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Douglas Thayer (1929-) in 1987
Author of *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*

Douglas Thayer's *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*: A Mormon's Christian Response to Wilderness

Thayer's stories reveal the perils of seeking a secular salvation in the wilderness and explore how humans might relate to nature without desroying it or being pulled into a nonhuman existence.

Eugene England

Much of the tragic in American experience comes from what we and the wilderness have done to each other, and Douglas Thayer conveys that tragedy as well as any contemporary western writer. His second collection of stories, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*,¹ gives us a remarkable range of insight into the particular history of that destructive relationship in the West, from the arrogant, self-defeating mountain men of the 1830s, intruding into lands and cultures they could not comprehend, to modern men and boys who try, at great cost to themselves and others, to recapture the wilderness and merge with the primitive. This book places Thayer² in the top rank of western fiction with Levi Peterson, whose *Canyons of Grace* explores the values as well as the dangers of wilderness as a place for modern people to seek salvation.

From the first, the Puritans saw the wilderness west of them as the dark abode of witches and Indians, literally the devil's territory, which they must subdue—even slash and burn and kill—in order to expand their little plantations of light. With the opening up in the early 1800s of *the West* by Lewis and Clark and the fur traders who followed them, religious myth and national purpose became fused in our “manifest destiny” to conquer all for American civilization, from sea to shining sea. But both Puritans and mountain men were aware that they had a mighty and mysterious, as well as strangely and terribly attractive, adversary. The early ministers and

missionaries, “called” into the wilderness, gave the devil his due and often loved unto despair both the noble “savages” and the Edenic wilderness they found themselves destroying.

Americans are still living out in life and literature the consequences, in guilt and fear and yearning, of this paradoxical attraction and destruction. We continue to sentimentalize Native Americans while we marginalize their descendants. We spend enormous resources to preserve wilderness on the one hand and wantonly destroy it on the other. Many Americans still seek to find some central meaning to their lives, even some ultimate healing, in a “return” to nature, to the primitive that is best encountered, they naively believe, in wilderness, in the simple, clean life of the desert survival trek or the fall hunt.

Douglas Thayer’s collection ridicules much of this view, both directly and with fine subtlety. His stories demonstrate the consequences of our continuing destructive relations to wilderness and gently point to some alternatives in mature, family- and community-centered living. Thayer grew up in the Rockies, like some of his protagonists, killing whatever wildlife he could, running wild, and swimming naked along the margins of Mormon villages. His conversion came through education and writing, the maturing of his own Mormon faith, and marriage and family late in life.

Thayer did his graduate work at Stanford under Yvor Winters, perhaps the most powerful modern voice against Romantic optimism—and blindness—about nature. Thayer’s early stories reveal a constant and increasingly successful effort, as Bruce Jorgensen showed in an excellent study published in *Western American Literature*, to adopt the major Romantic lyric form, a self-educative meditation in or upon a wilderness setting, “to western Mormon experience and consciousness, but in ways that also question and undercut this form.”³ Thayer’s mature work also reflects a similar undermining of the typical secularized Romantic lyrical *content*: Thayer makes it Christian by turning it from the naturalized supernaturalism of a merely self-imagined interior education or wholeness “back towards the sacred narrative sequence of fall and redemption that it once derived from.”⁴

Thayer has now produced a whole collection of stories with the qualities Jorgensen most praises, beginning with what I believe

is his masterpiece to date, “The Red-Tailed Hawk.” Since it appeared in *Dialogue* in 1969,⁵ this story has seemed to me one of the finest stories I have ever read and has continued to live in my mind with the constancy and power of genuinely great works of art. Seeing it in connection with four other stories of similar theme, I find its power enriched, as I realize more fully how effectively it deals, as most fine literature does, with some central human paradox—in this case, the one that informs the best work of the “high” Romantics, particularly Coleridge and Keats: How can we respond adequately to the pull of nature—the nonhuman—and still remain human? Specifically, how can we relate to the wilderness and not destroy or be destroyed by it?

“The Red-Tailed Hawk” provides an even more decisive and moving critique of Romanticism and of secular modes of salvation, it seems to me, than the stories from Thayer’s first collection that Jorgensen analyzed. While it uses a similar meditative mode, the story is more fully and effectively plotted. Perhaps more important, while many Thayer stories use some form of limited-omniscient central consciousness within the present action for gaining sympathy and revealing complexity of feeling, this one uses an older first-person narrator looking back in clear-eyed judgment on his unredeemed self and on the infusion of grace and the subsequent action that led to his salvation. This device demands of the reader a better, more moral, balance of sympathy and judgment.

