

# THE MYTH OF THE ADIRONDACK BACKWOODSMAN: FROM THE GOLDEN YEARS TO CONSUMER SOCIETY

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In his sociological approach to literature, Kenneth Burke proposed to consider the poetic artifact as “equipment for living”, that is, as a collective discursive strategy or attitude of an active nature that functions for the sake of “human welfare” (1973: 293). According to Burke, any given culture is bound to project in its art perfected formulas through which not only to represent immediate reality, but also to provide exemplary acts worthy of imitation. “One tries, as far as possible, to develop a strategy whereby one ‘can’t lose’. One tries to change the rules of the game until they fit his own necessities. [...] One tries to fight on his own terms, developing a strategy for imposing the proper ‘time, place, and conditions’” (1973: 298), he writes. In modern criticism, Burke’s argument on the psycho-sociological weavings underlying myth and the literary piece is accepted as an a priori fact, and its intrinsic obviousness has somewhat pushed it away to oblivion. In this paper, however, I would like to recuperate Burke’s stipulations for the analysis and deconstruction of the Adirondack backwoodsman myth for several reasons: firstly, Burke suggests that literature is at once reactionary and creative, that is, it is a fabricated response to circumstances (or, to use Burke’s term, “situations”) upon which a conduct to overcome those circumstances is reflected. The reaction and the act of perfecting the human possibility of overcoming circumstance are in themselves sociological processes of acknowledging immediate spatial and temporal reality. Secondly, the perfected literary piece is ironic in its dynamics as equipment for living: it is at once developed and imitated by the cultural group at hand with the aim of eternalizing

its value as long as the circumstances are essentially the same. The side-effect of this collective process is that circumstances remain forcibly unchanged by human anxiety for myth until they prove to be more powerful than the equipment for living itself. As history moves forward, the “rules of the game” are readjusted so as to establish the proper “time, place, and conditions” under which the literary piece will attend to the cultural group’s new perfected needs. The Adirondack backwoodsman is a localized paradigmatic example of the mythical process as described by Burke, a perfect instance of the pragmatism of myth in its persistence as an agent and creator of history. As such, I will present the archetypal dimension and fictional modes of the nineteenth-century backwoodsman (a category that includes guides, trappers, and hermits of the New York North Country) as a case study of equipment for living that in a relatively short span of years rose to battle against “the situations” only to succumb to the industrial era and the power of consumer culture.

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It was during the so-called golden years of the Adirondacks (1830-1865) that the mythical connotations of the backwoodsman reached their full potential. In order to trace the development of the myth, we must first contemplate the situations against which it was intended to react, that is, the historical circumstance that forged the myth as a cultural imperative.

Until the early 1800s, the Adirondacks had been practically devoid of the white man’s presence: the hostile climate, the mountainous environment and its barren soils had been enough to convince cartographers that the land was completely useless. As the American frontier was conquered westward and topographical reports consistently delivered information about the territories’ features, the Adirondacks were represented by a blank triangle-like space on the map. Finally, in the 1830s, the geologist Ebenezer Emmons was commissioned to develop the New York Natural History Survey’s Northern Wilderness section. Emmons’s detailed geological descriptions and scientific hypotheses not only helped to finally place the Adirondacks physically on the map, but moreover, they reacted against the previous topographical accounts that “emphasized the region’s mystery, wildness, and unsuitability for agriculture” (Terrie 2008: 5). Such a reaction was not an isolated event; at the turn of the century the entire nation had reached a most profound identity crisis stemming from the need to articulate the cultural uniqueness that had required a revolution to take place. Writers and artists seeking to compete with the history, artistry and refinement that European culture afforded finally accepted the American territory as the virgin space from which to erect a fresh sense of identity. In Roderick Nash’s words, “in the early nineteenth century American nationalists began to understand that it was in the *wildness* of its nature that their country was unmatched” (2001: 69). Although the consideration of

‘wildness’ as the primitive mythical space was a nationalistic parameter original to America, such a consideration absorbed European romanticist thought so as to justify its validity. Most notably, Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762) and *Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) proclaimed that society corrupted the morality of man and that the practice of a primitive lifestyle could sway the individual away from spiritual degradation. In this scope, the wilderness ideal was embraced as a moral sanctuary; it represented an actual, physical space where man could retreat to his untainted, original innocence. The American frontier, uncontainable and uncontrollable in its primitiveness, was hence morally superior to the decadent cities and domesticated gardens of the old continent (Nash 2001: 69).

