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### Speaking of Alaska

Writings about Alaska predate the purchase of its 587,878 square miles by the United States in March 1867 for 7.2 million dollars in gold, a sum that works out to about two cents an acre. When the second Vitus Bering expedition landed on the Alaska islands in 1741, record-keeping Europeans were generating documents about what came to be called Russian America, and the paper trail, which I have not followed there, probably extends back into the vicinity of 1648, when Semen Dezhnev sailed with a group of Russians through the strait that later took Bering's name. For the limited purposes of this brief discussion, however, I will focus on various ways in which the speeches and writings of a few influential citizens of the United States, influential because of their public positions or the prominent publication of their remarks or both, have treated Alaska verbally from 1867 to the present.

This highly selective survey, which begins with speeches by two major figures in the forging of the original purchase agreement and ends with testimony about drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, makes no attempt to maintain generic purity or consistency in its samples. Political speech, congressional testimony, journalistic writing, travel writing, nature writing, personal memoir,

private or public letter, official web site copy: all these genres and sub-genres, often overlapping in the same document or piece, potentially have something to tell us about how people have spoken about Alaska, as well as about the place of Alaska in the minds and imaginations of those living in the Lower Forty-eight, a very small percentage of whom will ever visit the forty-ninth state but a very large percentage of whom live and think and vote in ways that directly or indirectly affect its air, water, land, creatures, and people. In a country that takes as its motto the Latin tag *e pluribus unum*, inevitably individual states will feel the effects of actions and policies originating outside their borders, but nowhere else in the United States does this peculiar situation exist in such an extreme, and highly publicized, form.

Thirty-one years before the purchase of Alaska, Ralph Waldo Emerson published his little first book, *Nature* (1836), and although it makes good sense to invoke Emerson's legacy in this context, since it passes to Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, the Sierra Club, and others, I turn to him not for his help in thinking about the natural world, which he tended to see from an unremittingly anthropocentric perspective, but for his help in organizing the different ways people speak about the natural world, in this case Alaska. Whether or not the various subheadings he gave to his rambling, quasi-scientific, quasi-religious, quasi-philosophical, quasi-poetical utterance illuminate the natural world for us, many of his headings in fact do describe the

dominant tendencies of various utterances about Alaska. In what follows, then, I am proposing to take some of Emerson's categories as rhetorical guides, if not philosophical ones. In particular, his four classes of what he calls the "multitude of uses" human beings can make of nature in their efforts to comprehend "the final cause" or purpose of the world offer us a useful starting point. Emerson's four classes are Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline, and though they slip and blur and overlap, they still can help us sort and differentiate.

#### 1. *Sumner and Seward*

"Under the general name of commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature," Emerson begins, and it is under the dominant sign of Commodity that Charles Sumner's 164-page speech on "The Cession of Russian America to the United States," delivered in its original and presumably much shorter form to the Senate "on the Ratification of the Treaty between the United States and Russia, April 9, 1867," sets out to describe Alaska.<sup>1</sup> Students of the Civil War may remember Sumner as the abolitionist senator whose speech in 1856 prompted Preston Brooks to beat him severely with a cane

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<sup>1</sup>*The Works of Charles Sumner* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1883), XI, 181. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text by page number, as they will to any other after the first citation.

on the floor of the Senate. When he delivered his speech on Alaska eleven years later, and two years to the day after Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, he did so as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, having worked closely with Secretary of State William Seward to bring negotiations with Russian Minister Edouard de Stoeckl to a satisfactory conclusion. For all the admirably judicious even-handedness of Sumner's speech, then, he clearly intended to use it to persuade his colleagues to vote for ratification of the agreement.

Through its Latin root "commodity" inherits broad connotations of advantage or convenience, as Emerson's use of the term confirms, and in his speech Sumner works exhaustively to convince his colleagues of the abundant advantages Russia will give the United States. These advantages fall into two main categories. Most obvious, and at times overwhelming, are Sumner's inventories of commodities in the narrower sense in which we now use the term to denote articles of trade and commerce. Beginning with "Advantages to the Pacific Coast" (216) and quickly noting the potential gains in securing supplies of ice, fish, and furs, not to mention new harbors from which to ship them, Sumner soon turns to the implications of the new territory for international trade: "Not only does the treaty extend the coasting trade of California, Oregon, and Washington Territory northward, but it also extends the base of commerce with China and Japan" (218).

What precisely are the commodities this trade and commerce, whether domestic or international, would involve? Sumner begins with a section on vegetable products, which include timber, later described as "forests of pine and fir waiting for the axe" (346), and then turns to minerals, first among them iron and copper, soon followed by "ochre, copper pyrites, garnets, schorl, granite, schist, horn-stone, very pure quartz, mica, plumbago, coal" (297). He adds silver and lead and then turns to gold with the wry observation, especially notable in anticipation of the Klondike Gold Rush to come thirty years later, "Gold is less important than coal, but its discovery produces more excitement" (303). If Sumner had known of the existence of petroleum in Alaska, no doubt he would have listed black gold among these advantageous commodities as well. Finally, after minerals come long sections on furs (seventeen pages) and fisheries (twenty-four pages) before a brief summary and a section on "What Remains to be Done," in which he proposes the name "Alaska" for the new territory.

So much for the commodities of commerce and trade, but what of the other category, that of commodity as advantage more generally? In case the material riches of Alaska might leave his fellow senators unpersuaded, Sumner follows "Advantages to the Pacific Coast," which he describes as "Foremost in order, if not in importance" (216), with twelve pages on the commodity we now might call "national security," marshaling his reasons under four headings: "Extension of

Dominion," "Extension of Republican Institutions,"  
"Anticipation of Great Britain," and "Amity of Russia."

Emerson's *Nature* includes no thoughts about vast areas of the natural world serving human beings as strategic geopolitical commodities, perhaps because geopolitical strategy looked less pressing to him in 1836 than it did to Sumner in 1867, perhaps because Emerson's mind did not do its most productive thinking in that area. Whatever the truth, Sumner's sense of Alaska as not merely a source of material commodities but also a source of geopolitical advantage has anticipated both the militarization of Alaska during World War Two and the current debate about drilling for oil to reduce the dependence of the United States on countries with which its relations are potentially volatile.

In other words, although Sumner's ruminations on, for example, acquiring Alaska to contain British influence in North America or to show good faith with Russia, which had recently struggled towards its own version of emancipation, a cause especially close to Sumner's heart, are receding from us into the distance of history, his arguments show that speaking of Alaska, at least in the United States, has never included a time when geopolitical advantage and national security were not primary considerations. Opponents of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge may contest claims made about national security by proponents of that drilling, and many do so quite reasonably, but they cannot contest the claim that national security, or geopolitical commodity, has always

figured prominently in the ways in which many Americans have thought about and imagined Alaska. It came into national consciousness as an international chess piece, and it has remained one ever since. That it also figures in many minds as an image of the Last Frontier and a place to be protected and preserved only confirms the complexity of Alaska. When Milton's Satan declares in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, "We know no time when we were not as now," his diabolical amnesia confirms his fallenness, but in the American imagination of Alaska the fall has never taken place because there never was a time when Alaska was not as now, at least in the context of international relations. Its function as a national commodity has always overshadowed its operations as a separate entity. In contemplating this last statement, one cannot dismiss as pure coincidence the timing of the Alaska acquisition, as Alaska was the first territory added by a country that had just put down an insurgency motivated, in the minds of many, by the assertion of the rights of individual states.

What Sumner's comprehensive speech does not anticipate is anything we might recognize as an impulse toward protection and preservation. Whether in the sentence about "forests of pine and fir waiting for the axe" or in his ethnographic descriptions of the two principal groups of "aborigines," which he labels "Esquimaux" and "Indians" (264), Sumner shows little or no concern about the possible effects of the Alaska treaty on any aspect of the new territory. At one point he does lament of the indigenous people, "All, I fear, are

slaveholders" (265), reflecting his own fierce opposition to slavery and preparing us for encounters with Indian slaveholders in John Muir's *Travels with Alaska* (1915), but the vulnerability and impermanence of either the enslavers or the enslaved, or of any features of their world, do not trouble him as they might have troubled his fellow citizen of Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau, who by the late 1840s was already thinking and writing about the vulnerability of woods, ponds, and native people.

