

Max Oelschlaeger. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 353 pp. † notes.

This ambitious interdisciplinary work aspires more to intellectual history than to literary analysis or cultural history. It seeks a broad framework for understanding the recent emergence of a wilderness ethic. Max Oelschlaeger credits several major influences, notably Roderick Nash, Charles Glacken, and Paul Shepard.<sup>1</sup> His own book links postmodernism with the paleolithic era. In the first 67 pages he surveys the human relationship to nature, from 10,000 B.C. until 100 A.D., and concludes that, in contrast to totemic hunter society, the Judeo-Christian world view was "a virtually perfect rationalization of agriculture" as a system of production and ground of existence. He then devotes 60 pages to the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, which he characterizes together as "modernism." As used here, this term roughly means instrumental thought after Galileo and Descartes, as developed by classical physics and laissez-faire economics and attacked by the romantic movement. Such a usage will no doubt confuse some literary specialists and discomfit some philosophers. Oelschlaeger's "modernism" is a set of philosophical ideas more than a literary movement, yet the heart of his book is a reading of five American authors: Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder. Through summaries and some close readings, they are approached essentially as philosophers who intuited an ecological understanding of the natural world. The book concludes with two theoretical chapters. "Contemporary Wilderness Philosophy" attacks the "resourceism" rampant in western society, which treats nature as raw material, and offers a range of alternative philosophies: preservationism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism. The final chapter draws together these strains into "a postmodern wilderness philosophy."

In this account national differences are of little import; American experience is seen as an extension of European developments until the twentieth century, when the voices of Thoreau and Muir are first really

<sup>1</sup> 1. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Charles Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodan Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Paul Shepard is prolific, but clearly Oelschlaeger likes *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 1982 and *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 1978).

heard. The author devotes half his text to the five Americans, giving little space to Europeans, though most major figures make the roll call, particularly dissenters from "modernism" such as Spinoza, Rousseau, most of the English and German romantics, Marx, Nietzsche, and Bergson. There is a certain imbalance between the focus on five male American writers and the grand sweep of a book embracing several thousand years, which concludes by suggesting that a new epoch in human thought is upon us. Why these five? Why are women excluded? The group, taken in historical sequence, cannot be called representative American thinkers. Rather they are treated as men struggling to attain a "vision rooted in earth consciousness, a rediscovery of the wisdom of the ages, known to primal peoples across the face of the earth during the Paleolithic era ... a world in which computer technicians might walk in autumn with migrating elk."(280) Oelschlaeger contends that the wilderness idea is not a romantic anachronism, a view he attributes to Nash. Rather he finds the idea of wilderness necessary to help the reader transcend the ideology of "modernism" and reestablish an organic connection to nature. In a dangerous and uncertain world, this idea reminds humanity of "the cosmic womb that gave us birth" (350) celebrated in Snyder's poetry. No doubt many will find this book an exciting breakthrough, but it seems largely an up-dated American Transcendentalism, as though one of Emerson's earnest followers had been given access to today's libraries and forced to write a doctoral thesis. An interesting but not a groundbreaking book, it made me want to re-read Robinson Jeffers.

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