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Introduction

In the 1850s and 1860s Americans began turning to new landscapes to express their changing perception of nature. Whether faraway places – tropical forests, ice-bound vistas, desert islands – or the swamps, marshes, and uninhabited beaches closer to home, landscapes previously neglected were seized upon. Such imagery posed an alternative to high Romantic iconography, associated, for example, with the Hudson River school and to the moral allegory and aesthetic criteria that underlay it. The new resonance that natural images assumed just before the Civil War reflected both the self-consciousness and cosmopolitanism of an emerging middle class and a deep-seated cultural strain. In keeping with the deflation of Romantic ebullience – the loss of faith in the boundless capacity of unaided intuition occurring at this time[1] – nature was becoming less a source of moral insight and more a sanctuary from an increasingly urbanized and technological environment. This development helped set the stage for the rise of such late nineteenth-century trends as tourism, naturalism, and social Darwinism. But it is especially important in its own right. Severe cultural conflict and change led to a resourceful new symbolic mode.

Interest in the new landscapes coincided with a renewed apprehension of the natural image in its often startling immediacy, a retreat from the didactic tone and "picturesque" conventions canonized by the preceding generation of writers and artists. Even more important than the growing emphasis on the scientific accuracy of observation, however, was the way in which the new landscapes were likely to present an altogether indifferent or hostile face to the world of human enterprise and social concern. It is in this respect that they fall under the age-old rubric of "desert" places. The term at once recalls the wilderness of the Old Testament and designates wasteland. Its old-fashioned usage referred to "any wild, uninhabited region, including forest land . . . deserted, forsaken, abandoned" (Oxford English Dictionary). Swamps, in particular, had been characterized as desert places from the earliest years of English settlement in North America.

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Yet by the mid-nineteenth century the associations of these waste places were changing, gaining in nuance and sometimes actually reversing in value. Articles in such magazines as *Harper's Monthly, Putnam's*, and *The Atlantic* (to name only the most significant to begin publishing in this period) not only expressed but also largely shaped the attraction of the new reading public to exotic and even alien experiences. Such periodicals were filled with accounts of travel and adventure in faraway places, especially Latin America. *Harper's*, especially, contained numerous illustrations that brought the world all the more vividly into middle-class parlors and libraries. The theme of immersion in the unknown became standard popular fare and was adopted and refined by a number of writers and artists.

The novel description provided metaphors through which to explore the inner self and to expand the horizons of culture. Remote from the arena of public meaning, desert places had always alternated uncertainly between outer world and inner. With growing dissatisfaction over the course of civilization in the years before the Civil War, this subversive ambiguity began to offer the means for developing a world apart from civilization or at least for bringing about a significant adjustment in the traditional relationship between nature and culture. As civilization came to seem burdensome, nature tended to be progressively interiorized and relativized.

If the outlines of this development appeared on the European scene as well – the dialectical counterpart, ultimately, of the reification of the material world wrought by capitalism – its American nuances were molded to the peculiarities of the American environment. The shift in the attitudes of Americans during the Mid-Victorian period from moralistic preoccupations to a concern with psychic fulfillment and self-exploration was effected to a surprising extent by attention to landscapes that – unlike mountains or waterfalls, lakes, or forests – had never before been awarded particular notice, much less positive value.

The way in which a landscape is represented pertains not only to its physical shape but also to what artists and writers project on it, owing on the one hand to their professed values, hopes, and ideals and on the other to their implicit fears, prejudices, and needs. Hence, given the orientation to nature that we find in America during much of the nineteenth century,[2] descriptions of landscapes can be a revealing index of both the culture's inner life and its professed worldview. Psychic projection is especially evident in desert landscapes that, by definition, are untrammeled by conventions that reflect conscious aspirations to the exclusion of other kinds of meaning. Regions of the unknown have often provided open fields for the projection of unconscious material. But the invitation to psychic projection was never more imperative than in the case of the swamp, an image whose complexity and elusiveness, as I hope to show, could lure awareness through an endless array of dissolving surfaces and shifting dimensions.