In this respect Sumner differs from Secretary of State William Seward, who delivered his speech on Alaska to the citizens of Sitka on August 12, 1869, two years after ratification of the treaty. Like Sumner, Seward had his hands full during the Civil War, and his speeches and papers from the years before the acquisition focus, for example, on Vicksburg, Gettysburg, the fall of Atlanta, Lincoln's assassination, and the Freedmen's Bureau. But unlike Sumner, Seward grounds his remarks, much shorter than Sumner's, in the first-hand experience of actual travel to the new territory. Even the little bit of coastal Alaska he visited enabled him to inform his speech, clearly aimed at an audience much wider than the few Sitkans who heard him, with a perspective not wholly dependent on the maps and reports and statistics on which Sumner had to rely. True, Seward's speech still focuses primarily on what Emerson would call commodity, as when he considers the fresh possibilities for logging and rhapsodizes, "No beam, or pillar, or spar, or mast, or plank is ever

required in either the land or the naval architecture of any civilized state greater in length and width than the trees which can be hewn down on the coasts of the islands and rivers here, and conveyed directly thence by navigation."<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, he follows Sumner in meditating on the abundance of furs and minerals, and he even surpasses his ally from the Senate when he then describes, in a magisterial formulation worthy of Emerson, "the great natural law that obliges needy men to seek subsistence, and invites adventurous men to seek fortune where it is most easily obtained, and this is always in the new and uncultivated regions" (567). Seward invokes this great natural law, which still realizes itself in the context of drilling for oil in the Arctic, to reassure the citizens of Sitka that "reinforcements shall come" to join "the pioneers, the advanced guard" they represent. Always those of a calculating statesman, Seward's assurances also aim beyond his immediate hearers to the eyes of those who will subsequently read his printed speech and perhaps find themselves tempted by the economic prospects offered by migration to Alaska, which the visitor from Washington prophecies will become, along with Oregon, Washington Territory, and British Columbia, "a ship-yard for the supply of all nations," once "the European nations, and even those of

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<sup>2</sup>*Works of William H. Seward*, ed. George E. Baker (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1884), V, 563.

Eastern Asia, have exhausted . . . their own forests and mines" (567).

But Seward performs his role as Alaska-booster not only by dwelling on the advantageous commodities to be found there. In answering the imagined question, "'You have looked upon Alaska, what do you think of it?'" (559), he moves beyond commodity to sound two notes that Sumner's speech never does. The first is the note of preservation, and it makes itself heard not in the context of forests and animals but in that of the Alaska Indians. Having referred to the practice of slavery among them, he remarks that they "have never confederated or formed permanent alliances," so that "in the presence of the superior power exercised by the United States Government, they live in regard to each other in a state of enforced and doubtful truce" (566). Assessing this complex situation with the same political acumen that made him effective as Secretary of State, Seward then comments, "It is manifest that, under these circumstances, they must steadily decline in numbers, and unhappily this decline is accelerated by their borrowing ruinous vices from the white man." Although the circumspect Seward does not say so, both Burroughs's "In Green Alaska" (1904) and Muir's *Travels in Alaska* subsequently teach us to read "whiskey" for "ruinous vices." Especially remarkable about Seward's elegiac meditations on the Indians, which he wrote down twenty-one years before the Wounded Knee massacre, is that they acknowledge the desirability of preservation at the same time

that they foretell its impossibility: "When we consider how greatly most of the tribes are reduced in numbers, and how precarious their vocations are, we shall cease to regard them as indolent or incapable; and, on the contrary, we shall more deeply regret than ever before, that a people so gifted by nature, so vigorous and energetic, and withal so docile and gentle in their intercourse with the white man, can neither be preserved as a distinct social community, or incorporated in our society" (566-67).

For Seward, at least in this speech, preservation involves preserving humans and their world, not non-humans and theirs. Nevertheless, as he sounds the second note absent from Sumner's speech, he anticipates a moment when later people might think otherwise about Alaska: "It would argue inexcusable insensibility if I should fail to speak of the scenery which, in the course of my voyage, has seemed to pass like a varied and magnificent panorama before me" (565). Among the reasons to acquire Alaska Sumner understandably never considers the beauty of its scenery, but for Seward Commodity and Beauty, the second of Emerson's categories in *Nature*, exist in close proximity, as he shows when he tells the citizens of Sitka, "I am living constantly on ship-board, as you all know, and am occupied intently in searching out whatever is sublime, or beautiful, or peculiar, or useful" (559). In his exultation in the scenery, Seward anticipates the tone and language of the nature writers soon to follow him to Alaska, as when he marvels, "Nature has furnished to this

majestic picture the only suitable border which could be conceived, by lifting the coast range mountains to an exalted height, and clothing them with eternal snows and crystalline glaciers" (565). Most famous among those later nature writers are Burroughs and Muir, and this sentence of Seward's would not be out of place in the writings of either.

## 2. *Burroughs and Muir*

For Sumner Alaska means commodity; for Seward Alaska also means commodity, but commodity does not exclude beauty; and for the two Johns, Burroughs and Muir, Alaska presents itself largely, though not at all exclusively, under the Emersonian sign of Beauty. That both men met read and met Emerson clinches the connection, but even if they had not, their writings on Alaska confirm the emergence of beauty as a primary subject in verbal treatments of Alaska.<sup>3</sup> A fuller

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<sup>3</sup>The chronology of events and textual history is complicated here. Beginning in 1879, Muir made several trips to Alaska before he and Burroughs joined the Harriman Expedition of 1899, so his experience of the new territory precedes that of Burroughs. But although the first volume (1901) of the thirteen-volume series, *Harriman Alaska Expedition*, included writing by both, Burroughs's contribution, after revision, became "In Green Alaska," which appeared in *Far and Near* (1904), volume XI of his *Writings*, and preceded Muir's posthumously published *Travels in Alaska* by eleven years. The literary rivalry between the two men suggests that as Muir worked on his book right up to his death in 1914, he could not help but write with an awareness of Burroughs's earlier text. For an excellent account of Burroughs's and Muir's writings on Alaska and the complicated relationship between them, see James Perrin Warren's chapter "Alaska and the Pictorial Imagination" in *John Burroughs and the Place of Nature* (Athens: U Georgia P, 2005). For the definitive work on the

account of their writings would need to situate them within the context of a nascent Alaska tourist industry, which quickly developed after Muir first saw Glacier Bay in 1879 and soon generated a new genre, the Alaska travel narrative, exemplified by Septima M. Collis's *A Woman's Trip to Alaska* (1890), which includes in its opening pages a congratulatory letter from William Tecumseh Sherman. In her chapter on the Muir Glacier, the redoubtable and well-connected (Mrs. General C. H. T.) Collis quotes extensively from the published accounts of previous visitors to the glacier, naming Kate Field, Charles Hallock, Martin M. Ballou, Mrs. E. R. Scidmore, and Alexander Badlam, as she shows that both women and men contributed to the new genre.

In the present discussion what concerns us more than their literary precursors are Burroughs's and Muir's representations of Alaskan beauty, along with the implications of those representations. To be sure, neither man comes across as so blinded by Alaskan scenery that he notices nothing that would fall under the heading of commodity; between them one finds several references to mines, fisheries, canneries, and lumbering that recall both Sumner and Seward. But their writings show clearly that whatever other interests they have in mind, and more discussion of those interests will

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emergence of American nature writing, see Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1995).

follow shortly, the appreciation and verbal description of natural beauty matter a great deal to them. In the first few pages of his book, when barely out of San Francisco harbor, Muir declares, "the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty," and just past the middle of his, Burroughs describes Sunday, June 25, 1899, as "a day that gave us another feast of beauty and sublimity."<sup>4</sup> In Muir's book, which runs about three times the length of Burroughs's, "beauty," "beautiful," and "beautifully" appear at least ninety times, coming at an average rate of about once every four to five pages. By contrast Burroughs, who is the more self-conscious and fluent literary craftsman, uses these words much more sparingly.

