

The QUARTERLY JOURNAL of SPEECH

VOLUME 67

AUGUST 1981

NUMBER 3

JOHN MUIR, YOSEMITE, AND THE SUBLIME RESPONSE: A STUDY IN THE RHETORIC OF PRESERVATIONISM

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THE American preservation movement, or the movement to set aside areas of natural scenery or wilderness for appreciation and enjoyment, is one of the oldest and most visible segments of present-day environmentalism. And there appears to be little disagreement among historians that John Muir was a preeminent figure of the preservation movement.¹ Most endorse the substance,

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¹The preservation movement, or more specifically, the movement supporting the withholding of lands, forests, water, and wildlife in inviolate reserve for their scenic, recreational, and inherent values, may trace its origins as a movement with national importance to the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892, two years after the establishment of Yosemite National Park. However, preservationism expressed as a policy may have originated as early as 1875 with the beginning of the American Forestry Association, and coincident with some of John Muir's first public writings. Preservationism as an active element in present-day environmentalism is represented by such groups as the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society, the Wildlife Federation, the National Park Association, and, of course, the Sierra Club. For the definition and origins of preservationism, see Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley: Univ.

of California Press, 1957), pp. 173 and 226 fn. 2; and Holway Jones, *John Muir and the Sierra Club: The Battle for Yosemite* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1965), pp. 4-5.

if not the hyperbole, of preservationist Enos Mills' claim that Muir was "the grandest character in National park history,"² and Frank E. Smith's judgment that Muir was the "foremost champion of [the] untouched preservation [of the California mountains]."³ Though such writers as George Catlin and Henry David Thoreau had expressed a concern for preservation, no one before Muir had succeeded in forging that concern into effective appeals to a national public.⁴ Roderick Nash has written, "Muir's efforts did much to call into being a potent national sentiment for preserving wilderness," and Holway Jones elaborated, "What began for Muir as the simple pilgrimage of a devout nature lover ended in his bringing the Yosemite story to the common

²Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir* (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. x.

³Frank E. Smith, *The Politics of Conservation* (New York: Pantheon-Random, 1966), p. 136.

⁴Hans Huth, *Yosemite: The Story of an Idea* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1948), p. 49.

man all over the continent; certainly Muir awakened a new enthusiasm for the preservation of natural wonders for their own sake."⁵

Regardless of his ultimate impact upon preservationism, however, Muir at first did not attempt to initiate or organize a social movement. Instead, he chose to elicit public support for particular preservationist issues, using appeals which took the form of literary essays rather than persuasive discourses. Specifically, Muir succeeded through his literary contributions in transforming his readers' imaginative experience of scenic grandeur into an obligation to support preservationist legislation. This ability to convert essentially passive aesthetic responses into pragmatic action represents Muir's unique persuasive accomplishment, and as such invites further examination.

The earliest and best example of Muir's ability to elicit public action for scenic preservation is to be found in the campaign for Yosemite National Park. In 1890, Muir wrote two articles, "Treasures of the Yosemite" and "Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park," which had considerable nationwide impact.⁶ "Copied in part or in

whole by the press of the nation, with supporting editorials, [Muir's] articles aroused the public to action," according to Linnie Marsh Wolfe, Muir's biographer. "Opportunely the bill to create the Yosemite National Park within boundaries prescribed by Muir was introduced in Congress. Immediately letters, telegrams, and petitions poured into Washington demanding passage."⁷ John W. Noble, Secretary of the Interior under President Harrison, was influenced by the show of popular support and pledged administration assistance to the bill, which passed October 1, 1890.⁸

To account for Muir's success, one must examine his writing in the years both prior to and during the campaign. Muir performed at least two important services for his readers: first, as Norman Forester wrote, "Muir gave this region to the country—both to those who could not go to see and to those who, having eyes, saw not"; second, "in a more literal sense it may be said that he gave this region to the country, for it was he, more probably than any other man, who was responsible for the adoption of our policy of national parks."⁹ Muir provided the first service—developing for his potential readers a vicarious experience of mountain grandeur—in his series of articles, primarily for the

⁵Roderick Nash, *The American Environment: Readings in the History of Conservation*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1976), p. 71; Jones, p. 7.

⁶*Century*, Aug. 1890, pp. 483-500; Sept. 1890, pp. 656-67. The importance of the Yosemite campaign in the history of the national park system is attested to by John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961), p. 50; *The United States Forest Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1920), p. 111; and Huth, *Yosemite: The Story of an Idea*, pp. 48-49, 75. Huth's now-familiar argument on the premier public significance of the establishment of Yosemite in 1890 over the establishment of Yellowstone in 1872 is based upon more concerted efforts after 1890 to develop a system of national parks. Huth argues that Yosemite was preeminent in "the shaping of public opinion so that it will either demand or suffer conservation measures" (p. 29).

Similar considerations, plus the importance of Muir's role in establishing the Yosemite, dictated the choice of topic for this study.

