



The Ecocriticism Reader



LANDMARKS IN LITERARY ECOLOGY



Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm

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CHERYLL GLOTFELTY

Introduction



LITERARY STUDIES IN AN AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Literary studies in our postmodern age exist in a state of constant flux. Every few years, it seems, the profession of English must "redraw the boundaries" to "remap" the rapidly changing contours of the field. One recent, authoritative guide to contemporary literary studies contains a full twenty-one essays on different methodological or theoretical approaches to criticism. Its introduction observes:

Literary studies in English are in a period of rapid and sometimes disorienting change. . . . Just as none of the critical approaches that antedate this period, from psychological and Marxist criticism to reader-response theory and cultural criticism, has remained stable, so none of the historical fields and subfields that constitute English and American literary studies has been left untouched by revisionist energies. . . . [The essays in this volume] disclose some of those places where scholarship has responded to contemporary pressures.¹

Curiously enough, in this putatively comprehensive volume on the state of the profession, there is no essay on an ecological approach to literature. Although scholarship claims to have "responded to contemporary pressures," it has apparently ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis. The absence of any sign of an environmental perspective in contemporary literary studies would seem to suggest that despite its "revisionist energies," scholarship remains *academic* in the sense of "scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world" (*American Heritage Dictionary*).

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, controversy over the Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest, a wildfire in Yellowstone Park, medical syringes washing onto the shores of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, overtapped aquifers in the West, illegal dumping in the East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emissions standards, famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations special conference on environment and development, a U.S. president declaring the 1990s "the decade of the environment," and a world population that topped five billion. Browsing through periodicals, you would discover that in 1989 *Time* magazine's person of the year award went to "The Endangered Earth."

In view of the discrepancy between current events and the preoccupations of the literary profession, the claim that literary scholarship has responded to contemporary pressures becomes difficult to defend. Until very recently there has been no sign that the institution of literary studies has even been aware of the environmental crisis. For instance, there have been no journals, no jargon, no jobs, no professional societies or discussion groups, and no conferences on literature and the environment. While related humanities disciplines, like history, philosophy, law, sociology, and religion have been "greening" since the 1970s, literary studies have apparently remained untinted by environmental concerns. And while social movements, like the civil rights and women's liberation movements of the sixties and seventies, have transformed literary studies, it would appear that the environmental movement of the same era has had little impact.

But appearances can be deceiving. In actual fact, as the publication dates for some of the essays in this anthology substantiate, individual literary and cultural scholars have been developing ecologically informed criticism and theory since the seventies; however, unlike their disciplinary cousins mentioned previously, they did not organize themselves into an identifi-

able group; hence, their various efforts were not recognized as belonging to a distinct critical school or movement. Individual studies appeared in a wide variety of places and were categorized under a miscellany of subject headings, such as American Studies, regionalism, pastoralism, the frontier, human ecology, science and literature, nature in literature, landscape in literature, or the names of the authors treated. One indication of the disunity of the early efforts is that these critics rarely cited one another's work; they didn't know that it existed. In a sense, each critic was inventing an environmental approach to literature in isolation. Each was a single voice howling in the wilderness. As a consequence, ecocriticism did not become a presence in the major institutions of power in the profession, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA). Graduate students interested in environmental approaches to literature felt like misfits, having no community of scholars to join and finding no job announcements in their area of expertise.

BIRTH OF ENVIRONMENTAL LITERARY STUDIES

Finally, in the mid-eighties, as scholars began to undertake collaborative projects, the field of environmental literary studies was planted, and in the early nineties it grew. In 1985 Frederick O. Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources*, which included course descriptions from nineteen different scholars and sought to foster "a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines."² In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*, whose purpose was to publish brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes, and information pertaining to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Others have been responsible for special environmental issues of established literary journals.³ Some universities began to include literature courses in their environmental studies curricula, a few inaugurated new institutes or programs in nature and culture, and some English departments began to offer a minor in environmental literature. In 1990 the University of Nevada, Reno, created the first academic position in Literature and the Environment.

Also during these years several special sessions on nature writing or environmental literature began to appear on the programs of annual literary conferences, perhaps most notably the 1991 MLA special session

organized by Harold Fromm, entitled "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies," and the 1992 American Literature Association symposium chaired by Glen Love, entitled "American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches." In 1992, at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed, with Scott Slovic elected first president. ASLE's mission: "to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world" and to encourage "new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research." In its first year, ASLE's membership swelled to more than 300; in its second year that number doubled, and the group created an electronic-mail computer network to facilitate communication among members; in its third year, 1995, ASLE's membership had topped 750 and the group hosted its first conference, in Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1993 Patrick Murphy established a new journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, to "provide a forum for critical studies of the literary and performing arts proceeding from or addressing environmental considerations. These would include ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the human/nature dichotomy and related concerns."⁴

By 1993, then, ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school. The formerly disconnected scattering of lone scholars had joined forces with younger scholars and graduate students to become a strong interest group with aspirations to change the profession. The origin of ecocriticism as a critical approach thus predates its recent consolidation by more than twenty years.

DEFINITION OF ECOCRITICISM

What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature

represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact.

But the taxonomic name of this green branch of literary study is still being negotiated. In *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972) Joseph W. Meeker introduced the term *literary ecology* to refer to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species."⁵ The term *eco-*

criticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (reprinted in this anthology). By ecocriticism Rueckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." Rueckert's definition, concerned specifically with the science of ecology, is thus more restrictive than the one proposed in this anthology, which includes all possible relations between literature and the physical world.⁶ Other terms currently in circulation include *ecopoetics*, *environmental literary criticism*, and *green cultural studies*.

