Those who wish to preserve our country’s remaining wilderness areas are faced with many of the same questions that literary critics have learned to ask themselves: what constitutes a proper understanding of this “text”? Does it have an inherent value, or is its value contingent on the use to which it is put? At what point does the act of appreciation become an act of appropriation in which its intrinsic qualities are sacrificed to the agenda of its audience? Environmentalists, like literary theorists, differ sharply in their responses to these problems. Their attitudes range from the New Critical stance of the Nature Conservancy, whose stated mission is to identify and maintain the world’s most valuable ecosystems; to the reader-response flexibility of the Sierra Club, which advocates informed use by members of a select interpretive community; to the Marxist vigilance of groups like Greenpeace and Earth First!, which expose the political and economic structures that form the basis for many decisions about an area’s potential value. Developing an appropriate attitude toward nature is even more problematic for the government agencies that control most of the nation’s public lands. If we imagine environmentalists to be like literary critics, then park administrators are publishers: their job is to produce and market an interpretation of nature’s text that renders it accessible to the public.

The affinity I am suggesting between the interpretation of texts and the
interpretation of nature presupposes that what we call nature or wilderness is a fiction, a cultural myth. I will concentrate in this essay on the aesthetic dimension of the wilderness myth and how it has affected our management of public lands, primarily by focusing on a specific comparison, between the aesthetic of the “picturesque” as it was developed in England and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the aesthetic of “wilderness” as it is manifested in the controversies surrounding the National Park Service’s management of Yellowstone National Park. Although the complex questions of wilderness management cannot be adequately addressed here, I hope that the juxtaposition of these two contexts for viewing landscape will illustrate the usefulness of practicing self-conscious criticism of our reading of nature.

The American idea of the wilderness might seem closer to the aesthetic category of the sublime than to the picturesque. In fact, the American wilderness has gradually been transformed from a sublime landscape into a series of picturesque scenes. The sublime vistas that staggered the imaginations of early settlers in a sense no longer exist. The feeling of awe that is inspired by a “sublime” scene depends on the spectator’s sense of its dominant power and its ability to call forth a visionary grasp of infinity. The American wilderness, however, has been gradually reduced and circumscribed until it no longer seems to stretch into infinity, but is contained and controlled within established boundaries. The conscious aesthetic framing of the landscape that typified the picturesque movement is, I will argue, replicated in the carefully delineated borders of our national parks.

Although the picturesque movement constructed itself as a form of disinterested artistic appreciation of nature, it in fact represented an elitist appropriation of the environment. The specific qualities the picturesque aesthetic required from a scene were based on principles derived from painting, not from nature, and hence many parks and gardens needed tasteful “improvement” in order to conform. This aestheticization of landscape removed it from the realm of nature and designated it a legitimate object of artistic consumption.

The aesthetic view of the wilderness that is part of the picturesque legacy has had a crucial effect on public land management policies. It has taught us to value nature, but the criterion for evaluation is the quality of aesthetic experience a landscape provides. The aestheticization of landscape permits the viewer to define and control the scene, yet fosters the illusion that the
scene is part of self-regulating nature. The viewer seems to be an incidental spectator of the beauties of nature when in fact man has created the “view” himself by announcing and promoting it as “scenic.” The idea of wilderness refers to the absence of humanity, yet “wilderness” has no meaning outside the context of the civilization that defines it. This paradox requires that we experience the wilderness without changing its status as wilderness. This can only be done by constructing an aesthetic image of the wilderness that allows us to avoid confronting its reality.

An artwork remains fixed, presenting the same face to succeeding generations, though interpretations of it may differ; a living ecosystem, however, cannot achieve that stasis. Pete Gunther has pointed out that man and nature bear different relations to time: “Man lives in a progressive, expressive, non-repetitive time; ecology is the science of cyclical repetition” (112). One way to reconcile these two opposing movements, the arrow and the circle, is to freeze them both. They intersect in a static image of a harmonious relation between man and nature—an image that, as we will see, is best illustrated by the American conception of the National Park.

