Joe Skimmons

2.13.17

Sec 303

Exercise 2.3

Does our view on the beauty of wilderness come from our immersion in it, or our romanticism of it from afar? In the case of Christopher McCandless, who perished in Alaska after spending time in the wilderness and living as simply as possible the answer is not so clear. If he had decided to remain in his normal life and not escaped into the wild, he would probably still be alive today. This begs the question, was the reward of living in the wilderness worth giving up his own safety? Is immersion in the wilderness that much greater than simply observing what the media portrays nature to be, or experiencing nature to a lesser degree?

Thoreau would have agreed with McCandless’s decision to immerse himself, as he was quoted in “Walking”, saying “I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted” (Thoreau 14), meaning that no form of nature other than being fully immersed in it can quench the thirst he was for the wilderness. For Thoreau, the thought of being fully immersed in Nature being thought of as a bad thing would be heresy, and he would support McCandless’s decision, even though it resulted in his death. Cohen, on the other hand has a very different view relating to a person’s immersion in nature. Where Thoreau believes it is an honorable and humbling experience, Cohen would disagree with the idea that McCandless needed to leave home and everything he had in order to find the “modern” idea of wilderness, which is actually a construct of the human mind. Instead, nature is in everyday life and not just in the sublime and grandeur sights that McCandless ended up finding on his journey. Cronon would also argue that McCandless’s view of nature throughout his journey was shaped by the sublime and religious views of nature, such as the ones put forward by Thoreau. By viewing nature as wonderful and full of proof of God, Thoreau shaped the idea that the wilderness is separate from everyday life and something that humans need to go out and find. As Cronon states in “the Trouble with Wilderness” , “the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” (Cronon 13). This belief created McCandless’s need, and contributed to his eventual death.