Behind the different rates at which they speak directly of beauty hover a larger difference and a more significant point. Whereas Muir speaks frequently of beauty and more rarely of sublimity ("sublime" and "sublimity" appear only a dozen times in his book), Burroughs prefers the latter at moments of greatest descriptive intensity. In the final paragraph of *Travels in Alaska*, for example, Muir concludes an extended account of staying up all night to watch a magnificent display of the aurora borealis this way:

"Excepting only the vast purple aurora mentioned above, said to have been visible over nearly all the continent, these two

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<sup>4</sup>*Travels in Alaska* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 6, and *The Writings of John Burroughs, XI: Far and Near* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 70.

silver bows in supreme, serene, supernal beauty surpassed everything auroral I ever beheld" (383). By contrast, in his description of the famous White Pass, twenty-one miles by train from Skagway, Burroughs opts for a markedly different tone, complete with self-dramatizing exclamation mark: "The terrible and the sublime were on every hand. It was as appalling to look up as to look down; chaos and death below us, impending avalanches of hanging rocks above us. How elemental and cataclysmal it all looked!" (36-37). In trying to explain the tonal differences here, one could argue that looking up at even a superlative display of northern lights lacks the sense of terror integral to representations of the sublime since Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* theorized them in 1757.

But such an argument not only underestimates the awful, overwhelming magnitude of the northern lights on certain occasions; it also distracts from significant differences between Muir and Burroughs, and between two versions of speaking of Alaska they represent. The latter may tremble in the face of sublime terrors in White Pass, at which after all he, too, is only looking, but in fact it is the former who again and again records actual first-hand experiences of real, often life-threatening danger throughout his travels in Alaska. Only once in nearly four hundred pages does Muir admit to being "terror-stricken," and that admission closes an account of paddling a canoe through a "smooth-walled ice-

lane," when "Just as the bow of the canoe cleared the sheer walls they come together with a growling crunch" (378-79). It would seem that Muir's tendency to speak of beauty rather than sublimity reflects the depth of his working intimacy with the physical challenges and threats posed by close contact with Alaskan land- and waterscapes, whereas Burroughs's quickness to work his descriptions up toward sublimity reflects his distance from and discomfort with that close contact. As Elaine Scarry argues in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), "Beauty brings copies of itself into being," so that the observer can prolong contact with what is beautiful, either by making an image of it or by simply continuing to stare at it.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, sublimity (which Scarry does not discuss), though powerful and transforming, does not invite prolonged contact, as that contact would soon prove debilitating. This difference between beauty and sublimity, intimacy and distance, distinguishes not only the Alaska writings of the two Johns but also many of the ways people have spoken of Alaska after them.

And yet it is not simply a matter of praising Muir for his rugged outdoorsmanship while dismissing Burroughs as an Eastern tenderfoot. Another difference marks them as well, and this one introduces the third of Emerson's four categories, Language. In the "Language" section of *Nature*,

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<sup>5</sup>*On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 3, 5.

Emerson speaks of many suggestively complicated things, but the one that is most relevant here comes with his formulation, "Nature is the symbol of spirit," which means that, according to Emerson, the natural world is the language in which spirit or God or divinity speaks to us. For Muir, speaking of the beauty of Alaska typically leads to speaking about God and divinity, but for Burroughs this is not the case, despite the fact that Burroughs valued Emerson's example above all others. In turn, many subsequent writers and speakers about Alaska follow Muir in this respect, as Muir follows Emerson, who follows, in unsystematic ways, English and German Romanticism, the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, his own Puritan forefathers and -mothers, and the philosophical principles of the Neoplatonists. For many subsequent describers of Alaska, as for Emerson, as for Muir, nature always, or almost always, speaks of spirit.

Consider, for example, a brief sample from one of the great passages of *Travels in Alaska*, in which Muir describes a sunrise over Glacier Bay: "Beneath the frosty shadows of the fiord we stood hushed and awe-stricken, gazing at the holy vision; and had we seen the heavens opened and God made manifest, our attention could not have been more tremendously strained. When the highest peak began to burn, it did not seem to be steeped in sunshine, however glorious, but rather as if it had been thrust into the body of the sun itself. Then the supernal fire slowly descended, with a sharp line of demarcation separating it from the cold, shaded region

beneath; peak after peak, with their spires and ridges and cascading glaciers, caught the heavenly glow, until all the mighty host stood transfigured, hushed, and thoughtful, as if awaiting the coming of the Lord" (186-87). The condition of finding oneself "awe-stricken" would seem sufficient to shift these three sentences into the rhetorical mode of the sublime more characteristic of Burroughs, but in Muir's hands Burkean, Romantic sublimity is itself sublimed into theophany, into a vision of the holy, complete with transfiguring fire, that speaks so powerfully through nature of spirit that all human speech ceases, as Muir's possibly unconscious, unedited repetition of "hushed" quietly testifies.

Although they do not share a tendency to read Alaskan land- and waterscapes as speaking the language of spirit, Burroughs and Muir do share an inclination to meet Alaska on the terms of Emerson's fourth and final category, Discipline. By "discipline," which claims etymological kinship with "disciple" and derives from a Latin verb meaning "to learn," Emerson means among other things that nature is both a teacher and an object of study. Predictably enough in Emerson's case, the ultimate lesson that nature always has to teach us is the lesson of spirit, and he does not recognize, at least in the writing of 1836, a division between the formalized study of nature we call "science" and the lesson of spirit. Encountering Alaska some forty to sixty years after Emerson published *Nature* and on the other side of the Darwinian divide, Burroughs and Muir tend to speak of natural discipline

in a tone characterized by a secular empiricism more familiar to us, but both are clearly more tuned to Alaska as discipline than as commodity.

Admittedly, Burroughs himself is no scientist, as we gather from his description of the more than forty passengers who sailed with him on the 1899 Harriman expedition: "college professors from both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts—botanists, zoölogists, geologists, and other specialists, besides artists, photographers, two physicians, one trained nurse, one doctor of divinity, and at least one dreamer" (21-22). Last but not least, the dreamer is presumably Burroughs himself, but his dreaminess does not prevent him from recognizing and valuing the presence of so many lecture-giving experts, including the one he describes with this mixture of admiration and irony: "In John Muir we had an authority on glaciers, and a thorough one; he looked upon them with the affection and the air of proprietorship with which a shepherd looks upon his flock" (22). For his part Muir frankly and repeatedly acknowledges his commitment to nature, specifically glaciation, as his discipline, as when he includes, for example, the anecdote of Mr. Young, a white missionary, telling Muir's incredulous Indian guides on the Glacier Bay trip of 1879 that Muir "was only seeking knowledge," whereupon Toyatte, "a grand old Stickeen nobleman" (141), replies, "'Muir must be a witch to seek knowledge in such a place as this and in such miserable weather'" (178). Muir does not endorse the exchange, but he does not contradict it either.

In his almost obsessive treatment of Alaska glaciers as a discipline, always describing them, sketching them, measuring them, walking on them, Muir recalls the earlier example of Thoreau, whose rigorously careful, ascetically patient observations of the natural world along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers or around Walden Pond or in the wilderness of Maine set a very high standard for subsequent fieldwork. *Travels in Alaska* is as much about fieldwork, in this case geological, as it is about traveling, despite its unassuming title. At one point, for example, Muir focuses his narrative of his trip to the Big Stickeen Glacier on his own theory of glacial kettle formation (131-32), which his observations on the glacier confirm, and when he does so, there is nothing abstractly transcendental or aesthetically dreamy about that theorizing.

