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Between Nature and Civilization(s): American Wilderness as a Eurocentric Cultural Construct in Tony Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract: The paper argues that the concept of wilderness crucial both for the physical / spiritual landscape of early America and for the present-day environmental concerns plays one of the central roles in Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*. In contrast to the Puritan world picture, wilderness is presented not as an immanent characteristic of America originally intended by God for the chosen people as the legitimate object of their conquest and colonization, but as a cultural construct fashioned by Eurocentric civilization as its necessary Other. The paper focuses on three aspects of wilderness deployed in the text: the natural physical features of the New World colonies as perceived by Native Americans and Europeans; a metaphysical/spiritual opposite to the Edenic condition; and a certain (alleged) state of human mind and soul. While the first one is revealed through European-Native American civilizational encounter, the second manifests itself in the parable of the rise and fall of the Vaark farm as an Edenic locus, and the third finds expression in the character of Florens, each of them being critically treated within the framework of the prevalent Euro-American ideology of possessiveness. The novel also extends the notion of "civilization" beyond its Eurocentric boundaries featuring two non-European civilizations – Native American and African – as suggesting alternative (and much more positive) models of "nature-civilization" relationship.

Key Words: Toni Morrison, wilderness, New Eden, enclosed garden, cultural construct, possessiveness.

In the introduction to a volume of critical essays on Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) its editors Shirley Stave and Justine Tally maintain that the book's "nuanced and intricate" exploration of the issues of race, gender, religion and geography, to name but a few, engages "in an interface with a host of cultural artifacts and foundational myths"[1]. Arguably, the idea of American wilderness as an inalienable part of the "foundational myths" is among the key concepts given an original, multifaceted, and anti-

[1] S. Stave, J. Tally, "Introduction" in S. Stave, J. Tally (eds.), *Tony Morrison's A Mercy: Critical Approaches*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p.1.

-essentialist treatment by the writer. The adjective "wild" (alongside with its contextual synonyms "dark" and "feral"), as well as the nouns "wilderness" and "darkness" figure prominently in the story set in the late 17th century colonies, this abundance being a testimony to their conceptual centrality both for the early American cultural landscape and for their use in the novel as a backdrop for Morrison's parable of the nation's lost opportunities. Therefore, a look at the text through the lens of the wilderness concept, which this article seeks to offer, might contribute to a fuller understanding of the complexity and richness of the novel, especially in the light of the current "wilderness debate" in the US.

In Morrison's novel, the wilderness concept performs a variety of functions, the most important of them, in my opinion, being the following: 1) presenting the natural physical features of the New World colonies as perceived by Native Americans and Europeans; 2) providing a metaphysical/spiritual opposite to the Edenic condition longed for by the first European settlers; and 3) defining a certain state of human mind and soul as seen throughout various historical periods. While the first aspect of the (non) wilderness concept is revealed through European-Native American civilizational encounters, the second manifests itself in the parable of the rise and fall of the Vaark farm as an Edenic locus, and the third finds expression in the character of Florens. Concomitantly, they overlap and complement one another, ensuring the multidimensionality of the concept. Believing that the recognition of wilderness as "a human value construct is essential for looking at [it] in perspective"[2], the rest of the paper will explore textual strategies used for its construction in each of the three hypotheses mentioned above.

Primordial (Non)Wilderness: Eurocentric vs. Native American Perspective

In the context of ongoing globalization and environmental deterioration, the recent decades have seen an upsurge of interest in American wilderness both as a concept and physical localities, with the discussion participants coming from across many disciplines and often questioning its standard legal definition in the 1964 Wilderness Act as ("in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape"), "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain"[3]. In 1998,

[2] J. F. Organ, J. E. Dizard, "Wilderness in the 21st Century: Problem or Opportunity?", 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277720477_Wilderness_in_the_21st_century_Problem_or_opportunity

[3] *THE WILDERNESS ACT* Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1131-1136) 88th Congress, Second Session September 3, 1964 (as amended) https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf

the extensive anthology *The Great New Wilderness Debate* edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson summarized much of what has ever been written on the subject by both defenders and opponents of "the received wilderness idea" ("the notion of wilderness that we have inherited from our forebears" that had recently become "a subject of intense attack and impassioned defense"[4]). Changed visions of the wilderness as an American idea and symbol determined different approaches to the wilderness preservation doctrine in terms of its goals and procedures. The huge response to the volume over the decade following its publication showed that its topic remained "emotionally highly charged, contested, and controversial"[5] – a fact that motivated its editors to put out a follow-up, an anthology entitled *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (2008). Since Morrison's novel lends itself to reading, among many other interpretations, as a voice in this debate, it is worthwhile to look at the process through which the "received wilderness idea" took shape and became embedded in American consciousness.