While Rousseau’s doctrines functioned as the philosophical angle arguing for a necessary reversion to nature, Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) was enthusiastically received by American intellectuals as the aesthetic guidebook for the classification of wilderness features. Burke had established two distinct categories, the sublime and the beautiful, in accordance with man’s reaction at the moment the element is beheld. While the contemplation of beauty aroused in the human mind a sense of tranquillity and harmony, and provided a continuation of traditional taste, the sublime seemed to awaken irrational passions such as astonishment, awe and terror in an instant. Burke claimed that it was in nature that “the passion caused by the great and the sublime” operated “most powerfully” (1990: 53). The American wilderness provided not only beautiful landscapes, but more importantly, sublime ones. As writers and landscape painters saw it, the element of wildness increased the likelihood of experiencing the sublime at a level that Europeans would not be able to reach through the contemplation of their own natural features.

Although such aesthetic and philosophical taxonomies were initially embraced and propounded by artists and intellectuals, it was not long before public opinion became indispensable for the continuation of the wilderness frontier as America’s original mythical space. In the words of Bradley Dean, travel writing—either in the form of topographical surveying or reports by independent naturalists and authors—capitalized “on a reading public whose appetite for narratives of wilderness exploration seemed insatiable” (2007: 75).

## II

The new sociological circumstances had called for suitable features to represent the source of national pride. Accordingly, the cult of the sublime and the beautiful and the moral integrity that the wilderness represented required an adequate archetype to personify the reactive and creative impulse of the literary piece. In other words,

the American people had defined the ‘terms’ of the fight, and now an archetype had to be established to function within the ‘rules of the game’. As the popularity of the Adirondacks as a sublime and beautiful landscape surged, the practice of guiding developed as an independent profession. Nomads seasonally dedicated to hunting welcomed guiding as an additional or alternative way to supplement their incomes, and writers venturing into the region to pursue masculine sports and nourish their aesthetic sensibilities found in their trusty guiding companions the American Adam incarnate.

Before viewing examples of the type of discourse that launched the myth of the Adirondack guide, the qualities of the backwoodsman as an archetype are in need of clarification. In his study of fictional modes, Northrop Frye adopts a scientific methodology to approach the hero’s “power of action” (1973: 61). Our concern for this case lies in Frye’s three categories proximal to myth: in the first category, “if superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment [...] the hero is a divine being”. The second category stipulates that “if superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being”. Thirdly, “if superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader” (1973: 61). Rooted in structuralism, Frye’s fictional modes illustrate a hierarchy according to which the hero’s power of action deteriorates as he is distanced from myth. The three categories mentioned above mark perimeters for the types of heroes whose exceptionality places them above the conditions of ordinary men. While at the peak of the hierarchy roam the divine beings (that is, those that are governed by myth in its purest guise), the hero of romance and the hero as leader represent a form of superiority over other men that attracted romanticist thought. In the case of the frontiersman, it was the hero’s primitive qualities akin to the wilderness which endowed him with the skills and the morality that distinguished him from common man. The Adirondack backwoodsman’s superiority must necessarily always be based on degree, not on kind: the frontiersman’s essential appeal for romanticists is his limitation as a human being, as matter that will one day expire regardless of the gift of primitiveness and intuition. As such, the hero of romance and the hero as leader are archetypes worthy of emulation by the culture that created them.

Let us begin chronologically through the impact caused by Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Set in the Adirondack east, the Lake George region, the novel presents the reader with formulas characteristic of popular fiction while engaging a complex dialogue between the past and the present, between European purity of blood and American hybridization, and most specifically for our case, between regional and universal archetypes that have become cultural referents beyond the Adirondack borders. The plot revolves around the Fort William Henry

massacre which took place during the French and Indian War in 1757. In this context, the loyal and gallant Heyward functions according to traditional European standards of heroism, while Natty Bumppo (Hawk-eye) emerges as the nationalist archetype. Cooper created a protagonist who could have been bred only in America: he is a man with untainted moral values, yet does not answer to any specific creed. Bumppo rejects the corporative, methodological organization of Eurocentric militias when he claims that “he who wishes to prosper in Indian warfare [...] must not be too proud to learn from the wit of a native” (2005: 251); in other words, he is a man whose instinct and intuitiveness separate him from Eurocentric codes of conduct and survival, which in the American wilderness, as is proven through the inefficiency of Heyward in maintaining his own heroic status, are useless. While conservative, European codes rely on a series of corporative laws based on tradition, Bumppo places his individual experience as the basis from which to act. Instinct and intuition do not deceive the individual; they are innate predispositions through which one learns the art of improvisation and spontaneity, the tactics needed to become a skilful warrior (Lewis 1955). The battlefields over which the English and the French are fighting will never become truly theirs, no matter the outcome of the struggle: loyalties to the crown mean nothing to a wilderness which is indifferent to traditions and religions developed in faraway continents.