For all his disciplinary rigor, however, Muir also paints the big picture for his readers, escorting them from the particularities of glaciation to the exaltations of witnessing creation: "Standing here, with facts so fresh and telling and held up so vividly before us, every seeing observer, not to say geologist, must readily apprehend the earth-sculpturing, landscape-making action of flowing ice. And here, too, one learns that the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation" (84-85). Not surprisingly, Muir refers to "the plans of God" about half a page before this passage begins, but even the more secular, or perhaps more pagan, Burroughs finds himself painting a

strikingly similar picture in a sequence of three paragraphs about Muir Glacier: "We were in the midst of strange scenes, hard to render in words . . . . We saw the world-shaping forces at work . . . . We were really in one of the workshops and laboratories of the elder gods" (46-47). This last image of gods working in laboratories aptly blends the newly emergent imperatives of scientific discipline with an Emersonian gesture toward the mysteries of divinity.

Of the four figures we have seen so far, Muir comes the closest to uniting Emerson's four categories, Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline, when he speaks of Alaska, with Burroughs coming second. The category about which neither has much to say, compared to Sumner and Seward, is Commodity, but the little they do have to say shows us much, as it signals a shift toward linking the commodities of Alaska with the negative effects of those commodities. Although it would be straining the evidence to say that either Burroughs or Muir speaks about preservation when he speaks of Alaska, it is possible to hear in things they say the stirrings of a preservationist impulse. Here is Burroughs, for example, on a visit to the Treadwell mines, where nearly "two thousand tons of quartz rock are crushed daily at these mills" and where the noise produced in the process is overwhelming: "Niagara is a soft hum beside it. Never before have I been where the air was torn to tatters and the ear so stunned and overwhelmed as in this mill . . . . it was simply the most ear-paralyzing noise ever heard within four walls . . . . the auditory nerve

was simply bruised into insensibility" (34). Talk of decibel levels or noise pollution would be anachronistic here; yet Burroughs is describing one of the physical realities of the mining that Sumner and Seward blithely endorse.

Or consider Burroughs again, this time on one of the physical realities of Alaskan fisheries, as he describes a salmon cannery at Orca: "For some reason the looker-on soon loses his taste for salmon, there is such a world of it. It is as common as chips; it is kicked about under foot; it lies in great sweltering heaps . . . the air is redolent of an odor far different from that of roses or new-mown hay, and very shortly one turns away to the woods or to the unpolluted beach" (78-79). This is the only moment either Burroughs or Muir speaks so baldly about pollution, but smaller moments run in the same vein, as when Muir refers, in the section on his 1890 trip, to the forests around a mill on Douglas Island "being rapidly nibbled away" (334-35), or when Burroughs comments on the footprint left by gold-seekers: "Alaska is full of such adventurers ransacking the land" (70). Presumably these ransackers, who have what Muir describes as "gold-dust in their eyes" (60), are some of the reinforcements promised to the citizens of Sitka by Seward thirty years earlier.

Whether or not Seward would include ransackings by quartz-crushing or salmon-canning or forest-cutting or gold-mining or oil-drilling as inevitable consequences of his great natural law that fortune-seekers tend to come to new and

uncultivated regions for profitable commodities, we cannot know. What we do know is that by the time two more prominent authors speak of Alaska, about eighty years after Burroughs and Muir joined the Harriman expedition, much has happened that on the one hand looks new but on the other continues in the late twentieth century the trends of the late nineteenth. Between the publication of books on Alaska by Burroughs and Muir and the publication of John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* (1977) and Joe McGinnis's *Going to Extremes* (1980), the Alaska Highway appeared during World War II, Alaska became the forty-ninth state in January 1959, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, large oil reserves were discovered near Prudhoe Bay in 1968, the environmental movement began with the first Earth Day in 1970, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act gave forty-four million acres to native Alaskans in 1971, the Arab Oil Embargo threatened the supply of fossil fuels in the United States in 1973 and 1974, and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, completed the same year McPhee's book appeared, became a new feature of the Alaskan landscape.

### 3. *McPhee and McGinnis*

As this brief chronology illustrates, when McPhee and McGinnis speak of Alaska, they do so against the emerging of Alaska's oil economy, which happened to coincide with the emerging of both widespread environmental awareness in the United States and widespread awareness of what it means to

depend so heavily on oil from foreign countries. This volatile combination of factors gives both books their edges and their urgencies, some of which now feel dated (as in remarks about the proposed movement of the state capital from Juneau) and some of which, twenty-five or thirty years later, turn out to be inescapably prophetic. But even if readers knew nothing of these various contexts, the grammatical resemblance of the two book titles signals a shift from the perspectives of Burroughs and Muir. Whereas the latter writers opt for "In Green Alaska" and *Travels in Alaska*, titles that imply the stable containment of their narratives within the space of the Great Land (even though both writers also describe their travels to it), McPhee and McGinnis choose titles that rely on gerunds, those nouns formed from verbs, reflecting the restless movements of outsiders whose observations anchor themselves in perspectives shaped by the Lower Forty-eight. Both books, in other words, cast Alaska as a foreign world, a remote *there*, to and from which one must go and come in order to report on findings to readers back here.

For all the changes since Burroughs and Muir, Emerson's four categories could still introduce us to McPhee's *Coming into the Country*. Much if not most of the book unfolds under the sign of Commodity, with oil-drilling, gold-mining, fur-trapping, hunting, fishing, or farming influencing to some extent nearly every page and fulfilling the visions of Sumner and Seward in often unexpected ways. *Coming into the Country* is among other things a collection of case histories and case

studies, most of which share the realities of basic economic survival, whether by wage-earning or subsistence-living or both. At one point in the third and longest section of his book, McPhee generalizes about one of his main characters, "Like many Alaskans, he came north to repudiate one kind of life and to try another."<sup>6</sup> Fundamental to this repudiation, McPhee's portraits show us, is learning new sets of skills, whether those skills involve planting vegetable gardens during the preciously short growing season or mining for gold with massive bulldozers, managing sled-dogs for which hundreds of pounds of fish must be netted or repairing airplanes that sometimes land ungently on riverine gravel bars.

In the world McPhee represents, where we see an Alaskan making use of the natural world as Commodity, Discipline can never be far away, since that Alaskan must submit him- or herself to rigorous and often severe instruction by that same natural world. In *Coming into the Country*, Discipline does not usually take the form of studying natural features and phenomena for their own sake, as it does in Muir's *Travels in Alaska* in the context of glaciation, although at one moment in the earliest pages of his book, McPhee tell us that the four people with whom he is canoeing the Salmon River (one of nineteen Alaska creeks and rivers with this name) belong to a state-federal team whose job it is to study the river. But

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<sup>6</sup>*Coming into the Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 186.

aside from various references by members of this team to natural "cycles," a word that recurs like a refrain through the first seventy pages of the book and embraces the patterns of plants, animals, rivers, weather, climate, McPhee does not spend much of his narrative space and time on empirical study of the physical world around him. When Alaska teaches somebody something in this book, it does so in the school of Hard Knocks, not in an advanced seminar on botany, biology, zoology, geology, mineralogy, or meteorology.

Most striking are the changes McPhee rings on Emerson's two other categories, Beauty and Language. In *Coming into the Country*, the word "beauty" and its cognate forms make only about twenty appearances, or fewer than one-quarter of the number in Muir's book, which is a good bit shorter, depending on the edition. Not all of the beauty McPhee describes resides in the land either. On a visit to the Eskimo village of Kiana on the Kobuk River, for example, he admires some of the inhabitants: "They stared into my eyes. Their eyes were dark and northern, in beautiful almond faces, aripple with smiles. Amy. Katherine. Rose Ann. Ages nine and eleven. Eskimo girls" (42). Word-lover that he is, McPhee elsewhere finds beauty in another kind of catalogue as well: "The names of Alaska are so beautiful they run like fountains all day in the mind. Mulchatna. Chilikadrotna. Unalaska. Unalakleet. Kivalina. Kiska. Kodiak. Allakaket. The Aniakchak Caldera. Nondalton. Anaktuvuk. Anchorage" (126). True, he does have an eye for what we infer to be the beauty of the land, and

occasionally he does resort to terms that could be associated with beauty, such as "hypnotizing" (with respect to vistas; 29), "lovely" (39), and "stunning" (132). But the conventional descriptive language of beauty is rare in *Coming into the Country*, especially through the first three-quarters of the book.