Because the American idea of the picturesque is rooted in British aesthetic theory, I will focus on its development in Europe before discussing its influence in the New World.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the word picturesque—which had once referred to things that were graphic, visually particular, capable of being represented in a picture—came to designate a specific mode of pictorialism. The British cult of the picturesque originated with Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorrain, whose landscape paintings were seen and occasionally brought back to England by the travelers who flooded Italy after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. English travelers who had seen Italy and the Alps while on the Grand Tour wanted to recapture their experience in Britain, and suddenly the Lake District, the Wye Valley, the West Country, and parts of Scotland became fashionable destinations (Watson 13). Such tourists were aided in finding picturesque views by guidebooks and landscape poems; they sometimes carried “Claude glasses,” tinted convex mirrors, usually oval or circular, which the viewer could use to create a “picture” by standing with his or her back to the landscape and looking at the scene framed in the mirror. Thus, these early tourists’ enjoyment of landscape was based less on an appreciation of nature itself than on the secondary image of nature that they themselves constructed—either literally, through their amateur sketches, or imaginatively, simply in the way that they viewed the scenery.
The picturesque sensibility had an immediate effect on English landscape gardening. Formally arranged flower beds gave way to irregularly designed spaces characterized by "the judicious placing of artificial ruins ... the sudden opening of 'prospects,' and ... the juxtaposition of different effects" (Watson 17). Picturesque landscape gardening took the aestheticization of landscape to extremes: instead of merely seeking out appropriate views, the viewer altered the landscape in order to create them for himself. Mario Praz points out that "counterfeit neglect" was the effect these gardens strove for; they were deliberately designed to appear ravaged by time (21). Reference to the passage of time was artificially introduced and carefully controlled, giving the scene itself a timeless, mythic quality.

The picturesque scene is able to obscure the boundary between nature and human art because the origin of its "artistry" is unfixed. Although the actual implementation of picturesque aesthetic principles often involved ludicrous contrivance, in theory the picturesque is accidental. The viewer stumbles upon a scene or a prospect in which the elements are arranged "as if" in a picture; he or she mentally frames the scene through a process that is part recognition, part creation. The apparently "accidental" manifestation of the picturesque implies that the scene's properties are inherent, ready to be discovered. The presence of the spectator, however, is no accident. It is the spectator who engages the machinery of the picturesque aesthetic, mentally manufacturing a work of art where before there had been a work of nature. The defining feature of the picturesque scene is not chance but its opposite: pure intentionality. The picturesque scene is an early example of "found art": an artwork that exists only in the viewer's determination to label it "art."

The popularity of the picturesque movement was perhaps due to the fact that it rendered the landscape accessible and comprehensible in a way that was, paradoxically, both democratic and elite. It was aesthetically democratic because it permitted anyone to become an artist: those who could not sketch picturesque scenes could "create" them by an act of vision. A picturesque scene does not have to be painted on a canvas—it need only be "framed" by an appreciative spectator. But it was socioeconomically elite, because while artistic talent and original judgment were not required to participate in the picturesque, money was. Scenic tours abroad or in the Lake District required leisure time as well as money, and picturesque landscaping at home required an estate with gardens large enough to accommodate mazes and prospects. Raymond Williams has suggested that the landscaping of parks and the eighteenth-century enclosure of land are
“related parts of the same process . . . in the one case the land is being orga-
nized for production . . . while in the other it is being organized for con-
sumption—the view, the ordered proprietary repose, the prospect” (124).
The picturesque appreciation of landscape was in fact an appropriation of
landscape that had more to do with the attitude of the viewer than the in-
herent qualities of the scene, which was valued only to the degree that it
could be made to conform to preconceived aesthetic principles.

