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Jack London's Symbolic Wilderness: Four Versions

EARLE LABOR

In a recent article Gordon Mills has indicated "the symbolic wilderness" as a motif that links Jack London with the well known host of nineteenth-century romantic primitivists led by James Fenimore Cooper. Despite the strength of this motif and its persistence in London's fiction, however, Mills finds its varying applications confused, contradictory, even insincere at times. I wish to suggest, on the contrary, that a close reading of London's works reveals neither his confusion nor his lack of sincerity so much as his remarkable tact in handling complex symbolic patterns. The oversight in Mills's essay derives from his failure to realize that there are at least four separate versions of the symbolic wilderness in London's fiction—not merely one—and that each version is endowed with its own special qualities.

The first of these four versions is the White Silence, the vast, still wilderness of the Northland. Here, nature is cold, austere, and inviolable; man, puny and insignificant. As London explains,

Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finiteness—the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery—but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And the fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him—the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the

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vain striving of the imprisoned essence,—it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God.8

The northern wilderness is, in one sense, a "wasteland," as Mills calls it; yet it is not without a stern moral influence. The god of the White Silence is a harsh god but a just one: he is an inflexible disciplinarian who brooks no violation of his strict code. He is "indifferent" in that he neither helps nor actively hinders man in this creature's petty enterprises, nor do these enterprises appreciably alter the wilderness. On the other hand, man himself, in order to survive, must be altered; and this alteration is for the better, morally speaking, because it calls forth such virtues as courage, integrity, and brotherhood:

... in the young Northland, frosty and grim and menacing, men stripped off the sloth of the south and gave battle greatly. And they stripped likewise much of the veneer of civilization—all of its follies, most of its foibles, and perhaps a few of its virtues... but they reserved the great traditions and at least lived frankly, laughed honestly, and looked one another in the eyes.9

In book after book London stresses the importance of moral as well as physical adaptability for those who endure the rigors of the White Silence:

The man who turns his back upon the comforts of an elder civilization, to face the savage youth, the primordial simplicity of the North, may estimate his success at an inverse ratio to the quantity and quality of his hopelessly fixed habits. He will soon discover, if he be a fit candidate, that the material habits are the less important... his pinch will come in learning properly to shape his mind's attitude toward all things, and especially toward his fellow man. For the courtesies of ordinary life, he must substitute unselfishness, forbearance, and tolerance. Thus, and thus only, can he gain that pearl of great price,—true comradeship.10

With all this in its favor, however, the northern wilderness is not a satisfactory Eden. It is a place of frightening purity and simplicity; although a source of moral and spiritual purgation, it provides neither warmth nor security. It is a region to escape from.

10 "In a Far Country," The Son of the Wolf, pp. 69-70.
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—not to. Nature here is inimical to life. Man may find a certain serenity in the arctic wastes, but it is the blank serenity of death. Nowhere does London convey this idea more effectively than in the opening description of setting in *White Fang*:

A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness. ... It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.⁶

The spirit of this wilderness is not, to be sure, the same spirit that hovers benevolently over Leatherstocking’s forest—nor was it meant to be. It is the awesome naturalistic genie invoked by Darwin and Haeckel, and celebrated by Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser as well as by London. Under its domain men are no more than “specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little wisdom amidst the play and interplay of the great blind elements and forces” (pp. 5-6).

Failing to discover his paradise in the northern wilderness, London looked to the tropics. Here we encounter two versions of his symbolic wilderness: Melanesia and Polynesia. Melanesia is London's Inferno. Contrasting with the cold purity of the White Silence, the Melanesian jungles are hot, putrid, and malign. We need only to compare London’s writings about the Solomon Islands with his Alaskan tales to perceive the distinct symbolic values attributed to each version. Most noteworthy is the difference of moral influence. Though the Northland traveler may be caught amidst the “interplay of the great blind elements and forces,” a certain cosmic orderliness nevertheless prevails in the harsh, immutable laws of this wilderness. Those who survive are made better because of their adaptation to its laws; those who are weak in physical or moral character do not survive. This is the Darwinian ethic at its finest. Men are drawn together in a closer bond of sympathy and brotherhood because such qualities are essential to survival, as are courage, honesty, and selflessness. The outer cold of the arctic world stimulates an inner warmth of companionship among the men who brave its hardships. And always the stern,

terrible god of the White Silence is present to punish and correct those who violate his code. Finally, the man who is to endure the long arctic winter must be exceptionally gifted in that highest of human faculties—imagination: he must understand the ways of the Northland so sympathetically that he can anticipate its emergencies before they occur, always adapting himself to nature's laws, never attempting foolishly to impose the frail, devious customs of society and civilization upon the inviolable wilderness.