But before I discuss this remarkable story in detail, comparing it in theme and quality to one of the greatest Romantic poems, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” I will briefly review all the stories in Thayer’s second collection, indicating how their central concerns are connected to this story and give it a worthy setting.

“The Gold Mine” explores the paradoxical question, What is it that attracts civilized people to the wilderness edges of life, where we are likely to get killed? But this story only *hints* at a possible solution. Like “The Red-Tailed Hawk,” it uses an effective formal device to support its theme: the story is “about” the preservation and transportation through decomposing heat of the body of a young teenage hellion, who has been killed while exploring a mine in the Nevada desert—where his parents have sent him to be rid of him but also where they hope he might possibly be “saved.”

But this narrative actually derives its moral and spiritual life from Maude Miller, the central consciousness whose humanely garrulous and community-building words make up most of the story. She uses the fortuitous object lesson of the death to try to save from isolation and silence another young man, Carl, the discoverer of the body, who has chosen to live alone in the desert and faces, Maude tells him, a similar fate to the boy's:

"You'll die and won't even know it. That sun will bloat you up just like a dead sheep. How do you expect to live on canned beans and stay healthy? . . . Mae and me invited you to our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners both years. You didn't come, though. If I could drive, I'd have been up that canyon after you. You've never come to any of our parties or to church at the junction. . . . Mel says you never get any letters and nobody ever comes to visit." (28)

The sheriff—like the one in "Red-Tailed Hawk," a symbol of imperfect, but real and redeeming, human community—adds some straight talk of his own:

"This desert ain't no place to try to live without friends and family. . . . Why, I've seen men go completely nuts after a year or two of living alone up one of these canyons. They stop eatin' any decent food, and then they stop talking. . . . They start hugging trees and listening to rocks. They talk to squirrels and magpies. But it's when they start making pets out of Gila monsters and rattlesnakes, they find out this desert ain't the Garden of Eden. There was only one of those, and it didn't last long." (33-34)

Carl says only a few words in the story, words like "He's dead" and "No." As Maude talks to him and takes him to his cabin, where she prepares the body for transport, we learn that he has steadily resisted her efforts to include him in her little desert community, that he has steadily withdrawn into a world without church, holidays, even language or consciousness of time, and that he tries to hold to that alienation. But we see him gradually brought into the necessity of helping, finally even to the point of enjoying eating with another human and to some small hope he may return to a human world.

"The Rooster" is Thayer's slightest story here, but it is perhaps his most devastating translation of the brute mountain man into the brute modern suburban American. His protagonist is still trying to live out a fantasized wilderness connection on weekend

hunts but is so enslaved to habits of drink and self-gratifying eroticism that he not only fails as husband and father, but also turns the necessary, even perhaps heroic, hunting rituals of primitive humans into failure and squalor. Thayer confronts us not only with the sad joke perpetuated in the Great Fall Hunts of men and boys throughout America, especially his own Mormon Utah, but also with the degrading horror of misplaced sexuality and related violence. After a morning hunting pheasants without “luck,” the protagonist revisits the swimming hole of his youth, considers swimming naked in it again, but first builds a fire and roasts a rabbit he has killed. He reflects on his forced marriage and decaying body, steps back from the too-cold water, and is turned by Thayer into a grotesque parody of his primitive ancestors:

He took [the rabbit] off the spit and began to eat, breaking the parts off with his fingers, tasting the burned outside flesh. . . . The grease and juice smeared his hands, and small drops fell on his paunchy stomach, catching in the body hair. Naked, crouched there, he ate the whole rabbit, throwing the white bones into the fire, where they smoked and turned brown. (66)

In contrast, Mr. Wahlquist, of the title story, turns his hunt in modern Yellowstone into the tragic rather than the trivial. The narrator, a young, unconverted version of Thayer who, like him, worked one summer as a park ranger, gives a sympathetic, even seductive, view of old Mr. Wahlquist, who has spent most of his life wishing he could have been a mountain man or, better, a Crow Indian. As a boy in Kansas, he began collecting artifacts and visiting the sites of battles and buffalo slaughters; he has read all he could on the early West and the Native Americans and even learned to speak Crow. He believes, and the narrator agrees, “They should never have let Lewis and Clark go up the Missouri. . . . The land was sacred” (85). Now he comes to Yellowstone each year to be as close as possible to wilderness as it was and makes the narrator a disciple:

Mr. Wahlquist saw and heard things I didn’t. He took me to see rock graves, old fishing camps, and black ledges of basalt from which the Indians had made weapons and tools. It was as if what he looked for, and the only thing that could make him happy, was finding a band of Crows still living in the park. . . . And he would see them across a meadow or on a hill, and they would signal him to come, and he would leave me, . . . vanish into the surrounding mountains. (86)

Though quite taken in with this sentimental vision of his mentor, the narrator allows us to hear, occasionally, the cynically humorous and sensible voice of an older ranger that is much like Thayer's present, post-Romantic, ironic one: "Barney said if the Park Service closed the dump, the grizzlies would move into the campground to forage. 'That ought to add to the general merriment around here.' He shook his head. 'Wonderful'" (90-91).