To reconstruct the traditional associations, basic beliefs, empirical observations, and metaphoric suggestions that comprised the cultural profile of the swamp image during the nineteenth century affords an organic basis for comparing the responsiveness of various levels of culture to new experiences. Indeed, to study the response of various nineteenth-century Americans to this multiplex and multivalent image is to peer through a keyhole into the inner

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sanctum of the culture where reside some of its most furtive but urgent motives. However delimited the perspective, we may glimpse there what is simply not to be encountered in the breezy hallways and sunny verandahs at the culture's more accessible levels. Even though it never did so, the image of the swamp might well have provided some writer with an organizing metaphor – like Herman Melville's white whale and the whaling industry – for the most profound and poignant problems of American culture at mid-century. As it was, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her second novel, *Dred, A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856), came closest to making it such, though she too fell sadly short.

In any case, response to the swamp, as well as to such related landscapes as jungle and marsh, was not merely symptomatic of underlying cultural issues. This study rests on the assumption that images play an instrumental role in the evolution of cultural sensibility. It argues for the partial autonomy of images in shaping new cultural forms and styles and thereby influencing basic attitudes and values. And the claim for such autonomy is philosophically justifiable when applied to an age that still assumed an "objective" nature.

During the 1850s the swamp overcame, in the minds of many thoughtful Americans, its age-old stigma. Rather than evoking stock responses, it began to be confronted with fresh awareness and even to be inhabited imaginatively. Its associations had been traditionally tied to theological and folkloric contexts: It was the domain of sin, death, and decay; the stage for witchcraft; the habitat of weird and ferocious creatures. These associations remained current, at least in the popular mind, right up to the present. But this scrutiny of the swamp, through exploration and advancing scientific knowledge, led to a number of unforeseen implications. The image, realized more and more as an environment as well, illuminated emergent attitudes and half-repressed emotions and also gave shape to the moods and insights being engendered by a changing economic and social reality. These novel moods and insights in turn imparted mystique to a landscape hitherto shunned.

At the most visible levels of American culture, artists and writers discovered the distinctive "imagistic" features of the landscape: the arabesques of its vines and tendrils, the shifting patterns of light that played about its fastnesses, the surprising prospects offered at almost every step. This aestheticization of the swamp image revealed an ever-closer and more widespread engagement with the landscape in the years around the Civil War. Even more significantly, characteristics long noted – the sultry atmosphere, the treacherous mire, the bewildering vegetation – were granted a new, more positive perspective. The immersion in the unknown that desert places had always represented came to be embraced by many as not only a dangerous but also an exhilarating and self-renewing experience.

At the deeper levels of the culture, the swamp emerged as a metaphor of newly awakened unconscious mental processes. Here, the ongoing dialectic between image and meaning became synthesized. As the anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner argued, cultural evolution pertains to metaphor. Metaphor is a way of grappling with the unknown, of understanding complex and contradictory experiences not amenable to logical analysis. Geertz sees metaphors as the creative aspect of ideologies and as equivalent to maps

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through unfamiliar socioeconomic terrain for which established cultural norms fail to provide direction.[3] Turner views metaphor as "a certain kind of polarization of meaning in which the subsidiary subject is really a depth world of prophetic, half-glimpsed images, and the principal subject, the visible, fully known (or thought to be fully known component), at the opposite pole of it, acquires new and surprising contours and valences from its dark companion."[4]

How does this metaphoric function intersect with the social milieu? Alterations in the socioeconomic climate of the mid-nineteenth century – most of all its heightened freedom, variety of life, and quickened pace – opened up new areas of human interaction and disclosed previously unfathomed aspects of consciousness that lay on the fringes of thought and behavior but sank roots deep into the cultural ferment. A developing self-awareness lay behind the quickened interest in the metaphoric possibilities of the swamp that, owing to its own recent emergence from the realm of social taboo, could embody heretofore-unsanctioned types of experience and feeling.

But for this very reason, the image left its imprint on what it had come to express. As Turner put it, in metaphor, the "dark companion" of the image also falls under the influence of the association; because "the poles are active together the unknown is brought just a little more into the light of the known."[5] Accordingly, such elements of Modernist consciousness as a feeling for the portentous, ambiguous, or ambivalent or for the animistic or the insidious (representing to some extent a recrudescence of primitivistic sensibility within a more self-conscious awareness) could be experienced and explored through swamp and jungle imagery, which thus fulfilled its metaphoric potential. Although all these states of mind, whether challenges to the norms of morality or displacements of spiritual essence, became increasingly salient features of people's experience in mid-nineteenth-century America, they were most strenuously exercised in the presence of swamps and jungles.