The picturesque aesthetic as it was developed in English painting and
poetry was eventually imported to America, exerting considerable influ-
ence on poetry and art here long after it ceased to be in vogue in En-
gland. The descriptive writing of Alexander Wilson and Washington Irving,
and popular books such as Joshua Shaw’s Picturesque Views of American
Scenery (1820–21) and William Guy Wall’s Hudson River Portfolio (1821–
25), made it a part of American culture (Nygren 52–56). British visitors to
America helped popularize tourism here, too, so that by the early 1800s the
Schuylkill River, the White Mountains, the Hudson River, and the Catskill
Mountains were among the picturesque spots enjoyed by foreign and native
travelers (Robertson 193–204). Clearly, the American wilderness differed
greatly from the English landscapes that determined the specific aesthetic
elements of an ideally “picturesque” scene. But the self-conscious aesthetic
mastery that characterized the picturesque was reflected in American atti-
tudes toward nature.

As I suggested earlier, the various government agencies that are en-
trusted with our public lands embody a bewildering diversity of purposes.
In fact, many individual agencies operate under the burden of internal
contradictions within their stated objectives. The Bureau of Land Manage-
ment and the U.S. Forest Service, for example, control the disposition of
their lands for “resource activities” that include wilderness preservation,
but also timber production, domestic livestock grazing, minerals develop-
ment, and other commercial uses (Preserving Our Natural Heritage 89).
The National Park Service, too, espouses goals that are potentially incom-
patible. Its job is “to provide for the highest quality of use and enjoyment
of the National Park System by increased millions of visitors in the years
to come,” as well as “to conserve and manage for their highest purpose the
natural, historical, and recreational resources of the National Park System”
(Natural Heritage 2.4). “Conservation” in this context means management
rather than protection, and the “highest purpose” of these resources is
necessarily defined as their availability for “use and enjoyment.”
In addition, the National Park Service has acquired a symbolic role in the public mind that goes beyond its stated objectives. As natural areas in the United States have diminished, the public has come to perceive the National Park Service as its primary provider of the wilderness experience. And yet, as the number of park visitors has grown, the parks have moved farther and farther away from a state that could be described as “wild.” In fact, they were not originally intended to be wilderness preserves at all. When Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872, it was described as “a public park or pleasuring ground”; as Roderick Nash points out, its establishment involved “no intentional preservation of wild country” (Nash 112). The passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act established a system whereby parts of the national parks, as well as other federal lands, could be designated “wilderness areas,” but these, too, were to be “administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people,” though “in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness” (Allin 277).

The Wilderness Act’s own definition of wilderness reveals the paradox involved. The visitor to a wilderness area should find a place that has not been visited. A wilderness is “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man . . . which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; [which] has outstanding opportunities for solitude” (Allin 278). It is difficult to see how such an area could remain untrammelled while being used by even a small percentage of the American people, or how it could provide opportunities for solitude to numerous visitors. This description applies only to specified “wilderness areas,” but large sections of some parks are so designated: in Yellowstone, for example, 61 percent of the land is managed as “wilderness” (Mealey 208). Furthermore, it does in many ways represent a popular mandate for what a national park ought to be. Fortunately, an escape route is encoded in its language: it designates an area that “appears” to be affected primarily by nature, one in which man’s imprint is present but “substantially unnoticeable.” It describes an image, not a reality.

This image of the wilderness is as much of an aesthetic construct as picturesque views of the Lake District, and, some would argue, equally elitist. William Tucker suggests, for example, that there is a class dimension to the insistence of many wilderness enthusiasts on excluding motorized vehicles, which represent “different tastes in recreation,” from wilderness areas. In a kind of reverse chic, upper-middle-class environmentalists hike, canoe,
order to reduce a herd that had become far too large for the park to sustain. The oversized herd had developed in response to an earlier policy of killing the elk’s predators in order to protect this popular animal. As Alston Chase points out, “Yellowstone needed more animals for the tourists to see.” In 1967, Park Superintendent Anderson suggested that management should work to increase the availability of “wildlife shows for visitors” (quoted in Chase, Playing God 51). In response to public protest at the elk herd reduction, the secretary of the interior established a committee to evaluate the park service game management program. Chaired by zoologist A. Starker Leopold (son of Aldo Leopold), the committee issued a report outlining an influential philosophy of wildlife management that sought to maintain the parks as independent ecosystems. The Leopold report insisted that “observable artificiality in any form must be minimized and obscured in every possible way.” By using “the utmost in skill, judgment, and ecological sensitivity,” the report claimed, “a reasonable illusion of primitive America could be re-created” (Chase 33–34). The essential goal was that the park appear to be a natural wilderness. Artificiality could not be “observable”; instead, the park must sustain the illusion of a natural, primeval state. Like the ruins in a picturesque garden, it would emblematize a vanished past, presenting a perfect picture of the lost American wilderness.

