

compatriots and even later audiences? Why, while other American plays had been produced only once, did this one appear again and again? When one reads *The Contrast* today, it seems decidedly wooden, a stilted eighteenth-century farce, which, we learn, relied at least in part on a British model.³ But closer scrutiny shows that Tyler turned his model upside down, imitating it to say something Americans found new. More than that, the newness Tyler spoke on their behalf was an ideology of republican nature in the wake of the Revolution.

Through the characters and action of his play, Tyler gave his citizen audiences nature as a roughhewn quality of revolutionary innocence and simplicity, a sacred estate to be cherished and favorably contrasted to the artifice of England. In the person of Colonel Henry Manly, the patriot soldier who emerged as postwar protagonist, the old Puritan motif of wilderness trial was evoked and expanded to the limits of a changed society. Striding across the stage of nature's nation in his plain, unfashionable regimental coat, Manly preached in word and deed that American nationhood was a moral category demanding personal commitment. "Luxury" was "surely the bane of the nation," he said, and it was clear he thought natural simplicity its high blessing.⁴ In such a context, Manly's symbolic use of natural themes to express his political faith signaled the oblique appropriation of a religious heritage, even as it was rapidly achieving new form.

The "contrast" of the play was clear in the names and demeanors of male and female characters. Foppish Dimple, who was engaged to the virtuous and quietly heroic Maria Van Rough, in every respect countered the Manly creed. He was, as he bragged, "a gentleman who has read Chesterfield and received the polish of Europe"; and he demonstrated how well he had learned his lessons by simultaneously maintaining his engagement to Maria and courting Charlotte Manly (sister of the colonel) and her friend Letitia. Meanwhile, Charlotte's embrace of European etiquette seemed complete, as she boasted to her visiting brother of the "faces of the beaux," which were "of such a lily-white hue! None of that horrid robustness of constitution, that vulgar cornfed glow of health." Maria, on the other hand, sat home and endured her engagement to Dimple, dutifully obeying her father's wishes. While Dimple was away in England, she had schooled herself on the ideal of the

Christian gentleman by reading Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*. More tellingly, one day disconsolate in her room she sang the death song of the Indian, the son of Alknomook, praising "the manly virtue of courage" it bespoke for her.⁵

Remember the wood where in ambush we lay,
And the scalps which we bore from your nation away:
Now the flame rises fast, you exult in my pain;
But the son of Alknomook can never complain.⁶

Maria lamented that she must "marry a depraved wretch, whose only virtue is a polished exterior," but in the end she was spared the sacrifice. A chance meeting with Colonel Manly meant love at first sight for both. Then, in the farcical denouement of the plot, Dimple's machinations were uncovered, and the senior Van Rough, restored to his republican senses, blessed a Manly-Van Rough connection. The shamed Dimple departed abruptly, presumably taking his dapper servant Jessamy, who once had told his master that Colonel Manly looked "the most unpolished animal your honour ever disgraced your eyes by looking upon." No doubt, too, the innocent young natural Jonathan, who had pointedly told Jessamy he was no servant to Colonel Manly but his waiter, accompanied the happy couple.⁷

In the midst of the laughter, Tyler's politicized use of nature was revealing. If *The Contrast* expressed the civil religion of the Revolution, it read the faith in decidedly New World ways. Gone was Jehovah God of battles and gone the city on the hill that lit the world's path to Israel redivivus.⁸ Here, instead, was the plain country virtue of those who dwelt in the free air of nature. And here, in Alknomook's son, was the haunting dark of the forest that nourished with its wilderness energies. Indeed, the initial success of Tyler's play, at the end of the revolutionary era, signaled the prestige of nature during at least the previous two decades. All unaware, the comic drama fostered a species of nature religion, mirroring the values of a culture that found political will in the strength that nature provided.

Yet, for all its achievements, *The Contrast* was only one sign, and it expressed only one public form of the symbol. It was but one instance of the power of the media—and of the patriot leaders who simultaneously shaped and were shaped by the public rhetoric. To

be sure, for many nature never did attain symbolic stature, and its capacity for nonsacral ordinariness should not be overlooked. To be sure, too, the explicit fear of wild country expressed by seventeenth-century Puritans continued, and in sermons during the revolutionary era a new Exodus drama was played out in the ambiguity of the New World wilderness. By the revolutionary age the fear and ambiguity were shared by recent immigrants such as, in the most well-known example, J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur. The Frenchman thought that living in proximity to woods and forests brought an echoing wildness to humans, with “lawless profligacy” and an “eating of wild meat” that tended “to alter their temper.” He argued that the chase rendered hunters “ferocious, gloomy, and unsociable,” reducing life to a state of degeneration.⁹

Here, however, we need to direct our gaze elsewhere—to the collective symbolism that was linking nature to the life and destiny of the republic. For all the fear of wilderness, there was also patriotic fascination and even veneration for it, as the song of the son of Alknomook suggests. And for all the “secular” response to nature by those who struggled with and against it in order to survive, there was also exaltation of it in the public ideology that was the legacy of the Revolution. Thus, it is instructive to search for the religious appropriation of nature within the republican venture.

When we do, we find that, in the main, nature functioned in republican religion in three related ways. First, as in Tyler’s *Contrast*, nature meant New World innocence and vigor, the purity and wholesomeness of clean country living on the edge of an empowering wilderness. Second, in an American appropriation of Enlightenment religion, nature meant the transcendent reality of heavenly bodies, which moved according to unflinching law, and—corresponding to it—the universal law that grounded human rights and duties within the body politic. Third, fusing with an aesthetic tradition of landscape veneration, nature meant the quality of the sublime as it was discovered in republican terrain.

Each evocation of nature built on the other, together adding to the enormous weight accorded the symbol and, so, to its accretion of spiritual power. Unlike signs, which are distinguished by their straightforwardness, symbols are multivalent and multidimensional. What they point toward can never categorically be articu-

lated in rational language, and their very mysteriousness leads to an amassing of energy that translates as extraordinary. So the symbol of nature acquired a life of its own as it commanded the imaginations of the patriots. Collective passion displaced onto the symbol was transformed into the wholly Other, and, as emblem of more-than-human power, nature also *became* that power. Nature, in short, became religious center and sacred force.¹⁰

We do not have to look far to find instances, during the Revolution and thereafter, of the first meaning of nature—that of the politicized rhetoric of nature that permeated Royall Tyler’s play. If we want to underline the side of the rhetoric that proclaimed natural wholesomeness, we can turn to the ritual wearing of homespun before and during the war. It was true, certainly, that the intertwining of politics and economy overtly prompted the move. Why should protesting Americans, angered by the Townshend Acts of 1767, support the British economy by their purchase and use of imported manufactures? The nonimportation movement tightened the screws on Britain with an economic boycott that was widely successful in 1768 and 1769, and its effectiveness could be measured by the repeal, in 1770, of all the Townshend duties except the one on tea.

Yet, significantly, the constitutional protest that gave voice to colonial objections to the Townshend Acts came from the pen of the Philadelphia lawyer John Dickinson, who published his installments in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* as “Letters from a *Farmer* in Pennsylvania to Inhabitants of the British Colonies.” And, as the sanction movement spread, the negative act of economic refusal assumed positive form and function. “There began a vogue for spinning bees, wearing clothes of home-woven cloth, and brewing raspberry-leaf or Labrador tea,” wrote Samuel Eliot Morison. “A freshman in the College of New Jersey who later became the fourth President of the United States, wrote to his father that every one of the 115 Princeton students was wearing homespun. The Harvard Corporation voted to let commencers wear homespun gray or brown instead of imported black broadcloth.”¹¹ When the Continental Congress mandated nonimportation in 1774, the stage was set for a wearing of homespun that would join the symbolic counters of patriotism, rural wholeness, and uncorrupted virtue.