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Had it not been for *The Last of the Mohicans*, the story of the Adirondack backwoodsman would have evolved quite differently. Regional writers have attested to the deterministic influence that the novel, and in particular its protagonist, had over the popularity of local guides. Paul Jamieson stated that “the Leatherstocking legend embodies one substantial truth: the good guide was lord of the forest and held the key to it for the townsman” (2009: 107). Robert Williams also notes that “real-life stories of the great Adirondack guides probably owe more to the influence of Cooper and Leatherstocking than they might admit” (1985: 73). If we consider once more Frye’s fictional modes, one could argue that Bumppo, as a hero of romances, was superior in degree to other men and to his environment. Frye elaborates on this notion: “the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him” (1973: 61). For Frye, although the presence of magical and fantastic objects and characters is canonical evidence of this category, it is not indispensable for a story revolving around the romance hero. The natural prodigies of courage and endurance suffice in elevating the archetype above the laws of his environment. It was not rare for readers of *Mohicans* to interpret Natty Bumppo as a man who had absorbed and imitated the ways of the wilderness to such an extent that he had become superior to his environment. Indeed, none of the difficulties that impede the other characters from being confident in their stride

seem to affect Hawk-eye. Not once does the wilderness as a space (without including the French and Indian enemies) present an actual threat; he does not even fall into the more earthly human faults of tripping or missing his target. Symbolically, Bumppo has killed the primal father (the wilderness) in the very act of imitating and overcoming it, an act that can be regarded as euhemeristic in its implications. Despite the fact that Frye confined the godlike features of the archetype to the first category, superiority over the environment can be understood as a deifying transformation that takes the hero beyond the limits of human existence.

In his history of Adirondack guides, Charles Brumley summarizes the development of the relationship between Cooper's novel and the Adirondack guiding tradition as a case where "reality soon began to imitate art" (1994: 52). Indeed, romanticist travel writers, enthused by the hero they had read about in their youth, became the leading figures to seek Hawk-eye's qualities in their guides. Amongst these, it was the New Hampshire native John Cheney (1800-1877) who most recurrently appeared as subject matter in the works of several writers that range from Ebenezer Emmons, Charles Fenno Hoffman, Joel T. Headley, and William Redfield to Charles Lanman, Farrand Benedict and Seneca Ray Stoddard. His reputation as a skilled, courageous hunter was legendary, and his stories were familiar folk material throughout the Adirondacks. It was Cheney who guided Emmons to the tallest peak (which the geologist named Mount Marcy) and he was the reason why a one-legged writer and editor by the name of Charles Fenno Hoffman decided to set out on an excursion to the North Country. Hoffman's resulting book, *Wild Scenes in the Forest and the Prairie* (1839), was pivotal in launching the Adirondack backwoodsman archetype, for he was the first to claim the symmetry between the Leatherstocking and an actual man of flesh and bone:

If it did not involve an anachronism, I could swear that Cooper took the character of Natty Bumppo, from my mountaineer friend, John Cheney. The same silent, simple, deep love of the woods —the same gentleness and benevolence of feeling toward all who love his craft —the same unobtrusive kindness toward all others; and lastly, the same shrewdness as a woodman, and gamesomeness of spirit as a hunter, are common to both. (2007: 35-36)

The description of the renowned nimrod Nat Foster (1767-1841), was a variation on the same theme: he had a reputation amongst sportsmen and Adirondackers as an excellent hunter and trapper, and Jephtha Simms christened him "the modern Leatherstocking" (2007: 177, 181) in his highly acclaimed book *Trappers of New York* (1850). He reportedly killed more than seventy deer, more than thirty bears, and more than twenty wolves in a single season, along with other fur-bearing animals. He was also notorious for his animadversion towards Indians, and was distrustful of any kind of dealing with them. Foster did not bother to conceal his

dislike of them, and even put into circulation around the Fulton Chain region rumours about how he had eliminated more than one Indian in the solitude of the forests. Many of Foster's contemporaries believed him to have been not the replica of Bumppo, but the one in whose image Hawk-eye had been created. Unlike the case of Cheney, this did not involve an anachronism, for Foster was said to have met Cooper when he visited Lake George before writing the *Leatherstocking Tales*. In *The Life and Adventures of Nat Foster* (1897), Reverend Byron-Curtiss claimed that

The assumption that Foster is the hero of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* I think is well founded. [...] The character of Nat Foster as portrayed by the facts here presented, and the character of Natty Bumppo of Cooper, are wonderfully similar; which, taken with the unbiased opinions of men of Foster's time, are weighty arguments in favor of the idea advanced. (2009: 8)