The policy outlined in the Leopold report affected every aspect of Yellowstone’s management. When the park’s bear policy was questioned in the early 1970s, a study of its bear population was undertaken but then quietly suppressed and discontinued by the Park Service. The collars that the scientists used to track the bears were considered “unsightly” and had to be removed before the park’s upcoming centennial celebration (Chase 157). As early as 1868, John Muir had recognized the necessity of catering to the picturesque tastes of park visitors. “Even the scenery habit in its most artificial forms . . . mixed with spectacles, silliness and kodaks . . . may well be regarded as a hopeful sign of the times,” he wrote (Runte 172).

A Newsweek article about the Yellowstone fires noted that “Yellowstone remains an enduring symbol of the American wilderness” (“Fighting for Yellowstone” 18). It is not an example, but a symbol of wilderness; it functions as a representation or illustration of the concept. But the Park Service’s insistence on treating Yellowstone as if it were in fact a naturally regulated, self-enclosed ecosystem has, Alston Chase has argued, resulted in contradictory and damaging policies. Even as a public relations gesture, “natural control” often backfired. When bears were deprived of access to
the garbage they had grown dependent on, and forced to feed themselves “naturally,” they became aggressive and attacked park visitors, causing a public outcry. In one highly publicized incident, spectators became infuriated when park rangers allowed a bison to drown when they could easily have rescued him. Tourists wanted an image of wilderness, not a realistically dangerous wilderness experience.

The impossibility of this “illusion” sustaining itself without help became dramatically visible in the summer of 1988 as wildfires swept through the park, eventually reaching almost a million acres of land and destroying some 40 percent of the park’s territory. The park’s “let it burn” policy dictated that all naturally occurring fires be permitted to run their course unless they posed an imminent threat to life or property. Although environmentalists were quick to defend the policy, which was intended to allow, in the words of the park’s chief scientist John Varley, the natural cycle of “rebirth and renewal of the park’s ecosystem” (“Yellowstone: Up in Smoke” 36), the public was outraged at the spectacle of the nation’s first national park consumed by flames. President Reagan expressed the confusion of the average American at this counterintuitive approach to “conservation” when he called the policy “a cockamamie idea” (“Burn Baby Burn” 14).

The static image of the wilderness lodged in the collective consciousness did not readily accommodate the idea of change. Pictures, after all, do not change; they merely hang on the walls of the museum.

As we saw earlier, the picturesque scene, though mentally constructed by the spectator, presents itself as a fortuitous accident; the public reaction to a genuine “accident” at Yellowstone exposed this apparent autonomy as an illusion. There was far more discussion about the Park Service’s refusal to assert control over the fires than about the actual effect on the park. Although the media duly reported the scientific reasoning that lay behind the “let it burn” policy, their coverage of the fires reflected the popular perception that the park service had been negligent. The headlines from the major newsmagazine stories on the fire emphasize the Park Service’s lack of control: “Burn Baby Burn! Stop Baby Stop!” (U.S. News and World Report); “Did the Park Service Fiddle While Rome Burned?” (Business Week); “Yellowstone: Up in Smoke” (Newsweek); “‘We Could Have Stopped This’” (Time). Many of these stories focused on the massive efforts that were finally mounted to halt the fires (some ten thousand fire fighters, including two thousand army troops, eventually participated) and on the question of whether it would have been possible to succeed if the
fire fighting had started sooner. Louisa Wilcox, of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, pointed out that the destruction is “part of living in an ecosystem that is wild and uncontrollable” (“We Could Have Stopped This” 19), but clearly the public did not want its park to be genuinely beyond its control.