Many critics write environmentally conscious criticism without needing or wanting a specific name for it. Others argue that a name is important. It was precisely because the early studies lacked a common subject heading that they were dispersed so widely, failed to build on one another, and became both difficult to access and negligible in their impact on the profession. Some scholars like the term *ecocriticism* because it is short and can easily be made into other forms like *ecocritical* and *ecocritic*. Additionally, they favor *eco-* over *enviro-* because, analogous to the science of ecology, ecocriticism studies relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world. Furthermore, in its connotations, *enviro-* is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment. *Eco-*, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts. Ultimately, of course, usage will dictate which term or whether any term is adopted. But think of how convenient it would be to sit down at a computerized database and have a single term to enter for your subject search. . . .

THE HUMANITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature

departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem.

How then can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature?⁷ The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture. As historian Donald Worster explains,

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding.⁸

Answering the call to understanding, scholars throughout the humanities are finding ways to add an environmental dimension to their respective disciplines. Worster and other historians are writing environmental histories, studying the reciprocal relationships between humans and land, considering nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama. They trace the connections among environmental conditions, economic modes of production, and cultural ideas through time.

Anthropologists have long been interested in the connection between culture and geography. Their work on primal cultures in particular may help the rest of us not only to respect such people's right to survive, but also to think about the value systems and rituals that have helped these cultures live sustainably.

Psychology has long ignored nature in its theories of the human mind. A handful of contemporary psychologists, however, are exploring the linkages between environmental conditions and mental health, some regarding the modern estrangement from nature as the basis of our social and psychological ills.

In philosophy, various subfields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand and critique the root causes of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth.

Theologians, too, are recognizing that, as one book is subtitled, "The Environment Is a Religious Issue." While some Judeo-Christian theologians attempt to elucidate biblical precedents for good stewardship of the earth, others re-envision God as immanent in creation and view the earth itself as sacred. Still other theologians turn to ancient Earth Goddess worship, Eastern religious traditions, and Native American teachings, belief systems that contain much wisdom about nature and spirituality.⁹

Literary scholars specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, and it is in these areas that they are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking. Believing that the environmental crisis has been exacerbated by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and overly specialized way of knowing the world, humanities scholars are increasingly making an effort to educate themselves in the sciences and adopt interdisciplinary approaches.

SURVEY OF ECOCRITICISM IN AMERICA

Many kinds of studies huddle under the spreading tree of ecological literary criticism, for literature and the environment is a big topic, and should remain that way. Several years ago, when I was attempting to devise a branding system that would make sense of this mixed herd, Wallace Stegner—novelist, historian, and literary critic—offered some wise counsel, saying that if he were doing it, he would be inclined to let the topic remain large and loose and suggestive and open, simply literature and the environment and all the ways they interact and have interacted, without trying to codify and systematize. Systems are like wet rawhide," he warned; when they dry they strangle what they bind."¹⁰ Suggestive and open is exactly what ecocriticism ought to be, but in order to avoid confusion in the following brief survey of ecocritical work to date, I am going to do some codifying. Let us hereby agree that the system is not to be binding. Nonetheless, Elaine Showalter's model of the three developmental stages of feminist criticism provides a useful scheme for describing three analogous phases in ecocriticism.¹¹

The first stage in feminist criticism, the "images of women" stage, is concerned with representations, concentrating on how women are portrayed in canonical literature. These studies contribute to the vital process of consciousness raising by exposing sexist stereotypes—witches, bitches,

broads, and spinsters—and by locating absences, questioning the universality and even the aesthetic value of literature that disallows altogether the experience of half of the human race. As in ecocriticism study how nature is represented in literature, so in feminist criticism consciousness raising results when stereotypes are identified—virgin land, miasmal swamp, savage wilderness—and what is not noticed: where *is* the natural world in this text? But nature is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body.

Showalter's second stage in feminist criticism, the womanhood stage, likewise serves the important function of consciousness raising as it rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders literature by means of feminist criticism, similar efforts are being made to recuperate the neglected genre of nature writing, a tradition of nature-oriented writing that originates in England with Gilbert White's *A Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789) and extends to America through Henry Thoreau, John Muir, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Robert Bly, Abbey, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and many others. Nature writing boasts a rich past, a vibrant present, and a bright future, and ecocritics draw from any number of existing critical theories—psychoanalytic, new critical, feminist, Bakhtinian, and others—in the interests of understanding and promoting this body of literature. The evidence that nature writing is gaining ground in the literary world is witnessed by the staggering number of anthologies that have been published in recent years.¹² In an increasingly urban society, nature writing has an important role in teaching us to value the natural world.

Another effort to promulgate environmentally enlightened criticism involves identifying mainstream genres, identifying fiction and poetry that work manifests ecological awareness. Figures like Willa Cather, Robert Lowell, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, Gary Oliver, Ursula Le Guin, and Alice Walker have received critical attention, as have Native American authors, but the horizon of possible subjects is suggestively open. Corresponding to the feminist interest in the lives of women authors, ecocritics have studied the environment in an author's life—the influence of place on the imagination—that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to the understanding of his or her work. Some critics find it worthwhile

places an author lived and wrote about, literally retracing the footsteps of John Muir in the Sierra, for example, to experience his mountain raptures personally, or paddling down the Merrimac River to apprehend better the physical context of Thoreau's meandering prose.

