motif, which

began as a neo-platonic abstraction, becomes one of the central metaphors for emotional

revelation in European tradition, a figure for illuminating the process by which

characters reveal their interior experience as well as their exterior adventures.

END NOTES

[1] For a fuller treatment of the relationship between the wilderness motif, pilgrimage, and narrative, see Julia Bolton Holloway, *The Pilgrim and the Book: Studies of Chaucer, Langland, and Dante,* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987)..

[2] In earlier romances, the movement was circular, from general principle to individual action, and back. For example, in the romances of Chretien de Troyes, each narrative begins with a general statement of the author's purpose and the issues involved. Then the actions of the characters follow, and in the conclusion, the author returns to the general statement. In *Sir Gawain*, on the other hand, the action precedes the interpretation, and for the most part, the interpretation is left to the ingenuity of the reader.

[3] Citations from Rolle are from *The Fire of Love* and *The Mending of Life* (Trans. M.L. Mastro, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1981).

[4] The implications of this use of *kynde* or nature are fully apparent in the discussion offered by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*.

[5] It is clear that the *House of Fame* is incomplete as it stands. Clearly, Chaucer found that it was not working as well as he wanted, or he lost interest. However, from a

modern point of view, the poem works well as it stands. At the end, all of the syncopates in the court of fame rush forward, stumbling and stepping on one another's heels to see the man of great authority--who never comes. In the shifty world of *Fama*--vain reputation--the mass of people will always be looking eagerly for an authority which can impose order, but since it does not exist, the clear and compelling authority never arrives. This is a reading which would be utterly foreign to Chaucer, but it sits well with the details of the poem, and it certainly represents one very modern dilemma.

[6] In this regard, Chaucer's linking imagination with the order imposed by art is similar to the conclusion drawn regarding the relationship between the narrative, the painting, and the two artists in regard to the *Troilus and Criseyde* frontispiece.

[7] The specific details of weather are of significance in the development of the wilderness motif (See Elizabeth Salter, *The Times and Seasons of the Medieval Landscape*), and clearly the winter weather forms a central aspect of the *Gawain* narrative. However, though it does not directly introduce the idea of wilderness in this scene, the rain storm which persists during Criseyde's ultimate seduction is a wilderness element which certainly heightens the storm of emotions.

[8] A.S. Fisher in his article "The Proposed Illuminations of the *Troilus* Manuscript" makes a very plausible case for at least two additional wilderness illustrations, had the manuscript been completed, one with Troilus looking over the walls

waiting for Criseyde's return and another of Criseyde looking away from the Greek camp toward Troy. The element of wilderness as a structural space in the poem is apparent even in these proposed paintings.

[9] What we now celebrate as the secular holiday of New Years Day was in the Middle Ages, the Feast of the Circumcision, a holiday celebrating Jesus' receiving his given name and his initiation into the covenant community. These "rite of passage" elements surely color the nature of Gawain's insistence on proving his knighthood by accepting the Green Knight's challenge.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Perhaps because they were a migratory people, swooping down on the

Minoans from the north and then scattering through the islands of the Aegean into

Asia, the Greeks depicted experience as movement. [1] Even the neo-platonists who

tried to divorce themselves from the physical world, found it appropriate to figure

their development as relationships within space. From this pattern two

elaborations encompass most of the subsequent variations of the wilderness motif.

The classical authors from Homer and Theocritus to Virgil and the poets of the

Silver Age represent wilderness as a place of beauty outside the confines of the

city or of domestic life, the often uncanny woods and groves of myth and

mystery. The scriptural writers, on the other hand, viewed the desert as a place of

conversion and temptation, a place of spiritual danger which none the less formed

the basis of their cultural identity as "strangers and sojourners."

These three elements, metaphysical space, *locus amoenus*, and desert,

form the basis of the medieval icon of wilderness. As real space of trial for

missionaries and pilgrims or imaginary space for poets, the wilderness became the

motif for representing change, test, and spiritual or emotional transition.

Eventually, in the Middle Ages, nature came to represent a "heraldic language"

(Eco 138) of both natural and supernatural meanings. This correspondence is

apparent in a poem attributed to Alan de Lille:

> Every creature of this earth is like a book or picture; it is a mirror of
>
> ourselves. It is a faithful mark of our life, our death, our state, and our fate.
>
> [Omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum; /
>
> nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis, / nostri status, nostrae sortis, / fidele
>
> signaculum. (Eco 49)

And within this scheme of representation, the wilderness landscape represents--

stands for--psychological development, spiritual progress, and to a great extent,

social identity and change.