Such is not the case with Melanesia. Here the Darwinian law operates in its most insidious forms: dysentery, malaria, and loathsome skin diseases attack the good and the bad alike without respect for bravery, integrity, or imagination—the air itself "is saturated with a poison," London tells us, and "many strong men who escape dying there return as wrecks to their own countries." This, rather than the Northland, is the real waste land of London's fiction. In Melanesia the concept of the wilderness as Eden is inverted: the Melanesian god is the Prince of Blackness himself, and his myrmidons are the cannibalistic natives whose highest instinct of sportsmanship is to catch a man with his back turned and to smite him a cunning blow with a tomahawk that severs the spinal column at the base of the brain. . . . on some islands, such as Malaita, the profit and loss account of social intercourse is calculated in homicides. Heads are a medium of exchange, and white heads are extremely valuable."

Instead of bringing out the best in those who survive, Melanesia brings out the worst; especially is this true of the white man. Those qualities which were spiritual assets in the Northland—comradeship and imagination, for example—become liabilities here. To live in the Solomons, the white man must have "a certain colossal self-satisfaction, and a racial egotism that convinces him that one white is better than a thousand niggers every day in the week, and that on Sunday he is able to clean out two thousand

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7 Ibid., pp. 199-200. London's Solomon Islanders appear to be identical—both symbolically and literally—to Poe's evil, black-toothed savages of the "Tslemon" islands in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. In the story "Mauki" London explains how the natives' teeth are turned "lamp-black" by being compressed in a powdered mineral dug from a landslide on Malaita, "the most savage island in the Solomons" (p. 84).
niggers'; furthermore, he "must not understand too well the instincts, customs, and mental processes of the blacks, the yellows, and the browns; for it is not in such fashion that the white race has tramped its royal road around the world" (pp. 200-201). The Melanesian wilderness is the source of further corruption—not of purification. In the midst of ruthless savagery, the white man is reduced to like savagery; human values are cruelly subverted in this rotting green hell. The theme of dissolution, moral as well as physical, is central to London's Melanesian fiction. As one character cynically confesses, "I've been in the tropics too long. I'm a sick man, a damn sick man. And the whiskey, and the sun, and the fever have made me sick in morals, too. Nothing's too mean and low for me now, and I can understand why the niggers eat each other, and take heads, and such things. I could do it myself." London expressed his own feelings about Melanesia unequivocally when he wrote, "If I were a king, the worst punishment I could inflict on my enemies would be to banish them to the Solomons. On second thought, king or no king, I don't think I'd have the heart to do it."

In contrast, London loved the islands of Polynesia. With their fertile valleys and cool, flower-swept mountains, their golden youths and maidens, their salubrious climate, these islands would seem to be Eden itself. It is significant that London's autobiographic hero Martin Eden yearns for Polynesia when suffering from neurasthenic disillusionment." And London himself makes the association of Polynesia with Elysium explicit in such lyrical passages as the following:

As I write these lines I lift my eyes and look seaward. I am on the beach of Waikiki on the island of Oahu. Far, in the azure sky, the trade-wind clouds drift low over the blue-green turquoise of the deep sea. Nearer, the sea is emerald and light olive-green. Then comes the reef, where the water is all slaty purple flecked with red. Still nearer are brighter greens and tans, lying in alternate stripes and showing where sandbeds lie between the living coral banks. Through and over and out of these wonderful colors tumbles and thunders a magnificent

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*A Son of the Sun* (New York, 1912), pp. 17-18.
*See Martin Eden* (Rinehart Edition: New York, 1956), pp. 319-320. Note that, as his condition worsens, Martin's visions of the wilderness tend subtly to shift from Polynesia to Melanesia (see p. 359).
surf. As I say, I lift my eyes to all this, and through the white crest of
a breaker suddenly appears a dark figure, erect, a man-fish or a sea-god,
on the very forward face of the crest... It is a Kanaka on a surf-board.
And I know that when I have finished these lines I shall be out in that
riot of color and pounding surf, trying to hit those breakers even as
he, and failing as he never failed, but living life as the best of us may
live it. And the picture of that colored sea and that flying sea-god
Kanaka becomes another reason for the young man to go west, and
farther west, beyond the Baths of Sunset, and still west till he arrives
home again.\footnote{11}