Its character complicated and enriched by the engagement with both its material and expressional aspects, the image of the swamp developed as an ever more potent metaphor. The core of my study is consequently an analysis of swamp and jungle images from what I call a *phenomenological* perspective. I shall examine the image of the swamp, as perceived in contemporary descriptions and representations, in relation to the prevailing epistemological and aesthetic criteria, in order to show how it came to challenge the Romantic-realist iconography. For instance, whereas the Romantic approach to landscape stressed dramatic contours (as shown in relatively distant prospects) and pastoral or instructive associations, the energy and intricacy of jungle vegetation tended to undermine these inherently moralizing conventions.

By the same token, the more the perspective entered the actual landscape (as with the depiction of lowland scenery it inevitably did), the less well the image could transmit an unequivocal message and so serve a didactic purpose. Gaston Bachelard's concern with "the onset of the image in the individual consciousness"[6] is relevant here. As he contended, "Some might insist on speaking of symbol, allegory, metaphor, and ask the philosopher to designate moral lessons before images. But if images are not an integral part of moral thought, they would not have such life, such continuity."[7] Indeed, it is the

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subtle, endlessly variable reverberations that the image stirs in the individual consciousness before the imposition of stable patterns of conceptualization that constitute the dynamic aspect of moral thought. A phenomenological approach, in Bachelard's terms, thus highlights the way in which images and moral thought interacted dialectically to determine cultural boundaries.

Bachelard's distinction between images and moral thought corresponds to the difference that another French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, drew between *meaning* and *signification*, using a terminology with even wider ramifications: "By *signification* I mean a certain conventional relationship which makes a present object the substitute of an absent object; by *meaning* I denote the participation of the being of a present reality in the being of other realities, whether present or absent, visible or invisible, and, eventually, in the universe."[8]

In other words, meaning refers to the image per se, with its potential for forming relationships, whether physical or imagined, between itself and the rest of the universe. Meaning therefore underlies and subsumes the total range of significations, those conceptual relationships that define a cultural identity and that, because they are concerned with questions of value, limit the chances for making connections among distinctly perceived entities. This is not to suggest that the image lies beyond the social construction of meaning; it simply distills itself at a level of the self that is relatively free of the accretions of such constructions and thus is energized by the instinctive response.

We may think here of Samuel Coleridge's famous distinctions between allegory and symbol, fancy and imagination. Coleridge, too, assumed "a sort of participation mystique" linking us with the symbol, as Angus Fletcher noted.[9] It is intriguing to consider in this light the reappraisal of landscapes like the swamp in relation to the flowering of American symbolism during the 1850s. I argue that the probing of the texture, contours, and associations of surfaces by American writers (especially Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau) was a way of awakening wonder and realizing a reality that represents a fulfillment of Coleridgean theory never rivaled by the English Romantics themselves, inheriting as they did the idealizing temperament and diction of the eighteenth century. Once liberated from the grasp of the Ideal, the symbol could become a more effective medium for metaphysical truth, psychological insight, and social reality.

The idea that meaning involves the "participation of the being of a present reality in the being of other realities" is instrumental in understanding not only the shift in the recreation of the swamp in America but also the way in which we conceive of this shift. In adopting a phenomenological approach, we naturally are less concerned with the significations that Americans imposed on the landscape, given their preconceptions, than with those meanings of the phenomenology of the images themselves that tend to subvert the adequacy and authority of the conventional symbols.

This is a subtler distinction than it might first appear, as the act of perception is itself so interpretive. We are in effect simply shifting to a level of interpretation at which there is less of a bifurcation between subject and object. To intuit meanings at this level demands our empathy for both the subject represented (the landscape) and the mind behind the representation. We might

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speculate on the impact of the representation on the public it addressed; yet this question lies largely outside the scope of this book, as it seeks to indicate only generally the currency of swamp, jungle, and marsh images in the United States during the Victorian period, while suggesting what impacts such images had on basic values and assumptions.[10]

Still, this book is less a chronicle of American encounters with the swamp and other desert places than an examination of evolving literary and cultural sensibility. I have chosen to concentrate on the cultural transformation of the 1850s and 1860s as the matrix for the most important alteration to occur in literary, artistic, and even popular conceptions of such landscapes. The symbolic potential of an image must always be weighed against those factors that determine the culture's ability to exploit it.