Much of the story is related in Roderick Nash's (by now classic) study *Wilderness and the American Mind* (first published in 1967, 5th edition 2014). The author positions wilderness as "the basic ingredient of American culture" that had endowed the new civilization with "identity and meaning"[6]. His narrative of the remarkable transformation of the long-lasting negative perception of wilderness in the American mind into its more recent appreciation proceeds from viewing it as a basic opposition to "paradise as an environment perfectly suited to human desires"[7] in the Puritan world picture.

It is true that at the beginning American "wilderness" under the milder guise of "virginity" had the potential to be incorporated into the paradise discourse. The "discovery" of America seemed to ease or even resolve the established European "nature-culture" dichotomy. As Leo Marx put it, "And now here was a virgin continent! Inevitably, the European mind was dazzled by the prospect. With an unspoiled hemisphere in view, it seemed that mankind might actually realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy"[8] However, too soon, the idyllic chronotope transmogrified in the American context into the persistent motif of nature-civilization clash, where the

[4] J. B. Callicott, M. P. Nelson. "Introduction" in Callicott, Nelson (eds) *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, The University of Georgia Press, 1998, p. 2.

[5] M. P. Nelson, J. B. Callicott, "Introduction: The Growth of Wilderness Seeds" in Nelson, Callicott (eds) *The Wilderness Debate Rages On,* The University of Georgia Press, 2008, p. 1.

[6] R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind,* Yale University Press, 1967/2014, pp. XIX-XX.

[7] Ibid., p. XXI.

[8] L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden,* Oxford University Press, 1964/2000, p.3.

too real and frightening wilderness "had no place in the paradise myth"[9]. The tough struggle for survival on the continent far from hospitable to the newcomers complemented the underlying Puritan topos of America as the "New Eden" with the idea that the wilderness must be curbed so that it can be habitable for Europeans. Consequently, "civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good"[10], that is, waging a war against the wilderness.

It was not until the mid-19th century that the American wilderness was vindicated and "recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem"[11]. The Romantic infatuation with wilderness (as opposed to mere "nature") as a "medium through which God spoke most clearly" provided America, which could still boast of possessing at least some of it, with "a distinct moral advantage over Europe, where centuries of civilization had deposited a layer of artificiality over His work,"[12] and led to the establishment of the national cult of wilderness by the early 20th century. The ideals associated with the impact of wilderness and the frontier on shaping American identity reflect the romantic "belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living" turning wilderness into "a place not just of religious redemption, but of national renewal"[13].

The wilderness preservation initiative originated as individual voices belonging to the East Coast literati, but soon evolved into a massive academic and public movement with its victories and setbacks, with its prophets, ideologues and warriors, such as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Robert Marshall, Sigurd Olson, Howard Zahniser, and others, culminating in the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964. According to Nelson and Callicott, "as a result, in the American mind wilderness was portrayed [...] as a place of big, dramatic, awe-inspiring monumental scenery – a place that gave Americans a unique national identity"[14]. It is on behalf of this mythologem lying at the metaphysical core of the "received wilderness idea" that many scholars and publicists remain its advocates claiming that protecting wilderness protects the nation's myth of origin[15].

A similar argument, called by philosopher Marvin Henberg "the character thesis", found an eloquent spokesperson in the early 1960s in the writer Wallace Stegner who argued that to let the remaining American wilderness be destroyed would mean a loss to Americans as people: "We need wilder-

[9] R. Nash, op. cit., p. 9.
[10] Ibid., p. 24.
[11] Ibid., p. 67.
[12] Ibid., p. 69.
[13] W. Cronon, "The trouble with wilderness" in W. Cronon (ed) *Uncommon Ground*, W. Norton & Co., 1995, p. 76.
[14] M. P. Nelson, J. B. Callicott, op. cit., p. 6.
[15] W. Cronon, op. cit, p. 77.

ness preserved – as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds – because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed"[16]. Obviously, it is much the same reasoning that Frederick D. Turner used in eulogizing the American frontier as one of the principal shapers of American character, and both are currently being dismantled in the light of the nation's belatedly recognized ethnic diversity and emerging environmental and post-humanist ethics. Therefore, Henberg answers his own question "Exactly whose character was formed by the 'challenge of wilderness'?" by pointing to the ethnic exclusivity of this thesis and demonstrating that for Native Americans, African Americans, and other diverse American populations "wilderness land as conceived in the mainstream preservation movement played little role in shaping character"[17]. Hence, he exposes the "character thesis" as a myth in a negative sense – "as in a false and possibly misleading tale"[18].

At the same time, given the deep embedded need of myths and symbols for any nation, as any anthropologist would tell us, Henberg is convinced that "wilderness is among the symbols we need most"[19], but for a different reason. His final conclusion – "Wilderness, then, is less about the mythic American character than about characters who live their natural lives apart from us"[20] – is very much in line with the stand taken by the "new wilderness debate" initiators and their followers who promote shifting the focus in wilderness discourse from anthropocentric to non-human.