With all this loveliness, however, Polynesia is not the Eden it once
was; it is, in reality, Paradise Lost, an Elysium despoiled by the
inevitable white man. Unlike the god of the White Silence and
the foul fiend of the Melanesian jungles, the god of Polynesia is a
benevolent deity. He is neither impassive nor malignant but, un
fortunately, he is weak. His tender beneficence extends to all men,
both good and evil; he has no code except that of loving kindness
and abundance for all. His wilderness is therefore defenseless
against the unscrupulous advance of commercialism and civiliza
tion. In such stories as "Koolau the Leper" and "Shin Bones"
London depicts the tragic despoliation of this wilderness by the
materialistic Nordic. "This is the twentieth century, and we stink
of gasoline," one character remarks;\footnote{12} and his insight foreshadows
a dominant theme of modern literature. During his visit to Typee,
London noted the contrast between the happy primitives described
in Herman Melville's first novel and the miserable survivors of
the twentieth century:

Life has rotted away in this wonderful garden spot, where the climate
is as delightful and healthful as any to be found in the world. Not
alone were the Typeans physically magnificent; they were pure. . . .
When one considers the situation, one is almost driven to the conclu
sion that the white race flourishes on impurity and corruption . . . .\footnote{13}

Polynesia might have fulfilled London's dream of Eden, but he
arrives there too late—the islands had already been found and
violated.

In addition to the Northland, Melanesia, and Polynesia, there

\footnote{11} The Cruise of the Snark, pp. 58-59.
\footnote{13} The Cruise of the Snark, p. 170.
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is yet a fourth version of the symbolic wilderness in London's fiction: the Valley of the Moon. Disenchanted with the northern wilds and the tropics, London focused his attention with increasing intensity upon the great virgin forests of the American West. Five novels—White Fang (1906), Burning Daylight (1910), The Abysmal Brute (1913), The Valley of the Moon (1913), and The Little Lady of the Big House (1916)—deal with this version. As we shall see, the American Eden differs in many ways from the Northland and the tropics; it also differs from the American wilderness as represented in the works of earlier writers such as Cooper, Farnham, and Webber.44

Perhaps the main feature that distinguishes the Valley of the Moon from the other three versions of London's wilderness is this: only in this last version does London envision man as making a satisfactory long-term adjustment to natural surroundings. The central problem arising from this feature is how to place man in the wilderness, to enable him to live in nature and partake of its restorative essence without contaminating the crystal springs from which he drinks. The problem did not present itself in the other versions of wilderness: in the Northland those springs were frozen and in the tropics they were already polluted. But in the American West they were both accessible and pure, at least as London saw them. The attempt to place man harmoniously within nature involved several considerations, in making which London was neither confused nor insincere—but merely optimistic. First, the wilderness itself must be benevolent toward man; it must be both virginal and tractable. Second, man himself must be spiritually purified before entering the wilderness. Third, after undergoing a cleansing of the baser motives of civilization—after being reborn—man could impose social refinements and scientific methods upon nature, so long as these changes "improved" the wilderness without desecrating it. Finally, the initiate must become a self-appointed guardian of the wilderness, protecting it against all attempts to assault and corrupt morally or materialistically. As a result of these considerations, London's fiction about the American wilderness assumes qualities of the pastoral romance. Such an idyllic element is, for obvious reasons, generally alien to the fiction of the White Silence and the tropics.

London's first two novels presenting the American idyll contrast

it dramatically with the northern wilderness. *White Fang* opens with one of London's finest descriptions of the vast, cold lifelessness of the arctic wastes; the controlling metaphors are those of toil, suffering, and death. The pastoral wilderness into which *White Fang* moves at the end of the novel is, on the other hand, a place of abundance, life, and movement:

There was plenty of food and no work in the Southland, and *White Fang* lived fat and prosperous and happy. Not alone was he in the geographical Southland, for he was in the Southland of life. Human kindness was like a sun shining upon him, and he flourished like a flower planted in good soil.\(^\text{15}\)

Here is the American Dream as Crévecoeur had described it, an Edenic wilderness of boundless fertility and happiness. *White Fang*’s new home is a far cry from the stark, primeval wilderness of the Northland; it is a place of love and humanity. But its beauty and salubrity are not inviolable: they must be protected from evil invaders, represented in this case by Jim Hall, an escaped convict who sneaks onto Judge Scott’s idyllic ranch to kill the man who sentenced him. *White Fang* proves his right to Edenic privileges by saving the judge’s life, and is consequently christened “Blessed Wolf.” Having proved himself worthy of his new environment, the dog-hero settles into the Southland’s softly modulated rhythms; and the novel concludes with *White Fang* drowsing comfortably in the life-giving California sun, while his new-born puppies romp around him.