To clarify further the relationship between imagery and cultural sensibility, it is useful to draw a parallel between Sartre's notions of signification and meaning and what the art historian Erwin Panofsky defined as *iconography* and *iconology*.[11] Panofsky isolated three levels of meaning above the formal basis of any image, which apply equally to painting and to real life (and, by extension, to literature). The first level consists of "primal" or "natural" meanings, including the recognition of facts and expressions (a level generally mistaken, says Panofsky, for the formal level). We see something – a collection of sense data – as a manifold, a "man" or a "tree," and we may also apprehend a complex of emotions. The second level is that of conventional meaning, of signification. This is the iconographic level, involving the connection of motifs with themes and of concepts with images.

Turning to nineteenth-century representations of the swamp, we could point here to common motifs like the moss-draped oak or the lone bird, an egret perhaps, as discrete iconographic elements. Of the lone bird, for instance, consider the description by the eighteenth-century naturalist William Bartram: "The solitary bird . . . stands alone on the topmost limb of tall dead cypress trees, his neck contracted or drawn in upon his shoulders, and beak resting like a long scythe upon his breast. In this pensive posture and solitary situation, it looks extremely grave, sorrowful and melancholy, as if in the deepest thought."[12]

There is a suggestive pictorial analogue to this description in a work entitled *Louisiana Swamp* (Figure I.1) by William Buck – an artist working in New Orleans during the latter part of the nineteenth century – suggesting how persistent Bartram's conception was. Painters of the swamp generally place the bird not in a tree but (obviously for the sake of composition and to give it prominence) somewhere in the lower foreground. In any case, the point is that the bird, though entirely naturalistic in appearance, exemplifies the pathetic fallacy; it commands a consistent, conventionalized emotional response. The same is true of the oak, no less melancholic with its "funereal" trappings. Both motifs focus the mood of the landscape as a whole, offering a kind of shorthand for its overall meaning. The remainder of the composition falls into place around this unitary pattern. Like the bird or the tree, everything seems suffused with the air of pensiveness and dejection.

Motifs like the melancholy oak or the sentinel bird might best be classified as emblematic; their function relates them to the long-standing tradition (ul-

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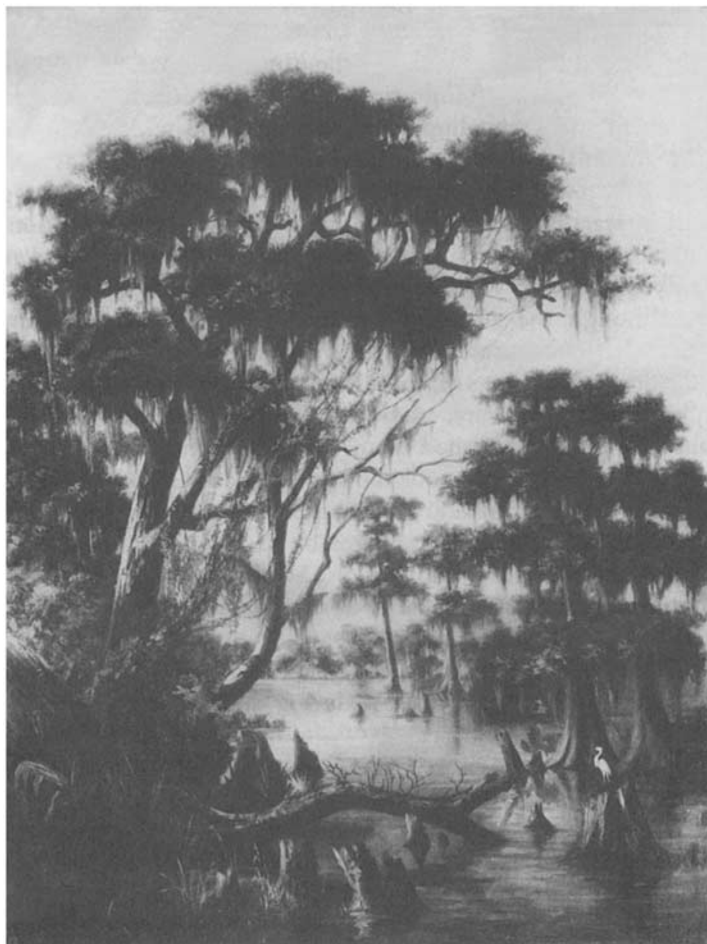

Figure I.1. William H. Buck (American, born in Norway, 1840–1888), *Louisiana Swamp* (oil on canvas, 18 × 24 in., c. 1880). Acquired through the Ella West Freeman Foundation Matching Fund, New Orleans Museum of Art.

timately medieval) of allegorical pictures or heraldic devices accompanied by a label and usually a verse relating a moral truth.[13] Such emblems referred to certain topics or master narratives – the pilgrimage or life journey, the *psychomachia,* the chain of being – that organized society's values and sanctioned modes of behavior according to the Christian theological framework. We think immediately of John Bunyan's Slough of Despond. Emblems functioned as codes through which cultural concerns could be communicated and enforced.