The current critique of the "classic" approach to the preservation of physical wilderness has as its target, in particular, the disregard for the Indigenous peoples' age-long existence in the natural environment without affecting it to a perilous extent, as well as valuing wilderness predominantly from the human use perspective, albeit non-consumptive, i.e. "human recreation, aesthetic gratification, spiritual communion, character building, scientific study and so on"[21]. In the epilogue to his famous book's fifth edition, Roderick Nash calls on Homo Sapiens as a species to "stand down, back off, consider sharing" and proclaims: "Wilderness is important for its own sake"[22]. Consequently, two main alternatives put forward by the critics of the received wilderness idea are, first, deanthropocentrizing it by turning "wilderness" into biodiversity reserves as "refugia for non-human forms of life", and, second, replacing it with the concept of wildness,

[16] W. Stegner, "The Wilderness Idea" in D. Brower (ed) *Wilderness: America' Living Heritage*, Sierra Club Books, 1961, p. 97.

[17] M. Henberg, "Wilderness, Myth, and American Character". *The Key Reporter* 59 (3) Spring, 1994, p. 44.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 45.

[20] Ibid., p. 51.

[21] J. B. Callicott, M. P. Nelson, op. cit., p. 13.

[22] R. Nash, op. cit., p. 385.

free nature, sustainability, and reinhabitation[23] by supporting traditional peoples to continue living symbiotically with their non-human neighbors in free nature. From an indigenous perspective, the "shift in the framing of wilderness from a strict absence of human influence to one focused on the lack of industrial impacts, provides a more inclusive framing for considering the long-term interactions between Indigenous peoples and their environments"[24].

It is the latter thesis that comes into sharp relief in Morrison's novel. Scholars believe that "the wilderness idea was directly challenged by Native Americans, who were its first victims"[25] and who, historically, had not drawn the demarcation lines because they had never shared the Puritan dichotomy of humans and nature. As Chief Luther Standing Bear, a Lacota writer and activist, explained, "we did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild'. Only for the white man was nature 'a wilderness'..."[26]. Pre- and non-European attitudes are expressed in the novel within the framework of Native American nature discourse conveyed through the character of Lina as its focus and spokesperson. First and foremost, the emphasis is placed on Native Americans' self-perception as a part of nature and their understanding of individual lives as links in the universal chain of life. Although Lina's tribal belonging remains obscure, Morrison makes her live out Standing Bear's pronouncements about Lacota feeling still "a part of the earth", as "in the beginning" – perhaps as a reminder of the universality of similar ontological premises shared by most Indigenous peoples. The way to be in the world, for Lina, is to become "one more thing that moved in the natural world. She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain"[27]. This characteristic resonates with Standing Bear's insistence upon his people's "kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water" as a real and active principle that results in "the common tongue" spoken by humans and other life forms[28]. Disapproving of the new house construction on the Vaark property, Lina blames her master for senseless "murdering" of over fifty trees, the anthropomorphic personification of flora correlating with Native American belief in the sacral and fundamental unity of the whole Universe, with which a human as its integral part must not interfere.

Another relevant recurrent motif in the novel is the rape of nature by white intruders and their repudiation of the (natural) life practices

[23] J. B. Callicott, M. P. Nelson, op. cit., p. 12.

[24] A. Fernández-Llamazares et al., "Reframing the Wilderness Concept...", *Science and Society*, Vol. 35, Issue 9, 2020, p. 753.

[25] J. P. Callicott, M. B. Nelson, op. cit., p. 5.

[26] L. Standing Bear, "Indian Wisdom" in Callicott, Nelson (eds) *The Great New Wilderness Debate,* The University of Georgia Press, 1933/1998, p. 201.

[27] T. Morrison, *A Mercy*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, pp. 48-49.

[28] L. Standing Bear, op. cit., p. 202.

of native people as "sinful". (As Standing Bear observed, "For one man [Native American] the world was full of beauty; for the other [a white man] it was a place of sin and ugliness to be endured…"[29]). This storyline reaches its climax, first, in Lina's rendering of the Sahem prophecy about Europeans based on a pun – they are cut loose from the soul of the Earth and are interested solely in its soil as a commodity, which makes them insatiable, like all orphans. "It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary people"[30], is the prophet's visionary judgment.

The next climactic moment in the development of this theme is Lina's favorite "colonial myth-narrative" about a She-Eagle, eventually interiorized by Florens and capitalizing upon the same theme – Europeans as destroyers of natural beauty ("turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow"[31]) due to their drive for possession. In Standing Bear's diction, the great distinction between Native Americans and Europeans lay in the fact that "Indian faith sought the harmony of man with his surroundings; the other sought the dominance of the surroundings"[32]. In accordance with the novel's passionate condemnation of the lust for possession as America's nemesis, "the dominance" here takes the form of appropriation – "this is mine" is the white traveler's only response to the perfection of what he sees around. Mother-Eagle's attempt at attacking him is met with a stick blow that sends her falling, "and she is falling forever". When Florens the narratee asks about her abandoned eggs "Do they live?", Lina replies "We have". In his subtle narratological /ecocritical analysis of *A Mercy,* James B. Petersen discusses the shifts of focal perspectives in this fragment, remarking that in the end "Morrison fuses the focalizations of Lina's narrative with that of the abandoned eggs"[33]. In the context of this article, the fusion might serve as still further evidence of Lina's identification with the rest of American nature; thus, it supports Petersen's conclusion about her offering "a cultural perspective that runs counter to the European assumptions of territorial domination"[34], especially taking into consideration the absence of a land-ownership concept in Native American social philosophy.