Among these contemporaries of unbiased opinions Bryon-Curtiss included E.P. Hurlbut, who "claimed that James Fenimore Cooper had actually modelled Natty Bumppo after his client" (Schneider 1998: 75), and his son.<sup>1</sup> Byron-Curtiss quotes a letter he received from the latter:

James Fenimore Cooper having known Foster in his lifetime (at an early age) it seems not improbable that he took Foster as the original of his famous scout and trapper, commonly called 'Leatherstocking,' or in other words, that 'Nat Foster' and 'Natty Bumppo' were identical. [...] You find points of similarity, hardly the work of chance [...] and there is additional ground for the assertion that they are the same persons; or rather, that Cooper's hero was none other than Nat Foster. (2009: 135-136)

The fact that Foster was 'the real deal' authenticated his status as a local celebrity and to some extent must have licensed his violence against local Indians. Lionel Trilling (1972) and Richard Handler (1986) have described the modern era as a transition from the obsession with sincerity (which, by its very nature, is dependent upon the public sphere) to the anxiety for authenticity, "which has to do with our true self, our individual existence, not as we might present it to others, but as it 'really is' apart from any role we play", and which is "particularly apparent where national or ethnic groups find themselves in a struggle for recognition" (Handler 1986: 3). The rhetoric of authenticity resembles the archetype's role as equipment for living in that it calls upon the mythopoeic credentials of 'the first' and 'the original'. If Foster had inspired Cooper's Bumppo, and Bumppo symbolized the honesty, nobility, and innocence of the woodsman, then so must Foster, as the original, founding source, be the model of such a virtuous code of conduct. Above all, Foster and Bumppo were true representatives of the code of individuality (versus the code of commitment to a social contract). As such, they were figures of authority before a nation that was coming to terms with its own moral and

aesthetic identity through the convention of primitiveness and the cult of the sublime and the beautiful. In addition to this, Cooper had suggested in *Mobicans* that the tragic yet inevitable disappearance of the Indian race was a necessary step for progress so as to “legitimize an established social hierarchy” (Fluck 1996: 427). If Cooper was, therefore, justifying certain historical events (and subsequent casualties through genocide practices), so was *Mobicans* somewhat legitimizing Foster’s actions.

Adirondack guides were prone to archetypal mystification through writers’ evocations of romanticist mythical paradigms. Beneath their mesmerizing abilities in the arts of hunting, trapping, and woodcraft, lay the philosopher with an intuitive and emotional sensibility that endowed him with gifted insight into the meaning of existence. The guides’ choices in the materialization of their lives signified a dogma governed by pragmatic and ethical standards. For the romanticist hero, the ephemeral essence of time is the suffocating shadow that man is destined to agonize over; the individual is condemned to clutch the earthly in the struggle against inevitability (let us recall that it is the inescapable conclusion of life which characterizes the frontiersman as a hero superior in *degree* to other men). Life for the romanticist hero is a final gasp to make possibility out of impossibility, to overcome the terminal edges of the physical, the body. Although the futile battle against Chronos can shepherd the hero through tragic existence, the awareness of time may also be met with more pragmatist attitudes by which the hero’s strife becomes an affirmative attempt to live life fully (Argullol 2008: 393). In nineteenth-century America’s attempt to perfect, that is, to complete its nationalistic identity, what was adopted was this latter ‘strategy’ (or ‘attitude’) of a more positive character. The backwoodsman philosopher pragmatically reacted against time; at least during his lifetime, in this space, and under these circumstances, he was the master of his existence and therefore creator of his identity. Herein lay the true powers of the frontiersman: the refusal *to live by* the limitations of human condition, to lead the pusillanimous life of common man together with the impulse to always be there and face out the interstices of time by willingly testing himself against the wilderness perils. Paradoxically, the closest the hero can ever get to immortality is by balancing himself on the fragile borders of mortality. Joel T. Headley observes in his classic work *The Adirondack; or, Life in the Woods* (1849) that it is a learnt stoicism of spirit which prevents the guide from tipping over the edge:

[Cheney] was once hunting alone by a little lake, when his dogs brought a noble buck into the water. [...] In the eagerness of pursuit, he hit his rifle either with his paddle or foot, when it went off, sending the ball directly through one of his ankles. [...] The first thought was to return to shore; “the next was”, said he, “I may *need that venison before I get out of these woods*”; so, without waiting to examine the wound,

he pulled on after the deer. Coming up with him, he beat him to death with his paddles, and pulling him into the boat, rowed ashore. Cutting off his boot, he found his leg was badly mangled and useless. Bandaging it up, however, as well as he could, he cut a couple of crotched sticks for crutches, and with these walked *fourteen miles* to the nearest clearing. There he got help, and was carried slowly out of the woods. How a border-life sharpens a man's wits. Especially in an emergency does he show to what strict discipline he has subjected his mind. His resources are almost exhaustless, and his presence of mind equal to that of one who has been in a hundred battles! (2006: 82-83)