The third stage that Showalter identifies in feminist criticism is the theoretical phase, which is far reaching and complex, drawing on a wide range of theories to raise fundamental questions about the symbolic construction of gender and sexuality within literary discourse. Analogous work in ecocriticism includes examining the symbolic construction of species. How has literary discourse defined the human? Such a critique questions the dualisms prevalent in Western thought, dualisms that separate meaning from matter, sever mind from body, divide men from women, and wrench humanity from nature. A related endeavor is being carried out under the hybrid label "ecofeminism," a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. Yet another theoretical project attempts to develop an ecological poetics, taking the science of ecology, with its concept of the ecosystem and its emphasis on interconnections and energy flow, as a metaphor for the way poetry functions in society. Ecocritics are also considering the philosophy currently known as deep ecology, exploring the implications that its radical critique of anthropocentrism might have for literary study.

THE FUTURE OF ECOCRITICISM

An ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?

I noted above that ecocritics have aspirations to change the profession. Perhaps I should have written that I have such aspirations for ecocriticism. I would like to see ecocriticism become a chapter of the next book that redraws the boundaries of literary studies. I would like to see a position in every literature department for a specialist in literature and the environment. I would like to see candidates running on a green platform elected to the highest offices in our professional organizations. We have witnessed the feminist and multi-ethnic critical movements radically transform the profession, the job market, and the canon. And because they have transformed the profession, they are helping to transform the world.

A strong voice in the profession will enable ecocritics in mandating important changes in the canon, the curriculum policy. We will see books like Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* become standard in American literature. Students taking literature and core courses will be encouraged to think seriously about the relations between nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit and found ecological implications. Colleges and universities of the twenty-first century will require that all students complete at least one course in environmental studies. Institutions of higher education today do business on recycled-content paper—some institutions

In the future we can expect to see ecocritical scholarship become ever more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international. Interdisciplinary work is well underway and could be further facilitated by inviting experts from a wide range of disciplines to be guest speakers at conferences and by hosting more interdisciplinary conferences on environmental topics. Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion, and focuses on ecocritical work in the United States. The next generation will be an international one, for environmental problems are global in scale and their solutions will require worldwide collaboration.

In 1985, Loren Acton, a Montana ranch boy turned astronaut, flew on the Challenger Eight space shuttle as payload specialist. His observations may serve to remind us of the global context of ecocriticism.

Looking outward to the blackness of space, sprinkled with stars, the universe of lights, I saw majesty—but no welcome. Below me was the planet. There, contained in the thin, moving, incredibly fragile biosphere is everything that is dear to you, all the human drama. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is.¹⁴

ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION

This book is intended to serve as a point of entry to the field of ecocriticism. As ecocriticism gains visibility and influence with increasing numbers of people have been asking the questions

44. Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, 165–80. Brooks is to be credited with documenting women's participation in the history of nature writing in America and with his sympathetic evaluations of their contributions. He leaves unexamined, however, the possibility of any difference between the reasons for men's and women's valuations of the natural world.

SCOTT SLOVIC

Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology



THE INTERIORITY OF OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.—John Muir, *Journal* (1913)

Wilderness is above all an opportunity to heighten one's awareness, to locate the self against the nonself. It is a springboard for introspection. And the greatest words, those which illumine life as it is centrally lived and felt, intensify that process.—Bruce Berger, *The Telling Distance: Conversations with the American Desert* (1990)

Sharon Cameron has suggested that “to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and sometimes about how the mind sees itself” (44). I believe this statement holds true not only for Henry David Thoreau, to whom Cameron is referring specifically in her book *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (1985), but also for many of Thoreau's followers in the tradition of American nature writing. Such writers as Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez are not merely, or even primarily, analysts of nature or appreciators of nature—rather, they are students of the human mind, literary psychologists. And their chief preoccupation, I would argue, is with the psychological phenomenon of “awareness.” Thoreau writes in the second chapter of *Walden* (1854) that “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake” (90). But in order to achieve heightened attentiveness to our place in the natural world—attentiveness to our very existence—we must understand something about the workings of the mind.

Nature writers are constantly probing, traumatizing, thrilling, and soothing their own minds—and by extension those of their readers—in quest not only of consciousness itself, but of an *understanding* of consciousness. Their descriptions of this exalted mental condition tend to be variable and elusive, their terminologies more suggestive than definitive. Thoreau himself (drawing upon classical sources and daily cycles for his imagery) favors the notion of “awakening”; Dillard and Abbey use the word “awareness” to describe this state, though for Dillard such activities as “seeing” and “stalking” are also metaphors for stimulated consciousness; Berry, at least in his major essay “The Long-Legged House” (1969), emphasizes “watchfulness” as a condition of profound alertness; and for Lopez, two complementary modes of “understanding” natural places, the “mathematical” and especially the “particularized” (or experiential), serve as keys to mental elevation.

Both nature and writing (the former being an external presence, the latter a process of verbalizing personal experience) demand and contribute to an author’s awareness of self and non-self. By confronting “face to face” the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its “otherness,” the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown. Many literary naturalists imitate the notebooks of scientific naturalists, the logbooks of explorers, or even the journals of nonscientific travelers in order to entrench themselves in the specific moment of experience. The verbalization of observations and reactions makes one much more acutely aware than would a more passive assimilation of experience. As Annie Dillard bluntly puts it in describing one of her two principal modes of awareness, “Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it” (*Pilgrim*, 30).

Giles Gunn writes that “Modern man tends to view the encounter with ‘otherness’ . . . as a mode of access to possibilities of change and development within the self and the self’s relation to whatever is experienced as ‘other.’” We associate “reality,” he continues, “with the process by which we respond to [other worlds’] imagined incursions from ‘beyond’ and then attempt to readjust and redefine ourselves as a consequence” (*Interpretation of Otherness*, 188). The facile sense of harmony, even identity, with one’s surroundings (a condition often ascribed to rhapsodic nature writing) would fail to produce self-awareness of any depth or vividness. It is

only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who *they* are and what’s what in the world.