The environmental, gendered and anticolonial thrust of this textual plane makes it consonant with ecofeminist pronouncements. The novel draws recurrent parallels between the plights suffered by Native American Lina as one of its female protagonists and American virgin nature, promp-

[29] Ibid., p. 205.

[30] T. Morrison, op. cit. p. 54.

[31] Ibid., p. 63.

[32] L. Standing Bear, op. cit., p. 205.

[33] J.B. Peterson, "Eco-Critical Focal Points…" in S. Stave, J. Tally (eds.) *Tony Morrison's A Mercy: Critical Approaches*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, p. 17.

[34] Ibid.

ting its reading within the ecofeminist theoretical frame. In response to the sharp criticism levelled against ecofeminism in the early 21st century for its alleged "essentialism", its defenders argue that, first, the critics tended to disregard "ecofeminism's diversity of arguments and standpoints"[35], and, second, "somehow lost sight of the structuralist insight of ecofeminism that yoked together world patterns of environmental degradation with women's oppression"[36]. Relying upon Carolyn Merchant's taxonomy of ecofeminisms, Morrison's version of it in *A Mercy* is closer to social ecofeminism grounding its analysis in capitalist patriarchy and asking "how patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal the domination of women by men and how capitalist relations of production reveal the domination of nature by men"[37]. Moreover, in Val Plumwood's words, ecofeminism has not solely contributed a great deal "to theorizing links between women's oppression and the domination of nature" in capitalist patriarchal societies, but also has, as in Morrison's book, "engaged with all four forms of exploitation encompassed in race, class, gender and nature"[38].

Therefore, as far as the physical aspect of American wilderness is concerned, Morrison's voice in the 21st century "great new wilderness" debate resonates in unison with the opinion that "the continuing use of wilderness as a conservation framing has been seen as reifying the long-standing nature-culture dualism, and conflicting with indigenous understandings of nature as an interconnected web of life, linking humans and non-humans in complex relationships"[39].

Recasting the Traditional "America as New Eden" Motif

On the one hand, "wilderness" in its direct vocabulary meaning as "wild place", "virgin land", "desert" was a perfect fit for the physical reality the Puritan settlers were confronted with in the New World. On the other hand, for them it retained the status of the Biblical "type" allowing for a number of religious interpretations, both positive and negative. From the very outset of North America's European colonization, the notion of the "new" continent's "virginity" has been one of the crucial constituents of American national

[35] G. Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited". *Feminist Formations*, 2011, Vol.23 (summer), p. 26. https://www.academia.edu/2606383/Ecofeminism_Revisited

[36] Ch. Thompson, "Back to Nature?". *Isis,* 97(3), 2006, p. 511.

[37] C. Merchant, "Perspectives on Ecofeminism", *Environmental Action*, Summer, 1992, p. 18.

[38] V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,* Routledge, 1993, p.1. For ecofeminist readings of the novel see, for example, Zhao Bao Rong's (2011) dissertation "An Eco-feminist interpretation of *A Mercy* by Tony Morrison" at https://www.dissertationtopic.net; Dr.Sh.Maseeh (2017), "Ecofeminism in Tony Morrison's *A Mercy*", *Global Journal for Research Analysis*, vol.6, # 5. May, pp. 443-444.

[39] A. Fernández-Llamazares et al., op. cit,. p. 750.

mythology. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, it was associated for Puritans with the idea of the millennium, while non-Puritan early European settlers personified the New World "simultaneously as a nourishing mother and an undefiled virgin [...] providing material plenty, perennial good health, and moral purity against a backdrop of Edenic lushness"[40]. Like Jacob Vaark, one of the characters of the novel, many an early European settler felt the intoxicating effect of "breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation"[41].

No wonder that one of the original topoi in early American iconography and rhetoric was borrowed from the Old Testament to represent the New World as a "peaceable kingdom" where "[t]he wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together..." [42]. The idyll was a part of the Puritan settlers' teleological mental make-up according to which their God-entrusted mission was to build the new "city on the hill" on the virgin land unsullied by sin to become the beacon for the rest of mankind. Due to the reasons discussed above, however, in Puritan mentality the image of wilderness eventually morphed from an asylum or shelter to a desert subject to sacral transfiguration into a garden as a result of fulfilling the prophetic Errand into the Wilderness. It is significant that the word semantics was also extrapolated from physical to human nature, designating racial, ethnic, religious, and sometimes gender Others as "wild".