The story is the narrator's day-long reverie as the rangers search for the missing Mr. Wahlquist. When they find him, inevitably destroyed by his quest—killed by a grizzly he had attacked with a Crow lance from his collection—the narrator is quite sobered, still yearning for the vision but conscious of how it is vanishing into the approaching winter storm.

An approaching storm hangs over the last story, "Dolf," as well. But here, in the 1830s, the mountain men and Crows are real enough—as well as the fiercely destructive Blackfeet. Dolf and his cousin Gib leave Providence, Rhode Island, to travel up the Missouri with one of the early fur-trading companies, just twenty years after Lewis and Clark. Gib, especially, senses a "last chance" to be part of the incredible, raw westering that they have heard about and that is already vanishing toward civilization, and he indeed goes "native." He kills animals wantonly and an Indian savagely, scalping and mutilating the body. He fathers children upon Crow women. He pushes for an opportunity to trap beavers over the winter in an untouched valley—untouched because it is too close to dangerous Blackfoot country; and he refuses to leave immediately when a Blackfoot hunting party comes into the valley.

Gib pays for his arrogance with his life, and the story is about Dolf's heart-pounding run for his own life, his ingenious trapping and killing of most of the Blackfeet, and his ultimate destruction in the wilderness through his own tragic mixture of arrogant strengths and blind weaknesses.

Dolf's mistakes include leaving "Providence" (clearly a symbol of the family and of civilized, even sanctified, human community that for Thayer is the only salvation) and eventually succumbing to Gib's temptations of primitivism, violence, and irresponsible sexual behavior. But his more intellectual pretensions of learning the Crow language like Mr. Wahlquist and "thinking" his way through

the adventure with his supposedly superior white-man's rationality are also mistakes which combine to tempt him to extreme and violent actions—cutting his arm to leave a blood trail to bait his trap and with screamed insults goading the last Blackfoot to unnecessary hand-to-hand combat—actions that at first seem to save, even exalt, but finally undo him:

The knife struck him in the stomach again. Falling, he hit on his side, so that he saw the high, grey mountains for that moment when he still had vision. Through the dark he heard the man scream words, the scream becoming a chant. He felt his long hair being twisted, tightened, his head lifting from the ground.

He did not understand the words. (153–54)

In these last words of the book, Thayer shows himself fully sensitive to the Romantic poets' fearful awareness of a tragic paradox about experience and words: that the very unity with nature they so much yearned for, the very merging into wilderness and the primitive that so attracted them, inevitably meant enormous loss—not only of the higher consciousness that they found so alienating from nature and wished to leave behind, but also, as an inevitable result, of language, of poetry itself, of the very *means* for exploring and expressing their yearning. Language, understood and well used, is essential for understanding the values, as well as the dangers, of wilderness; and it is what succumbing to wilderness, as Dolf does, will inevitably destroy—we literally lose understanding of the words.

The storms that darken three of these stories and close in upon Dolf at the end of the book to obscure life as well as vision are, of course, supreme symbols of the destructive, life-ending force of wilderness. This symbolism is clearest in "The Red-Tailed Hawk," where the protagonist, much like that of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," is tempted toward a kind of suicide—a literal merging of body and mind into unconscious unity with nature—and nearly "succeeds" in a terrible storm.

"The Red-Tailed Hawk" deserves close analysis. It not only follows the strategy of what M. H. Abrams calls the "Greater Romantic Lyrics"; it also conforms to Abrams's description, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, of the characteristic Romantic effort to find salvation. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats hoped to

bridge the fundamental void between ego and non-ego through a self-educative “circuitous journey” out from perplexity and alienation into a meditation on the natural scene and then back to a higher form of unity with the primal essence from which we have emanated. The young protagonist of Thayer’s story powerfully experiences the Romantic temptations to deify nature and attempt to lose one’s alienating self-consciousness by merging with nature, even, if necessary, in death. The mature narrator, clearly a voice for Thayer himself, is able, in looking back, to give us sympathetically the boy’s meditations, to still feel deeply the temptation. But he is also able, first in imagery and then in described action, to give us the profound, tragic awareness of the high Romantics: that the human mind is finally entirely separate from nature and can cross the void only in death or oblivion and thus by the loss of the very ability to perceive and be tempted by nature—to feel or express anything.