⁷Wolfe, p. 249. See also "The Enlarged Yosemite Reservation," *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, 3 June 1890, p. 2 col. 2; Robert U. Johnson, "For Mr. Hecht to Dwell Upon," *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 1890, p. 2 col. 4; "The Witness of the Sun," *San Francisco Examiner*, 5 Aug. 1890, p. 3, col. 1; "As It Appears to John Muir," *Oakland Daily Evening Tribune*, 6 Sept. 1890, p. 4, col. 1, for articles, letters, and editorials citing Muir and the Yosemite campaign.

⁸Wolfe, p. 251.

⁹*Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), p. 262.

Century magazine from 1875 to 1882, and in the edited collection of essays, *Picturesque California* (1889). By 1890 he accomplished the second task by associating these experiences with a positive program, the creation of a national park around the Yosemite valley.¹⁰ The first two sections of this study discuss in turn how Muir produced each of these effects among his readership. The final section offers conclusions regarding Muir's impact upon America's changing attitudes toward nature, as measured by his influence on the movement for preservation.

JOHN MUIR AND THE ESSAY OF NATURAL HISTORY

Little of John Muir's early life explains his eventual development from a transplanted Scotch immigrant working as an itinerant shepherd, woodcutter, and guide in the California Sierras to the articulate and persuasive spokesman for the preservation of wilderness. Certain events stand out: his arrival with his family at the Fountain Lake farm in Wisconsin in 1849 at the age of eleven; the traumatic, possibly formative experience of losing consciousness at the bottom of a well he was digging by hand for his father sometime after 1856; his study of geology and chemistry at the University of Wisconsin from 1861 to 1863; his pledge in 1867 to seek out natural beauty after almost losing his sight in an industrial acci-

dent.¹¹ In the period between his arrival in Yosemite in 1868 and his first publications in 1873, Muir acquired the need to express in literary form his experiences with nature.¹² Along with this need, but less persistently, grew a need to express his opinion on the ravaging of nature by the forces of civilization.

Perhaps because his literary impulses preceded his concern for preservation, Muir chose to write essays of natural history, a form that determined his range of subject matter, his potential audience, and the thrust of his later appeals.¹³ Essays of natural history were generally short descriptions of natural phenomena, often from a personal perspective, which also touched upon such topics as the literary and artistic appreciation of scenery, the new scientific theories of evolution, and the wonders of the newly discovered Western territories.¹⁴ These topics particularly attracted middle-class, Eastern, urban readers of such magazines as *Appleton's* and the *Century*, who were curious about their natural surroundings, but far removed from the realities of life out-of-doors.¹⁵ They also were

¹¹Wolfe, pp. 27, 45, 73, 103-05.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 116-17, 153-54.

¹³For discussions of the antecedents of the essay as a form of the literature of natural history, see Philip M. Hicks, *The Development of the Natural History Essay in American Literature* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1924), and Peter Schmitt, "Birds in the Bush," Ch. III of *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 33-44.

¹⁴For a fuller account of the components of the essay of natural history, including a discussion of the popular national magazines which served as its vehicles, see Christine Oravec, "Studies in the Rhetoric of the Conservation Movement in America, 1865-1913," Diss. Univ. of Wisconsin 1979, pp. 16-27.

¹⁵Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: The Changing Model of Success in American Magazines* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 7; Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of the American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 183-84.

¹⁰A reliable list of Muir's magazine articles appears in Jennie Elliot Doran, "A Bibliography of John Muir," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Jan. 1916, pp. 41-54. I have chosen to concentrate on the articles which formed the core of his work from 1875 to 1882 and which later comprised the book *The Mountains of California* (New York: The Century Co., 1894). The same book also contains parts of "Treasures of the Yosemite," which along with "Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park" presented the central arguments for preservation of the park.

attracted to topics of culture and self-improvement, particularly in the arts and sciences.¹⁶ Consequently, by choosing the literary form of the essay of natural history, Muir addressed a significant audience which seemed receptive to themes most similar to his own interests.¹⁷

Yet, Muir did not simply reiterate the standard themes of popular natural history; instead, he used two familiar techniques to transform the essays of natural history into the bases for later persuasive appeals. The first technique evoked a popular aesthetic and rhetorical effect, the "sublime response," to recreate in his audience the sensation of mountain grandeur. The second technique was the use of a literary *persona* to identify the readers' more or less passive literary experience with the activity of the figure Muir called the "true mountaineer." Thus Muir encouraged his readers to become active in the social arena as well, to preserve untouched areas of natural scenery.

First, Muir employed literary de-

scription of the California mountain country to elicit what may be termed the sublime response, which consisted of three elements: the immediate apprehension of a sublime object; a sense of overwhelming personal insignificance akin to awe; and ultimately a kind of spiritual exaltation.¹⁸ For example, Muir evoked the perception of outstanding natural objects primarily through vivid verbal pictures. In one of his descriptions, that of snow banners created by the winds at the top of the Sierras, he introduced the view from above Indian Cañon as if unveiling a work of art: "And there in bold relief, like a clear painting, appeared a most imposing scene."¹⁹ After exhorting his readers to "fancy yourself standing on this Yosemite ridge looking eastward," Muir elaborated in detail "how dense and opaque [the snow banners] are at the point of attachment, and how filmy and transparent toward the end," a "beautiful and terrible picture as seen from the forest window." Later, Muir concentrated upon the sublimity of the distant view: "Still surpassing glorious were the fore-and-

¹⁶Kimball King, "Local Color and the Rise of the American Magazine," in *Essays Mostly on Periodical Publishing in America*, ed. James Woodress (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1973), p. 122; Henry Nash Smith, *Introd., Popular Culture and Industrialism, 1865-1890*, ed. Henry Nash Smith (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1967), p. viii; Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 577; Greene, p. 70; Howard Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World: American Culture; The Formative Years* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 376; *National Parks and the American Landscape*, National Collection of Fine Arts (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), pp. 24-29.