The intensity of public concern about the Yellowstone fires was connected, as many people noted at the time, to the widespread environmental fears roused by the abnormally hot summer of 1988. The sight of Yellowstone’s parched forests feeding an unstoppable inferno became the ultimate symbol of the vulnerability of nature to the forces unleashed by technology. In his book *Strange Weather*, Andrew Ross points out that extreme weather events are often linked in the public consciousness with contemporaneous political and social events: “Instances of prolonged meteorological abnormality expose popular and official anxieties about the economy of change and constancy that regulates our everyday lives” (233). The hot summer of 1988, he suggests, focused our fears of global warming, and our anxiety about America’s place within a global economy, by providing a premonitory image of the future (232–33). Our apparent inability to control the natural processes at work within the boundaries of Yellowstone, then, became the most telling sign of the environmental apocalypse we had brought upon ourselves.

Ironically, a main reason for the fires’ rapid spread may have been the dead trees and underbrush that had accumulated during the many years in which park policy had been to suppress all fires. Therefore, some have argued, it was unreasonable to treat the fires as part of a natural cycle when previous interference had already rendered the park an artificial environment (Chase, “Neither Fire Suppression nor Natural Burn a Sound Scientific Option” 24). Recognizing the illusoriness of the aesthetic image that constituted “Yellowstone National Park” would perhaps have allowed for a more accurate approximation of “natural” development. But the whole concept of *natural control*, as the oxymoronic term implies, rests on the paradoxical assumption that only human interference can guarantee a natural state of affairs.

It is of course easier to criticize the aesthetic view of landscape than to define alternative criteria of “value” in nature. Even committed environmentalists disagree about the reasons for protecting wilderness areas. Land that has been preserved from commercial exploitation may serve sci-
entific, recreational, spiritual, or aesthetic purposes, or some combination of these. Since Aldo Leopold first called for a “land ethic” that would extend the community regulated by social conduct to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals” (204), philosophers have developed theories of environmental ethics that attribute to nature an inherent value independent of any such uses. So-called “deep ecologists” argue that nature possesses the same moral standing and natural rights as human beings. The most radical proponents of this view, the members of Earth First!, see “The Defense of Mother Nature” as a task that merits the same human risk and civil disobedience as the antislavery and civil rights movements. But most independent environmental organizations attempt to formulate policy based on a specific sense of why nature is useful to humankind.

The stated mission of the Nature Conservancy, for example, is “to preserve plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and water they need to survive” (Nature Conservancy Annual Report 1990 5). Its ideal is to preserve land for scientific, rather than recreational, uses. Unlike most other environmental groups, it does not choose the land it deems worthy of protection on the basis of visual beauty. A recent article on its work notes that “ironically, the Conservancy often performs its mission best when the property in question has no particular scenic value” (Selcraig 52).

The Sierra Club, on the other hand, lists as its primary interest “to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth,” and indeed its first goal after its founding in 1892 was to “render accessible’ the Sierra Nevada and other West Coast mountain ranges” (McCloskey and Carr 4,5). Known to many people primarily for the stunning nature photography displayed in its popular calendars, it seeks to increase public awareness and enjoyment of the environment. But while the Nature Conservancy emphasizes scientific, and the Sierra Club recreational, uses of land, they both rely on picturesque appreciation of the landscape to further their goals.

In fact, all of the major environmental groups depend on selling an attractive vision of nature, as is evident in the competition between the glossy magazines each one produces for its members. National Geographic is, of course, the standard by which these vicarious forays into nature are judged. Sierra and Wilderness are both substantial magazines, complete with lengthy feature articles and advertising, while Nature Conservancy recently expanded from an undersized format into a full-sized magazine with more sophisticated graphics and layout. All are structured around
large reproductions of scenic photographs. The Wilderness Society entices prospective members with the offer of a free book of Ansel Adams photographs, while the Audubon Society's most recent membership appeals emphasize the benefits of "enjoying the spectacle of nature through Audubon magazine," which, they assure us, is "the most beautiful published anywhere." The experience of this "fine art book" is an armchair substitute for the experience of nature itself: "Reading it makes you feel the same way you do after a walk in the deep woods, or a swim in a crystal lake. You are rewarded. Enriched. Uplifted" (Berle, n.p.). Clearly, environmental groups do agree on one thing: the way to promote nature is to illustrate its picturesque beauty. Our insistence that the natural world should not merely exist but also satisfy our aesthetic sensibilities is, it seems, difficult to overcome.