In his “Ode to a Nightingale,”⁶ Keats, speaking to the bird in the first-person present, creates in language and rhythm the same feeling of painful ease that the bird’s song induces—ease because the poet is pulled for a time away from man’s “fever” and “fret” (“What thou among the leaves hast never known”) but increasingly painful through an implicit sense of the cost of such a journey. The first four stanzas continue this typical Romantic nostalgia, using the poetic devices of fantasy, witty comparison, and consciously hypnotic imagery and rhythm to evoke that alien realm and the desire to enter it. But there is the latent irony that both the language capable of such invention and the very feeling of nostalgia itself are possible only to the conscious human mind. That irony emerges into a direct facing of the pain as the fantasy reaches a crescendo of awareness of the consequences of actually joining the nightingale: “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod.” The bird would go on singing, but the poet, reduced to mere dirt in the decay of death, would hear nothing.

The mind draws back from merging because it sees that means the mind’s dissolution. The remainder of the poem is a gradual withdrawal from the “perilous” realms Keats has voyaged upon, realms that include an imagined extending of the bird’s song

back into prehistory and toward the primitive in man where the unity with nature might have been possible. The poet realizes that those realms, “faery lands forlorn,” are, like death, no longer real alternatives to man: “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!” Thus Keats explicitly recognizes he must remain alone, “sole.” He must be inescapably alienated in the self-consciousness of rational thought and language if he is to be able even to yearn for the nightingale’s song and seductive nonhuman ease, including its release from moral responsibility (“No hungry generations tread thee down”).

However, the nostalgia remains. The yearning to know the nonrational and subhuman, the fascination with loss of painful identity, the desire to leave behind the grief and despair and responsibility and to merge fully with nature—all are fully felt and continue. But the poet makes a deliberate choice to refuse the temptation, even insists that he has been only “half” in love with easeful death—that it had only *seemed* rich to die. Nature is fascinatingly beautiful and temptingly mysterious, and death and the primitive, which are part of nature, constantly encroach upon us unless consciously resisted. To yield to them in the hope of perfect understanding and unity, in the desire to escape our painful self-awareness and experience of loss and change, is a delusion: the merging will cost everything, including the yearning and the hoped-for understanding.

This remarkable poem recognizes that the basic Romantic impulse to integrate the self with nature is a false and dangerous hope; any paradise thus regained is merely death. No matter what form the Romantic myth of salvation took, at its end lay some form of identity-destroying Unity that doomed the very values and meaning and means of the journey. Growth, education, higher consciousness, language, poetry—all were lost.

The greatest Romantics, like Coleridge and Keats, understood the dilemma and accepted the tragedy, affirming as primary the journey itself—the *process*, not the end. They accepted self-consciousness and language, despite the pains and limitations of both, as necessary accoutrements of the journey—and as possible sources of joy and growth and meaning. Keats achieves his best liberation from human mortality and alienation not when, in the

first part of the “Ode,” he seeks to *leave* the world of actual process, but when, in the last part of the “Ode,” he *accepts* that world, however regretfully. His perception is made perfectly explicit in a letter written a year later: “I wish for death every day and night . . . and then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing. Land and Sea, weakness and decline, are great separators, but death is the great divorcer for ever.”⁷

Thayer’s protagonist in “The Red-tailed Hawk” makes his similar discovery in almost the same language, which is the language, of course, of the grown man thinking back to his moment of grace and resurrection when he was a boy at the point of near death from freezing:

Snow filled the wrinkles of my coat; I was turning white.

All summer the [dead] cows had been vanishing, the wire-hung birds [I had killed] too, the carp, the little buck. And I had no name for it, only vanishing, knew only that it was not swimming, not running naked in the moonlight, not embracing trees, not soaring. It was not feeling. I grew whiter, saw myself vanishing into the snow. I watched, and then slowly, like beginning pain, the terror seeped into me, the knowing. I struggled up, fled. (16)

The story opens with images of cold: the icy alarm clock the boy grabs and keeps under the covers so as not to wake his disapproving mother, the winter chill on his clothes, thoughts of the icy river, and a connection in his thoughts to the mystical chill of nature that draws this young Romantic: “I was going after geese. . . . The great grey Canada birds were fantastic, huge almost, wild and free, with a clamorous gabbling that made me *shiver*. Yet I had never killed one” (1; italics added). The irony here, which we can see is working both consciously and unconsciously in the older, reflecting protagonist, is, of course, apparent most on a second reading; it is *then* that we (with him) know a different connection between cold and geese and death than the boy now can imagine.