Most nature writers, from Thoreau to the present, walk a fine line (or, more accurately, *vacillate*) between rhapsody and detachment, between aesthetic celebration and scientific explanation. And the effort to achieve an equilibrium, a suitable balance of proximity to and distance from nature, results in the prized tension of awareness. “This oscillating movement between man and his natural doubles is,” according to Alain Robbe-Grillet, “that of an active consciousness concerned to understand itself, to reform itself” (“Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” 69). Geoffrey Hartman, in commenting on Wordsworth, uses different terms to say something similar: “The element of obscurity, related to nature’s self-concealment, is necessary to the soul’s capacity for growth, for it vexes the latter toward self-dependence” (“Romance of Nature,” 291). In other words, the very mysteriousness of nature contributes to the independence and, presumably, the self-awareness of the observer. This dialectical tension between correspondence and otherness is especially noticeable with Thoreau, Dillard, and Abbey—these writers vacillate constantly between the two extreme perspectives. Berry and Lopez, however, do not vacillate so dramatically. Their sense of correspondence with the natural world in general or with particular landscapes does fluctuate, sometimes seeming secure and other times tenuous, but for the most part these two writers assume an initial disjunction (that of a native son newly returned from “exile” in Berry’s case, and that of a traveler in exotic territory in Lopez’s) which is gradually, through persistent care and attentiveness, resolved. The result, for Berry, is a process of ever-increasing “watchfulness”; for Lopez, one of deepening respect and understanding.

For all of these contemporary American nature writers, the prototypical literary investigation of the relationship between nature and the mind is Thoreau’s Journal (*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, hereafter referred to and cited as Thoreau’s Journal). The Journal, far from being a less artful and therefore less interesting subject for scholars than the works published during Thoreau’s lifetime, is actually an example of nature writing at its purest, no conscious attempt having been made to obscure and mystify the writer’s intense connection or disconnection with his natural surroundings. In the published works the temporal element tends to be muted (by extensive philosophical digressions in his 1849 *A Week on the*

Concord and Merrimack Rivers and by the somewhat concealed seasonal movement in *Walden*, for instance) and the authorial self often dissolves into multiple personae. The Journal, on the other hand, generally presents consistent temporal and spatial locations; we receive almost daily entries from a consistent narrator and it's usually clear exactly where Thoreau was and what he did or thought while he was there. The Journal gives us the sense throughout of Thoreau's actual presence in the natural world, something we encounter only intermittently in the published works, even in the many essays organized according to the excursion format. And not only is the author's proximity to nature more consistent and concrete in the Journal, but there is also a more explicit *testing* of the boundaries of self against the "other world" of nature.

One of the major "issues" of the text, which covers more than twenty years of Thoreau's life (1837-1861), is whether there is, in Emersonian terms, a "correspondence" between the inner self and the outer world, between the mind and nature. This is a question that Thoreau never answers finally—and thus results the rich tension of identity forging. The Journal, an almost daily record of observations (predominantly measurements of seasonal transformations), shows the author's efforts to line up his internal rhythms with those of external nature. There are times when Thoreau takes pleasure in the apparent identity of his own fluctuating moods and the "moods" of the passing seasons. At other times, though, it is nature's very *otherness* which fascinates and delights him: "I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him" (4.445). The idea of nature as distinct from man gives the cranky author more than mere refuge from the annoyances and trivialities of the human world. This understanding, which comes from constant and thorough observation of natural phenomena, helps Thoreau both to enlarge his minute self by anchoring it in nature and, conversely, to become more deeply conscious of his human boundaries. Along these lines, in his 1986 study William Rossi provides an illuminating discussion of Coleridge's theory of "polarity" in the context of Thoreau's frequent opposition of civilization and wildness. Rossi suggests that the very independence of the two realms (and, on a smaller scale, the individual human observer and the specific natural phenomenon) creates a vital tension that binds the poles together ("Laboratory of the Artist," 57-103). Virtually all nature writers in Thoreau's wake perpetuate his combined fascination with inner consciousness and external nature, but I have chosen to focus my comments in this essay on Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez be-

cause they represent with particular clarity modern variations of Thoreau's two opposing modes of response to nature: disjunction and conjunction.

For the purposes of the writer at the time of the actual observation (or of the journal-writing, which may, in Thoreau's case, often have occurred back at his desk), the journal is simply the most expedient way to keep a record, to protect observations from the foibles of memory. But even more importantly, as Dillard suggests in the quotation I gave above, putting things into language helps people see better; and this can happen either at the moment of confrontation or in retrospect while sitting at a desk hours later. Of course, it is possible to record observations without strictly keeping track of chronology, but for the nature writer the omission of time-of-day and time-of-year would betoken a vital lapse of awareness. Nature changes so dramatically between noon and midnight, summer and winter, and sometimes even minute by minute, that the observer fails to grasp the larger meaning of phenomena if he or she overlooks the temporal aspect. Also, by making regular entries, the writer establishes a consistent routine of inspection; the condition of awareness thus becomes more lasting, and is not consigned to occasional moments of epiphany alone. For the reader, the journal form in nature writing (either the private journal or the various kinds of modified journals and anecdotal essays) produces a vicarious experience of the author's constant process of inspecting and interpreting nature, and heightens the reader's awareness of the author's presence in nature.