In the final quarter, however, beauty makes a strong comeback, appearing to overcome and break down McPhee's earlier resistance to it, or to the conventional language of it. One half of his references to beauty appear in the final one hundred pages or so. Here is an especially salient one: "In the view's right-middle ground is Eagle Creek, where he and I once fished for grayling. It is in the United States, and if it is not God's country, God should try to get it, a place so beautiful it beggars description--a clear, fast stream, which on that day was still covered on both sides and almost to the center with two or three feet of white and blue ice" (373). The convention of describing beauty by saying it cannot be described is as old as description itself, and McPhee keeps his wry, detached, skeptical, understated voice from colliding head-on with cliché by calling on God in an irreverent, witty way, one that includes the Almighty among possible participants in the great Alaska land-grab of the 1970s.

God makes even fewer appearances than beauty in *Coming into the Country*. In speaking of Language, Emerson speaks of nature as the symbol of spirit, and Muir often speaks of God

when he speaks of natural beauty, but McPhee rarely speaks of God at all, and when he does he is usually quoting someone else swearing. To say so, though, is not to say that the Emersonian understanding of nature as divine language has no place in *Coming into the Country*, but it belongs to other people; McPhee never claims it as his own. For example, he characterizes Dick Cook, the same person who came north to repudiate one kind of life and to try another, as someone who regards nature "as God" (187), and he quotes Cook on the subject of what he has learned from nature as Discipline: "I've learned more from [someone else's] mistakes than I've learned from my own. I feel at home now, after twelve years-- at home on water, in the woods, in summer, in winter. I feel a part of what is here. The bush is so far beyond what anybody has been taught. The religious power here is beyond all training. There are forces here that a lot of people don't know exist" (267). When Cook states that the religious power of the Alaskan bush lies beyond all training, he sounds as though he means that it cannot be taught. But he could also mean, or one could also hear him meaning, that it lies beyond all the teaching for the teaching to point to, and Emerson would certainly endorse this claim, as he would that of Joe Vogler, a miner who shows McPhee feldspar crystals in granite and declares, "'that is the writing of God'" (318).

Alaska may not speak the language of God to the secular, journalistically detached McPhee, but it definitely speaks another language to him loud and clear. In *Coming into the*

*Country* McPhee implicitly revises Emerson in a powerfully telling way: Nature may speak of spirit to some, but in Alaska it also always speaks of irony. McPhee would hardly be the first twentieth-century writer, or his the first twentieth-century sensibility, to replace belief in God with an acute sense of irony, but of the writers considered here, he is the first to place irony squarely at the center of what Alaska means now. The word "ironic" makes its appearance early, and it recurs regularly, though not frequently, as in this example: "When one adds in the existing parks, government forests, and wildlife refuges and a vast federal petroleum reserve in the north, not much remains, so it is one of the ironies of Alaska that in the midst of this tremendous wilderness people consider themselves fortunate to have (anywhere at all) a fifty-by-a-hundred-foot lot they can call their own" (246). The difficulty of buying land in Alaska, perhaps the most significant consequence of the Prudhoe Bay oil discovery and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, at least in McPhee's eyes, comes up again and again in his book: "The remarkable propinquity of these dwellings is characteristic of nearly all settlements, large and small, in Alaska. In three hundred and seventy-five million acres--a sixth of the whole United States--so little property is available for purchase that conditions are as crowded as they are in Yonkers" (212).

The land situation leads McPhee late in *Coming into the Country* to bestow on Alaska a new epithet: "The Gelvins have

ten acres of land, an extraordinary spread for a family to own up here in ironic Alaska" (300). Ironic Alaska. McPhee's epithet hardly threatens to supplant "North to the future" as the state motto, but it does describe a new way of speaking about Alaska, a way that tries to consider and represent the oddities and incongruities of a state that own less than a third of itself, after the statehood act of 1959 granted Alaska one hundred and three million acres out of the three hundred and seventy-five McPhee mentions above. In the world of ironic Alaska, incongruity crops up again and again, as in this passage: "In Anchorage, if you threw a pebble into a crowd, chances are you would not hit a conservationist, an ecophile, a wilderness preserver. In small ghettos, they are there--living in a situation lined with irony. They are in Alaska--many of them working for the federal government--because Alaska is everything wild it has ever been said to be . . . . Within such vastness, Anchorage is a mere pustule, a dot, a minim-a walled city, wild as Yonkers . . . . Yet the city--where people are--is perforce the home address of wilderness planners, of wildlife biologists, of Brooks Range guides" (133).

One could not ask for a better textbook example of irony, of expecting one thing and getting another, of discordant inconsistency, and *Coming into the Country* brims with instances of discordant inconsistency. But beyond irony lies another formation, one that has sharper, harsher edges and arises not from mere incongruity, which after all often can

produce humor, but from flat-out contradiction, which tends to produce frustration, resentment, and anger. That formation is paradox, and McPhee identifies it at the core of late twentieth-century Alaska: "These [lakes], near Willow, had become a summering world for people from Anchorage--ice out in May and swimming by July--many of whom were now experiencing their own private spasms of the Alaskan paradox, the Dallas scenario versus the Sierra Club syndrome" (177). In the case of this Alaskan paradox, it is not simply a matter of irony, of expecting, say, oil development and getting instead wilderness preservation; it is instead a matter of head-on collision between antithetical interests, one that neither side of the opposition would be tempted to laugh off or chuckle over, as one might with irony.

Much of McPhee's effort in *Coming into the Country* turns out to go toward exploring this paradox. In traveling with the state-federal study team on the Salmon River or flying around with the committee charged with selecting a new site for the state capital or living in the northern bush with people who have carved out lives there, McPhee lets the people he meets have their say, sometimes at great length, about development and preservation. Balanced, fair, careful throughout, he reserves his own say for the end and a letter he writes home: "'Only an easygoing extremist would preserve every bit of the country. And extremists alone would exploit it all. Everyone else has to think the matter through--choose a point of tolerance, however much the point might tend to one

side. For myself, I am closer to the preserving side--that is, the side that would preserve the Gelvins. To be sure, I would preserve plenty of land as well. My own margin of tolerance would not include some faceless corporation "responsible" to a hundred thousand stockholders, making a crater you could see from the moon. Nor would it include visiting exploiters--here in the seventies, gone in the eighties--with some pipe and skyscrapers left behind'" (430-431).

In this passage McPhee skillfully navigates between the Dallas scenario of development and the Sierra Club syndrome of preservation by introducing a third term, the Gelvins, a family of self-reliant people who hunt and trap and fish and fly airplanes everywhere and with large machines rearrange tracts of Alaskan landscape while mining for gold. They also happen to resent "the long struggle carried on by environmentalists telling Alaskans they should not build their oil pipeline" (313). In his own personal version of paradox, McPhee appears to endorse the Gelvins' vision and life, while at the same time deploring the "visiting exploiters," whom the Gelvins do not see as visiting exploiters. The Gelvins themselves are hardly visiting exploiters, as McPhee painstakingly shows in making them sympathetic to his readers, but their point of view does include what McPhee's wish to prevent a crater visible from the moon would seem to exclude. Speaking of the pipeline, Ed Gelvin, the paterfamilias, declares, "'It's a way the state can pay their bills. It

doesn't spoil the appearance of Alaska'" (313). McPhee lets this last statement stand unchallenged, despite its oversimplification of contingencies and consequences, and the glib bravado of his defiant "bust me to a private" in the "ecomilitia" (430) somewhat complicates, and perhaps diminishes, the usefulness of his solution to the Alaskan paradox.