This process is well captured in Samuel Danforth's famed jeremiad-style sermon *Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness* (1670) built around Jesus' question "What went ye out in the wilderness to see?". In the course of his reasoning, Danforth deftly imposes the New Testament spiritual "wilderness" upon the settlers' actual physical and social environment. First, he uses it as a neutral spatial characteristic ("a woody, retired, and solitary place"), but later offers its emotionally charged reinterpretation as "this waste and howling Wilderness"[43], where it acquires properties of a living being, human or animalistic. This phrase was borrowed from another early American minister and poet, Michael Wigglesworth, in whose poem it serves to describe not only the land proper, but its inhabitants, too:

> A waste and howling wilderness
> Where none inhabited
> But hellish fiends, and brutish men
> That devils worshiped.

[40] S. Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1975, p. 137.

[41] T. Morrison, op. cit, p. 12.

[42] Isaiah 11:6.

[43] S. Danforth, *A Brief Recognition of New-Englands Errand into the Wilderness*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. An Online Electronic Text Edition, 1670, p. 1: p. 11.

> This region was in darkness plac't
> Far off from heavens light,
> Amidst the shaddows of grim death
> And of eternal night. [44]

As a parable, *A Mercy* lends itself to an interpretation as a story of the rise and collapse of an American Utopia or of the expulsion from Eden. Morrison offers her version of the archetypal story showcasing the originally existing but, alas, irretrievably forfeited probability of building America as a "peaceable kingdom". The novel constructs a micro-model of human/nature, racial, class, and religious harmony with the help of Edenic imagery as a myth of origin that might have had chances of being implemented throughout the New World but failed to do so. This utopia--turned-dystopia is distinctly localized within the boundaries of Jacob Vaark's farm. Since virgin and lush nature constitutes an inalienable component of the Edenic myth, in depicting the farm the writer relies upon verbal clichés abundant in one of the early genres of American writings, that is, promotion literature, intended to encourage European immigration to the New World. Thus, she uses such phrases as "sweet air", "fresh water", "plentiful wood for warmth"[45] that reiterate the typical wording of a promotion text, for instance "The Country is not only plentifull but pleasant and profitable, pleasant in regard of the brightnesse of the weather, the many delightfull rivers, on which the inhabitants are settled [...], the abundance of game"[46].

In this context Vaark's farm functions as a material embodiment of the "enclosed garden" metaphor also borrowed from the Scriptures and used in profusion in early American texts. The "enclosed garden" denoted both a patch of wild land cultivated by Puritan colonists, and their spirit "locked" against the world and its sin, and it symbolized the fruition of the chosen people's efforts to translate God's design into life. In his mid-20th century book, Henry Nash Smith, an early herald of American Studies in the making, extended this originally Puritan New England concept to American interior lands claiming that "(t)he master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth"[47] to become one of the central American mythologems. Present-day environmentalists, however, reject the enclosed garden model as a viable option for nature conservation due to the inevitable human interventions.

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[44] M. Wigglesworth, *God's Controversy with New-England,* 1662/1871., p. 1. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=etas

[45] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 82.

[46] J. Hammond, *Leah and Rachel, or the Two Fruitful Sisters Virginia and Maryland,* Virtual Jamestown, 1656, http://www.virtualjamestown.org/exist/cocoon/jamestown/fha/J1026

[47] H.N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth,* Harvard University Press, 1950, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/HNS/chap11.html

In Morrison's paraphrase, the primeval American "Eden/enclosed garden" is kept alive and thriving by a commonwealth of women differing in skin color, beliefs, and social status that is established in the course of domesticating a generous, but challenging land "that wants all of you"[48]. The initial animosity between Rebecca Vaark and Lina, being "utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb"[49] (an expressly feminine metaphor is noteworthy here), and the women became friends, later accepting the previously disparaged Sorrow and Florens into their small community. The text hints at the (unfulfilled) promise of a similar development on a broader national scale, but like any provisional equilibrium, the feminist utopia is fragile and cannot hold its own against the harsh reality symbolized in the farm's physical decay into wilderness. "The story of the Garden and its loss", Roderick Nash reminds us, "embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites"[50]. As Elaine Showalter observed in her seminal essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), "Many forms of American radical feminism … romantically assert that women are closer to nature, to the environment, to a matriarchal principle at once biological and ecological"[51]. The critic thinks of these (ecofeminist) assumptions as "mythology" that found its expression in many feminist utopias authored by English and American women writers. Allowing that "these fantasies of an idyllic enclave represent a phenomenon which feminist criticism must recognize in the history of women's writing", Showalter warns that "there can be no writing or criticism totally outside of the dominant structure"[52], and Morrison's novel demonstrates this in the logic of the text.

A creative male contribution to the arrangement of the Utopian farm locus is made by the work of the African blacksmith – "the glory of shaping metal". His craft/art is indicative of the traditional Afrocentric syncretic vision of the world where nature (floral imagery) fuses with culture (masterful ironwork), and the spiritual is inalienable from its physical medium. The gate he made combines animalistic and vegetative images in perfect balance, their forms morphing into each other. Thanks to his prowess with metal, thick vines become scaled serpents, "but ending not in fangs, but flowers. When the gate was opened, each one separated its petals from the other. When closed, the blossoms merged"[53]. It would seem that human beings need to take just one step to become part of this universal harmony, this "peaceable kingdom" of life, but other, much more destructive impulses are

[48] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 53.