My interest in the way nature writers both study the phenomenon of environmental consciousness and attempt to stimulate this heightened awareness among their readers has led me to consult some of the scientific literature on environmental perception. Stephen and Rachel Kaplan—most recently the authors of *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (1989)—edited an earlier collection of essays called *Humanscape: Environments for People* (1982), which I have found particularly useful. In his introductory essay, Stephen Kaplan cites William James's seminal definition of the perceptual process: "Perception is of probable and definite things" (31). "By 'probable,'" Kaplan writes, "[James] meant that we tend to perceive what is likely, what is familiar, even when the stimulus is in fact not familiar. By 'definite' he meant that we tend to perceive clearly, even when the stimulus is vague, blurred, or otherwise ambiguous" (32). In other words, rather than attending fully and freshly to each new experience when we look at the world, we tend to rely upon previously stored in-

formation—what Kaplan and others refer to as “internal representations” (33). Although we may generally feel certainty when we perceive external reality, we are actually making what Kaplan calls “best guesses” (32) and *not* perceiving everything thoroughly, in detail. The reasons for this perceptual process are, of course, understandable. Often we don’t have the time for thorough inspection—when we round a bend in the mountains and glimpse a large gray object, it is useful to decide quickly whether we have seen a dozing grizzly or a mere boulder. What especially interests me, though, is the implication that even when we feel certain we *know* our natural environment, we probably do not—we may not even have really looked at it.

It seems to me that Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey, in their efforts to stimulate our attentiveness to nature and to the foibles of our own minds, our delusions of certainty, take pains to invoke and then upend precisely the system of perception which Kaplan, echoing James, describes. Later in the *Humanscape* volume, William R. Catton, in an article entitled “The Quest for Uncertainty,” suggests that “one important type of motivation underlying the recreational use of wilderness by the average devotee may be the mystery it holds for him” (114). The excitement of mountain climbing, he explains, “is not in reaching the summit but in carrying on the task in the face of doubt as to whether the summit will be reached or will prove unattainable” (113). With a similar sense of the grippingness of uncertainty, Dillard and Abbey tend to place special emphasis on the startling, sometimes even desperate, *unpredictability* of the natural world. They capitalize in their essays on the harsh and chilling features of the landscapes they love, recounting with particular avidness experiences in which perception has not been probable and definite. The emotional result is disgust, horror, annoyance, surprise, and almost always (at least in retrospect) satisfaction with the intensity of the experience.

Critics have traditionally been thrown off track by the flashy catchwords of Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—specifically, the language drawn from either religion or natural science—and by their own desires and expectations. Think of the book’s title, for instance: *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. This in itself indicates the usual poles of critical response. Many readers approach the book expecting (and frequently *finding*) a “pilgrim,” a person making a quest for spiritual knowledge or fulfilling a spiritual commitment through meditation on wonders of divinely mysterious origin. Others dwell upon the *final* words of the title, “Tinker Creek,” suggestive of a

natural place. They expect to read meditations on nature or on man/nature interaction, and these readers are often put off by what they perceive as the work’s anthropocentrism. Hayden Carruth, in an early review, deplores Dillard’s abstractness and her failure to attend “to life on this planet at this moment, its hazards and misdirections,” referring to Wendell Berry’s writing as more responsible and “historically . . . relevant” than Dillard’s (640). And still other readers combine the two “poles” of the title and label Dillard a “visionary naturalist,” though not always a successful one (Lavery, 270).

But Dillard is not now and never has been precisely a religious mystic *or* an environmentalist. She calls herself an “anchorite” on the second page of *Pilgrim* and a “nun” in her next book of prose, *Holy the Firm*, which appeared in 1977 and in which one of the few characters other than Dillard herself is an accident-scarred—“Her face is slaughtered now” (41)—girl named “Julie Norwich.” But despite her beguiling hints and suggestions Dillard is not a latter-day Julian of Norwich. Nor is she Rachel Carson’s literary “daughter,” alerting the nation to the urgent problems of the environment. She is, I would say, a kind of hybrid—if we were to push this hypothetical lineage to absurdity—of Thoreau and William James. The “wake-up call” of Thoreau’s chapter “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” (*Walden*) reverberates throughout her works, as does the process of psychological experimentation demonstrated in the *Journal*, the alternating closeness to and estrangement from nature. Dillard is—and here I believe I deviate, at least in emphasis, from previous readers of her early work—a devoted student of the human mind, of its processes of awakening, its daily, hourly, and even momentary fluctuations of awareness. And in this way she is much like William James, an investigator of the varieties of human consciousness. However, whereas James dwelled upon the varieties of *religious* experience, Dillard’s emphasis (especially in *Pilgrim*—less so in her recent work) is on the varieties of *natural experience*—or, more precisely, on the experience of both heightened and dulled awareness of nature.

This is not to discount entirely the important religious and natural historical currents in her work. But I do think the *central* focus of her writing has always been the psychology of awareness. Even *Living by Fiction* (1982), with its concern for how writers working in various fictional and nonfictional genres experience “the raw universe” (145) and transform this experience into literature, is, to a great degree, psychological. In *Pilgrim* and *An American Childhood* (1987), Dillard displays with particular vivid-

ness her habit of provoking insight and wonderment by estranging herself from ordinary scenes and events. Fecundity and death, the opposing processes of nature so prominent in *Pilgrim*, are probably the most fundamental and therefore common processes in the natural world. Yet Dillard, in her dream-like observations of a giant water bug sucking the life out of a frog and the reproduction of a mantis ("I have seen the mantis's abdomen dribbling out eggs in wet bubbles like tapioca pudding glued to a thorn," *Pilgrim*, 167), uses unexpected language to transform the quotidian into the cataclysmic, thus snapping herself alert to the world and to her own thought processes. It is the verbalizing process, as she herself notes in the chapter of *Pilgrim* called "Seeing," which makes her a more conscious, meticulous observer of the commonplace, an observer able to appreciate the strangeness (the "otherness") of the world. Through her encounters with nature and her use of language, she awakens to her own participation in and distance from the organic world and to the dimensions of her own mind.