While McPhee attempts to mediate between paradoxical extremes by urging each of us to think the matter through and choose a point of tolerance, Joe McGinnis sets out to blast us with those extremes in intensified color and high-volume surround-sound. McGinnis describes a visit to Alaska from November 1976 through August 1977, and his visit includes a trip to Valdez the day after the first oil arrived there nine years after the Prudhoe Bay discovery. Sometime during 1977, either while he was in Alaska or after he returned, McGinnis must have learned of the publication of McPhee's book that year, and whether or not he read it--and, if he did, whether or not he did so before or during the writing of his own--he involuntarily found himself in the much the same position as Muir writing after Burroughs. The sense of competition with McPhee he would naturally feel, and his publishers would feel for him if somehow he did not, resulted in a book markedly different from the earlier one, despite predictable overlap and similarity. Both McPhee and McGinnis describe trips to the Brooks Range, McPhee at the beginning of his book, McGinnis at the end of his; both McPhee and McGinnis have

close encounters with grizzly bears that inform their respective senses and representations of Alaska wilderness; both McPhee and McGinnis travel through the Brooks Range with John Kaufmann, chief planner of the Gates of the Arctic National Park (who would surely have mentioned to the latter his travels with the former); both have things to say about Anchorage, Talkeetna, and other places their narratives have in common; both organize their books around journalistic portraits of people, including self-reliant, well-established Alaskans they obviously admire.

For all the similarities, though, when McGinnis speaks of Alaska, he tends to focus on the imbalanced, the intemperate, the outlandish, the unearthly, the extravagant, the excessive. Especially in the first half of *Going to Extremes*, titled "Winter," it often feels as though the narrative is under the direction of a writerly Diane Arbus, someone who repeatedly seeks out what is weird and grotesque and gives it to us with the contrast setting on high. McPhee's Alaska is a place where people confront ironies and paradoxes, incongruities and contradictions, with varying degrees of success and failure, humor and anger, wisdom and obtuseness, humility and arrogance. McGinnis's Alaska is a place where, especially but not only in winter, wildness does not confine itself to the land or animals. It erupts in people, in drug use, alcoholism, prostitution, rape, murder, suicide, and corrosive racial tension between native Alaskans and whites. And if we follow out the implications of a statement McGinnis quotes

near the end of his book, when he is traveling in summer in the Brooks Range, these eruptions are not merely sensational anomalies: "'All this is a lie,' Ray Bane said. 'A beautiful lie. Winter is the truth about Alaska.'"<sup>7</sup>

The truth about Alaska. For all the graphic, film-noirish, hard-bitten grittiness in McGinnis's writing, a naive idealism also runs through his book. In its first few pages he sets out with disarming straightforwardness, and in deliberate language that recalls Thoreau's *Walden* chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," his reasons for going to Alaska: "The pipeline, it seemed, was changing the state in ways that would never be undone. Not just physical changes, though they, in places, were severe; but changes in the psychological climate; deep scars cut not just across the tundra, but across Alaska's very soul. . . . The Americanization of Alaska had begun. . . . I decided that I would travel to Alaska . . . [i]n order to experience, and, perhaps, to some degree record, what I suspected might indeed be the last days of the last frontier America would ever have" (10-11). This passage draws the lines of McGinnis's project clearly and sharply: The pipeline means the Americanization of Alaska, and the Americanization of Alaska means the end of the last frontier, and the end of the last frontier must be experienced and recorded, and by me.

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<sup>7</sup>*Going to Extremes* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 255.

Such a project is fundamentally elegiac and will be most attractive to readers attracted to elegy. It is also a little self-important in ways that depend on ignoring the history of Alaska and how people have spoken about it since the acquisition. As we saw from looking at speeches by Sumner and Seward, the Americanization of Alaska began in 1867, not simply with the purchase from Russia, but with the conceptualization of Alaska as both a commodity bonanza for the United States and a piece of its geopolitical strategy. As the title of Stephen Haycox's recent *Alaska: An American Colony* (2002) suggests, Alaska has never graduated into anything like the independent status achieved by one of the original thirteen colonies after the Revolution. Yes, the pipeline has changed Alaska, physically and psychologically, and the seriousness of those changes should not and cannot be dismissed. But the pipeline is also the fulfillment of Sumner's and Seward's original prophecies; it is not simply the spontaneous combustion of sudden late twentieth-century American capitalism and dependence on fossil fuels. To say so is not to speak the truth about Alaska.

In traveling about to witness the end of the last frontier, McGinnis speaks repeatedly about authenticity, reality, and essence, as in this long sentence: "From the perspective of Prudhoe Bay, however, a trip to Barrow was the essence of high adventure: a journey from the twenty-first century to the nineteenth; from illusion to reality; from the antiseptic soullessness of the ARCO and British Petroleum base

camps to an authentic Arctic Eskimo whaling village, which might even turn out to be--who could tell?--the real Alaska that Alaskans did not seem to believe in any more" (58). Alaskans may not seem to believe in the real Alaska any more, but McGinnis certainly does, as he shows at many points, this one among them: "The thought occurred, as I walked, that for all the traveling through Alaska I had done, I had not yet come very near what I had perceived, at the beginning, to be its essence: the direct experience of vastness, isolation, and cold" (127). This sentence, which speaks of essence with no trace of irony or skepticism, anticipates a solo stay in a cabin at Crescent Lake during a blizzard; it also suggests the language of a quest, with McGinnis chasing the essence of the last frontier as Ahab chased the White Whale.

In the course of his quest, McGinnis does not, at least at first, sound much like Emerson, or much like someone speaking in ways Emerson helps us understand. In *Going to Extremes* Commodity seems wholly to have eclipsed Beauty, Language, and Discipline, swelling into something monstrous and fatal to the other three. And McGinnis does not always practice McPhee's brand of balanced, tolerant restraint when it comes to Commodity, as when, for example, in the chapter on Prudhoe Bay he deprecates the occupying army of "bloodless mercenaries," who in twenty years "would have all the oil sucked up and pumped south and their machinery would be taken away, or, if it seemed more economical, left to sit there, forever" (53), a foretelling that the passage of twenty years

has shown to be inaccurate, since more oil remains to be sucked up. But as his book moves along, passing from Winter to Summer and the flip side of his polarized vision, things begin to change.

McGinnis refers to beauty just a little less than McPhee does, with the word itself or its cognate forms making only nineteen appearances, some of them trivial, as in the threat by one person, "I'm gonna drive her [a new Ford truck] right out through your big beautiful plate-glass window and I'll run over any son of a bitch that tires to stop me" (13). But as in *Coming into the Country*, references to beauty accumulate and cluster towards the end of *Going to Extremes*, when McGinnis visits the Brooks Range, subject of the last chapter, in which a quarter of the references appear. Meanwhile, references to God and divinity are also scarce in this book, but they do crop up and at telling moments. Camping on Kahiltna Glacier, where planes land to drop off climbers for the ascent of Mt. McKinley, McGinnis finds himself "gazing at the face of Mount Hunter, just two miles east of the glacier-- a face that glowed like the face of a deity through the blue twilight of the northern summer night" (197). Later in the Brooks Range comes this extraordinary moment, which in its anthropomorphizing out-Emersons Emerson: "Then another image came to mind: the angle at which those mountain walls sloped back from the valley floor seemed the same as that angle at which human figures in certain Renaissance paintings recoiled from the image of the newly risen Christ" (275).

Having remained latent through most of the book, McGinnis's tendencies to associate natural beauty with divinity and religious experience suddenly break out in the culminating moment of the chapter on the Brooks Range, when the party of hikers passes along a corridor through what appears at first to be solid rock: "The rock walls parted and suddenly we found ourselves standing at one end of a broad grassy meadow. A sudden, astonishing, hidden meadow. With the high spires soaring above us on all sides, to form an amphitheater" (279). Weaving his own words around those of a fellow hiker, whom he quotes at length, McGinnis describes this hidden, amphitheatrical meadow, which probably no human has seen before, as a cathedral suffused with holiness. As the description continues, and as the moment is later recollected, it becomes clear that McGinnis has adopted the rhetorical and narrative conventions of revelation or epiphany to represent a moment like one of Wordsworth's spots of time or the one in which Emerson becomes a transparent eyeball in *Nature*. In the final pages of his book, he splices beauty and religion, referring to the moment in the amphitheatrical meadow as both "a beautiful dream" and "a mystical experience" (282).