In emblems, as in allegories (in Coleridge's definition), vehicle and tenor remained distinct. Ideally, in their schematic pictorialism and rigid meaning, emblems were meant to intrude between artist, reader, or viewer and the world of ideas to prevent any exchange that might generate dispute. The web of semantic and semiotic possibility in a visual image was mediated by con-

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ventions that proscribed its ambiguities, substituting a linear pattern for the normal visual continuum.[14]

Panofsky's third level of meaning, the "intrinsic," pertains to iconology. Intrinsic meaning is "a unifying principle which underlies and explains both the visible event and its intelligible significance, and which determines even the form in which the visible event takes shape."[15] We move away, in other words, from the text or painting itself into culture viewed as a gestalt, a complex of interacting forces. Iconology refers to the interpretation of symbolic values "which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he intended to express."[16]

Hence, although the swamp's conventional meaning (or iconography) clearly reflects larger cultural interests and problems, its implicit meanings help open up the deeper workings of the culture. With the dissolution of centralized authority and social hierarchy, traditional codes continued to carry meaning, but because they were detached from any fully coherent system of values, their individual formulations took on new inflections and often surfaced in new contexts. Similarly, an alteration in the usual composition of a landscape (in itself a cultural paradigm) impinges on the signification of that image, throwing it off balance in revealing ways. Stable patterns of experiencing and understanding something can yield to dynamic patterns. A quality of strangeness, or otherness, may eventually pervade the image, transforming it from a conventional symbol into an object of considerable subjective fascination, ready to displace the culture's most enduring touchstones.

It is difficult to miss the feminist implications of such otherness for certain trends in American culture with which the emergence of the swamp as metaphor is associated. Indeed, the aura of prohibition that traditionally surrounded the landscape may be attributed to the predominance well into the nineteenth century of Protestant (especially Puritan) patriarchal values.

In the growing fascination for the swamp during the middle of the century, we witness firsthand the erosion of patriarchal patterns of culture, motivated by an urge to control or suppress a "female" nature as the source of heretical and potentially anarchic meaning. We also detect the concomitant fabrication of alternative versions of America, associated not only with women and matriarchy but also with blacks (later we shall examine the popular image of the escaped slave hiding in the swamp) and with manifestations of the savage or precivilized. Above all, the swamp became a symbol for Southern civilization, whether positively or negatively conceived. Even the Cavalier figure so closely identified with the antebellum South shared many affinities with the connotative world of the swamp. The ambivalence with which all such figures and concepts were invested attests to the struggle for repression in Victorian culture, which is what makes them so revealing.

My view of what Ann Douglas called the "feminization of American culture" does not include her negative judgment of the trend.[17] Surely, some of the most creative aspects of American thought derived from the matriarchal and feminist perspectives of nature's meaning. Metaphors can be associated with one another, often linking diverse areas of experience; this process was begun during the Mid-Victorian period. Consider, for example, the etymology

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of the word *mother* offered by Noah Webster in the *First American Dictionary* (1828). It includes such associations as "matter," "mold," "mud," "stuff, the material from which anything is made," "womb," "cause," "origin," "root," "spring," "matrix," "the bed of a river, a sink or sewer," "pus," "purulent discharge," "vagina," "stark naked," and "hysterics."[18]

The list suggests one important set of connotations that the swamp can provoke and helps locate that landscape on the underside of patriarchal culture, dominated by the body, materiality, corruption, infection, sexuality, and irrationality – but also origin and creativity. What prompts these associations in the case of the swamp is the resistance of nature to the values of the dominant industrial-capitalist order.