Readers of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* usually have the impression of the author's palpable proximity to nature, and her intimate knowledge of it. But the book is actually a study of Dillard's *disconnection* with the little patch of Virginia countryside near Tinker Creek, full of awareness-prompting misperceptions, occasions when the author recalls expecting to see one thing and then encountering another. Every little thing surprises Dillard—awakens her. For her, being awake is not a steady condition or even an evolutionary process, but a repeated event. One key example of this awakening process—which few readers are likely to forget—appears at the very outset of the book. Dillard recalls how she once walked beside the creek with growing confidence—indeed complacency—in her ability to perceive the landscape: "I learned to recognize, slowing down, the difference in texture of the light reflected from mudbank, water, grass, or frog" (5). The sense of a *certain* environment, it soon becomes clear, is evidence of the viewer's unawareness. Eventually she saw a frog that didn't jump when she neared it, and she writes that as she stared, "lost" and "dumbstruck,"

he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to settle and collapse like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. (5-6)

However, this "monstrous and terrifying thing," every bit as much as the glorious "tree with lights on it" (33) which she later encounters, is just what Dillard seeks in her explorations of nature. It is a stimulant of awareness, much as her highly animated language stimulates the engagement of her readers through surprise and exaggeration. Dillard's own alertness to nature is erratic, sometimes seriously flawed. In an essay called "Dancing With Nature," Don Mitchell points out that Dillard's knowledge of praying mantises was less than adequate when she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Merely passing along a misconception (typically a grotesque one) that she received from the nineteenth-century French entomologist Henri Fabre rather than something she glimpsed with her own eyes, Dillard sustains, in Mitchell's words, "a hundred-year-old libel on praying mantises" by suggesting that females "devour their male sex partners" ("Dancing," 195-96). This misconception inspired some of the most memorable prose in Dillard's book—yet I would imagine that even Mitchell's rebuttal would be, for her, an occasion of celebration, a surprising disruption of the world flattened into predictability.

Edward Abbey, like Dillard, has often found his work co-opted by readers who need his voice for purposes other than his own. In his tongue-in-cheek Introduction to *Abbey's Road* (1979), Abbey claims to recall an incident which occurred after he gave a reading "at some country campus in Virginia." When a student accused him of not looking "right," not fitting the image of "a wilderness writer. An environmental writer," Abbey supposedly responded with the following indignant self-definition: "I am an artist, sir, . . . a creator of fictions" (xxi-xxii). But this poor student is certainly not alone in his failure to sort out Abbey's intriguingly overlapping literary personalities. The critics, too, have often been baffled, either ignoring his work altogether or confining it to rather predictable and inadequate labels. Much of Abbey's writing, both his fiction and his nonfiction, defies easy categorization—like George Washington Hayduke, the green-beret-turned-ecoterrorist in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey's 1975 novel, the writer's own language feints one way, dodges capture, hides out until the coast is clear, then parades itself once again before carrying out yet another daring escape.

Desert Solitaire, his most famous work of nonfiction, exists for many readers as pure rhapsody—indeed, as an elegy for the lost (or, at least, fast-disappearing) pristinity of the Canyon country in Utah. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, on the other hand, is usually read as a straightforward call-to-arms for environmentalists, and such radical preservationist groups as

Earth First! have even claimed it as their Bible. But neither description is really adequate. Ann Ronald encompasses part of the truth when she explains, in *The New West of Edward Abbey* (1982), how he uses “his sense of humor to pronounce a sobering message” in the latter work (200). I would push this explanation one step further by suggesting that Abbey’s abundant humor—which typically takes the form of puns—is merely one aspect of his broader devotion to the aesthetics of language. I believe that Abbey’s true project, his essential consciousness-raising effort, hinges upon the conflation of pure aesthetics and volatile moral issues (such as the sacredness of the wilderness, the inviolability of private property, and the appropriate use of public lands). “I write in a deliberately outrageous and provocative manner,” Abbey once told Judy Nolte Lensink in an interview, “because I like to startle people. I hope to wake up people. I have no desire to simply soothe or please” (Trimble, *Words from the Land*, 27). This tension between aesthetics and morality is evident throughout Abbey’s work, but it is particularly noticeable in *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, the latter of which I consider the *Lolita* of the environmental movement. Just as Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*, ideally, throws its readers into a richly conflicted state of disdain, pity, admiring sympathy, and aesthetic pleasure, Abbey’s novel heightens our attentiveness to issues of the environment (while providing little explicit dogma) by presenting *disturbing* extremes of both preservation and development in a literary context aimed to *please*. Obviously, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a novel, and hardly a journal-like one at that. But I believe it demonstrates a bold extension of the exploration of human awareness which Abbey began in *Desert Solitaire*, a more direct echo of Thoreau’s own psychological journal.

The multiple layers of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, although present throughout the work, are particularly evident in a scene midway through the narrative. While lying with his lover Bonnie near a campfire, Hayduke (alias “Rudolf the Red”) is awakened by raindrops falling on his face. “What’s the matter, Rudolf?” Bonnie asks.