The great last sentence of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), "I have had my vision," could also serve as the last sentence of McGinnis's *Going to Extremes*. This vision--of what he calls the real Alaska or the essence of Alaska--has been the goal all along, and in the dualistic,

Winter-Summer logic of the book (McGinnis builds his book out of two parts, whereas McPhee opts for three, the structure of dialectic), the wounds inflicted by the pipeline on the land and the soul of Alaska have been redeemed by a mystical vision of beauty. The book has about it, then, the neatness of a romance quest, or even of a not-so-divine comedy, with purgatory elided and the passage from the inferno to paradise a direct one. Such a narrative shape may feel too neat for some, who may suspect not only that the exalted ending comes a little too conveniently at the end of an often depressing, hopeless tour of oil-crazed Alaska, but also that the depressing, hopeless parts of the tour ultimately serve the function, or are meant to serve the function, of defending McGinnis against charges of narrative sentimentality.

His title warns us that extremes are what he traffics in, and if they include the extremes of grisly self-destructiveness, on the one hand, and visionary transcendence, on the other, so be it. But one problem of this narrative extremism for McGinnis's reader is that it can distract from the real journalistic achievement of *Going to Extremes*, which in fact has nothing to do with extremity at all. Instead, it has to do with the balanced presentation of a hearing in Anchorage on what subsequently became H. R. 39, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, the year McGinnis's book appeared. Present at the hearing are both Congressman Morris Udall, of Arizona, and Congressman John Seiberling, of Ohio. McGinnis gives the hearing, about an

initial proposal to preserve one hundred and fourteen million acres as wilderness, national monument, and national park, seven pages, and in those pages he quotes the arguments of those for and against the proposal, arguments that anticipate many of the arguments heard recently in the context of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>8</sup> In moving toward conclusion, I want not to repeat these arguments, whether for development or preservation, but instead to turn briefly to testimony by a supporter of oil-drilling in order to listen more carefully to how she speaks about Alaska.

#### 4. Norton

In the twenty-five years since the publication of *Going to Extremes* and the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, many more books have appeared and many more events have taken place, events which directly or indirectly influence the debate now in progress. Since McPhee and McGinnis, the Alaska memoir has grown and flourished as a genre, with subsequent examples coming from John Haines (1989), Susan Zwinger (1991), Nancy Lord (1999), Ned Rozell (2000), Peter Jenkins (2001), Pam Flowers (2001), and Spike Walker (2002) among others. Meanwhile, the Alaska legislature

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<sup>8</sup>In *Alaska: An American Colony* (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), Stephen Haycox gives Udall's original goal as one hundred twenty-two million acres, not one hundred fourteen (296).

established the Alaska Dividend Fund to distribute Permanent Fund earnings from oil to Alaska residents in 1980; Alaska voters repealed the law relocating the capital in 1982; the drop in oil prices below ten dollars a barrel sent the Alaska economy into a nosedive during 1986 and 1987; the tanker *Exxon Valdez* hit a reef and spilled eleven million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound in 1989; the United States Congress lifted a ban on exportation of Alaska crude oil in 1996; the attacks of September 11 initiated the War on Terror in 2001; the United States invaded Iraq in 2003; and the price of oil passed fifty dollars a barrel in 2005.

Against the background of these events the debate on drilling in section 1002 of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (named for the section of H. R. 39 that allows for the possibility of oil exploration there) has become charged with strong feeling, both in Alaska and in the Lower Forty-eight. Although national polls show most Americans against drilling on the Coastal Plain (different polls give different percentages, but they all agree on this point, although polls in Alaska itself run the other way), the Republican administration has maneuvered to secure approval for that drilling by attaching its initiative to a budget bill. As of May 2005, two votes that would have detached from the budget bill any reference to drilling in the Arctic, one in March and one in April, have gone the administration's way. While the outcome of this debate remains uncertain, we can look to recent statements by the Secretary of the Interior for

examples of how the present generation of politicians, or at least the majority of them now in elected offices or appointed positions, speaks of Alaska almost one hundred forty years after Sumner and Seward.

In her testimony before the House Committee on Resources on the Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act of 2003, which did not pass, Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton opens with a familiar credo: "As you know, the Administration firmly believes that we can develop energy at home while protecting the environmental values we all hold dear."<sup>9</sup> In the language of Emerson, according to this credo Commodity poses no threat to Beauty, and indeed there is no evidence in *Nature* that Emerson thought so either. As Jonathan Cannon and Jonathan Riehl have shown effectively, this credo reflects the "we can have it all" view of environmental policy, which originated with Nixon in 1970 and which provides an attractive alternative to the "tough choices" view.<sup>10</sup> The "we can have it all" view plays well with Americans, as many polls show, with eighty percent of those surveyed affirming a belief like Norton's (228).

After this opening Norton quickly establishes an opposition between rhetoric and facts, rhetoric characterizing

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<sup>9</sup>March 12, 2003.

<<http://www.doi.gov/secretary/speeches/030312anwr.htm>>

<sup>10</sup>"Presidential Greenspeak: How Presidents Talk About the Environment and What it Means," *Stanford Environmental Law Journal* 23, 2 (June 2004): 218-229.

the statements of environmental interests, which, according to her, have used a recent advertisement that "sways with emotionalism, and rarely bothers with all the facts," and facts informing the way she proposes to speak to the House Committee on Resources. In appealing to, and elevating beyond all other authorities, what she calls "facts," Norton enlists Emersonian Discipline in the service of Commodity. In particular, she refers repeatedly to "the recent study by the National Academy of Sciences," and she states that she intends "to uncover the facts . . . as clearly and as graphically as time and the Committee's audio-visual technology permit." In pitting the emotional rhetoric of environmentalists against the disciplinary facts of disciplined scientists, which by implication environmentalists have somehow ignored and muted, Norton neatly preempts the argument that someone, whether inclined towards an environmentalist position or not, could possess the same facts she has and yet read them very differently. And indeed people who have examined the same facts she cites do read those facts very differently, as one can quickly see by consulting, for instance, statements by the Sierra Club. To take just one example, Norton points to an estimate by the United States Geological Survey that the Arctic Coastal Plain contains "10.4 billion barrels of technically recoverable oil," a fact that the Sierra Club reads this way: "This is the amount of oil that could be recovered *without any regard to cost*. This figure does not take into account the actual cost of bringing the oil to

domestic markets. When economic factors are considered, the mean amount of economically recoverable oil drops to just 3.2 billion barrels."<sup>11</sup>

Here we have an instance not of fact versus emotional rhetoric but of one fact versus another fact: 10.4 billion barrels versus 3.2 billion. From their respective facts other facts quickly follow, Norton asserting that 10.4 billion barrels "would supply every drop of petroleum for the entire state of Arkansas for 144 years, Missouri for 71 years or South Dakota for 479 years," while the Sierra Club counters that "if Arctic oil was our nation's only source, it would fuel America's demand for less than 6 months." Bewildered by factual claims and counter-claims, with no means of verifying any of them on our own, those of us who depend on the testimony of others for our information, whether that of a Secretary of the Interior or an environmental organization, soon find ourselves in the position of people at the coroner's inquest early in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865): "Too late to know for certain, whether injuries received before or after death; one excellent surgical opinion said, before; other excellent surgical opinion said, after."

In fact, facts can take us only so far, since these particular facts cannot possibly be verified unless and until all the oil is pumped from the Coastal Plain and the costs of bringing the oil to market become known. Furthermore, despite

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<sup>11</sup><<http://www.sierraclub.org/wildlands/arctic>>

the cliché, whatever else facts may do, they rarely speak for themselves. They must be read by others and spoken for by others, and in that reading and speaking other impulses, including what Norton might well think of as emotional ones, can make themselves felt. Consider, for example, how she represents the Coastal Plain: "Now let's take a look at what the Coastal Plain of Alaska actually looks like most of the year, with a video produced by Arctic Power. This is what I saw when I was there the last day of March 2001, with a 75 degree below zero wind chill. This image of flat, white nothingness is what you would see the majority of the year. In fact there are 56 days of total darkness during the year, and almost nine months of harsh winter." Even if Norton believes that Arctic Power is a disinterested source of information, and even if she thinks that a video of the Coastal Plain in March brings one closer to omniscience than a video shot in July would, the language she uses is not that of fact. In choosing the descriptors "flat, white nothingness" and "harsh," Norton adopts language she would be unlikely to find in a study by the National Academy of Sciences and appeals to the emotional associations of people who would much prefer not to live their daily lives in such a setting.