[49] Ibid.

[50] R. Nash, op. cit., p. 15.

[51] E. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", *Critical Inquiry*, 1981, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 202.

[52] Ibid.

[53] T. Morrisom, op. cit., p. 150.

at work driving future Americans away from this opportunity. The image of a half-ruined gate featured on the cover of the collection of critical essays on the novel bears grim testimony to this[54].

Unlike Leo Marx's popular theory, the crash of the utopia, according to Morrison, is caused not so much by technocentric civilization built in the New World, but rather by its ugly bias towards material acquisition. Marx analyzed the machine (standing for technology and industrialization) in American literature as "invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity"[55]. In Morrison's text, though, it is not technology that invades (and ultimately ruins) the "enclosed space", that is, the farm's pastoral and idyllic spatio--temporal continuum – it would have been far too early for that in terms of historical accuracy. It is rather conspicuous consumption symbolized not by Marx's "machine in the garden" but by "a mansion in the garden" – a new house Jacob Vaark had set his heart on due to his fascination with vulgar luxury cultivated by the "papist" D'Ortegas whom he otherwise despises. Unlike most whites, the Vaarks at first seemed to Lina "mindful of a distinction between earth and property"[56], but Jacob, too, succumbs to the temptation of ownership. Interestingly, Marx's remark about the machine as "invariably associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape"[57] is also relevant in the novel's context in terms of opposing (male) yielding to civilization's rude physical allurements to (female) spiritual (though by no means submissive) unity with nature.

It is my belief that this motif in Morrison echoes the great American dramatist Eugene O'Neill's preoccupation with all-devouring materialism as the main cause of what he saw as the United States' failure as a country that had been originally given so much. In a 1946 interview, the playwright criticizes it for "trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it, too", and then refers to the Biblical pronouncement: "We are the greatest example of 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'"[58]. It was to become the subject of a dramatic cycle he planned to write entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, of which only a couple of plays had been written. Remarkably, one of them was *More Stately Mansions*, completed and produced after O'Neill's death in 1953, making use, as Morrison's novel does, of the "mansion" as a symbol of rampant materialism.

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[54] See S. Stave, J. Tally (eds.) *Tony Morrison's A Mercy: Critical Approaches,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

[55] L. Marx, op. cit., p. 29.

[56] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 54.

[57] L. Marx, op. cit., p. 29.

[58] Qtd. in B. Clark, *Eugene O'Neill. The Man and His Plays*, Dover Publications, 1947, pp. 152-53.

Shown through the prism of the author's proleptic knowledge of what would happen to America over the next centuries, the traditional Edenic locus loses its original innocence, acquiring features of tragic irony, the novel's principal narrative slant. The transience of civilization's short-lived peaceful coexistence with the wilderness epitomized by the decline of the Vaarks' farm signals that the ephemeral social harmony was bound to give way to vicious racial prejudice, religious zeal, and class inequality providing, as the book's blurb says, "the fertile soil in which slavery and race hatred were planted and took root". Carrying on the floristic metaphor, it can be argued that the writer recorded the transformation of the original "Garden of Eden" into a field of mutual mistrust and bloody collisions among its inhabitants. Following in the steps of Alexis de Tocqueville and a host of more recent critics of American democracy, Morrison sees the root of the nation's degradation in the "taste for physical gratifications" growing in people "more rapidly than their education and their experience of free institutions" that might lead to their losing all self-restraint "at the sight of the new possessions they are about to lay hold upon"[59].

A Wild Woman Within: Florens Turns Feral

In line with Puritan ontology, the conceptual field "wilderness/wildness/darkness" in *A Mercy* encompasses not only America's 17th century physical landscape, but human beings as well. This is especially true of Florens, the first-generation African American teenage girl, who by the end of the story is repeatedly referred to as "wild" both by herself and other characters. In portraying Florens, however, Morrison goes far beyond the standard definitions of "wilderness" espoused by the first European settlers. She craftily plays upon the concept's polygenic mythology combining elements of early modern lore with the 20th - 21st century scholarship.

The early modern period inherited from the Middle Ages the image of the wild man/woman based on the mixture of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions where his/her "differentness" was perceived, in the former, as physical and cultural, and in the latter – as moral and metaphysical[60]. As a result, this figure becomes "the incarnation of "desire" on the one side and of "anxiety" on the other". Hayden White traces the process of eventual interiorization of this image in the Western psyche that led to the conviction underlying many psychological and psychoanalytical theories of

[59] A.de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Book II. Chapter XIV, 1840. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/de-tocqueville/democracy-america/ch30.htm

[60] H. White, "The Forms of Wilderness" in E. Dudley, M.E. Novak (eds) *The Wild Man Within*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972, p. 10.

the past two centuries – that "the wild man is lurking within every man, is clamoring for release within us all"[61]. External or internal, he performs the same age-old functions as "a projection of repressed desires and anxieties".