“It’s raining.”

“You’re nuts. It’s not raining. Go to sleep.”

“It is. I felt it.”

She poked her head out of the hood of the bag. “Dark all right . . . but it’s not raining.”

“Well it was a minute ago. I know it was.”

“You were dreaming.”

“Am I Rudolf the Red or ain’t I?”

“So?”

“Well goddammit, Rudolf the Red knows rain, dear.”

“Say that again?” (282–83)

End of scene. On one level, of course, this dialogue fits into the larger context of the narrative: the two characters are out in the wilderness and it starts to rain. But the main purpose of this scene is simply to set up the reindeer pun, which Hayduke supposedly utters unconsciously but which Bonnie, in her half-sleep, catches. Is Abbey merely having fun with language here? Is this why the novelist intrudes elsewhere with more or less explicit references to himself? In one scene, for instance, a ranger named “Edwin P. Abbot Jr.” (190) inspects a box of Bonnie’s belongings and finds, among other things, a “personally autographed extremely valuable first-edition copy of *Desert Solipsism*” (196), an allusive echo of Abbey’s original title (“Desert Solecism”) for the work which became *Desert Solitaire*. It seems that Abbey had a great deal of fun in writing this novel, but I don’t think this is the only reason for the work’s many conspicuous aesthetic games and extravagances. All of this, I believe, is related to Abbey’s exploration of the way our minds work, and his discovery that we frequently become alert to things (including ourselves) not through harmony, but through opposition, even antagonism.

The epistemologist Michael Polanyi suggests in his essay “The Structure of Consciousness” (1965) that there are “two levels of awareness: the lower one for the clues, the parts or other subsidiary elements and the higher one for the focally apprehended comprehensive entity to which these elements point.” He goes on to explain that “The way we know a comprehensive entity by relying on our awareness of its parts for attending to its whole is the way we are aware of our body for attending to an external event. We may say therefore that we know a comprehensive entity by *interiorizing* its parts or by making ourselves *dwell in them . . .*” (214). The strain of trying to interiorize disparate elements—such as the self and nature or, perhaps, the divergent moral and aesthetic strata of a novel such as *The Monkey Wrench Gang*—vaults us to higher levels of awareness.

There is a sudden shift in mood and language when we turn to consider the final two writers, Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez, whom I have selected for this overview because they contrast so vividly with the more flamboyant and whimsical modern nature writers. Whereas Dillard and Abbey tend to emphasize disjunction and unpredictability in their efforts

to prompt awareness, Berry and Lopez take the opposite approach, mirroring the correspondential swing of Thoreau's mental pendulum. For Dillard and Abbey, the most effective stimulus of intense alertness is change, surprise, the disruption of the facile certainty implied by the Jamesian concept of perception. But Berry and Lopez assume ignorance or limited awareness to begin with, then proceed to enact a gradual and almost linear progression, a continual deepening of awareness. What most people merely *perceive* as "probable and definite" in the external world, these two writers attempt to make ever more solid, ever more certain. Neither of these writers ever claims to have achieved a fully developed consciousness, an unsurpassable plateau of awareness. Like Thoreau, they emphasize the *ongoing process* of mental growth, but they deviate from the dazzling erraticness of Thoreau's other heirs, Dillard and Abbey, in their steady and (perhaps to some readers) tediously persistent movement toward the world.

In "The Long-Legged House," the lengthy essay which is my primary example of Berry's "watchfulness," the author presents the history of his attachment to his native place along the Kentucky River, showing "how a person can come to belong to a place" (145). It was only after contemplating Andrew Marvell's poetry about man's place in nature that Berry began "that summer of [his] marriage the surprisingly long and difficult labor of *seeing* the country [he] had been born in and had lived [his] life in until then" (141). Thus Berry's work implies the need to move beyond complacent acceptance of our "internal representations" of the places where we live or visit, the need to see things consciously, to become *aware*—and it indicates also the role of literature in inspiring and guiding "awakening" (to use Thoreau's word) of its readers. The essay sweeps through many years of Berry's life, recounting the history of the place where he eventually, after years as a wandering academic, came to live and re-vitalize his roots. Berry also digresses from direct discussion of this place, known as "the Camp," in order to reflect abstractly on connections between the self and the natural world, on ways of coming to know intimately a specific natural place. The place, he says, will reveal its secrets to the human observer, but it takes prolonged contact: "The only condition is your being there and being *watchful*" (169—my emphasis).

This necessary watchfulness is enhanced by the process of writing. At the point in the history when Berry and his wife have returned to the Camp and he has vowed to become (as he later puts it) "intimate and familiar" with the place (161), he recalls that he began writing "a sort of journal,

keeping account of what [he] saw" (146). Immediately after he mentions this, the style of the essay, too, changes—it becomes much more detailed and concrete, the pace of the narrative slowing to allow the presentation of specific natural observations, examples of how "the details rise up out of the whole and become visible" to the patient observer (161). What is interesting to me about this process of observation is that Berry associates it explicitly with the act of writing, a connection manifested even in the way the prose of the essay changes, becomes more journal-like and immediate, at the point in the history when the author is finally making contact with the place. The result of this increasing intimacy with the Camp and the nearby river landscape, despite the deepening sense of attachment, is an awareness that the man belongs to the place without the place belonging to the man. So there remains a disjunction between man and his most familiar natural place—the separation lessens, but is never erased entirely. This awareness does not mitigate the author's feeling of attachment, but it does result in the distinctive humility of Berry's work, in the frequent reminders that people are part of a vast world.