In this moment Norton turns from Discipline to Beauty, but she does so to deny the latter, in the context of the Coastal Plain, and to remove it from consideration, presumably because she recognizes the power of Beauty to influence human considerations of the natural world. Because on the last day

of March, 2001, people who live comfortably in centrally heated houses in the Lower Forty-eight would be unlikely to see anything but harsh, flat, white nothingness in the Arctic Coastal Plain, the thinking might go, they would also be unlikely to consider that nothingness beautiful and to worry about threats to that beauty. Norton's argumentative inconsistency becomes apparent a little later in her testimony when, arguing that exploration and drilling for oil will not harm the tundra, she shows the House Committee a slide and explains, "This slide shows an exploration drill site developed using the new technology. There is little evidence of seismic trails, ice roads or ice pads--once the snow cover is gone." At this moment, she apparently has forgotten or temporarily discarded her description of the Coastal Plain as a place where the snow cover is hardly ever gone.

The new technology receives much of Norton's attention, for reasons Cannon and Riehl help us understand: "In presidential rhetoric, industrial technology and the market economy do not contradict environmentalism; they are essential to its success" (230). It is the new technology, here extolled not by the President himself but by his representative, that enables us to have it both ways by, in this case, learning from and correcting the destructive mistakes of drilling operations on the North Slope near Prudhoe Bay. As Norton puts it, "New technology allows extraction of oil from larger areas, reducing the number of pads needed to develop an oil field. Because the fields use

more effective drilling and fewer wells, waste, mud, and cuttings are less. Because fuel consumption is lower, there are fewer emissions." True as this testimony may well be, the sequence "fewer," "less," "fewer" is not the same as the sequence "no," "none," "no," and the hedges in both the language of H. R. 39 ("Avoidance, to the extent practicable, of springs, streams and river systems") and in the Secretary's testimony ("Large magnitude spills have generally been avoided on the North Slope") could fall short of reassuring even moderate skeptics. Especially noteworthy in this context is Norton's casual aside to the Committee about laying out the facts "as clearly and graphically as time and the Committee's audio-visual technology permit." Anyone who has had to give a public presentation that depends on audio-visual technology can understand and sympathize with this disclaimer, since some piece of equipment or some connection will all too often fail at an inopportune moment, but this same disclaimer necessarily places anyone whose presentation includes a celebration of "American ingenuity and technology" in an awkward position, whether she realizes it or not.

In thinking carefully about how Norton speaks about Alaska, we can focus as productively on what she leaves out as on what she includes. Although she does make very brief remarks, just before closing, about the link between increased domestic oil production and more jobs for Americans (and the number of jobs is another contested fact), she has nothing else to say about the human consequences of drilling for oil

on the Coastal Plain, aside from a nod to the effect of gasoline prices on "the lives of American families, farmers and workers," prices that many argue will be unaffected by adding a million barrels of oil a day to the supply of a country that uses 19.5 million barrels each day. She does not mention Native Alaskans once in her testimony or acknowledge their divisions over the issue of drilling, with the Inupiat tending to support the administration's position and the Gwich'in tending to oppose it.<sup>12</sup> In avoiding any reference to Native Alaskans, she also avoids any reference to the racial tensions exacerbated by the development of Alaska's oil economy, tensions that are among the "deep scars cut not just across the tundra, but across Alaska's very soul," as McGinnis puts it. The omission is puzzling, since the Bureau of Indian Affairs falls under Norton's jurisdiction. Whatever her reasons for it, she focuses much of her testimony on animals instead of humans, again arraying various facts about polar bear, muskoxen, and caribou populations, and she does so quite wisely, since people likely to worry about the consequences of oil-drilling would be more likely to do so on behalf of animals than on behalf of vast tracts of flat, white nothingness that support those animals, and since animal populations and breeding habits and migration patterns lend themselves easily to quantification and statistics, which in

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<sup>12</sup>Recently, though, evidence suggests that even the Inupiat are split over this issue. See the *Guardian Weekly* 172, 15 (April 1-7, 2005): 7.

turn can be interpreted in various ways without the inconvenience of animals speaking for themselves the way humans can and do.

But Norton's shrewdest omissions have to do with Emersonian Language, with the reading of nature as symbol. As many have pointed out, reading nature as a symbol of divinity often reflects a fundamentally anthropocentric habit of mind, as indeed does reading nature as a symbol of anything. And as many others have pointed out, reading nature as a symbol of divinity in no way guarantees wanting to protect nature, since the tendency to read nature symbolically as divine often coincides with the tendency to read nature as what the divine provides primarily for human use. Emerson's notion of Commodity confirms this tendency. But anthropocentric or not, the tendency to read nature, in this case the Arctic Coastal Plain of Alaska, as an image of something else, something abstract, is now a basic feature of speaking about Alaska and in particular a basic feature of arguing about it. In making her arguments for oil-drilling in the secular setting of Congressional testimony, Norton does not say anything, in the spirit of Genesis 1:26 or Psalm 8:6, about God giving Americans dominion over the oil of the Arctic Coastal Plain, although others have said so before her. She also says nothing about the symbolic value of the Coastal Plain as part of the Last Frontier, since she would find it hard to make that symbolism work in her favor. One can cite facts to argue that caribou will not be hurt by oil-drilling, albeit facts

that can be contested, but one cannot cite facts to argue that oil-drilling will not hurt the symbolic value of untouched wilderness.

And yet even with these omissions, Norton, like the President and administration she represents, shares with Emerson and other philosophical idealists an inclination to read material realities, with all their attendant facts, in larger, abstract terms. Ironically, this inclination links Norton's arguments with many of those in favor of preservation at the 1977 Anchorage hearing on what became H. R. 39. "The arguments in favor of preservation tended to be idealistic and vague," as McGinnis puts it (218), and the same could be said of Norton's final words. In closing her testimony, she gestures beyond Alaskan oil not to God but to something abstract and God-like in its power to comfort and reassure with the promise of saving: "I ask the Committee and the entire Congress to please examine the facts as the National Academy of Sciences did, and discount the rhetoric of partisanship. This decision is too important to the energy security of our country." With recent votes on including Arctic oil-drilling in a budget bill tending to fall along party lines, Norton's appeal to something beyond "the rhetoric of partisanship" suggests an appeal on behalf of one kind of partisan rhetoric over another.

Instead of reading Alaskan oil as pure Commodity, or as Commodity emanating from divine favor, Norton urges her audience to read it as an image or symbol of "energy

security," a vague and fuzzy abstract ideal that subsequent events have tinged with a variety of other associations, among them war, occupation, the emotionally charged phrase "supporting the troops," and the volatile term "patriotism." With various official reports predicting that "peak oil," the point at which global production rises to its highest point before declining permanently, will occur anytime between 2003 and 2037, it is unclear what Norton could mean by "security" in the context of that production.<sup>13</sup> One week after Norton's testimony, the Senate rejected the administration's Arctic oil-drilling proposal on March 19, 2003, the same day the United States and Britain invaded Iraq. Two years later, with the war in Iraq continuing, administration efforts to speak of Alaska and its oil as symbols of security, in the face of widespread insecurity about the complexities and consequences of that war, seem to be proving persuasive. In linking Alaska to international relations, the Bush administration is not doing anything that Charles Sumner did not do in 1867. But in investing Alaska and its primary commodity with so much significance and saving power, power that by any factual measure Alaska cannot possibly possess in the face of dwindling worldwide supply and rising worldwide demand, it is.

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<sup>13</sup>See recent articles in the *Guardian Weekly* 172, 19 (April 29-May 5, 2005): 1, 15-16.