However, the boy does have an imaginary life: “I wanted to be left alone, wanted that fiercely, didn’t want anybody around me, touching me. I wanted to be alone like the birds. Birds were alone” (2). He cuts himself off from the human, the touch and company

of his younger brother, the discipline of his father (“I hated him . . . for kicking me in the butt hard, for always shouting that I was a fool. But I never cried. He couldn’t make me” [2]), the solicitous love of his mother (“[She] might wake up and, because of the storm, change her mind about me going, or make me take Glade” [4]). Instead he kills and stuffs birds, hangs them on wires in the barn, suspended as if in flight, the prize “a large red-tailed hawk, wings spread, soaring” (2), hanging from the ceiling over his bed: “Birds could fly wherever they wanted, could be alone. Nothing touched them but the air” (2).

The boy not only wants, with his stuffed birds, to isolate, to fix and preserve, the flux of random particulars that makes up the nonhuman realm, but he wants to merge into that realm himself:

I would sneak off my pajamas and curl tight under the blankets but not really feel them in the darkness because they were warm like my skin, like air. And that summer often I lay on top of the covers spread out, stared up at the hawk, lifted my naked arms. (2)

But these fantasies are not merely erotic: “Mostly I dreamed other dreams, dreams of flying, soaring, lifting away from the earth, being an eagle or a hawk, vanishing into the yellow sun” (3). He lets kites go to escape into the wind, sails his model glider off a cliff into the thermals until it disappears into the sun, stands with arms raised as if he, too, would glide away. He dreams of having a room alone, putting all his birds there as if they were flying, with a breeze through the open window to stir them: “I would be in a flock of birds” (3). He lives in the river bottom, swimming, fishing, hunting, soaring on the great rope swing, running naked through the green willows, lying spread-eagled under the sun: “I was always hiding from Glade and the others, the sheriff when he came down to see if we wore swimsuits; always driven, I reached out for something infinite, not knowing what it was, but feeling myself drawn to it, some final feeling beyond the earth in the yellow sun” (5).

This imaginative quest finally becomes terribly real. It is three days before Christmas, at the winter solstice, when the sun is at its lowest southern arc but when, from ancient times, humans have detected the turning point of its journey back, its resurrection, and have made celebration, even transposing the birthday of the Son of

God to that season. At the beginning, the boy is still in decline, determined to make his ultimate quest though he knows a storm is coming, alienated from his father, resenting the music and people and gift-giving of Christmas, reaching away from family and human community toward the clean chill of the nonhuman: “Through my cotton gloves I felt the cold metal of my shotgun, a double-barrel. I didn’t care if they all woke up to a cold house. My father was on graveyard shift at the dairy” (4).

The developing plot is interspersed with reflections placed in the boy’s mind, but, as we are sufficiently reminded, these are actually the words and understanding of the older narrator, the future man who developed from this boy and who begins to include images of death in the boy’s paradise that were, in his earlier, fallen state, incomprehensible to him:

I would see only the few starved-out horses left in the fields to winter. Sometimes the horses died, froze icy, the legs sticking straight out. When the snow melted, the magpies flocked out of the willows to feed on them. (5)

. . . A magpie flew over me and dropped into a field with a dozen others and some crows near the partially covered skeletons of three cows killed by lightning that summer. (6)

The depths of the boy’s moral confusion, in his surrender to the seductions of imagined existence in free and irresponsible nature, are revealed in his own words—but, again, selected by the older, more fully understanding and more self-revealing, self-condemning narrator. As he comes to a creek, intending to jump shoot ducks on his way down to the river, he finds that two men have already gone ahead in a boat, spoiling the shooting and solitude for him: “I cursed, the words steady and half silent, like a hiss” (6). He follows the men, vainly hoping to get a straggler from one of the flocks they raise, then sneaks up close as they rest before returning—and hears one bragging about his shooting: “I aimed first at him, centering the bead on his head. A little closer, I could have blown big holes in the boat the same way I blew holes in sheds and wooden fences. . . . I clicked my safety back on, turned and started down the river” (7).