In Morrison's novel, at the beginning of Chapter 7 (the middle of the story), Florens seems to increasingly fit the description of the archetypal wild person: "the wandering life... linguistic confusion..., and physical aberration in...color (blackness)"[62]. In a cause-and effect sequence, she first thinks of herself as "wild" (or "dark") as a result of her encounter with witch-hunters that makes her painfully aware of the insurmountable abyss of her "difference". Hardly any of the ignorant farmers have ever seen an African before, and Florens' dark skin is immediately associated in their dim minds with a Black Man, that is, the devil, whose minion the girl is presumed to be. She is subjected to a humiliating examination aimed at detecting on her body evidence of their kinship – a tail or an extra tit. Florens is not so much scared by the imminent danger, as shocked by the lack of expression in the faces of the farmer women: in their eyes there was "no hate, or scare, or disgust, but they are looking at me, my body across distances without recognition"[63]. It is the Black girl's first confrontation with her own "invisibility" for Whites (a common trope for African Americans' status in US culture owing much of its appeal to Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man,* 1952), which amounts to questioning her humanity. Psychologically, the farmers' response finds its explanation in the fact that people uncertain "as to the precise quality of their sensed humanity" tend to appeal to "the concept of wildness to designate an area of subhumanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not"[64], in this case, Florens' dark skin.

As pointed out by scholars, denial of recognition can seriously injure a person's sense of self. Charles Taylor, for one, accentuates the importance of recognition/its absence for identity formation, concluding that "nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being"[65]. This is exactly what happens to Florens: she feels like "a thing apart", "a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well" ("The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home")[66]. Associating her innermost self with darkness, she interiorizes her assaulters' anxieties extrapolating them to her own humanity. According to her mythopoetic world perception, Florens thinks of this interior "darkness" in

[61] Ibid., p. 7.

[62] Ibid., p. 16.

[63] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 113.

[64] H. White, op. cit., p. 5.

[65] Ch. Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism. A Critical Reader,* Oxford (UK) & Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1994, p. 75.

[66] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 115.

zoomorphic terms, as something "small, feathered, and toothy" breaking loose when she is hurt or furious, as an embodiment of her "wilderness". This image correlates with the (Western Catholic) proposition of St. Thomas Aquinas about animal and human souls: the first, unlike the second, driven by pure desire undisciplined by reason[67]. At the same time, Florens' "going wild" agrees with the medieval belief that "God had not created the wild man in his present lowly estate", but "wildness in human beings was due to degeneration caused by extraneous circumstances"[68]. The writer, therefore, debunks the notion of Florens' putative "wilderness" as an inherent attribute of her Blackness and depicts its genesis under the bland and unrecognizing White gaze.

The threatening aspect of the "wilderness" thrust upon Florens is revealed in the subplot focusing on Florens' love for a skilled blacksmith of African descent. It seems to corroborate the myth of "the most persistent as well as the most revealing of the traits common to the various species of wild women" being their erotic "craving for the love of mortal men" which they are intent on obtaining at any cost[69]. In this context Morrison ironically transposes the rational discourse of European Renaissance and, later, Enlightenment in an Afrocentric mode making a free African-born individual its mouthpiece. When the girl declares that he alone owns her, he accuses her of being a slave and retorts: "Own yourself, woman… You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind"[70]. As we see, his response repeats Aquinas's pronouncement about the animal soul almost word for word, and, indeed, it provokes Florens to a flash of wilderness not controlled by reason. "Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand"[71]. However, from a feminist perspective, speaking of the above mentioned "desires and anxieties", a woman "may simply be the projection of the unconscious" for a male, and "in this sense, 'the wild' is always imaginary"[72], possibility adding another facet to Morrison's multiple literary optics.

Shortly after this outburst, another character comments on Florens "turning feral". As the dictionary tells us, "feral" does not mean only "existing in the natural state, uncultivated or wild", but also "having reverted to the wild state, as from domestication". On the basic level of imagery, this reversal is illustrated by the footwear metaphor running through the text as a "bare--foot/shod-foot" opposition. Florens' love for shoes and her abhorrence of walking barefoot is the first thing she chooses to share about herself in the

[67] St.Th. Aquinas, "Treatise on Man" in *Summa Theologica*. https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FP/FP075.html#FPQ75OUTP1

[68] R. Bernheimer, *Wild Man in the Middle Ages*, Harvard University Press, 1952, p. 8.

[69] Ibid., p. 34.

[70] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 141.

[71] Ibid.