¹⁷The numerical size of Muir's audience can be approximated with reference to the circulation figures for the magazines in which he typically published. His readers may have numbered in the hundreds of thousands; readership for the *Century*, for example, peaked in 1890 with 200,000, and some magazines reached 350,000 by 1903. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1865-1885* (1938; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), III, pp. 467 and 475; Greene, p. 70.

¹⁸The elements of the sublime as described here are derived from Samuel Monk's discussion of the pattern of response developed by rhetorical and literary theorists of the eighteenth century, a pattern that he describes as "essentially the sublime experience from Addison to Kant," in *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935), p. 58. William H. Goetzmann, in *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 329-30, uses similar language in describing the particularly American conception of the sublime: "Immensity—sublime, endless, empty immensity with here and there an Indian or a buffalo as an allegorical nature god—was most often depicted by the explorer-artists of the day. . . . Man, especially civilized man, whenever he did appear, was usually only a figure in the foreground, almost insignificant in the face of the immensity of nature and nature's wonders." For a fuller discussion of the sublime and its function in the literature of natural history, see Oravec, "Studies in the Rhetoric of the Conservation Movement," pp. 27-48.

¹⁹John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. 44.

middle-grounds obliterated altogether, leaving only the black peaks, the white banners, and the blue sky."²⁰

Consistent with his efforts at transmitting the impressive details of sublime scenes, Muir often simultaneously evoked the feeling of comparative insignificance in the face of awesome complexity and vastness. In so doing, he tended to reduce the importance of any human influence upon the landscape. Following a lengthy description of the Sierra range, Muir noted that the accumulation of detail combined with the effect of distance produced a feeling of grandeur compared to which man was small and helpless: "The Sierra is about 500 miles long, 70 miles wide, and from 7000 to nearly 15,000 feet high. In general views no mark of man is visible on it, nor anything to suggest the richness of the life it cherishes."²¹ Whenever Muir introduced a human presence into his descriptions, he consistently subordinated it to the surrounding elements, and sometimes associated with it forces of destruction and death, as in his description of Mount Shasta: "Standing on the icy top of this, the grandest of all the fire-mountains of the Sierra, we can hardly fail to look forward to its next eruption. Gardens, vineyards, homes have been planted confidingly on the flanks of volcanoes which, after remaining steadfast for ages, have suddenly blazed into violent action, and poured forth overwhelming floods of fire."²²

Ultimately, however, Muir evoked the highest emotions of awe and wonder through scenes almost "impossible to describe for their vastness and complexity."²³ Muir himself noted the difficulty

in describing the full effect of sublimity in the case of the Mono Trail to Mount Lyell, a "savage and bewildering" place where "fore-grounds, middle-grounds, backgrounds, sublime in magnitude, yet seem all alike—bare rock waves, woods, groves, diminutive flecks of meadow and strips of shining water, pictures without lines of beginning or ending."²⁴ His detailed description of Yosemite Falls in *Picturesque California* culminated in broad generalizations, evoking spiritual exaltation without specificity of reference: "Gray cliffs, wet black rock, the white hill of ice, trees, brush-fringes, and the surging, roaring torrents escaping down the gorge in front, glorifying all, and proclaiming the triumph of Peace and eternal invincible Harmony."²⁵

In sum, by presenting his readers with the sequence of the sublime response, accompanied by an impressive collection of descriptive details, Muir's essays in the *Century* series appeared to circumvent the rational processes and institute a knowledge more fundamental than rationality could supply. "One finds himself continually in a state between awe and rapture, overwhelmed by impressions which I, at least, have never been able to express," wrote Robert U. Johnson of his first experience of Yosemite. Significantly, he ascribed the same feeling to Muir's written descriptions. "Only the pen of John Muir has ever approached an adequate reflection of the feeling of a sensitive person in that Holy of Holies."²⁶

The feeling of awe and wonder derived from natural scenery also may

²⁰Ibid., pp. 44-46.

²¹Ibid., pp. 2-3; for a similar passage see also pp. 10-11.

²²Ibid., pp. 12-14.

²³*West of the Rocky Mountains*, reprint of *Pictur-*

esque California, ed. John Muir (1888; Philadelphia, Pa.: Running Press, 1976), pp. 73-74.

²⁴Ibid., p. 9.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 100-02.