That the ethos lived on long after the war is suggested by Colonel Manly's regimental coat, evoking in its plainness and simplicity its American homespun virtue.

If, on the other hand, we want to underline the side of the politicized rhetoric of nature that stressed its wilderness edge, we can point to the Liberty Tree and its meaning in prerevolutionary America. The tree rose, first, at the boundary of the citted world of Boston. Protesting against the Stamp Act of 1765,

a few gentlemen hung out, early in the morning on the limb of a large tree, *towards the entrance of Boston*, two effigies, one designed for the stamp master, the other for a jack boot, with a head and horns peeping out at the top. Great numbers both from town and country came to see them. A spirit of enthusiasm was diffused among the spectators. In the evening the whole [of the effigies] was cut down, and carried in procession by the populace, shouting "liberty and property forever, no stamps."¹²

As use of the Liberty Tree spread, demonstrating its practical assets as a place from which to regard symbols of American estrangement from British power, the choice of the tree told more. It spoke of patriot involvement in a process of religious symbol making that was at once universal and distinctively American. The tree expressed themes of centering, evoking ancient myths of trees that were the axis of the world. It made implicit statements about fertility and the continuance of life—recalling the maypoles of European and, especially, English country life—now joined to the quest for liberty. And it disclosed intuitions of the requirement of blood and violence for abundant life (in the effigy deaths on the tree)—as in sacred origin myths from many cultures.¹³

But, in the end more important here, the tree marked the place where the negotiated life of the polis, the city, touched the wilderness spontaneity of natural power. In the ceremonial performances of the Sons of Liberty under the huge elm tree in Boston or under other trees in other parts of the colonies, strength was communicated through the medium of the land itself. In the background lay the language of the dissolution of government into a "state of nature," a philosophical metaphor that distinctly captured the universal mythic sense of chaos and formlessness as the source of new societal form.¹⁴ In the foreground was the understanding that, in America, nature already modeled its forms, providing a blueprint for the kind of society that was truest and best. When, later,

frontiersmen in the patriot army adopted hunting shirts as their uniform they not only succeeded in frightening the British and accommodating the shortfall in the congressional treasury. They also proclaimed a warrior mentality that only made sense in the shadow of the Liberty Tree.

The warrior mentality was reflected in Tyler's Colonel Manly, fallen in love with the maiden who approvingly sang the song of Alknomook's son and his ambush. It would be reflected in the next century, as we shall see, by another (fictional) denizen of the forest, who outperformed the Indians in his frontier neighborhood to make Colonel Davy Crockett a household name. Yet, curiously, these graphic features took their power from a second understanding of nature, one that moved the symbol from native ground to starry sky. In the Enlightenment language that shaped the revolutionary generation's public, political grasp of nature, concreteness evaporated in a quest for the universal. Impressed by the machinery of the heavens and their ceaseless motion according to canons of universal law, the sons and daughters of the Revolution learned to speak a lofty, abstract dialect. If, as Marjorie Hope Nicolson has argued, "what men see in Nature is a result of what they have been taught," then the patriots, as heirs to European (and Puritan) intellectual life, saw what their mentors pointed toward and spoke their seeing in absolute terms.¹⁵

Beginning in the seventeenth century, English writers had conceived of space as the infinite realm of divinity. Likewise, in a parallel intellectual move, a doctrine of absolute time was articulated, finding eventual fruition in the work of Isaac Newton, among others.¹⁶ With the order and regularity of the Newtonian universe, the harmony of the spheres moved from ancient Greek philosophy to modern scientific law. Meanwhile, the absoluteness of nature set a new standard for estimating the significance of any human endeavor. When Colonel Manly praised American virtue, his compliment corroborated an absolute law that, following the classical dictum "As above, so below," moved from heaven to earth and back again in concepts of reason and the reasonable life. Universal law existed in the motion of the sun and other stars, and it existed in the human species with its natural perception of the requirements of morality. Among the heirs of the Revolution lay the possibility

for the reasoned gathering of humans in society and for the reasoned life through moral law.

Before and through the years of their Revolution, educated upper- and middle-class patriots had been exposed to the natural religion of British worthies whose books appeared in New World libraries. Some had learned with Joseph Butler to contemplate "the conduct of Nature with respect to intelligent creatures," comparing "the known constitution and course of things . . . with what [the Christian] religion teaches us to believe and expect." Or they had understood with William Wollaston that the religion of nature was equivalent to morality, with its great law "*that every intelligent, active, and free being should so behave himself, as by no act to contradict truth.*" Or, if they had read Samuel Clarke, the close friend of Isaac Newton, they had been taught that originally the natural consequence of eternal rule was happiness. Subjecting their appetites and passions to reason, they would find the most direct way "to preserve the *Health and Strength of the Body,*" while intemperance naturally brought "*Weakness, Pains, and Sicknesses into the Body.*"¹⁷

The clear bow to pragmatic gain in Clarke's reference to health and disease was implicit in the philosophic language of universal natural law. If nature meant revelation through the regular working of natural law, and if natural law equaled natural morality and, so, religion, then the presence of all three would guarantee the right working of society. Nature religion implied abundance and plenty. The pursuit of life, liberty, and property could flourish under the benediction of universal nature, and the grasp of metaphysical principle could prove, in the republic, a very tangible business.

Familiarized with Enlightenment ideas of nature through English writers and through American Puritans, such as John Wise, whom we met in the last chapter, the American patriots learned their lesson well. When, during the debates of the Continental Congress in 1774, they sought a rationale for their resistance to the British government, they decided to pursue their claims by taking their cue from Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. Lee wondered out loud "why we should not lay our rights upon the broadest bottom, the ground of nature. Our ancestors found here no government." Others argued for the British constitution and their rights as En-

glishmen, but in the end the universalist sentiments of Lee prevailed.¹⁸ He had conveniently transposed the abstract law of the starry heavens to an earthy bottom; and, in doing so, he had inadvertently revealed the uses of idealism to further specific class and ethnic aims in the American republic.