Thayer works constantly with plot as well as theme and imagery. The journey proceeds, with specific details about vistas and landmarks,

to establish precise locales and distance—and to prepare us for the long, desperate, agonized return journey in the storm. Meanwhile, the interspersed reflections flesh out fully the boy's world of daring, isolated, almost desperate immersion in nature:

I had been first across the swimming hole that April, Glade shouting for me to come back, not to try it, that it was too cold, too swift. They'd had to lift me out, build a fire for me. I vomited, blacked out, but I had been first across. (7-8)

Then again:

In the summer, alone, my swimming suit hung in a tree, wearing only my Keds, I liked to stand in the willows and let the fluttering green leaves touch me. Rifle in hand, I hunted unseen, alone, sometimes naked except for my feet, shouts drifting to me from the swimming hole. When a thunderstorm came over the west mountains, and the farmers, afraid of being hit by lightning, left the fields, I sneaked out to stand in the belly-high green wheat, watch the great flashes of light, hear the roar and rumble of thunder, feel the wind, the wheat waving against me. Or I climbed high in the bending trees, wrapped my arms and legs around the limbs, squeezed until the rough bark hurt, rode the trees. (8)

The narrator constantly intrudes upon his own ambivalent nostalgia with his present sense of what for the boy should have been a warning. He reports it as mere observation, but we increasingly, especially on a second reading, feel it with the proper force of premonition:

If I tired of hunting birds, I shot the surfacing carp, watched them fade into the deep grey water, . . . followed them, walked slowly into the river . . . until the water was over my head and the slow summer current carried me. I spread my arms and legs to touch the flesh-warm water, became nothing, only part of the water. . . . Then I lay in the yellow sun, looked at it through the cracks between my fingers, tried to see what it was. (8-9)

In his further reflections part of the mystery of the sun's meaning is revealed—naively, it would seem, except that the narrator's adult awareness is implicit in the selection of detail and color: "Days later I saw the carp near the edge of the water, bleached yellow-white and pecked by magpies" (9). The image of the yellow sun, center of the attractive mystery of life in nature, is transmuted into the yellow carp, corrupted in death by that same sun and the boy's unholy quest for its "mystery."

The theme of human alienation—and the paradoxical quest for perfect life and freedom through killing and pretending—is continued right to the denouement of the story. The boy remembers (that is, the narrating man recreates remembering) that he had pretended not to know where the young spruces in the river bottoms were and so refused to get one for Christmas at his father's request: "I didn't want to cut a tree, drag it up to the house, hang it with tinsel . . . didn't want to watch it turn brown" (10). But juxtaposed to that memory is this one of another form of his dishonesty—his trying not to look clearly at the death he causes:

A hundred yards back from the spruces, under the snow, were the bones of a little spike buck I had killed a year earlier in August. . . . I shot him through the eye with my .22, watched him until he was quiet, and then turned him over so he didn't look hurt. I went back three times that day, squatted down by him, brushed off the ants. The second day the magpies were on him. (10-11)

Late in the day, later than he has ever stayed and than his parents would allow, he has his final fantasy, remembering the huge cottonwood, the rope tree where he had climbed higher than anyone, then had intentionally tipped out and barely caught himself ("I liked the feeling, the shiver" [11]). He remembers swinging, then letting go:

And for that one moment I flew, saw everything below me, soared, hovered. Then I dropped, felt the tingling in my crotch, felt the air, the rushing, heavier water. And I stayed under until they all thought I had drowned. I was both bird and fish. If anybody climbed as high as I had, I would climb higher, swinging again and again, falling until my nose bled . . . so that I looked wounded. The letting go, the soaring, was the very best part. I wanted to feel like that forever. (11)

Seeking the limits of that sensation, the boy had gone out at night, run naked down the sandy path, then ventured into the swimming hole:

The dark air over me, I floated, tried not to move, the water fusing with the darkness. . . . The second night, in a wind I rode the trees, the high limbs, heard a million leaves, screamed into the sound. And when I swung on the rope it was fantastic because I couldn't see where the water started. The tingling went from my crotch clear to my skull, and I reached out to a world I had never known, something inviting me, as in my dreams. (13)

This passage is fully believable in context as the protagonist's personal memory, and it is also a precise and sophisticated statement of the fundamental Romantic yearning toward the seductive, but impenetrably alien, natural world.