²⁶Robert Underwood Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), p. 280.

have reminded Muir's readers of humanity's unique place in the natural world. Muir's audience was exposed to contemporary developments in geological and evolutionary theory through the literature of natural history, and Muir strove to apply their knowledge to the natural scenery of the mountains.²⁷ To this end he employed a second technique common to the literature of natural history, the development of a narrative *persona*. Muir discovered that developing a portrait of himself as both a learned expert on mountains and an experienced guide would establish a human perspective upon the complexity of nature and ground his descriptions in scientific fact.²⁸

Muir's authoritative voice analyzed the terrain of the Sierra so thoroughly the effect was that of a map spread out before the readers' mental eye:

[The] general order of distribution . . . is perceived at once, but there are other harmonies, as far-reaching in this connection, that become manifest only after patient observation and study. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the arrangement of the forests in long, curving bands, braided together into lace-like patterns, and outspread in charming variety. The key to this beautiful harmony is the ancient glaciers; where they flowed the trees followed, tracing their wavering courses along cañons, over ridges, and over high, rolling plateaus.²⁹

In another excerpt he inserted his character more directly into the scene by

²⁷Edith Jane Hadley, in "John Muir's Views of Nature and Their Consequences," Diss. Univ. of Wisconsin 1956, outlines Muir's Darwinian influences and his scientific views of nature. Information on the scientific advances of the day was made available to Muir's readership through such popular magazines as Youman's *Popular Science Monthly* and the *National Geographic*, as well as articles in *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Century* by such prominent scientists as Joseph Le Conte and Nathaniel Shaler.

²⁸See Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness*, p. 166, and Forester, p. 258, for discussions of Muir's narrative techniques. Forester (p. 244) also treats Muir as the archetypal mountaineer.

²⁹*The Mountains of California*, p. 144.

narrating the story of his own adventures among the Sierra glaciers:

Cautiously picking my way, I gained the top of the moraine and was delighted to see a small but well characterized glacier swooping down from the gloomy precipices of Black Mountain in a finely graduated curve to the moraine on which I stood. . . . The uppermost crevasse, or "bergsch-rund," where the *névé* was attached to the mountain, was from 12 to 14 feet wide, and was bridged in a few places by the remains of snow avalanches, Creeping along the edge of the schrund, holding on with benumbed fingers, I discovered clear sections where the bedded structure was beautifully revealed.³⁰

The story of his discovery thus presented as a sequence of events became a training guide or manual for readers, instructing them in the reading of glacial signs and imposing a rational order upon a mass of unconnected details.

While retaining the same incisive but personalized tone, Muir often transformed the narrative line of scientific exposition into the narrative adventure, thereby involving the reader in the active life of the mountaineer-guide. Muir's most noteworthy narrative description is his adventure atop Mount Ritter. After his artist friends had rejected for conventional aesthetic purposes a place where "fore-grounds, middle-grounds, back-grounds" were "all alike," Muir left them at an appropriately picturesque but pedestrian spot. He then traveled deeply into the wilderness to experience the mountain-face first hand:³¹

After gaining a point about half-way to the top, I was suddenly brought to a dead stop, with arms outspread, clinging close to the face of the rock, unable to move hand or foot either up or down. My doom appeared fixed. I *must* fall. There would be a moment of bewilderment, and then a lifeless rumble down the one general precipice to the glacier below.

When this final danger flashed upon me, I became nerve-shaken for the first time since

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 48-54.

setting foot on the mountains, and my mind seemed to fill with a stifling smoke. But this terrible eclipse lasted only a moment, when life blazed forth again with preternatural clearness. I seemed suddenly to become possessed of a new sense. The other self, bygone experiences, Instinct, or Guardian Angel,—call it what you will,—came forward and assumed control. Then my trembling muscles became firm again, every rift and flaw in the rock was seen as through a microscope, and my limbs moved with a positiveness and precision with which I seemed to have nothing at all to do. Had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete.³²

In this description, Muir employed the familiar sequences of apprehension, depression, and exaltation not merely to describe a sublime view, but to convey an intensely personal and immediate psychological and physical sensation—the fear of falling from a cliff and the subsequent deliverance. Muir thus succeeded in associating sublime sensations with active experience in a way familiar to readers of popular mountaineering adventures. By extending the aesthetic experience of the sublime to include intense physical experience, Muir also brought his readers into even closer contact with the natural scene, and encouraged contemplation upon their place in it. Indeed, he conveyed the impression that he had confronted the danger of wilderness and had viewed death as part of a natural order—an order based, incidentally, either upon

divine (“Guardian Angel”) or Darwinian (“Instinct”) principles.

As these selections indicate, an important step in the developing argument for preservation was to involve the reader in the active mountaineering life, not only as passive observers but as vicarious participants, through the viewpoint of the narrator. But a short step remained to identify Muir’s general references to the “mountaineer” with the reading audience. If the readers of an essay by Muir wished to benefit from their literary experiences, they had to become the kind of person most receptive to the benefits of wilderness—in other words, true mountaineers.

Thus Muir represented the generalized figure of the mountaineer as an actor upon the stage of the California scenery, moving and interrelating with the forces of the environment, such as an impending winter storm: “Warned by the sky, cautious mountaineers, together with the wild sheep, deer, and most of the birds and bears, make haste to the low-lands or foot-hills.”³³ Often the mountaineer was addressed in the second person or in the indefinite, identifying the reader more fully with the fictional character:

One would experience but little difficulty in riding on horseback through the successive belts all the way up to the storm-beaten fringes of the icy peaks. . . .