The pragmatism of battling against time by harvesting from the pleasures of one's circumstance is instilled in the sober simplicity inherent to each and every motive behind the guide's decisions. It is this same simplicity of motives which intrigues and fascinates romanticist sportsmen. Hoffman confesses his initial surprise when he saw that Cheney carried a pistol rather than a rifle. His confusion turned to understanding when the guide recounted how he once crushed the skull of a wolf with a rifle, killing the animal but damaging the barrel. Rather than purchasing another rifle, Cheney resolved to carry with him more adequate gear: "I got me this pistol", Hoffman quotes him, "which being light and handy, enables me more conveniently to carry an axe upon long tramps, and make myself comfortable in the woods" (2007: 85). Everything about Cheney, from his personality to his attire, is motivated by an experience. In other words, he adapts perfectly to the environment, carrying with him only what he has learned is necessary, being *practical* and ridding himself of the decorum that urban social life masks man with. Headley's reaction to Cheney's story of a deadly encounter with a panther resembles Hoffman's observations:

Being a little curious to know whether he was not somewhat agitated in finding himself in such close proximity to a panther all ready for the fatal leap, I asked him how he felt when he saw the animal crouching so near. "I felt", said he coolly, "as if I should kill him". I need not tell you that *I* felt a little foolish at the answer [...] for the perfect simplicity of the reply took me all aback. (2006: 77)

But it is not only through action that the Adirondack guide evidences his philosophy. His sensibility endows him with the soul of a poet, and contemplation of the wilderness becomes a process of introspection whereupon the limits of man are once again examined. In one of the most famous passages of Adirondack literary history, William Chapman White quotes Cheney upon his view of the vast landscape from the Mount Marcy summit in 1837: "It makes a man feel what it is to have all creation under his feet. There are woods there which it would take a lifetime to hunt over, mountains that seem shouldering each other to boost the one whereon you stand up and away, heaven knows where" (1985: 14). Guiding was not simply a matter of leading one's clients through the mountains or instructing

them in the strenuous activities of camp-life; at the intersection between the primitive wilderness and the hectic, corrupted world of man stood the backwoodsman. The guide was a medium through which man could get a glimpse of what one once was and what one ought to be; his every motion and every word was a tribute to primitiveness, a poem of essences of meaning. In other words, his role was purely hermeneutical: he was to deliver the Word of the wilderness to those lost in the vortex of civilization. It was up to modern man to seek Hermes the messenger and to decipher the cryptogram of his frontier life as entangled with the sublime and beautiful forefronts of the wilderness. In this context, the guide himself becomes the primal feature of the picturesque. Describing the Abenaki Indian Mitchell Sabattis (1824-1906), whose reputation resembled Cheney's, Headley alludes to the aesthetically symbiotic relationship between the wilderness and the guide:

Every nerve in him seemed to have been suddenly touched by an electric spark—and he has now stooped to elude the watchfulness of the deer, and now again stood erect, with his rifle raised to his shoulder, he was one of the most picturesque objects I ever saw. (2006: 177)

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Beyond the aesthetic qualities of the backwoodsman were matters of an ethical nature. The traditional guide challenged the excesses of modern utilitarianism through early conservationist principles and emotional sensitivity. The moment the guide reveals his ethical stance is depicted as a cathartic revelation for the writer. The sportsman is exposed for the societal laws and absurd interests that govern his methods, while the always short, simple reflection of the backwoodsman holds a cosmogony of harmonic order that revokes anthropocentric dogmas of existence. Such was the reaction that Headley recalls when on the verge of shooting a female duck, he turns to Sabattis for approval:

I turned to Mitchell and inquired if I should fire. "I guess I wouldn't", he replied; "she has young ones". My gun dropped in a moment. I stood rebuked, not only by my own feelings, but by the Indian with me. I was shocked that this hunter who had lived so many years on the spoils of the forest, should teach me tenderness of feeling. (2006: 161-162)

In a somewhat similar note, Hoffman records Cheney's position as an advocate of hounding and an enemy to the practices of still-hunting and jack-lighting:<sup>2</sup>

"How can a man sleep sound in the woods", saith John Cheney [...] "when he has the heart to lure the mother of a fawn to the very muzzle of his rifle by bleating at her: or who has shot down the brutes by torchlight, when they come to the waterside to cool themselves at nightfall?" (2007: 88)