[72] E. Showalter, op. cit., p. 201.

initial lines of her first-person narrative: "The beginning begins with the shoes"[73]. A small daughter of a slave woman on a Portuguese plantation, she is allowed to wear Señora's thrown-away shoes against her mother's will – the latter believing that it is only bad women who wear high heels. As the plot progresses, the shoe detail grows in its instrumentality as marking subsequent stages in Florens' transition from her desire to parrot white civilization to a more and more natural (feral) condition – pointy-toe elegant shoes with a buckle on top (albeit one of them with a broken heel), that is, a luxury item in consumer society, give way to simpler wooden shoes the girl loses on the ship; she gets to the Vaark farm as an ill-shod child, and there Lina makes her rabbit skin shoes which signify her moving closer to the world of nature. Florens' inability "to abide being barefoot" is equated to her assumed inability to adapt to life in the New World: "As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. Lina is correct. Florens, she says, it's 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady?"[74] Sending the girl to look for the blacksmith, the women on the farm make her put on the dead master's boots that are way too big for her (suggesting the reversal of gender roles), but she loses them, too. In the end, Florens addresses her long-lost mother: "Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress"[75]. The trajectory of the footwear metaphor seems indicative both of the character's adjustment to her New World environment, and the wilderness' victory over civilization.

However, the boundary separating civilization from wilderness, which in the Eurocentric discourse coincided with the borders between "the West and the rest", radically changes its configuration – Florens is "wild" not because she is African. Just the other way round, her "wilderness" is delineated as a result, on the one hand, of her being snatched away from her native African civilization even before her birth, and on the other hand – of her non-acceptance by European civilization.

No one reading the novel can miss the implications of the protagonist's name – Florens – which is the Latin for "flourishing, blooming". But "Florens" also resonates with "feral", having the same set of consonants (f, r, l). She is both, then, and her duality is extended to practically every character in the story and to America per se. Drawing an inevitable parallel between Florens and the "flourishing" American land, one should also bear in mind that the hostile European gaze imposes upon both the semantics of wilderness that "enslaves and opens the door for what is wild"[76]. As Hayden White points out, "it was the oppressed, exploited, alienated, or repressed part of humanity that kept on reappearing in the imagination of Westen man as the

[73] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 3.
[74] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 4.
[75] Ibid., p. 161.
[76] Ibid., p. 160.

Wild Man [...] always as a criticism of whatever security and peace of mind one group of men in society had purchased at the cost of the suffering of another"[77]. Historically, the identities of both – the girl and the land – are doomed to duality: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving....Slave. Free. I last"[78]. These words can be read as an epitome of Tony Morrison's dialectic literary vision.

Conclusion

In contrast to the Puritan world picture, in the novel wilderness is presented not as an immanent characteristic of America originally intended by God for the chosen people as the legitimate object of their conquest and colonization, but as a cultural construct fashioned by Eurocentric civilization as its necessary Other. The novel discusses three aspects of wilderness (doomed to near destruction as part of the natural world when tampered with by Europeans; triumphant over a short-lived illusionary Edenic harmony on the Vaark farm; imposed upon human beings by means of displacement and non-recognition) within the framework of the prevalent Euro-American ideology of possessiveness.

A revisionary take on the "received wilderness idea" is accomplished here by a specific angle of vision factoring in racial, social, and religious others, that is, a multiplicity of civilizational models. The text's main narrative strategy is aimed at achieving heteroglossia: the first-person narrative (Florens' inner speech) alternates with focalizations through every important character in turn, providing for a stereoscopic view of the same events (as in Faulkner, the writer's celebrated literary "teacher"). Therefore, we must speak not about one single (Eurocentric Christian) civilization's attempts at taming and appropriating the American "wilderness", as perpetuated in Puritan discourse, but about an array of possible relations with nature exemplified in other civilizational paradigms – Afrocentric (the blacksmith) and Native American (Lina). It is their dialectical dynamics diversified by numerous contributions from other cultures that has shaped what we currently refer to as "American civilization".

Therefore, it can be concluded that *A Mercy* deconstructs a whole cluster of propositions underlying the concept of wilderness in America's traditional Eurocentric discourse. On the one hand, it proves, like many other writings, the imminent failure of any number of attempts to bring to life an Edenic utopia in the New World due – after Morrison – to its degeneration into a merely material "American dream", which, in its turn, brought about the crash of unstable racial, social, and religious harmony in the microworld

[77] H. White, op. cit., p. 36.
[78] T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 161.

created in the novel. On the other hand, the text discredits the persistent identification of civilization with all things European, and of "natural wilderness" with all things non-European, that is inherent in classical Western thought. Both non-European civilizations figuring in the novel, unlike Westerners bent upon conquering, dominating, and owning, can boast of many subtle ways for establishing with nature relations of affinity and kinship. At the same time, the opposition is not lifted altogether, but acquires new semantics: the notion of civilization is extended to embrace the then extra-civilizational Others (Native Americans, Africans), while the "wilderness" of transatlantic territorial expanses including their endemic denizens loses its essentialism being unmasked as a Eurocentric construct. Last but not least, the writer postulates plurality as the original historical foundation for American identity and insists on its creative potential.

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