Crossing the treeless plains of the Sacramento and San Joaquin from the west and reaching the Sierra foot-hills, you enter the lower fringe of the forest. . . . After advancing fifteen or twenty miles, and making an ascent of from two to three thousand feet, you reach the lower margin of the main pine belt. . . .³⁴

³²Ibid., pp. 64–65. Note the striking similarity of expressed emotions in the description of Muir and the dog, Stickeen, as they crossed a narrow ice-bridge over a glacial chasm, in John Muir, *Stickeen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909). Muir writes of himself: “At such times one’s whole body is eye, and common skill and fortitude are replaced by power beyond our call or knowledge. Never before had I been so long under deadly strain. How I got up that cliff I never could tell. The thing seemed to have been done by somebody else” (pp. 54–55); and of the dog, Stickeen, “Never before or since have I seen anything like so passionate a revulsion from the depths of despair to exultant, triumphant, uncontrollable joy” (pp. 65–66).

³³*The Mountains of California*, p. 36; see also pp. 27, 54, and 78.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 142–43. In addition, Muir adapted extensive portions of *Picturesque California* from earlier essays to include systematic changes from the first to the second person. For example, he composed the chapter in *Picturesque California* entitled “Peaks and Glaciers of the High Sierra” from fragments of the essays “Living

Occasionally Muir exhorted his readers to engage in mountaineering activity for its beneficial spiritual results: "Fear not, therefore, to try the mountain-passes. They will kill care, save you from deadly apathy, set you free, and call forth every faculty into vigorous, enthusiastic action. Even the sick should try these . . . passes, because for every unfortunate they kill, they cure a thousand."³⁵ Finally, Muir completed the identification of his reader with the mountaineer by claiming, "Mountains are fountains not only of rivers and fertile soils, but of men. Therefore we are all, in some sense, mountaineers, and going to the mountains is going home."³⁶

Furthermore, Muir thought that mountains produced leadership, heroism, and even persuasive force, or sublimity in the Longinian sense.³⁷ This excerpt from his journals, the source of the passage from *Picturesque California* quoted previously, extended his concept of the greatness which stems from mountain origins: "The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thoughts and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the moun-

tains—mountain-dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest trees in Nature's workshops."³⁸ The mountaineers of Muir's experience were intelligent, healthy, and friendly men, attuned to the natural eloquence of the environment:

Dwelling apart in the depths of the woods are the various kinds of mountaineers—hunters, prospectors, and the like—rare men, "queer characters," and well worth knowing. . . . These men as a class are singularly fine in manners, though their faces may be scarred and rough like the bark of trees. . . . [They] know the mountains far and near and their thousand voices, like the leaves of a book. . . . The aims of such people are not always the highest, yet how brave and manly and clean are their lives compared with too many in crowded towns mildewed and dwarfed in disease and crime!³⁹

The mountain experience even created facility in speech in "part-time" mountaineers: "The minister will not preach a perfectly flat and sedimentary sermon after climbing a snowy peak; and the fair play and tremendous impartiality of Nature, so tellingly displayed, will surely affect the after pleadings of the lawyer."⁴⁰ Mountain sublimity, then, appeared to make even ordinary people capable and effective in the social as well as the natural world.

But in sharp contrast with the exaltation of the mountaineering figure and his natural surroundings, Muir occasionally inserted descriptions of the desecration committed by humanity itself upon the face of nature. He typically viewed human desecration as not just an individual trait but characteristic of the mass of mankind: "Unfortunately, man is in the woods, and waste and pure destruction are making rapid headway."⁴¹ He firmly condemned the

Glaciers of California" and "In the Heart of the California Alps," later included in *The Mountains of California*. In many of the descriptions rewritten for the chapter, including the adventure of Mount Ritter, Muir changed the pronoun "I" to the pronoun "you." One may speculate that the change occurred with the conversion of material from the exclusive and formal *Harper's* and *Scribner's* essays to the more popular picture-book format represented by *Picturesque California*.

³⁵*The Mountains of California*, p. 79.

³⁶*West of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 202.

³⁷For Longinus, the sublime was a quality existing primarily in the excellence of a rhetorical presentation, and only secondarily in the nature of the audience's response. Though later theorists emphasized the latter, they never totally abandoned the suggestion that sublimity was a product of a great orator, or a quality of character perceived in great individuals. Monk, pp. 12, 61, 63, 76, 111; Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (1927; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), VIII. 2-3; IX. 1-4.

³⁸Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness*, p. vi.

³⁹*West of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 202; see also *The Mountains of California*, p. 328.

⁴⁰*West of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 204.

⁴¹*The Mountains of California*, p. 198; see also pp. 96 and 350.

acquisitive, "conquering" spirit in humankind, and preferred to see humanity as morally superior to nature, referring to shepherders, for example, as "money-changers . . . in the temple."⁴² Muir's readers may have received the clear impression that only individuals, particularly individual mountaineers, who had experienced the sublime and had been transformed by its power could transcend the original sin which humanity as a group possessed. Indeed, Muir's tendency to condemn humankind as a group may have underlain his initial appeals for individual action rather than a collective movement in support of the Yosemite wilderness.