Of all the guides of the golden years, it was probably Orson 'Old Mountain' Phelps (1816-1905) whose hermit ways and ardent adulation for the North Country best

mirrored the backwoodsman philosophy. The novelist and journalist Charles Dudley Warner was mesmerized by Phelps's worship of the wilderness: "there were other trappers and more deadly hunters and as intrepid guides", Warner writes, "but Old Phelps was the discoverer of the beauties and sublimities of the mountains" (2008: 50). It was only for the "appreciative tourist" that "Phelps was ready, as guide, to open to him all the wonders of his possessions" (2008: 50). The Adirondack Hermes would, after all, only gift the interpreter with a message if he humbly believed in the wilderness Word:

It then became known what manner of man this was who had grown up here in the companionship of forests, mountains, and wild animals; that these scenes had highly developed in him the love of beauty, the aesthetic sense, delicacy of appreciation, refinement of feeling; and that, in his solitary wanderings and musings, the primitive man, self-taught, had evolved for himself a philosophy and a system of things. (2008: 50)

But the tourists were not always appreciative; there were those whose "presence was a profanation amid the scenery [Phelps] loved" (2008: 55). These tourists did not have the wit to appreciate "being accompanied by a poet and a philosopher" (2008: 55), and Phelps's contemplative ways on "the various problems of existence" (2008: 55) were often mocked and he was frequently accused of being a fraud. "They would have said the same of Socrates", Warner remarks; these tourists were the sons of Xantippe, "who never appreciated the world in which Socrates lived" (2008: 55).

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Indeed, tourists seeking the ultimate Natty Bumppo in the Adirondacks often found their adventure a frustrated one; but they were not the only ones unable or unwilling to submit to the backwoodsman philosophy. None other than the father of Transcendentalism poeticized about the limits of primitiveness. In his poem commemorating his 1858 excursion to Follensby Pond in the company of notable gentlemen such as the painter William James Stillman or the naturalist Louis Agassiz, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests that although the backwoodsman's life is worthy of admiration, social and scientific progress remain man's grandest achievements:

We praise the guide, we praise the forest life;  
But will we sacrifice our dear-bought lore  
Of books and arts and trained experiment,  
Or count the Sioux a match for Agassiz?  
O no, not we! (1994: 157)

I will return to these 'worldly' characterizations of the guide later on, but for now it is important to keep in mind that although most of the romanticist writers who lived through the Adirondack golden years undertook the quest of finding a flesh-and-bone version of Bumppo, there were also unimpressed visitors inclined to knock the hero off his pedestal.

Let us turn to Frye's fictional mode once more to comprehend the overall effect of this case of reality imitating fiction. I mentioned above that Bumpo could be interpreted as a hero superior in degree to other men and to his environment, yet in the process of reality emulating illusion the resulting hero should be classified in Frye's third category: he is superior in degree to other men, but not to his natural environment. As such, "the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature" (1973: 61). Indeed, despite their initial claims, Hoffman, Headley, and Warner resist portraying their subject matters as superior to their environment, opting instead for the characterization of a man *from* his environment. Unlike the Leatherstocking, these heroes are subject to the occasional human error: Cheney accidentally shoots himself (and local tradition has it that he also accidentally killed one of his clients when handing him a loaded pistol); and Sabattis, despite his admirable skills, was depicted by L.E. Chittenden in his *Personal Reminiscences* (1893) as prone to alcohol abuse. In addition to this, their physical presence was not necessarily impressive: the historian Alfred Donaldson describes both Cheney and Sabattis as "small and slight of stature" (2009: 87) and Seneca Ray Stoddard recalled in his 1874 landmark work *The Adirondacks* that Phelps's voice was of a "cheery, cherripy squeaky sort of tone" (2008: 138). Thus for these writers the absolutism of self-reliance elevated the guide's position to a realm of veneration that was not beyond human possibility, but rather, was the result of the craft of self-improvement. His hermeneutical role, though rendering him superior in degree, is not euhemeristic; it is the very limits of human condition—his awareness of time—which provides him with the sensibility to look into the beyond. The hero's descent to the third category reflects Burke's idea that the most effective strategies are those in a middle ground between myth and realism: "one must also, to develop a full strategy, be *realistic*. One must *size things up* properly" (1973: 298), he notes. The American Hermes is therefore necessarily human and necessarily a man of his environment. The same rules of the wilderness apply to him as they would to any other man, but his superiority in degree and the strict discipline noted by Headley allow him to perfect existence in the parameters between life and death.