Still, ethnic idealism needed sociological embodiment in a community and ceremonial expression in public settings. So the lawful revolution sent its leaders to Freemasonic institutions, where the symbol of Enlightenment nature could be appropriately expressed. Freemasonry mediated the scientific culture of the Newtonian world, and, with it, a religion of nature that in America provided a model for the new democratic impulse within the body politic. Linked together in a fraternal web, the American Masonic brothers formed an intercolonial network that facilitated the flow of news and the shaping of opinion. Like the Great Awakening, which had spread a sense of unity of ideal and purpose in the colonies, the Masonic brotherhoods worked, in their own way, to achieve that end. One student of the phenomenon, Bernard Faÿ, argued that the Sons of Liberty (to whom we owe the Liberty Tree), as well as the revolutionary committees of correspondence, were Freemasonic "puppet" groups. Another Masonic scholar has stated that, with the exception of Benedict Arnold, all of the American generals during the war were Masons. Certainly, the majority of members of the Continental Congress were, and so, too, were perhaps fifty-two of the fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence. And we know that after the war Masonic membership swelled, with war heroes and prominent public figures known to be Masons attracting the membership of other Americans.¹⁹

One need not lose sight of the obvious social reasons men joined the lodges in order to inquire what they were learning and what they were doing within these bastions of religious secrecy. How was Masonry shaping its initiates, and what kinds of ritual performances expressed and reinforced their affirmations? When, in 1783, Captain George Smith's *Use and Abuse of Free-masonry* appeared in London, it explained proudly that the Masonic craft "supereminently excels all other arts, by the bright rays of truth which it sheds on the minds of its faithful votaries, illuminating their understandings with the beams of a more resplendent light than is to be derived from the assemblage of all other arts what-

soever.”²⁰ Smith had offered a classic sun-reason-truth analogy and, in the process, had pointed toward that chief star in the heavens on which Masonic ceremony turned. If Enlightenment nature, on the Newtonian model, eschewed particularity of place and landscape, then Enlightenment ritual in Freemasonry appropriately moved beyond the provincial to the universal sun.

Smith, and Thomas Paine who followed him, asserted Masonry’s derivation from the religion of the ancient Druids who were priests of the sun. But we need not accept their historiography to take their cue regarding symbolism within the eighteenth-century lodges. “When the lodge is revealed to an entering mason,” wrote Smith, “it discovers to him a representation of the world, in which, from the wonders of nature, we are led to contemplate her great original, and worship him from his mighty works.” By the “great original,” Smith meant God, the great Architect and Creator; but in the ambiguity that was characteristic of Freemasonry, it was the sun, that “emblem of God’s power, his goodness, omnipresence, and eternity,” that figured prominently in the lodge.²¹ One gazed at the sun in order to understand the deity—and in the sacramental life of symbols, as we know, the emblem in some sense *becomes* what lies behind it, invested with a power that moves beyond the representation.

Paine noted that the orientation of the lodges, along an east-west axis, conformed to the sun’s apparent motion through the heavens. “The master’s place,” he added significantly, “is always in the East.” In a formal ritual that stressed the symbolic geography of sacred space, Entered Apprentices (first-degree initiates) were questioned by the master in regard to the lodge’s orientation. Meanwhile, apprentices wore leather aprons, white in color—and, so, filled with Christian meanings related to baptismal purity but also, for Smith and Paine, reminiscent of the garb of Druids and of Egyptian and Grecian priests. The floor of the lodge seen by the apprentices told the story of creation, while overhead the roof displayed the great sign of the sun. Finally, with space, officiant, and objects proclaiming the solar cult, Masonic time, too, promoted the religion of the sun. For in the Christian feasts of the two Johns—Saint John the Baptist, on June 24, and Saint John the Evangelist, on December 27—Masons discovered a convenient pretext for celebrating summer and winter solstices.²²

In fact, the prestige of the sun in the lodge was shared with architectural symbols of the great Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and there was visible evocation of biblical themes in Masonic rites. One could, of course, go further and point to the gnostic and metaphysical readings of biblical lore favored in certain Masonic texts. However, it is clear that the religion of the sun was intertwined with still other themes in the lodges. Indeed, with its symbols of square and compass—emblems of the operative mason’s craft—and with use of these and related objects to construct a mythic model for moral development, the quest for the ideal disclosed an ethnic edge.²³

To be sure, the Masonic ethic symbolized in the stylized construction tools spoke a language as universal as the Enlightenment could make it. With Captain Smith, Masons understood their work—or “art”—as “coeval with creation; when the sovereign Architect raised, on masonic principles, the beauteous globe, and commanded that master science, geometry, to lay the planetary world, and to regulate by its laws the whole stupendous system in just, unerring proportion rolling round the central sun.” However, the triumphalism of the universal was also hardly subtle. If God had been English for early colonists, he was Mason for a key segment of their revolutionary descendants. With Smith, they contemplated their “virtuous deeds,” assuming “the figures of the sun and moon, as emblematical of the great light and truth discovered to the first man; and thereby implying that, as true masons, we stand redeemed from darkness, and are become the sons of light.”²⁴

This Easter glory of the brotherhood at once exalted and masked the content of the moral life required of initiates. Counseled by their speculative and metaphysical Masonry, they fostered regard for active virtue—fairness and honesty in dealing with one’s fellows (being “square” and “on the square”); charity and concern for brother Masons and their families; equality in community among members of the lodge; respect for secrecy and strength in maintaining silence, along with the bond these brought; love of country and willingness to sacrifice, and even die, for it. In short, American Masons were encouraged to the full panoply of Anglo-Saxon virtue, to the proverbial Protestant ethic that was linked, as Max Weber later contended, to capitalism and to the thriving mercantile classes.²⁵

If the list seems unremarkable enough, we need to notice at least part of what was *not* there, what was not apparently written into the universal, natural law. In the paradox that was central to Freemasonry, universal virtue was predicated on elitist organization. Women, by definition, were excluded from a male society, but—as privileged men of their times—neither did the Masons accord equality in the brotherhood to blacks, or to the poor, or to other groups who did not “belong.” Masonic virtue, in fine, was clubby, and so was the religion of nature it preached. The law of the starry skies and its human equivalent in the moral life, it turned out, were the concomitants of a recently nationalizing and ethnic class consciousness.

That consciousness, as we have already seen, was regularly drawn from heaven to its earthy foundation. Hence, nature held a third meaning for the revolutionary generation, a third meaning that lay in the landscape they had begun to glimpse in North America. Once again, Europe had given its gift to its New World relatives by shaping and cultivating patriotic sensibility, so that Americans would know what to see as they looked at nature. By the late eighteenth century, what some of them saw was the sublimity of a wilderness terrain. Taught to recognize the quality of the sublime, they lifted mind and emotion to higher realities, infusing landscape with mingled awe and admiration and even with astonishment that verged on terror. Still more, in a peculiarly republican aesthetic that separated them from Old World vision, these Americans learned to understand the sublimity of what they saw as a sign of the stature and destiny of the new nation. Even nature had smiled her beneficence on the grand political experiment the patriots had begun. She had prepared the choicest portions of the planet—indeed, the most mammoth and stupendous portions—as the space for republican government.

Like other Englishmen, the patriots had been schooled to recognize the sublime by a generation of “sublime” writers, but probably most clearly by Edmund Burke. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke had distinguished between the two. He discovered the source of the sublime in whatever operated “in a manner analogous to terror” and linked the sublime to “the strongest emotion which the

mind is capable of feeling.” Burke explained to readers that the great and sublime in nature caused astonishment, “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.” He went on to tell them of the “inferior effects” of the sublime in “admiration, reverence and respect.” There was “nothing sublime” that was not “some modification of power,” said Burke; and, likewise, he connected the sublime to qualities such as vastness, infinity, and magnificence.²⁶

It would be almost two centuries before another European, Rudolf Otto, would dissect the experience of the Holy to find in it elements of awe, overpoweringness, and urgency, as well as a perception of total Otherness and a mysterious fascination.²⁷ Yet it is not far from the mark to read into Burke’s description of the emotion of the sublime much of what Otto was trying to chart in *Das Heilige*. The patriots would behold the American landscape, at certain privileged moments, with a quality akin to universal religious awe. At the same time, they would never forget that, in the idealism of their vision, it was the *American* landscape they were seeing and that, with America as a moral category, the land itself shared in political virtue.