In any case, Muir's readers responded favorably to his combination of scientific instruction and mountaineering adventure. A characteristic response included patriotic pride in the bounties of the natural landscape. Alice Morse Earle, in her review of *The Mountains of California* in 1895, exclaimed that "no one in whose veins runs a drop of patriotic blood could read this story of the mountains without burning with pride at the pictures of the natural beauties of our native land."⁴³ Another reviewer in *The Critic* stated that "it stirs our patriotic blood to know what noble mountains, glaciers, trees and game we have within our national domain, and he who can combine science, sentiment and literary art in describing them is worthy of high praise."⁴⁴

Thus the writings of that "faithful citizen" John Muir were occasionally

used to support the concept of patriotism in a country continually searching for reasons to foster national pride.⁴⁵ But more importantly, Muir suggested that his armchair readers abandon an image of themselves as sightseers, scenic appreciators, tourists, to a life of strenuousness and commitment. He also encouraged them to reject the kind of activity that would result in the destruction of nature, the source of their spiritual inheritance. In response, Muir's audience may have interpreted his suggestions for the preservation of Yosemite as appeals to their sense of social responsibility as well as their emotions and personal character. Indeed, only this explanation accounts for the immediate response to Muir's proposals for establishing a Yosemite national park.

MUIR'S ARGUMENT FOR THE CREATION OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

Muir's argument for the creation of a Yosemite national park appeared in two articles, "Treasures of the Yosemite" and "Features of the Proposed Yosemite National Park," some eight years after the appearance of his last *Century* article.⁴⁶ In formulating specific proposals, Muir was influenced directly by the

⁴²Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, p. 316. In a similar vein, G. Edward White, in *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), describes the gradual transformation of Theodore Roosevelt in the public press from 1890 to 1900: "Thus in the minds of eastern reviewers Roosevelt himself had evolved from a practical expert on cattle ranching and a teller of strange tales into first a chronicler of a phase of American civilization and finally a patriot who saw the legacy of a western experience in some of the ideals of modern America" (p. 190).

⁴⁶Muir suggested the nationalization of another wilderness area, Mount Shasta, in *Picturesque America* (*West of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 204) just previously to the appearance of the *Century* articles. The suggestion, however, does not constitute a complete argument. Perhaps significantly, the suggestion appears immediately after Muir's description of the mountaineering character and the "mountains are fountains" section.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴³Alice Morse Earle, "The Mountains of California," *The Dial*, 1 Feb. 1895, p. 75. She also identified Muir's ability to popularize scientific information: "There is no doubt that the average reader for pleasure, or even for information, unless of scientific bent, looks somewhat askance at a chapter on glaciers: but no one will skip Mr. Muir's fascinating chapters on glaciers, glacier lakes, and glacier meadows" (p. 76).

⁴⁴"The Book of Nature," *The Critic*, 5 Jan. 1895, p. 4.

reforming zeal of his publishing outlet. Associate Editor Robert U. Johnson convinced Muir over a campfire conversation to write two articles drawing a descriptive picture of the Yosemite region, one suggesting national park areas surrounding the state-owned valley, and the other urging public action to make the park a reality.⁴⁷ In turn, Muir suggested extending the proposed national park to include all the Yosemite watersheds.⁴⁸

Muir's proposal rested upon the premise that a concentrated effort by individual readers across the nation could cause the government to preserve the unified but complex wholeness of the Yosemite basin from piecemeal destruction. To support his argument, Muir juxtaposed his own descriptive and narrative pictures of nature in the wild with references to the desecration of human development and with specific proposals for the intervention of government. The combination was sufficiently rich in familiar associations and in particular appeals to impel Muir's readers to action.

The pattern of Muir's argumentative appeal rehearsed the descriptive and narrative techniques of his earlier work in more concentrated form. He began by sketching a view of what he considered to be the most sublime scenery on the American continent, the Sierra Range, here quoted as it appeared in Muir's original *Century* article of 1890:

One shining morning, at the head of the Pacheco Pass, a landscape was displayed that after all my wanderings still appears as the most divinely beautiful and sublime I have ever beheld. There

⁴⁷Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, pp. 287-88; Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness*, p. 245; Hadley, pp. 517-518.

⁴⁸Letter, Muir to Johnson, 4 March 1890, Box CH-101, Francis P. Farquhar Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; also reprinted in "The Creation of Yosemite National Park," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Oct. 1944, p. 53.

at my feet lay the great central plain of California, level as a lake, thirty or forty miles wide, four hundred long, one rich furred bed of golden *Compositae*. . . . But no terrestrial beauty may endure forever. The glory of wildness has already departed from the great central plain. Its bloom is shed, and so in part is the bloom of the mountains. In Yosemite . . . all that is perishable is vanishing apace.⁴⁹

Muir began with a description designed to elicit the initial feelings of the sublime response. But by the conclusion of his description, Muir had converted his readers' apprehension of the sublime into a feeling of impending deprivation and loss. The pattern of response paralleled that of the sublime, but instead of eliciting a feeling of comparative insignificance in the face of an overwhelming nature, he made his readers focus those feelings upon the prospect of human degradation.