In the aftermath of the Yellowstone fires, considerable political pressure was brought to bear on the agriculture and interior secretaries and on National Parks Director William Penn Mott, Jr., forcing reconsideration of the "natural control" policy. In 1991 a review team composed of representatives from public land agencies issued a new set of recommendations that honored the theory of "natural control" but imposed numerous restrictions that prevent implementation of the policy except under specific conditions (Lowry 83). Many of the issues raised by the fire policy have recently resurfaced in the controversy surrounding the decision to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone. There, too, the problem is that a "more natural" ecosystem can only be attained through deliberate human effort—and now that wolves are an "optional" part of Yellowstone, many people choose to reject that option.

The National Park Service's immediate strategy for countering public criticism and forestalling damage to Yellowstone Park's tourist trade after the fires was, not surprisingly, to redefine the park's image. By September 1988 it had begun a "campaign to sell the charred forest parkland as 'nature's laboratory,' a place to watch the world remake itself" (Egan 6). The park still provided a spectacle, but now it was a test tube rather than a museum. Aesthetic appreciation was to be replaced by scientific curiosity. While this change in attitude was perhaps forced upon park administrators, it does provide a model for a more flexible and responsible use of the parks. Recognition that we do not in fact create the wilderness, but that it makes and remakes itself, is the first step toward learning to read nature's text as something other than fiction.
NOTES


2. In his essay, “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (in The New Historicism, ed. H. Aram Veeser [New York: Routledge, 1989]) Stephen Greenblatt meditates briefly on the significance of the signs and railings on the Nevada Falls Trail at Yosemite National Park, noting that “the wilderness is at once secured and obliterated by the official gestures that establish its boundaries” (9).


4. For an excellent overview of the establishment of Yellowstone and the development of the National Park System as a whole, see Runte.

5. The problems posed by the various recreations and amenities sought by vacationers are explored in detail by Sax. The classic example of the “elitist” attitude is, of course, Edward Abbey’s attack on industrial tourism. He suggests that each visitor to a park be told: “PARK YOUR CAR, JEEP, TRUCK, TANK, MOTORBIKE, SNOWMOBILE, MOTORBOAT, JETBOAT, AIRBOAT, SUBMARINE, AIRPLANE, JETPLANE, HELICOPTER, HOVERCRAFT, WINGED MOTORCYCLE, ROCKETSCHIP, OR ANY OTHER CONCEIVABLE TYPE OF MOTORIZED VEHICLE . . . GET ON YOUR HORSE, MULE, BICYCLE, OR FEET, AND COME ON IN” (Desert Solitaire [New York: Ballantine, 1968] 65–66).


7. John D. Varley himself almost predicted such a response in a paper he presented at a 1987 National Park Service Ecosystem Management Workshop. He noted that the public regards Yellowstone as a kind of “aquarium,” and fails to recognize that it is a “dynamic and interactive” ecosystem (“Managing Yellowstone National Park into the Twenty-First Century” in Ecosystem Management, ed. Agee and Johnson 218).
8. Forest Service fire use specialist Walt Thomascak said later: “When conditions get as bad as it was in the summer of 1988, you’re wasting your money trying to suppress fires. But the public would never accept the fact that any federal agency merely stood around and watched a forest as it was consumed by flames, so the federal agencies have to put on a good show” (quoted in George Wuerthner, “The Flames of ’88,” Wilderness 52.185 [Summer 1989]: 50).


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"We Could Have Stopped This." *Time* 5 September 1988: 19.