When Jedidiah Morse published his *American Geography* in 1789, his admiring description of the natural features of the new United States, in fact, could not qualify as sublime. But the book loudly proclaimed the virtue of American republicanism, as Morse followed his geographic account with a discussion of the patriot government, a reprinting of the recently adopted Constitution, a series of convention resolutions, and—after consideration of economic and military matters—a history focusing on events beginning with the Revolution. Still, some of the patriots did look to the sublimity of wild land to feast their republican sentiments. “In at least one respect Americans sensed that their country was different,” wrote Roderick Nash. “Wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World.” “In the early nineteenth century,” he noted, “American nationalists began to understand that it was in the *wildness* of its nature that their country was unmatched.” The wilderness was nature in its most unsullied form; and, for deists, it was the place par excellence where God could manifest himself.²⁸

Even in the city of Philadelphia in 1786, there were adumbrations of the meaning of wild country in Charles Willson Peale’s

natural history museum. By the 1790s, Peale's welcoming sign at the museum's front door announced "the great school of nature" within. At the south entrance, another sign invited citizens: "the book of Nature open," to "explore the wond'rous world. / A solemn Institute of laws eternal." Peale aimed to retain natural form and attitude and—if practicable—a sense of habitat in the exhibits, and so he kept a live menagerie attached to his museum. When creatures died, they were preserved and mounted; and the specimen collection grew to include an assortment of animals, birds, and even insects from throughout the world. Meanwhile, scriptural quotations inscribed in oval frames on the walls pointedly told of the Creator's power. In its heyday in the early nineteenth century, with the bones of at least one American mastodon and a stuffed buffalo part of the collection, the museum's visitors could contemplate in imagination the grandeur of the continent that had become their domain.²⁹ They could travel in mind to the wilderness boundary from which not only law but also a profusion of life forms hinted the spiritual power nature gave Americans.

Not merely in mind, one native Philadelphian, William Bartram, had traveled personally through the South, partly while the Revolution was being fought. From 1773 to 1777, the naturalist absorbed messages from the wilderness more than early rumors and later reports of war. He thought the magnolia groves along the Alatomaha River, "on whose fruitful banks the generous and true sons of liberty securely dwell," rose "sublimely" to greet his view. Elsewhere in his journey he owned that he found some of his "chief happiness" "in tracing and admiring the infinite power, majesty and perfection of the great Almighty Creator." On the top of Oconne Mountain, Bartram called the view "inexpressibly magnificent and comprehensive," the landscape "infinitely varied, and without bound"; and at the summit of Jore Mountain, he "beheld with rapture and astonishment, a sublimely awful scene of power and magnificence, a world of mountains piled upon mountains." With instincts that George Smith and Thomas Paine would no doubt have endorsed, Bartram watched the sun rise near a Seminole camp. "Behold how gracious and beneficent smiles the roseate morn! now the sun arises and fills the plains with light, his glories appear on the forests, encompassing the meadows, and gild the top of the terebinthine Pine and exalted Palms, now gently rustling by

the pressure of the waking breezes. . . . All nature awakes to life and activity."³⁰

The Quaker naturalist had learned his love of nature from his botanist father, who, according to the "American farmer" Crèvecoeur, had placed an inscription over his greenhouse door: "Slave to no sect, who takes no private road, / But looks through nature, up to nature's God!"³¹ If so, the son had transformed his father's Enlightenment republican nature to a more romantic sublime that celebrated American landscape.

Meanwhile, the younger Bartram's contemporary, the more self-consciously republican Philip Freneau, mused in the words of his "Philosopher of the Forest" on the divinity once present in the American "woods and solitudes." There, he said, "the mind still finds itself in the best humour to contemplate, in silent admiration, the great and inexhaustible source of all things." Poet that he was, Freneau in patriotic vein could behold the Hudson River "On whose tall banks tremendous rocks I spy, / Dread nature in primaeval majesty." Or he could recall the awe he felt on the hills of "Neversink":

These heights, for solitude design'd,
This rude, resounding shore—
These vales impervious to the wind,
Tall oaks, that to the tempest bend,
Half Druid, I adore.³²

Freneau had joined to his sense of the American sublime a developed understanding of the revolutionary era's first and second meanings of nature. Not only did he speak through his journalistic Philosopher of the Forest, but he also found an Indian voice through the papers of the fictionalized Creek Tomo Cheeki. Using the pages of the *Jersey Chronicle* and, later, *The Time Piece, and Literary Companion*, Tomo Cheeki spoke of the wilderness vigor that would infuse American virtue. Likewise, Freneau's poems echoed the language of the Enlightenment by idealist references to nature's God who was the guarantor of the liberty of the American republic.³³

In his merging of the various meanings of nature, the poet Freneau was joined by other elite patriots, such as Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow. No deist, Dwight—most notably in "Greenfield Hill"—waxed eloquent on the wholesome rural virtue of American

country life, which was not also without its grandeur and, more, its millennial promise: "Profusely scattered o'er these regions, lo! / What scenes of grandeur, and of beauty, glow." Barlow, more comfortable with the Enlightenment God of Freneau, in a series of ambitious poems culminating in "The Columbiad" (1825) but already in "The Vision of Columbus" (1787), had pulled all stops, celebrating nature in a millennial vision of the republican future. "For here great nature, more exalted show'd / The last ascending foot-steps of her God."

What lonely walks, what wonderous wilds are these?
What branching vales run smiling to their seas?
The peaceful seats, reserved by Heaven to grace,
The virtuous toils of some illustrious race.³⁴

Roderick Nash has noted some of these connections, linking concepts of the sublime and the picturesque to deism in order to explain developing American attitudes toward the wilderness.³⁵ Here, however, we need to remember that republican nature meant more than wilderness, and we need to immerse ourselves fully in the ambiguity of the symbol. Wholesome country virtue and wilderness vigor, stars in planetary motion according to unchanging law, reason's rule and its expression in human moral life, American landscape sublimity—all were evoked in the nuanced life of nature among the patriots. Still more, all of the meanings, whether they were aligned along a horizontal (earthbound) or a vertical (heavenly) axis, disclosed in nature the conceptual expression of a spiritual ideal. And yet—and this was the rub and the distinctively American paradox—all used the ideal as a means to feather material nests and, at the same time, to refuse to see what others might have termed the real state of affairs. For nature provided the theological frame on which to hang a civil religion of the American republic, and it also provided a grand principle of obfuscation for patriots in the decades, even centuries, that followed.

None of the meanings of nature came to grips with what we might call a "secular" version of the events of the revolutionary era, with the pragmatic struggle of a prosperous group of colonists to free themselves from an empire they no longer required. Liberated from the older power, the former colonists could begin to fashion an empire of their own, exercising the self-determination

that would enable them to conquer a continent. They could be universal when they chose (and avoid the specificities of blacks, Indians, immigrants, and even their female counterparts). Or they could be particular when expansionist stirrings so dictated, amassing vast reaches of territory for the civilizing mission of the republic. In short, the patriots, with nature as their banner, could have things any way at all and, mostly, any way they chose.