Muir, however, did not depend merely upon a general feeling of loss and despair to arouse his readers to action. Rather, he began to lead his audience out of their hopeless condition by reminding them of their own responsibility for reversing the progress of destruction. He first drew upon his readers' understanding of some basic scientific and economic facts concerning wild nature and its effect upon the well-being of humanity. In his previous writings, Muir as naturalist and literary guide had provided his readers with orderly interpretations of a nature rich in valuable resources and well worth preserving, even if only for scientific or economic reasons. Muir intimated that the only evidence of a true understanding of his message by his readers would be their direct influence upon government actions: "These king trees [the Sequoias], all that there are of their kind in the world, are surely worth saving,

⁴⁹"Treasures of the Yosemite," p. 483.

whether for beauty, science, or bald use. . . . Were the importance of our forests at all understood by the people in general, even from an economic standpoint, their preservation would call forth the most watchful attention of the Government. At present, however, every kind of destruction is moving on with accelerated speed."⁵⁰

Then, he immediately supported his appeal to the reader's knowledge of science and economics by focusing upon the foolish rapacity and wastefulness of the mill owners and sheepmen: "In these mill operations waste far exceeds use. For after the young, manageable trees have been cut, blasted, and sawed, the woods are fired to clear the ground of limbs and refuse. . . leaving but little more than black, charred monuments. These mill ravages, however, are small as yet compared with the comprehensive destruction caused by the "sheepmen." Incredible numbers of sheep are driven to the mountain pastures every summer, and desolation follows them."⁵¹ Muir thus reaffirmed his readers' understanding of scientific and economic laws, while implying that the waste could continue only through their own passive acquiescence.

Yet even as the destruction of nature by humankind exceeded "that which necessarily follows use," Muir provided an incentive for preservation greater than the practical need to stop the waste. He argued that nature itself, as a living, organic entity, made claims upon humanity's sense of responsibility. The needs of nature were not only subject to human needs, but prior and self-evident, imposing upon mankind an unavoidable imperative to action:

Steps are now being taken toward the creation of a national park about the Yosemite, and great is

the need, not only for the sake of the adjacent forests, but for the valley itself. For the branching cañons and valleys of the basins of the streams that pour into Yosemite are as closely related to it as are the fingers to the palm of the hand—as the branches, foliage, and flowers of a tree to the trunk. Therefore, very naturally, all the fountain region above Yosemite, with its peaks, cañons, snow fields, glaciers, forests, and streams, should be included in the park to make it an harmonious unit instead of a fragment, great though the fragment be.⁵²

Muir described Yosemite as an organism, like a massive Sequoia, incidentally pleasing to humanity's aesthetic sense, perhaps economically beneficial, but requiring no specific argument outside of the readers' own perception and sense of responsibility to defend. Moreover, the grandeur of the perception, depicting Yosemite as it would appear from above, lent a spaciousness and feeling of transcendence to the very idea of preserving this remote wilderness as a national park.

Muir did not end his articles on a note of direct action, nor was he at this time concerned with the details of a public campaign. Nor did Muir indulge in patriotic excesses, as had some of his reviewers. Rather, he returned to his basis of strength, an extensive description of the wonders of the valley in his most exalted language, as if confirming for his readers the reality and worth of their vicarious experience: "From the heights on the margin of these glorious forests we at length gain our first general view of the valley—a view that breaks suddenly upon us in all its glory far and wide and deep; a new revelation in landscape affairs that goes far to make the weakest and meanest spectator rich and significant evermore."⁵³ Muir concluded with a reference to his readers' own state of exaltation, a state to be derived only

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 487.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 487-88.

⁵³Ibid., p. 488.

from an experience of mountains untouched by human enterprise. This experience, with its potential for producing greatness even in the "meanest" spectator, finally motivated his readers' active response.

Ultimately, the transcendence of Muir's view, like the transcendence of sublime exaltation, was argued from no rational base of economics or even aesthetic pleasure. Muir's view was affirmed through experience, both the vicarious literary experience of the mountains and the mundane experience of human destruction. But unlike the sublime, with its contrasting experiences of awe and despair transcended by exaltation, Muir moved his readers beyond merely passive experience to engage in distinctive, and even heroic, action. The result was the continued existence of the scenic ground of all such experience, untouched nature.⁵⁴

Incidentally, the sequence of awe, despair, and exaltation through concerted action evoked by Muir should have been particularly attractive to the reading audience of his time. Richard Hofstadter has argued that, during the 1890's, the campaigns of social reformers, the exposés of muckrakers, and the stirrings of social progressivism drew out

a particular sense of shock, guilt, and personal responsibility experienced by the middle class.⁵⁵ This same combination of motives may have produced the message written in a guide-book at Yosemite valley around 1889: "My name is Clement Studebaker. I am a manufacturer of agricultural implements at South Bend, Indiana. My output for last year was 2100 plows, 950 harrows, 1800 farm-wagons, etc., etc. I employ nearly 2000 hands and my works cover eight acres and a half. But what are these to the works of God?"⁵⁶ Apparently, the cathartic action of recognizing one's own inferiority and desiring to redeem it evoked a spiritual response—a response strikingly similar if not identical to the response of the sublime. Muir thus succeeded in wedding a primarily aesthetic convention to a motivation for action not only appropriate to his subject, but appropriate to his place and time.