But now the mature narrator recreates for us the fated end of such a quest: with all things dead around the boy, and the storm and cold and darkness descending, the geese finally come. Thayer has prepared us well with his carefully plotted suspense and also the carefully imaged paradox that in seeking ultimate being and integrity the boy both causes death and tries to ignore its reality. Earlier in the day the boy had killed a hen mallard,

dropping it dead, ragged, where I could drag it out with a stick, glad it didn't float away out of reach. Sitting in my blind again, I arranged the feathers, stroked them, touched the velvet green head. . . . The winter before on Christmas afternoon I had killed a mallard banded in Alaska. I made a ring out of the aluminum band, which I touched in school, in church, took off, read. Ducks could fly wherever they wanted to, up above everything, just in the air with nothing else around them, never touched by anything except water and air. (9)

Now the implicit contradiction in this identification with the ducks he kills—in the attempt to capture their envied perfect existence in pure water and air by stilling them and fixing them on a wire—is brought to a climax in the disparity between his *imagined* kill of the geese (“I would . . . bring them crashing down with perfect head shots” [10]) and the *actuality* (“I shot, missed, shot again, and the lead goose turned completely over and fell broken-winged, crashing into the water” [14]).

Only wing shot, the goose swims beyond reach and the boy has to kill it with another shot, then unhesitatingly strips and swims for it, bringing it back to shore only to find his left glove and shirt blown into the water. The imagery is increasingly ominous as the two beings come together; the yellow of the mysterious sun is now focused in the goose's broken wing—image of the failed dream of a perfect kill—and the warmth of life is literally ebbing for both the goose and him: “Yellow, the broken wingbone stuck out through the feathers. I picked up the goose again and hugged it to me, felt the still-warm body against my numb skin” (15).

The boy tries to dry himself and dress and heads back toward home, into the teeth of the storm, carrying the goose with his

ungloved hand—and soon (as the hand turns to “metal,” picking up the earlier images of the cold, metallic gun and the duck band made into a ring) it is clear that the ultimate unity he had sought with the bird will cost him hand for wing—and will perhaps be death for death. The boy, lapsing toward literal unconsciousness, finally begins to *experience* (not merely imagine) the ultimate sensation of merging he had always sought:

I floated, left the ground, rose, hovered, and it was a sensation I had never known before. . . . I was becoming something beyond myself. I felt no limits, nothing stopping, nothing touching me, as if I were rising alone into light, rising, never falling back, the sensation never dying. (16)

But we (and the narrator to whom Thayer has given that sober and ironic pun about “never dying”) know very well that rather than the sensation never dying, he is feeling precisely the sensation *of* dying, and that will end *all* sensation. At this moment, the lowest possible in the boy’s spiritual fall, as he literally “fell forward into the soft snow, where I lay on my side not caring, the snow not cold anymore” (16), he sees the horn and half-head of the lightning-killed cow he has stumbled over and with his “dead hand” pushes back the snow to see the “empty eye socket, the bone skull.” He realizes that it, and all the dead things, including those *he* had killed, are slowly vanishing—and that he will, too; the merging with nature will not mean heightened being and awareness but the opposite: “I had no name for it, only vanishing, knew only that it was not swimming . . . not embracing trees, not soaring. It was not feeling” (16). And he leaves the gun and the goose and flees for his life.

The boy is saved by the sheriff, sent by his parents’ pleas to look for him—the sheriff, representative of civilized order, society, who had earlier been seen by the boy merely as an intruder on his natural world but is now an instrument of grace and a bridge back to the human community. The boy loses his fingers and nearly dies of pneumonia. He comes up periodically into consciousness within an oxygen tent, which “is like being under water,” either to his mother or to his father, waiting alternately through the nights by his bed. He is terrified of sleep, that little death, and stops his pain shots so he can use the hurt to keep himself awake. He is

taken home to find his family dressed up for a late Christmas they have saved for him and then lies in his bedroom, warm with a new oil heater, looking up at the red-tailed hawk.

But now, like Keats, the boy sees the bird with new understanding of death and of the impossibility of entering its realm—and also of the corruption he had created by trying to capture death: “The yellow glass eyes looked down, the bird motionless, dusty, suspended from a wire. Out in the barn the hanging birds were dusty too, some of them splotted with pigeon droppings” (19). He gets his mother to let his brother Glade sleep with him rather than on the couch and accepts the quiet, sober ministrations of his father before he goes on his graveyard shift.

Then, in a powerful flash forward, the narrator tells of the devastation of later seeing his hand for the first time without bandages, of hiding it, quitting gym so others would not see it, crying to God, making promises, awaking afraid to look. He tells of his father making him start gym again, making him do chores, “no matter how many things I broke or spilled, and although he shouted at me sometimes, swore, he never again hit me” (20). The father tells him, “You can’t hide; you have to live with it.” And of course, it is *literally* life he can and must now live with. As the narrator who makes that pun has since learned well, such acceptance of limitation and responsibility is in every sense true living—the very opposite of vanishing into cold nature. And the narrator returns to the boy lying in bed on that late Christmas, the hawk above him fading, becoming “indistinct” as he “moved closer to Glade, touched him” (20). The final image is the narrator’s conscious recognition (through another double meaning) of the divine and human grace that had saved him: “I had received the most presents.”