Yet, this reading of the symbol of republican nature should not deny the bright and hopeful dreams it mediated. Idealism still was idealism, and, as nature religion fused with civil religion in the person of the patriot leaders, we catch a glimpse of the grandly seductive vision they beheld. We can look at Thomas Jefferson as one representative man among them, for in his words and deeds he articulated the conceptually and morally ambiguous meanings of nature that informed the emerging republican mentality.

Chosen to the subcommittee to draft the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson had quite literally stumbled into formal authorship. A brusque John Adams decided that the younger man should do the actual writing, and so it was the Virginian who composed the political statement that became a national creed. Jefferson's document gave classical utterance to the Enlightenment view of nature and also, in its lofty universalism, justified a specific revolution. Predicated on a contract theory of government, the Declaration assumed that a people had the power and right "to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another." It announced forthrightly that "the laws of nature and of nature's god" entitled them to a "separate and equal station" "among the powers of the earth" and went on to list their endowments from the Creator God. In the list of grievances against the British monarch that followed, Jefferson, in draft form, attacked the king for his role in the slave trade, accusing him of waging "cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people." Jefferson's earlier, more general statement had already proclaimed "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as being among the inherent rights of humanity and had understood government as security for these rights.³⁶

The Declaration, in effect, offered a brief for nature as an ideal

and metaphysical principle. Far removed from the flora and fauna of a Virginia landscape, nature had become a fixed source of right and order in the world; and so, like the inactive creator deities of many small, noncited societies, nature could explain without involvement and legitimate without interference. The claims of the past had been nullified, and the new order of ages could emerge unparented out of universal nature.³⁷

At the same time, the Freemason Jefferson was no abstract philosopher, and his empiricism as firmly brought nature back to earth. Natural rights were “inherent” rights; they could be found not floating in ideal realms but constituent in human beings. They were akin to the voice of nature speaking through the moral sense that informed each individual life. Writing more than a decade later to his nephew Peter Carr, Jefferson told him that “the moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm.” This sense of right and wrong was “as much a part of his [man’s] nature as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling.”³⁸

Conscience was, in fact, the individual version of universal moral law, and Jefferson could tie it to Christianity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose teachings embodied the law of nature. In the two compilations of New Testament extracts that Jefferson carefully constructed, he excised miraculous and divinizing materials to present Jesus as the quintessential natural man of the Enlightenment. What Jesus taught was universal ethical doctrine; and Jefferson’s view of moral law, as Charles Sanford has suggested, seemed “similar to the law of gravity.” Even so, Jefferson had taken great pains to historicize the universal teaching by discovering it in the words of the founder of Christianity: his ideology of nature was in the end pragmatic and concrete.³⁹

And Jefferson’s materialism was thoroughgoing. He had learned from Joseph Priestley, buttressing with the Englishman’s arguments his own convictions that spirit was matter. Writing late in life to John Adams, Jefferson succinctly stated his position, explaining to Adams that he considered thought “an action of a particular organisation of matter, formed for that purpose by it’s creator.” Still more, after drawing an analogy between the power of thinking in matter and, tellingly, the power of attraction in the “Sun . . . which reins the planets,” he launched into full confession. “To talk of *immaterial* existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say

that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul.”⁴⁰

Jefferson’s brief for the material spirit was radical doctrine among the patriots, but he had only uttered explicitly what they were already absorbing in more intuitive terms. In Jefferson’s version, Jonathan Edwards’s denial of material substance was surely nowhere to be seen, but a monism akin to Edwards there was. The ideal of nature became real in the public, political life of the republic: functionally, spirit had no existence apart from matter—and more, if the whole truth would be told—matter on the American continent. Later in the century, as we shall see, there would be other Americans who would push the implications of materialism further still. In fact, it might be said that if any genuinely *new* popular religion arose in New World America, it was a nature religion of radical empiricism, with the aim of that religion to conflate spirit with matter and, in the process, turn human beings into gods.

In Jefferson’s case, as Daniel Boorstin reminds us, “his materialism was no appendage to the rest of his thought, but an assumption—or rather a predisposition—which colored all his ideas.” And if the materialism was no appendage, it might properly be said to have sprung from Virginia soil. Whatever else they may be, religions are human constructions, expressions of human labor to effect definite ends and goals. Jefferson’s first understanding of work was the farmer’s, and Adrienne Koch was surely right in saying that “he never quite lost the farmer’s sense that the products of the orchard, the garden, and the fields are born of arduous labor.”⁴¹ Hence, we are brought squarely to Jefferson’s involvement in agrarian life and, within it, his appropriation of a second understanding of nature: that rural country wholesomeness that strode across the New York stage in the person of Royall Tyler’s Colonel Manly.

Before Colonel Manly ever graced the John Street Theatre, Jefferson was writing from Paris to John Banister, Jr., warning of the dangers of a European education. Away from home, one acquired “a fondness for European luxury and dissipation and a contempt for the simplicity of his own country.” Jefferson found the consequences “alarming,” for in Europe an American lost “in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness.” By contrast, as his *Notes on the State of Virginia* ex-

plained, "corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example." As for the individual, so for the body politic. "The proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption."⁴²

Yet, beyond his fears of corruption—whether from European immorality or, as detailed in his *Notes*, from excessive manufactures—Jefferson held a positive religious vision of life in tune with the land. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth."⁴³ Jefferson's language evoked Puritan notions of special destiny in the New World, linking to them the high moral ground that had inspired the old Puritan ethic of righteousness. Still, in his evocation of the past, Jefferson had advanced it for another day. The idyllic nature religion of the soil was, if examined from a different perspective, a charter for expansion—not unlike the vision of those earlier Puritans who, dissenting from New England church leaders, had sought wilderness plantations. Now, though, in the new nation manufactures would require concentration of resources into smaller, more efficient units. They would foster geographical compression and citted living. Agriculture, on the other hand, demanded wide, open spaces; and so it demanded the acquisition of territory—and, implicitly, an encounter with wilderness—to support the multiplying American generations.

When, in 1802, Jefferson, as president, learned that Spain had ceded the Louisiana territory to France, a concatenation of American anxieties and European events led to the huge sale of French real estate that annexed perhaps 828,000 square miles to the national domain. The new Constitution had been silent about the acquisition of territory, but by the end of 1803 the United States Senate had confirmed the Jefferson purchase. The sage of Monticello could dream of the agrarian future he had negotiated for the nation. For whatever the immediate circumstances of the land transfer, the Louisiana Purchase was, as Boorstin wrote, "an authentic expression of the Jeffersonian spirit." Now Americans

could flourish, as Jefferson had proclaimed in his First Inaugural, "kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of the others; possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the hundredth and thousandth generation."⁴⁴