The relationship of swamp imagery to the hegemonic values of capitalism is, however, two edged. As I have already suggested, swamp imagery would not have flourished without the aid of capitalist expansion and class formation. First, the shift of much of the population from producing to consuming goods and enjoying increased leisure time led to the relaxation of strict moral codes that was necessary before a taste for the "wayward" environment could be cultivated. Second, the rise of tourism, particularly in exotic locales like the swamps of Florida, was part of a growing cosmopolitanism that helped inculcate the self-consciousness of the new bourgeoisie. Cultural forms were generated from the new sensations confronting the average person, but such forms could easily be appropriated by the stereotyping processes that empowered the expanding and ever-more tyrannical market. It is crucial at every point to try to determine the role of imagery in interacting with the forces of modern life. To a large extent, it was simply compensatory, a symbolic antidote to the rigors and depredations of the new system. No wonder that this interest in the swamp came at a time when the new market economy was finally being accepted by the American public (at least in the northeastern part of the country). The vogue for the swamp following the Civil War, I believe, was part of the consumerism that seemed to be overtaking every aspect of American life. But there are nonetheless examples of the swamp's truly creative and subversive potential.

To assess the alterations in the conception of an image we must consider the various forces at work in the culture as a whole. Knowledge of the cultural background also helps explain why such motifs as the sentinel bird or moss-draped oak lose prominence or disappear altogether at a particular time, making room for other less familiar, more ambiguous features and a different feeling. Panofsky pointed out that iconology is as much above the sphere of conscious volition as expressional meaning is beneath it. Potential meaning – both phenomenological and iconological factors – thus surrounds intentional meaning, the expressional and the intrinsic interacting dialectically from different directions on the area of the known.

This configuration confirms the dynamic of cultural evolution as I see it: image and interpretation working together to inject traditional meaning into new forms that in turn influence what is perceived.[19] Despite the dichotomy that I am suggesting between image and interpretation, the connection between them is indissoluble. Accordingly, language, literature, and art must be given

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the same status as productive forces that we give to the manufacture of goods and services. Underlying my methodology is the assumption that no real distinction can be drawn between matter and spirit. Far from being ontological categories, matter and spirit are human constructs whose changing relationship reveals its evolving social and cultural orientation.

Given this dialectical view of cultural unfolding, the changing response to the swamp and its related images offers some clues to understanding the movement out of the sentimental ethos in the 1850s and 1860s that took place largely beyond the realm of articulate values. Even if this transition was finally only a prelude to the proliferation of genteel platitudes in the postwar period, it does indicate a period of searching and reevaluation in which some Americans took a plunge into the whirlpool of the primitive self.

The psychological repercussions of the swamp were most pronounced in its peculiar ecology. Mid-Victorian nature writers observed that the swamp lives off its own decay and produces so much vegetation that it can actually be seen to strangle itself. Contemplation of this mingling of forces normally thought to be opposed – life and death, good and evil – undercut the fundamental assumptions connected with the sentimentalist quest for purity and flight from death and both prefigured and later affirmed the Darwinian struggle for survival. To polarize life and death had been a way of closing off the physical and unconscious aspects of life that might interfere with the economic enterprise and the moral crusading implicated in it. To merge life and death opened up new avenues for culture to move in.

It is no accident that this shift in sensibility occurred during a period of increasing sectional divisiveness culminating in the Civil War. Sensitivity to the more radical implications of the swamp may be viewed as a by-product of the failed compromise that had been pressed by conservative Whigs like Daniel Webster. In talking about the prospect of disunion in a speech at Capon Springs, Virginia, in 1851, Webster used swamp imagery: "But secession and disunion are a region of gloom, and morass and swamp; no cheerful breezes fan it, no spirit of health visits it; it is all malaria. It is all fever and ague. Nothing beautiful or useful grows in it; the traveller through it breathes miasma, and treads among all things unwholesome and loathsome."[20] Webster's use of the swamp as moral emblem here contrasts the ideal of union with an imagery of dispersal, infection, corruption, and death that unveils the one-sided hegemonic and patriarchal prejudices at stake in his political culture.

The increasingly positive aura the swamp assumed in the 1850s indicates a reconfiguration of notions of the self and its relation to the body politic that contradicted the assumptions behind Webster's devotion to the shibboleths of union, constitution, and compromise. Moreover, much of the imagery we shall examine represents a departure from the aesthetic desiderata of the American picturesque tradition with its ideological conservatism as well as its adherence to a Burkean organicist political theory and to oratorical strategies that assumed the "sublime" universal appeal of the spoken word. Like the conservative Whigs of Massachusetts – where this political culture found its purest form and staunchest advocacy – the promoters of the picturesque and the sublime guarded elitist values emphasizing unity and hierarchy, collective

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