An important measure of Thayer’s achievement is the extent to which, like Keats, he is able to embody the full Romantic dilemma, as well as to give it a Christian, even a particularly Mormon, resolution. He suggests, and makes us feel, not only that the central Romantic emotion of attraction to nature and away from the conscious and civilized can be inimical to life itself, as well as to one’s humanity—but he does so without denying the power of that attraction. Though the narrator is a new creature, both fallen from

Eden and redeemed by grace beyond the temptation to return to Eden, he can evoke with lyric nostalgia the still-precious emotions attendant on his youthful closeness to that realm.

Thayer's achievement is supported, I believe, by his Christian faith as a Mormon, which posits—and finds supporting evidence in human experience and the achievements of human language—that there is genuine ontological connection between the mind and the world. A rational basis for this faith is the concept of a God who is not mere allegory, but a moral, personal being who has created man in his image and formed nature after the images in his divine mind—a mind to which man's mind is thus in turn related. God is not a vague “ground of being,” but an actual user and teacher of language himself who can aid in the process of using language to find genuine meaning and to live by it. And nature is not some contingent realm created *ex nihilo* by God, but something with necessary and eternal existence, operating through its own laws that demand respect and offer destruction to those who refuse that respect.

Thayer's protagonist in “The Red-Tailed Hawk” has not merely been true to post-Enlightenment skepticism about the mind's separation from the world and shared the Romantic temptation to merge with it, while finally pulling back from the inhumanity and death such a temptation can lead to. He has also experienced the fortunate fall from Eden's naive, static wholeness; has entered the moral universe of separateness and potential growth or decline; has sinned against the human community and himself; has reached the depths of awareness and accepted his sinful, alienated condition; and has there found and accepted grace sufficient to bring him back into atonement with his human self and other humans, if not fully with the blank, terribly non-human, and dangerous world of nature.

“The Red-Tailed Hawk,” besides being a fine initiation story, is, like Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale,” a rich, sophisticated parable that teaches us in our bones the truth expressed precisely in Emily Dickinson's little verse about “Nature” from “What mystery pervades a well”:

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.⁸

But Thayer also shows how to move firmly past that dilemma and its regret: his protagonist, who gets too close to Nature to know her well, still finds a way, through grace and the restoration of human forms and connections, to retreat and yet bring with him into his new wholeness some of the knowledge and emotion that can be found only in such realms—realms that are perilous and forlorn, but also potent, full of mysterious beauty and saving grace.

Though the older narrator is now a new creature, both fallen from Eden and redeemed by grace beyond the temptation to return to Eden, he can evoke with lyric nostalgia the still-precious emotions attendant on his youthful closeness to that realm. Even at the point of recalling how close he once came to paying literally with his life for letting himself be seduced too far toward that ultimately blank and silent world of pure animal existence, the destructive power of natural wilderness, he is able to evoke the wilderness animals with undiminished adult lyric beauty—as well as with a sophisticated Keatsian undertone of foreboding:

Low, gabbling, three great Canada geese flew out of the greyness below me, shadows, but then blacker, coming right at me in good range. Big, bigger than I had ever thought, beautiful, somebody pounding me over the heart. I watched through a hole in the blind. “Wait, wait,” whispering, “not too soon. Big. Wait, wait.” The gabbling grew louder—marvelous the wings, the long necks, the rhythmic birds. (14)

This is excellent writing, fiction—whether Mormon, western, or whatever—at its best.

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NOTES

¹Douglas Thayer, *Mr. Wablquist in Yellowstone and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1989).

²See my “Wilderness as Salvation in Peterson’s *The Canyons of Grace*,” *Western American Literature* 19 (Spring 1984): 17–28.

³Bruce W. Jorgensen, “Romantic Lyric Form and Western Mormon Experience in the Stories of Douglas Thayer,” *Western American Literature* 22 (Spring 1987): 34.

⁴Jorgensen, "Romantic Lyric Form," 47.

⁵Douglas Thayer, "The Red-Tailed Hawk," *Dialogue* 4 (Autumn 1969): 83-94.

⁶Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁷Bate, *John Keats*, 508.

⁸Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, comp. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961).