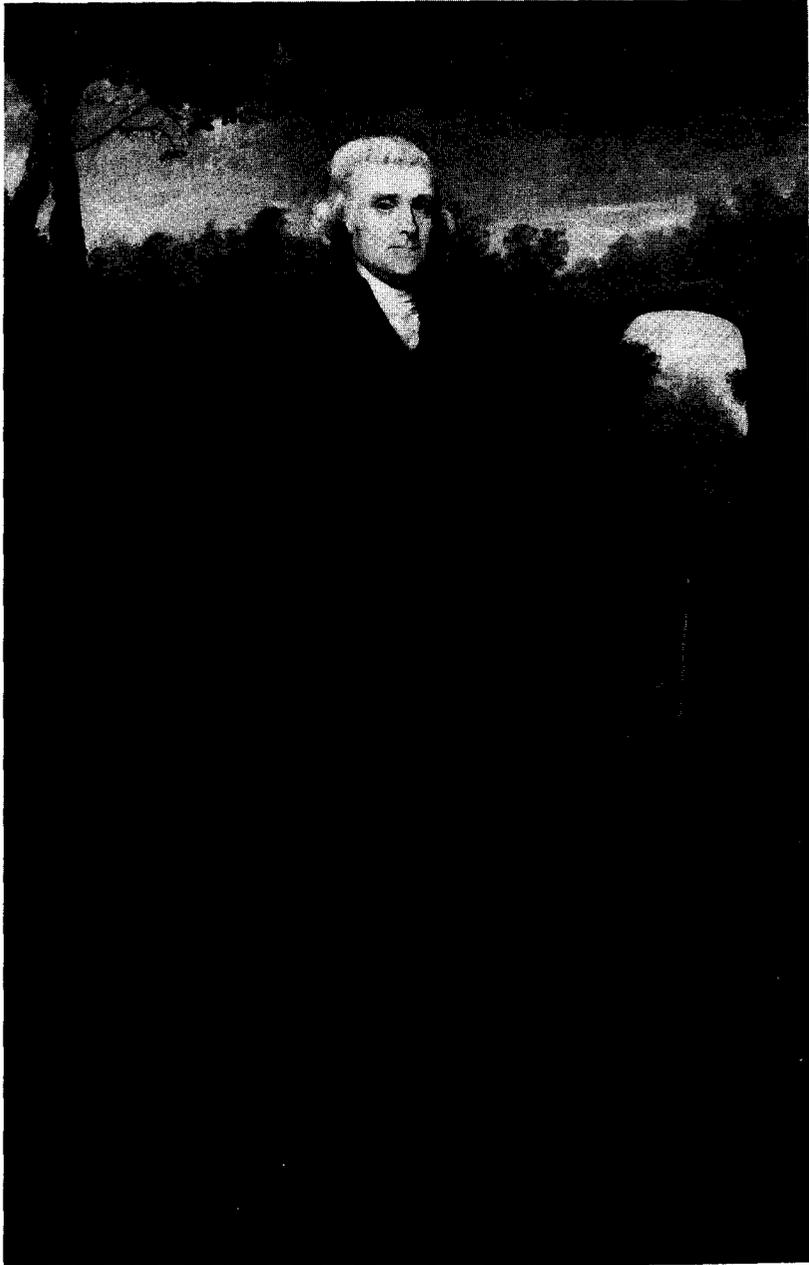
Surely, there was an irony in the Manly wholesomeness that Jefferson had inadvertently embraced. As Boorstin incisively remarked, the Jeffersonian's "professed belief, deeply rooted in his cosmology, that no piece of the universe was more important than another, that man's task everywhere had to emerge from his local condition, was overshadowed by the magnificence of the American destiny." And, indeed, "expansiveness and boundlessness seemed themselves a kind of destiny and definition."⁴⁵ Jefferson dreamed on, thinking of Canada and Cuba as part of the American empire. Thus it is in light of the dream of empire that we need to view his appropriation of the third understanding of nature, when Jefferson beheld the national landscape as American sublime.

Writing to Maria Cosway, with whom he had formed a romantic attachment, Jefferson in Paris pictured the scene that Cosway, a landscape artist, might paint at Monticello:

Where has nature spread so rich a mantle under the eye? mountains, forests, rocks, rivers. With what majesty do we there ride above the storms! How sublime to look down into the workhouse of nature, to see her clouds, hail, snow, rain, thunder, all fabricated at our feet! And the glorious Sun, when rising as if out of a distant water, just gilding the tops of the mountains, and giving life to all nature!⁴⁶

If the expanse was awesome, it was also clear that Jefferson was in the high place looking down. Expansion and expansiveness gilded the sight he saw: it was the aesthetic and religious equivalent of his republican dream. "The Falling spring, the Cascade of Niagara, the Passage of the Potowmac thro the Blue mountains, the Natural bridge," Jefferson declared to Cosway. "It is worth a voiage across the Atlantic to see these objects."⁴⁷

Nor did he keep these sentiments only for private communication. "This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic," he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* after he had described for readers the passage of the Potomac River through the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was, "perhaps, one of the most stupendous scenes in nature."



Caleb Boyle, *Thomas Jefferson at the Natural Bridge*, ca. 1801. Oil on canvas; approximate size, 96" × 62". (Courtesy, Kirby Collection of Historical Paintings, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania.) Thomas Jefferson owned the Natural Bridge as real estate.

You stand on a very high point of land. On your right comes up the Shenandoah, having ranged along the foot of the mountain an hundred miles to seek a vent. On your left approaches the Potomac, in quest of a passage also. In the moment of their junction, they rush together against the mountain, rend it asunder, and pass off to the sea.⁴⁸

Jefferson went on, in a Burkean move, to write of the "distant finishing" of the picture, of its "true contrast to the foreground . . . as placid and delightful as that is wild and tremendous."⁴⁹ However, if the sublime yielded to the beautiful for the distant gaze, we need to notice that, in the foreground, the sublime equaled wilderness equaled power. The equation had been shaped in Europe, but it was being reshaped in America under the aegis of forces that stressed magnitude as a way of being, a necessary landscape for the virtuous republic.

It was at Natural Bridge, though, that Jefferson found "the most sublime of nature's works." Although few had walked to the "parapet of fixed rocks" to look out over the "abyss," he had done so. "You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet, and peep over it," he wrote. "Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head-ache." The view from the bridge had been "painful and intolerable," but that from below was "delightful in an equal extreme." Jefferson was enthusiastic: "It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime to be felt beyond what they are here," he affirmed. "So beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were up to heaven! the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable!"⁵⁰

Yet, if Jefferson had conformed his memory to Burkean categories, he had also confused them, finding sublimity both in the view from below that gave him delight and in the (painful) view from above. Moreover, as Garry Wills has shown for Jefferson's delight, he had altered his evidence. Immediately following his account of the spectator's rapturous pleasure below, Jefferson described the scene as the mountains were cleft by the fissure. Significantly, he told of what could only be viewed from the high place. "The fissure continuing narrow, deep, and straight, for a considerable distance above and below the bridge, opens a short but very pleasing view of the North mountain on one side and the Blue Ridge on the other, at the distance each of them of about five miles."⁵¹ Jefferson had been caught in the act, so to speak. It was an *American* sublime that he had experienced; and, in American sublime, rather than being

terrified, one liked and enjoyed being on top. That Jefferson was the legal owner of Natural Bridge as real estate only underlined the connection: American sublime hinted of empire and dominion.