CONCLUSION

The Yosemite National Park Bill, first introduced as HR 8350 by Representative William Vandever of California in March, 1890, was the first successful proposal for preservation of natural scenery to gain widespread national attention and support. There is little doubt as to Muir's direct public influence upon the bill, through the appearance of the *Century* articles in August and September.⁵⁷ References in

⁵⁴Paul Shepard has suggested a connection between the vicarious experience of the sublime and the impulse to preserve the wilderness. With the preservation of Yellowstone Park in 1872, "it was implicit that reclamation must follow, but the public was not to come as settlers and builders. The wilderness must remain wilderness, and the ruins forever ruins. It was the character of the pilgrims themselves that was to be reconstructed" (*Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* [New York: Knopf, 1967], p. 253). And of the preservation of Dinosaur National Monument in the early fifties: "What the conservationists apparently wished to save was big enough and genuine enough to influence the imagination, particularly the urban mind. A large part of the public accurately sensed and shared this objective" (p. 266). I suggest that in both cases, the acts of preservation were themselves acts of imagination and moral regeneration, since their objects may never have been perceived and their direct benefits never measured by the individuals involved.

⁵⁵Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Random-Vintage, 1955), pp. 203-12. See also Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1950), pp. 332-33, for a discussion of the role guilt and sin played in the American psyche of this period.

⁵⁶Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays*, p. 282.

⁵⁷See Jones, pp. 44-45, for an account of Muir's influence on the final version of the Yosemite Park bill.

government documents to magazine articles, photographs, and personal testimony certainly included John Muir's writing and editor Johnson's active campaigning.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Secretary of the Interior, John Noble, explicitly cited Muir's and Johnson's "experience and intelligence" in regard to a related campaign for a national park in the Kings River region.⁵⁹ In each case, government officials appeared influenced directly by the credibility of Muir and Johnson with reference to the photographic and printed evidence in support of the national park.

Muir thus was successful in accomplishing his immediate aims. His use of the sublime as a persuasive appeal encouraged an audience steeped in its social and ethical implications to consider seriously the creation of a national park; the two *Century* articles, timed to produce the greatest possible response, added a potent appeal to the Vandever proposals. Muir's readers were able to associate the sublime descriptions directly with support for a legislative measure, and thus complete the argument for preservation.

Furthermore, though the express purpose of the Yosemite campaign did not include the initiation of a social movement, those who identified with Muir's vision began to take "heroic" action. The Yosemite bill was only one of a long series of actions eventually resulting in the national park system as we know it, with its scientific and wildlife areas, wildernesses, and historic landmarks and monuments.⁶⁰ Muir and his supporters took responsibility for initiating laws to preserve many outstanding scenic and forest lands before 1914,

including the first forest reserves, the Grand Canyon, and the Petrified Forest. The Yosemite campaign was also the start of a series of campaigns and public actions conducted by organized private groups who incorporated the preservationist philosophy. The Sierra Club, an activist organization begun in 1892 with Muir as president, was typical of many individual interest groups involved in the preservation of scenery or wildlife, including the American Scenic Preservation Society, the American Civic Association, and the Appalachian Mountain Club.⁶¹ Specialized groups such as these have served as primary vehicles of preservationism until the present day.⁶²

From this larger perspective as well, Muir's appeals seem to have promoted a subtle but compelling change in the attitudes held by at least some Americans toward their natural surroundings. Before Muir's articles appeared, Americans had little incentive to act in behalf of nature, for they were able to engage passively in aesthetic appreciation through the literature of natural history even while witnessing unscientific and exploitative material development. The result was an alienation of the spiritual from the practical, of nature from humanity. Muir, however, provided his readers, through his particular transformation of the sublime response, the means to reject and then transcend these attitudes. He promoted both the practical advocacy of the aesthetic in nature and the rational limitation of destructive development. Both attitudes depended upon a radical reordering of human priorities toward recognition of nature's preeminent importance and spiritual value. In sum, Muir succeeded for some

⁵⁸For an account of Johnson's "spiritual lobbying," see *Remembered Yesterdays*, pp. 288, 293-96.

⁵⁹*Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, 30 June, 1871 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1891), pp. 142-45.

⁶⁰Harlean James, *Romance of the National Parks* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), esp., pp. 35-76.

⁶¹Huth, *Nature and the American*, p. 185.

⁶²Nicholas Roosevelt, *Conservation: Now or Never* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 37; Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (1942; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1950), pp. 459-60; Smith, p. 136.

of his readers in undermining their conventional belief in material progress and substituting activity in behalf of the immeasurable quality of the sublime, and all during America's "golden age" of industrial development.

John Muir's appeals, then, contained the potential to effect radical change in Americans' attitudes toward nature, and indeed, toward the moral bases of their civilization. He unified the aesthetic, rational, and ethical response to nature

in an effort to lessen the degree of alienation between humanity and the natural world. He succeeded in effecting the appeals in the campaign for Yosemite National Park. And, he supplied a motivation for preservation of natural scenery for both the early preservation movement and present-day environmentalism. For all of these accomplishments, Muir earned, and certainly deserved, the title "father of preservationism."

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