The Northland-Southland polarity also provides the structural basis for *Burning Daylight*. But this novel, unlike *White Fang*, places emphasis upon man’s heroic stature rather than upon his puny insignificance amid the crushing forces of the White Silence. The central character is Elam Harnish, nicknamed “Burning Daylight” because of his rest-defying vitality. A true child of the wilderness, morally simple and pure, Harnish is one in whom the life force pulses so strongly that he is a match even for the “frozen-hearted Northland Wild”: “Desire for mastery was strong in him, and it was all one whether wrestling with the elements themselves, with men, or with luck in the gambling game. . . . It was the urge of Life healthy and strong, unaware of frailty and decay, drunken

\(^{15}\) *White Fang*, p. 305.
and sublime complacence, ego-mad, enchanted by its own mighty optimism.” After accumulating a large fortune in gold, Elam leaves the Northland, seeking new adventures, particularly financial adventures, in the civilized Southland, which to his naive eyes appears to be no more than “another kind of wilderness.” He soon discovers that the jungle of big business is far more savage than the arctic wilds. Quickly mulcted of his eleven million dollars by a group of smooth-talking robber barons, Harnish abandons his sense of humanity and fair play in order to compete in this new environment.

Elam manages to recoup his fortune but, in doing so, undergoes a radical moral change:

Power had its effect on him that it had on all men. Suspicious of the big exploiters, despising the fools of the exploited herd, he had faith only in himself. This led to an undue and erroneous exaltation of his ego, while kindly consideration of others—nay, even simple respect—was destroyed, until naught was left for him but to worship at the shrine of self (p. 180).

In the Northland Elam’s egotistic strength was a heroic virtue, for it was necessitated and balanced by the awesome forces of nature. These same forces pressed men together in a common bond of mutual aid and companionship; without this meliorating factor, however, strength degenerates into ruthless brutality and egotism grows cancerous—“Cities did not make for comradeship as did the Alaskan trail” (p. 274).

Only by renouncing his wealth and the corrupt life of the city may Harnish achieve his salvation. That such renunciation is a religious act London implies in his description of the pastoral wilderness itself; Elam’s spiritual reformation begins with his first excursion into the Valley of the Moon:

He halted his horse, for beside the spring uprose a wild California lily. It was a wonderful flower, growing there in the cathedral nave of lofty trees. At least eight feet in height, its stem rose straight and slender, green and bare, for two-thirds its length, and then burst into a shower of snow-white waxen bells. There were hundreds of these blossoms, all from the one stem, delicately poised and ethereally frail. Daylight had never seen anything like it. Slowly his gaze wandered

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from it to all that was about him. He took off his hat, with almost a vague religious feeling. This was different. No room for contempt and evil here. This was clean and fresh and beautiful—something he could respect. It was like a church. The atmosphere was one of holy calm. Here man felt the prompting of nobler things (p. 184).

His reformation is consummated by his love for Dede Mason, a displaced woodland spirit who works in Daylight’s office. Like Rima of Hudson’s Green Mansions, Dede serves as priestess-guide for Harnish in his return to the wilderness. Also, it is she who convinces Elam that he must give up his money if he is to gain salvation: “All these last years you have been living unnaturally,” she tells him; “You, a man of the open, have been cooping yourself up in the cities with all that that means. You are not the same man at all, and your money is destroying you. You are becoming something different, something not so healthy, not so clean, not so nice. Your money and your way of life are doing it” (p. 292). Fully awakened to the pastoral beauties of the Valley of the Moon and to the corresponding elevation of Dede’s love, Harnish finally renounces both his fortune and the city, and moves into the Valley of the Moon. His transformation, like White Fang’s, reinforces Crévecoeur’s famous dictum that “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow.” London echoes these words in describing Daylight’s new birth under the combined influences of love and the wilderness: “... he had been afraid of love all his life only in the end to come to find it the greatest thing in the world. Not alone were [Elam and Dede] well mated, but in coming to live on the ranch they had selected the best soil in which their love would prosper” (p. 350).