Beyond that, the Americanness of American sublime mediated a certain danger. What was stupendous bore the risk of becoming merely stupefying in dimension, as if magnitude in size could serve as equivalent for moral magnitude. Already, in his *Notes*, Jefferson was expressing the American mentality that would flourish into the nineteenth century and beyond. He boasted of the "tusks, grinders, and skeletons of unparalleled magnitude" found in large numbers on the Ohio River and elsewhere. And he waxed, for the benefit of the French naturalist the Count de Buffon and others, on the putative mammoth whose remains had been recently discovered on American soil. Its skeleton told of "an animal of five or six times the cubic volume of the elephant," and it was certain the mammoth was "the largest of all terrestrial beings." With one animal—even such as this—not sufficient, Jefferson painstakingly assembled and elaborated a chart that compared the body weights of the "Quadrupeds of Europe and of America." He would establish to his and his countrymen's satisfaction the superiority of American specimens.⁵²

The patriotism of Jefferson's polemic was evident. But what is important here is how patriotism, for Jefferson and his countrymen, was—for all the starry skies of Enlightenment law—mingled inextricably with an "earthy bottom." The land and its products must correspond in their stature to the perceived stature of the young republic. Nature must stand beside liberty; and if true liberty broke down Old World bonds and limits, nature, too, must defy Old World categories in its expanse. In the surroundings of the continent's seemingly unending space, the American translation for value was becoming size and magnitude. Nature religion meant communion with forces that enlarged the public life of the nation. And with Jefferson and other American patriots always on top, it meant conquest to insure that nature's forces would flow as the lifeblood of the body politic.

The logic and energy of the symbol were real: it contained power and mediated power, acting as mythic broker for an evolving American mentality. Meaning piled on meaning even for the revolutionary

generation, with nature and its religion moving in a kaleidoscope. And, as we shall see in succeeding chapters, the lens of the Revolution, turned by new times, could lend surprising and even contrary line and form to an American nature religion. It is in the context of this symbolic pluralism that we need to pursue the Jeffersonian vision into a new age, keeping sight of the light and dark of the dream.

We gain one view of how the lens turned for the nineteenth-century future by glancing at a popular republican near midcentury. Already fictionalized in the midst of public life, this man—a southerner like Jefferson—expressed and exploited the nature religion that the revolutionary generation had bequeathed. In his person, the symbolic counter of nature manifested its wilderness power, its political wit, and its moral problem in an age of manifest destiny. The figure is Davy Crockett, and the life that he lived embodied the political world of the American Congress and the "savage" realm of the Tennessee frontier.

David Crockett, the historical figure, had moved from two terms in the Tennessee legislature (1821–24) to two terms in the United States Congress beginning in 1827.⁵³ As representative from the state of Tennessee, he early broke with Andrew Jackson, the democratic hero of the state who became president. Fighting with Jackson's forces over the Tennessee Vacant Land Bill and, later, the Indian Removal Bill, Crockett championed poor Indians in his home district by introducing legislation for their aid. After two terms in Congress, he sat out the years from 1831 to 1833 but was subsequently reelected for a final congressional term. A year later he was dead at the Alamo.

It was during his last term in Congress when, probably combining financial need with political ambition, Crockett with some assistance produced his *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* (1834).⁵⁴ Cast in frontier style and idiom, the work celebrated life in the woods and the hunter hero's exploits, culminating in his slaughter of 105 bears within the space of a year. Yet, throughout the autobiography with its tall tales and its heroic caricatures, Crockett talked politics in explicit and unmistakable terms. The *Narrative* was a running polemic against Andrew Jackson and his "kitchen cabinet," and it hinted, as well, that Crockett might soon become president of the United States. Whether as campaign biog-

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THE CROCKETT ALMANAC 1841.



Tussel with a Bear. See page 9.

**Containing Adventures, Exploits, Sprees
& Scrapes in the West, &
Life and Manners in the Backwoods.**

Nashville, Tennessee. Published by Ben Harding.



"Likeness of Crockett When Eight Years Old." From *Crockett's Almanac*, 1851, published in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston by Fisher & Brother, (unnumbered page) 14. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.) Even in childhood, Davy Crockett dominates the land, suggesting a kind of mystical engulfment.

Opposite: Front cover, *The Crockett Almanac*, 1841. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.) This Nashville almanac, purportedly published by the seafaring captain Ben Harding, graphically proclaims the embrace of nature that Davy Crockett boasted.

raphy or as literary entertainment, the work was enormously successful, exhausting seven editions (including a London edition) within the year.

Although even before the autobiography there had been mythicizing productions to make the congressman from Tennessee a legend, it was in 1834, again, that a work was published that completed the transformation of David into *Davy Crockett*. That year, in Nashville, there appeared the first edition of an almanac—*Davy Crockett's Almanack of Wild Sports of the West, and Life in the Backwoods*—which would continue in one form or another until 1856. Produced mostly, if not entirely, in Eastern cities, the Crockett almanacs suggested their own success by internal evidence and external circumstance. Like other almanacs of the era, they added

to standard almanac information pages of anecdotes—here concerning Crockett and his intimate friends and foes. In doing so, they recounted, quite clearly, exorbitant fictions; and in the pages of the almanacs David Crockett the man became Davy Crockett the myth.

Examining the myth of Crockett as it appears in the almanacs means looking into the republican kaleidoscope with the affirmations of the revolutionary generation turned and twisted. To view Crockett is to encounter an American isomorphism between farmer and hunter, between hunter and warrior, and between warrior and politician.⁵⁵ To see him is to see transformation in republican nature under the strains of a romanticizing age. The Tennessee folk hero moves through the pages of these almanac episodes as a gargantuan figure, deliberately and distortedly larger than life. Crockett required a twelve-foot cradle made of snapping turtle and varnished with rattlesnake oil to rock him in infancy; and by age eight, with his shoes off and feet clean, he weighed two hundred pounds and fourteen ounces. Meanwhile, he had been weaned on whiskey and always made it a practice to take a pint with mustard before breakfast. As almanac tales made clear, Crockett could outsavage any savage in hunt or fight. Indeed, at least subliminally aware of Enlightenment law and science, he and his foes still acted like animals as they fought. Consider, for example, this rather typical account from an almanac of 1850:

I stood up and spit in his face. He pulled up his breeches, and crowed three times. I felt my flesh crawl over, and my toe-nails moved out of place. I moved my elbow in scientific order, and got ready to take a twist in his hair. When he seed that, he squealed and ran around me three times. I jumped up, and planted my heels in his bowels. . . . he caught me 'round the thigh and war goin' to throw me down: but I stopped over and cotched him by the seat of his trowsers and held him up in the air, when he squirmed like an eel, and tried to shoot me with his pistol. I twisted him over, and took his knee-pan in my mouth and bit clear through to the bone.⁵⁶

The animal sounds and behavior and the veiled cannibalism of the Crockett who “bit clear through to the bone” contrasted sharply with the “scientific order” of the Tennessean’s elbow. So, too, on another occasion, did his address to Congress stand in juxtaposition to the conventions of that body. The mythic Crockett, like his historical prototype, was a congressman; but he was congressman-

qua-animal as, in almanac fashion, he accosted the speaker and the House. “Who—Who—Whoop—Bow—Wow—Wow—Yough,” he began, in a speech in which he declared himself a “screamer” and a “horse.” “I can walk like an ox, swim like an eel, yell like an Indian, fight like a devil, and spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad bull, and swallow a nigger whole without choking if you butter his head and pin his ears back.”⁵⁷ With a cannibalism that was now not merely innuendo and with a racism that was blatant and unapologetic, Crockett identified himself with the denizens of the forest even as he sat in the halls of Congress.

That the fictional Crockett took his congressional charge seriously was evident in the political preoccupation that haunted the pages of the almanacs as surely as it had run through the *Narrative*. The “savage eucharist,” as Richard Slotkin has called it, meant a fusion of self with wilderness forces, a fusion that culminated in the act of cannibalism, the ritual feeding that guaranteed the prowess of the enemy would be absorbed into oneself.⁵⁸ The ultimate act of conquest, it was also the ultimate form of nature mysticism, an eating in which external foe and victim became internal sustenance. Yet, in the symbolic ambiguity that invested the figure of Crockett, the war and hunting cannibalism of the forest became the collective political cannibalism of empire.