According to Frye, this type of hero is of a "high mimetic mode" (1973: 61), relegated to the genres of epic and tragedy. As I stated earlier, none of the backwoodsmen are tragic figures; they represent the embryonic form of the American epic. They are not the distinctive kings of the epic, for just as Natty Bumpo exposes Eurocentric diligence for its inefficiency, so American popular culture rejects corporative hierarchies based on social status as the prime structure of its mythology. Rather, the backwoodsman stands as a "stylistic

dignification” (Burke 1973: 413) of the democratic pragmatic impulse of the nation struggling to come to terms with its own identity. Laurence Coupe claims that, for Burke, myth contains the historic process by which “the idea of perfection is generated and sustained” (2009: 7). In order to attain that ‘perfection’ in the form of equipment for living it was imperative for the social group creating the myth to recognize itself in the hero it had created. As Burke points out, although “writ large”, the mythic hero’s life “must have been a replica of [the people’s] own process” (1973: 413). By finding actual men who conformed to the ‘rules of the game’ (in this instance, men who personified democracy) America made an act of affirmation (of national identity) through confirmation.

### III

Ultimately, of course, the ‘rules of the game’ change, and the hero must either be molded within the new rules or confine his eternity to a specific period of history. I have mentioned above a couple of examples in which the guide gravitates further away from myth to a position where he is superior “neither to other men nor to his environment” and is sometimes even deemed as “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves” (Frye 1973: 61). These are Frye’s fourth and fifth categories of the fictional mode, respectively. The fall of the Adirondack backwoodsman should not be seen simply as a series of spontaneous interpretations made by a number of unappreciative tourists who found their guides to be ordinary men. Rather, it should be interpreted as symptomatic of a shift in the dynamics between myth and history.

With the advent of the industrial era and consumerism, the cultural group that had created the backwoodsman surpassed its hero’s archetypal signification. Throughout the golden years, tourism had progressively increased in the North Country: various male sports became fashionable, as did the image of the Adirondacks as a health resort and natural sanatorium for those suffering from ailments caused by city life. Small hotels sprouted throughout the region, and so began the construction of a railroad to Saratoga Springs. In 1869, W.H.H. Murray published *Adventures in the Wilderness, or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks*, one of the pioneering texts in America to present the wilderness as a product for consumption for middle-class New Yorkers and New Englanders. Guides were displayed as a crucial part of the product; in fact, they were depicted as products themselves from which the consumer, that is, the vacationer, had the right to demand certain services. Murray classified guides according to their potential to meet the consumer’s expectations: the “witty guide”, the “talkative guide”, or the

“lazy guide”, depending on their personality traits, or the “independent guide” and the “hotel guide” (2009: 35) depending on whether they worked for themselves or for a business. As if exhibiting branded products, Murray concludes that the first three types are all faulty and are “hindrances to a party’s happiness” (2009: 35). The witty guide is “forever talking” and “thrusting himself impertinently forward”, and therefore the client should “avoid him as [he] would the plague” (2009: 33). The client should as well “beware” of the talkative guide because of his tendency to “brag” and of the lazy guide, deemed as “the most vexatious creature” (2009: 34). The hotel guide was also to be avoided; the very circumstances of his job as an employee of a mediating business fractured the sacred, traditional bond between guide and sportsman. Independent guides, on the other hand, lived up to the client’s expectations. They were “quick, inventive, and energetic” (2009: 34) and “models of skill, energy, and faithfulness” (2009: 35), the Leatherstocking that the consumer had bargained for.

That the hermeneutical powers of the guide were becoming irrelevant by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not only due to the clients’ wanting a servant rather than a leader, but also to the fact that the guides themselves had discovered Natty Bumppo as their own marketing strategy. As Williams notes, it became essential for the Adirondack guide to exploit his likeness to the Leatherstocking: “the more writers a backwoodsman could attract, the more famous he might become, and thereby the more clients might seek his services or guests stay at his hotel” (1985: 73). By the 1890s, the excess with which many guides earnestly sought to be replicas of what had been a model only a few decades earlier resulted in a complete implosion of the myth of the backwoodsman. The hotel guide became the standard, as did the backwoodsman employees of private clubs and camps. The celebrated independent guides of the golden years were a grim shadow of their former selves: Cheney had died in 1877, Sabattis had become a Methodist clergyman, Phelps’s quaint services as consort and philosopher discouraged tourists, Alvah Dunning was senile, Jack Sheppard left the Adirondacks when William Seward Webb began expanding the railroad system, and Bill Nye perished in a fire accident. More than ever, drink became the leading problem among the backwoodsmen that had once captured the imaginative powers of their clients. The physician and writer Arpad Gerster recalled in his diaries of the mid-1890s the deplorable state in which he often found the former guide Mike McGuire:

The once indefatigable hunter, famous guide, fisherman, fearless river driver, cook, and generally accomplished woodsman, who earned and spent money “like water”, who was famous for his wit and skill in difficult circumstances surprising the hunter or fisherman, has, in consequence of his addiction to alcohol, become a pauper. (2005: 85)

The new generation of guides that adjusted to the demands of consumer culture found in organizations the most effective way of protecting their interests. In 1891, the Adirondack Guides Association was formed; their aim was to “promote and facilitate travel”, “secure to the public competent and reliable guides” so as to assure “the welfare of tourists and sportsmen” and “aid in the enforcement of the Forest and Game Laws of the State” (Brumley 1994: 28). Similar objectives were soon followed by the Brown’s Tract Guides’ Association, organized in 1898. The bureaucracy surrounding the creation of the Adirondack Park and Forest Preserve in the 1880s and the 1890s launched the State as the new force governing the ways of the wilderness. Gone was the frontier in which the backwoodsman had lived by the laws of self-reliance and had learned to take matters into his own hands. The State was concerned to meet conservationist needs to protect the watersheds and to catapult tourism into a prime source of income: game laws and restrictions on the use of private and public land aggressively stipulated the limits as to what, how, when, and where the backwoodsman was allowed to hunt, fish, or cut down trees. Rather than rebel against legislative impositions, as Bumpo had done in *The Pioneers*, the guides’ associations became an effective tool to ensure their execution.

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I have attempted to present the rise and fall of the myth of a culturally-specific region through Burke’s sociological formulation of literature as equipment for living and a theoretical consideration of Frye’s fictional modes. The diachronic approach to the Adirondack backwoodsman as an archetype and a figure of authenticity reveals that the myth-history antinomy is one based on symbiosis as much as on the competition for credentials. While nineteenth-century America’s anxiety to explain the links between wilderness, individuality, and democracy pressed for the exaltation of exemplary men —either in fiction or in real life— to supply meaning to the circumstances or ‘situations’, the long-term result is a decline of the hero’s power of action. The implosion of the myth through mimetic obsession and the extinction of the basic rituals that defined woodsmanship as an expression of individuality (the ‘rudimentary’ technology used by the guides of the golden years for hunting, camping, and cooking, and more importantly, the traditional union between guide and client, where the backwoodsman played his double role as American Adam and Hermes) point to the uselessness of the myth’s original meaning for post-romanticist society. By the late 1920s enough roads had been constructed and enough detailed maps had been produced to allure tourists of the roaring automobile culture, who were bound to find guiding an unnecessary, expendable service. As new ‘situations’ surge and old ones fade, the ‘strategy’ is gravitationally pulled downwards, and the hero is ripped from his proximity to myth and precipitated into the light of common day: it is the unequivocal symptom of the process by which history overcomes myth.

## Notes

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1. Hurlbut was the defense attorney when Foster was put on trial for the murder of Peter Waters, known as 'Drid'. The trial brought Foster's popularity to its climax, and when Joseph Grady published his history of the Adirondacks in 1933, a century after the trial, he could still claim that "[Foster] looms heroically in the region's history as the slayer of the last Indian known to fall in the long series of feuds that have added bloody romance to the historical literature of the mountains" (71). Drid, an Indian of the St. Regis tribe, lived with his family in the same vicinity as Foster. For a long time the animosity between the two men was confined to verbal insults and death threats, but when Drid, who was in his late twenties, assaulted Foster, now in his mid-sixties, with a knife, the old trapper resolved to take matters into his own hands. The next morning, on September 17, 1833, Foster shot Drid as he was paddling his canoe, before several eye-witnesses. Foster turned himself in at Lewis County, only to find that nobody would issue a warrant for his arrest there. He was more successful in Herkimer County, and after a year in jail, the trial was celebrated on September 3 and 4, 1834. The testimonies of the witnesses

turned out to be unsubstantial. The verdict was clear: 'not guilty', which pleased not only Foster, but also the multitude that cheered for the trapper and embraced him as a hero.

2. Hounding, jack-lighting, and still-hunting are three types of traditional deer-hunting in the Adirondacks. The first consisted in releasing hound dogs into the woods to chase the deer down to the lakeshore, where the sporting party awaited. The huntsman would either shoot or paddle close to the swimming deer, beating it to death or slitting its throat. Jack-lighting involves approaching the deer in the night time, when the animal comes to the shore to graze and drink at ease. The hunter, quietly paddling his boat towards his prey, carries a light strong enough to blind the deer, which, unaware of the approaching danger, stands mildly alert, staring at the light. The hunter succeeds in getting quite close to his prey, from where he can usually get a straightforward and easy shot at the target. Lastly, still-hunting consists in the more strenuous practice of tracking the game on foot and getting the best aim possible so as to mortally wound the deer.

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