Further, the metaphor of wilderness, like the garden and the city, its

companion motifs, continues past the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and

beyond. Sherwood Forest, the Forest of Arden, Arcadia: all represent the life

away from the corruptions of the city, a place to restore sanity and "natural"

harmony. The wilderness of the new world--Bryant's "Gardens of the Desert"

and Cole's sweeping vistas--represent both personal challenge and cultural

regeneration. And even the dark woods of modern novelists interested in

representing the fringes of consciousness are echos of Dante's dark wood of

confusion "where the way was wholly lost and gone" --as Toni Morrison says,

"Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and

birds, but wild wilderness where there was none" (138).

It is sometimes--too often--the custom to view the Middle Ages as

separated from us by a great gulf of time and change. If this perusal of the history

of one metaphor can do no more, perhaps it can demonstrate that all of the great

icons of our culture are organic, present in our beginnings and continuing until

our ends.

END NOTES

[1] For additional information about the influence of migrations both in the ancient and medieval world, see Mary Anne Moore, *Man, Myth, and Monument* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

APPENDIX

AN ANALYTICAL DEFINITION OF REPRESENTATION

APPENDIX: AN ANALYTICAL DEFINITION OF REPRESENTATION

Though scholars in art history and criticism are generally consistent in their terms regarding the techniques and the content of representation, literary historians have not always been so exact. We do not usually consider separately the steps of the representative process, and when we do, we sometimes flounder in a morass of artistic and literary terms which carry a heavy load of connotation. The following scheme is complex enough to describe a wide range of artistic and literary representation, and yet it is direct enough to offer a way into the literature or the art, even for a relatively unsophisticated observer.

The process of representation, it seems to me, includes four elements which are logically sequential, though not necessarily sequential in practice:

1. The object

2. The idea of the object

3. The technique

4. The idea of the technique

This process applies to any artistic representation--painting, poetry, fiction--but for purposes of a brief discussion, painting provides the simplest examples.

The object is the thing represented by the artist; so he paints an apple. Perhaps he remembers what an apple looks like and paints from his memory, or he may place an apple on a stand before his easel and paint "from life." In either case, the apple is an object which exists apart from the artistic construct. Yet implicit in an object represented

is the artist's idea of the object, or perhaps less Platonically, the reason for choosing an object. The artist may choose an apple to represent original sin, to recall some personal association, or even to provide a dash of red in the composition. In any case, the artist chooses an apple (not a peach or a pear), places it in a certain composition or context to represent the idea he associates with apples.

As the artist chose to paint an apple, so he also must choose how to paint the apple. The choice of technique is certainly limited by the technology available. For example, oil paint on canvas allows for more transparency than egg tempera on wet plaster. To a great extent the technique is also limited by the cultural milieu and patronage of the period. The artist may elect to paint a still life rather than an *al fresco* picnic when still life is in vogue; art for art's sake is all very well, but a brief consideration of art history suggests that the artist has usually been influenced by the market. And when he is not, even the differences in technique reflect either a change in technology or a change in attitude or belief, or a change in both areas. Similarly, an artist chooses the mode of representation. A medieval artist, for example, may lean in the direction of classical models, or he may adopt the more severe devices of the Gothic designs. In either case, the decision reflects a choice in idea as well as a choice in technique.

Therefore, the fourth aspect of representation is the idea behind the technique. A classical or Romanesque apple, even on the facade of a cathedral, reflects influence of Roman, and indirectly of Greek models, and therefore secular and even heathen influences. A Gothic apple, on the other hand, represents doctrinal purity, in so far as

doctrine admits of representation at all. The letters exchanged between the abbot of Cluny and the Cistercian reformer, Bernard of Clairvaux exemplify the connection between modes of representation and the associated theological concepts.

Though for the sake of simplicity I have limited these examples to painting, the aspects of representation apply equally to narrative and descriptive literature. As T.S. Eliot has pointed out in his discussion of the *objective correlative*, an object is both itself and the ideas that it represents (*Hamlet and His Problems*). Equally, however, the literary form and the ideas implicit in the form are also present. A novelist, for example, who chooses to relate a good part of the novel in interior monologue, has chosen both an idea of human psychology and a conventional way of representing that idea; he has also implied that the kind of information which may be represented through interior monologue is of primary importance, at least in the novel, and perhaps in reality also. In other words, he has adopted a mode which is related to the study of psychology and which implies that the most significant information about an individual is known through the depiction of unconscious or pre-conscious process.

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NPNF   *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.* 4th Ed. Vol. 1-14. Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.

PL   *Patrologiæ Latinæ.* Vol. 1-60. Ed. J.P. Migne. Paris, 1961 (1957).

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