Championing the manifest destiny of his age, Crockett was certain that Texas, Oregon, and California all belonged to the territorial domain of the United States. He could show Americans, he said, “the chap fit to send to Congress, and one that knows how to talk about Oregon, annex Texas, flog Mexico, swallow a Frenchman whole, and lick John Bull clar out of his breeches!” Communion with nature through conquest signaled the eucharist of cannibalism and the eucharist of imperial absorption. As early as 1836, the almanac Crockett had delivered his “squatter speech” to the Congress, arguing that Americans “shall squat the face of this tarnal ‘arth, from the *Hatlantic* ocean to the *Specific!!!*” And, in an allusion to his historical role in fighting under Andrew Jackson in the Creek (Indian) War, he later boasted that “some of the fokes talked of putting me up for President becase I had showed myself a military hero.”⁵⁹

“You see, feller citizens,” Crockett declared without equivocation in an 1845 almanac, “I go in for Texas and the Oregon, clar



"Crockett's Patent Gouging; Or, Using Up Two Indian Chiefs," *Crockett Almanac*, 1849, published in Boston by James Fisher, (unnumbered page) 9. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.) The graphic accompanies the almanac's one completely explicit account of Davy Crockett's cannibalism.

up to the very gravel stone; for they both belong to Uncle Sam's plantation, jist as naturally as a cabbage leaf belongs to a cabbage stalk." The agrarian metaphor was not without significance, for—as the Jeffersonian dream reminds—it was the demands of agriculture that supplied the rationale for empire—and, indeed, in that other dark side of American life—for slavery. The historical Crockett had farmed the land before he occupied himself in politics, and the mythic Crockett was likewise unafraid to admit his livelihood as a farmer. Once, when he caught a party of Indians stealing his horse fodder, he mowed them down with his twelve-foot scythe, until "the red nigger's sap both watered an manured

my field, till it war as red an striped, as Uncle Sam's flag." "Thar's a stack o' thar bones standing in the medow to this very day," he confided, "an from the large majority o' thar blood that watered it all over, I have had a treble crop o' the tallest injun grass every summer."⁶⁰ If Crockett had inadvertently admitted that, in the pornography of violence, blacks and Indians were of a piece, he had also told that their wildness could fertilize the fields of empire under blood-red stripes of the American flag.

It is against such a backdrop that we can better understand the Crockett who, stalking out one January morning for a hunt, found the earth frozen fast on its axes and the sun jammed between two cakes of ice. Crockett rescued the cosmos by unloading a bear from his back, beating the hot oil out of it, and squeezing it over the axes of the earth until they were thawed. After that, it seemed an easy affair for the colonel to squeeze "about a ton on it [bear grease] over the sun's face" and "give the airth's cog-wheel one kick backward." "In about fifteen seconds the airth gin a grunt, and begun movin'—the sun walked up beautiful—saluten me with sich a wind o' gratitude, that it made sneeze." Crockett nonchalantly "walked home . . . with a piece of sunrise in my pocket, with which I cooked my bear steaks, an' enjoyed one o' the best breakfasts I had tasted for some time."⁶¹ The innocence and wholesomeness of the account, its fresh country humor and implied concern for compatriots suffering from the sun's predicament, cloak the expansionist impulse. Crockett had exposed the universal natural law as subject to American manipulation. The ideal order of things did, indeed, have an earthy bottom.

Hence, to view the mythic Crockett who entertained Americans from the 1830s to the 1850s—and, in his later manifestations, beyond—is to examine one transmutation of the nature religion of the revolutionary age. Its three strands of meaning are present in the grotesquerie of the almanac episodes. The innocence of the Crockett who unfroze earth and sun exists side by side with the wild ferocity of the man whose thumbnail achieved renown for its prowess at gouging panther and human alike.⁶² The "scientific order" of Crockett's fighting mimicked the eternal law of the heavens but also hinted that wilderness strength could overcome it. At the same time, the law of nature's noble primitive proved to be, in another version, the law of political manifest destiny. For con-

strued as fundamental law discovered in the contour of the land and in the character of the American people, manifest destiny accomplished more concretely what eighteenth-century patriots had intuited all along. Finally, the American sublime of Jefferson and his Enlightenment friends was echoed, in more discordant key, in the ecstasies of the hunter hero who celebrated nature even as he ingested it through conquest. The savage eucharist was the ritual culmination of the imperial gaze of the patriot—always on top, and always looking down.

What all of this suggests is that Davy Crockett and the demands of manifest destiny represent, in fact, the underside of revolutionary idealism. The twisted vision of Crockett and the contorted figures with whom he grappled reflect the twists in a popular American mentality grown arguably overlarge. In this nineteenth-century American enactment of its themes, nature religion had become dominance over the land and, simultaneously, escape and illusion. The embrace of matter had become avoidance of matter, the celebration of a grandness that glanced off the reality of the continent and its peoples in fulfillment of the urge to empire. The other-than-human persons of the Algonkians of another age had fled into the forests; the Puritan dialectic of fear and fascination had played itself into another key; and the Enlightenment had yielded its rationalism to the powers of the irrational. Dream had come to shape destiny, as nature, turned to new American purposes, presided over the unfoldment—and terror—of history.⁶³

On the other hand, it was clear that the nature religion of the revolutionary age could move in different directions. Jeffersonian materialism, conflating matter and spirit, could be used to additional purposes; and the implications of the revolutionary age could be discovered in other configurations as the nineteenth century turned the kaleidoscope of nature. Well before David Crockett put his mind to autobiography, another man—soon to be a lawyer like Royall Tyler and, like him too, a native of Massachusetts—had put his hand to paper. When his words were finally published in 1817, his readers were an elite few and his chosen genre was poetry. In his “Thanatopsis,” a youthful William Cullen Bryant announced to subscribers of the *North American Review* a version of

the religion of nature, with a romanticism profoundly different from that which would characterize Crockett.

To him who in the love of Nature holds
 Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
 A various language; for his gayer hours
 She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
 And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
 Into his darker musings, with a mild
 And healing sympathy, that steals away
 Their sharpness, ere he is aware. . . .

 Go forth, under the open sky, and list
 To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
 Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
 Comes a still voice.⁶⁴

Bryant's words in many ways would find their parallel in 1836 when another youthful American—a restive Ralph Waldo Emerson—sounded the opening lines of his Transcendentalist gospel *Nature*. And years later, in 1864, when Bryant was seventy, Emerson would say that the celebrated poet was “always original.” Reading other popular American and English poets, Emerson thought they appeared “to have gone into the art galleries and to have seen pictures of mountains.” “But this man,” he paid tribute, had “seen mountains.” With as much admiration, Emerson went on to affirm that there was “no feature of day or night in the country” that did not “to a contemplative mind, recall the name of Bryant.”⁶⁵ Hearing, like the poet of “Thanatopsis,” a divine voice in the land, Emerson and other Transcendentalists would explore the legacy of nature religion left by the revolutionary generation—and, as much or more, the legacy left by the Puritans before them. But they would follow the historic line to end at a different place. Davy Crockett was not the only heir to nature's law.