London’s treatment of the wilderness theme in The Abysmal Brute and The Valley of the Moon is essentially the same as in White Fang and Burning Daylight. Pat Glendon, the hero of The Abysmal Brute, is a prize fighter who denounces the corruption of city life as manifested in the fight game and then retires with his new bride to the “pure” life of the California wilderness (again it is the woman who disabuses the hero concerning the evils of city living). Likewise, Billy Roberts—also a boxer—and Saxon Brown, the principals of The Valley of the Moon, find their salvation amid the healing elements of the Sonoma wilderness after their marriage
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has nearly collapsed in strike-ridden San Francisco. The city-wilderness antithesis is sharply delineated in Saxon's sad meditations after the stillbirth of her child and the jailing of her husband during the teamster strike:

She sat there, racking her brain, the smudge of Oakland at her back, staring across the bay at the smudge of San Francisco. Yet the sun was good; the wind was good, as was the keen salt air in her nostrils; the blue sky, flecked with clouds, was good. All the natural world was right, and sensible, and beneficent. It was the man-world that was wrong, and mad, and horrible. Why were the stupid stupid? Was it a law of God? No; it could not be. God had made the wind, and air, and sun. The man-world was made by man, and a rotten job it was."

But, like the Harnishes and the Glendons, Billy and Saxon recapture Eden in the Valley of the Moon; and, as in the case of White Fang, their rebirth is confirmed when they are christened "You blessed children" by Edmund Hale, the ancient priest of the Sonoma wilderness. The novel concludes with the further promise of new life in Saxon's announcement of her pregnancy as she and Billy, standing symbolically beside a quiet pool in the heart of their canyon, gaze serenely upon a doe and new-born fawn at the edge of the forest.

*The Little Lady of the Big House* concludes on an altogether different note. The last novel in which London dealt with the theme of the American Eden, *The Little Lady* reveals the collapse of his faith in the restorative powers of this wilderness. There is an unmistakably personal element in the novel: its central characters, Dick and Paula Forrest (note the surname), are in many ways identical to Jack and Charmian London; and their ranch closely resembles London's place at Glen Ellen, California. Unlike the other works of London's pastoral wilderness, *The Little Lady* is informed by a mood of cynical irony. On the surface, the Forrests seem to be an ideally mated couple: they are both splendid physical specimens, dynamic, amiable, sensitive, fun-loving, intelligent, and very appreciative of each other's virtues. They live in a beautiful home, enveloped in the love of friends and in the rich abundance of nature (Dick is a scientific breeder of prize stock). Yet, despite these outward signs of an almost Edenic bliss, some-

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thing is obscurely amiss in the Forrest household: Paula is a chronic insomniac, Dick sleeps with a loaded .44 Colt’s automatic at his bedside, and—most disturbing—their marriage is barren.

Because the Forrests themselves have no children, the theme of natural fecundity that runs through the novel assumes a pathological significance. Dick reiterates this theme obsessively in his favorite songs, such as “The Song of Mountain Lad” (the Forrests’ prize stud):

“Hear me! I am Eros. I stamp upon the hills. I fill the wide valleys. The mares hear me, and startle, in quiet pastures; for they know me. The grass grows rich and richer, the land is filled with fatness, and the sap is in the trees. It is the spring. The spring is mine. I am monarch of my kingdom of the spring.”

Though capable of fostering the abundance of nature, the Forrests are frustrated in their own most basic function as mates. Ostensibly their marriage is broken up by Evan Graham, Dick’s best friend, who falls in love with Paula; but, more subtly, the breach has already been made by the Forrests’ failure to become parents. Dick ponders suicide when he discovers his wife’s attachment to Graham; before he can carry out his plan, however, Paula shoots herself. Her dying words to Dick are, “I’m sorry there were no babies, Red Cloud” (p. 391). The irony that has been merely hinted at earlier breaks through as harsh mockery in the novel’s conclusion:

After a long time, she sighed faintly, and began so easily to go that she was gone before they guessed. From without, the twittering of the canaries bathing in the fountain penetrated the silence of the room, and from afar came the trumpetings of Mountain Lad and the silver whinny of the Frothingham Princess (p. 392).

As London’s final statement upon the American wilderness as Eden, The Little Lady of the Big House is a depressing and important book: an artistic failure, it was his last serious attempt at novel-writing; and it was published only a few months before his probable suicide. In view of its contents, these hardly seem coincidences. London had run through several wildernesses in his quest for Elysium and, though frustrated by his essays into the

10 The Little Lady of the Big House (New York, 1916), pp. 84-85.
Northland and the tropics, he had been sustained by the old American Dream. But in the end even this failed him—as it had failed Melville, Twain, and Henry Adams. Perhaps in this respect London's tragedy is America's tragedy as well. In any case, to say that he was insincere in his treatment of the Dream and that "the wilderness as a symbol placed in opposition to civilization must have little force in London's fiction," as Mills has suggested, is neither fair nor accurate. The seeming contradictions in London's portrayals of the symbolic wilderness are, in fact, consistent variations on the theme of progressive disillusionment. Considering the pressures under which London wrote, his tactful handling of the four versions of this wilderness is a rather impressive achievement.