Although Berry narrates this process of return and re-connection most thoroughly and explicitly in "The Long-Legged House," he also meditates compellingly on exile, homecoming, and belonging to a place in such works as "Notes from an Absence and a Return" (a 1970 essay/journal which tersely parallels "The Long-Legged House"), the Odysseus section in *The Unsettling of America* (1977), and "The Making of a Marginal Farm" (1980). In the latter essay, Berry makes an important distinction between writing about a place from afar, treating it merely as "subject matter," and actually living on the land that is, in turn, on his mind. "In coming home and settling on this place," he writes,

I began to *live* in my subject, and to learn that living in one's subject is not at all the same as "having" a subject. To live in the place that is one's subject is to pass through the surface. The simplifications of distance and mere observation are thus destroyed. . . . One's relation to one's subject ceases to be merely emotional or esthetical, or even merely critical, and becomes problematical, practical, and responsible as well. Because it must. It is like marrying your sweetheart. (*Recollected Essays*, 337)

Although, for Berry, awareness or watchfulness is indeed an exalted state of mind, it is not an innocently blissful one. "The Long-Legged House" tends to emphasize the difficulty of achieving watchfulness and the plea-

sure of paying attention to the subtleties of place once one's mind begins to get in shape. However, "The Making of a Marginal Farm," written a decade later, admits that paying attention can reveal horrors as well as delights. In this essay Berry is particularly attuned to the problem of erosion, a problem so severe along the steep slopes of the lower Kentucky River Valley that "It cannot be remedied in human time; to build five or six feet of soil takes perhaps fifty or sixty thousand years. This loss, once imagined, is potent with despair. If a people in adding a hundred and fifty years to itself subtracts fifty thousand years from its land, what is there to hope?" (335). Despite this expression of despair and futility, Berry's life and literary work are both processes of reclamation, rehabilitation. To write about a problem is not necessarily to produce a solution, but the kindling of consciousness—one's own and one's reader's—is a first step, an essential first step.

One of the important issues in contemporary nature writing is how this literature translates into concrete changes in readers' attitudes toward the environment, and into more environmentally sound behavior. Some scholars—such as Cheryll Burgess [Glotfelty], the author of a paper entitled "Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism" which was delivered at the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association—argue that it is the responsibility of critics and teachers to point out the environmental implications of literary texts, to engage in "ecocriticism." At a panel called "Building a Constituency for Wilderness," which took place during the 2nd North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference in February 1990, such writers and editors as Michael Cohen, Stephen Trimble, and Gibbs Smith contemplated more specifically the likely audience for nature writing and the possible effects—or lack thereof—which this writing might have. Are nature writers "preaching to the choir," or do their voices reach out even to the unaware and uncommitted? With the 1990 Earth Day celebration now more than five years behind us, it is clear that the Thoreauvian process of awakening is not merely a timeless private quest, but a timely—even urgent—requirement if we are to prevent or at least retard the further destruction of our planet. But how can nature writers lead the way in this awakening, this "conversion process"?

This is, of course, the problem Barry Lopez presents movingly in the prologue to *Arctic Dreams*: "If we are to devise an enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic, we need a more particularized understanding of the land itself—not a more refined mathematical knowledge, but a

deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were, itself, another sort of civilization we had to reach some agreement with" (11). The book itself consists of nine chapters, which could be said to represent such academic categories as anthropology, geology, biology, history, and aesthetics. Much of this material, however elegantly worded, is discursive—that is, non-narrative. And this alone would not be enough to achieve the special understanding Lopez seeks for himself and his readers. But what he does is to crystallize all of his scholarly passages around vivid kernels of personal experience, demonstrating his own profound engagement with the place and soliciting his readers' imaginative engagement, the first step toward active concern.

In his 1988 interview with Kay Bonetti, Lopez explained that "The sorts of stories that I'm attracted to in a nonfiction way are those that try to bring some of the remote areas closer for the reader by establishing some kind of intimacy with the place, but also by drawing on the work of archeologists and historians and biologists" (59). This description explains the approach in much of his work, not only in *Arctic Dreams*—his process of venturing to exotic, seldom-experienced landscapes (including terrain, flora, fauna, and human inhabitants), and reporting back to his North American readers in a detailed, respectful mode of storytelling calculated to regenerate his audience's concern not only for the specific subject of the narrative, but for their own immediate surroundings. "The goal of the writer, finally," Lopez asserted at the Fourth Sino-American Writers Conference (also in 1988), "is to nourish the reader's awareness of the world" ("Chinese Garland," 41).

The chapters in *Arctic Dreams* are frequently aloof, informative, and coolly prophetic, but then Lopez suddenly presents a pulsing human heart amidst the frozen landscape, pushing understanding beyond the merely mathematical, the intellectual. The personal anecdotes do not show the author melting easily into the landscape, despite intimating his reverence for its beauty and the inspiring abundance of Arctic life—rather, the emphasis tends to be, for instance, on the author's insecurity, his vulnerability, as he stands on the edge of an ice floe which could without warning break adrift or be shattered by the predatory battering of a submerged polar bear. Insecurity, alienation, even gawking wonderment (at the appearance of icebergs, for instance)—yet there is also a sense of deep respect for the place, an awareness of the simultaneous fragility and power of the landscape and its inhabitants. Lopez achieves his thorough understanding of the Arctic by coupling academic research with personal experience of its otherness, of its separate, inhuman reality. He makes use of the personal anecdote to

recreate the "experiential moment" and thus guide his audience through a vicarious conversion.

The purpose of Lopez's writing, a goal he hopes to extend to his readers, is to develop an "intimacy" with the landscape which does not interfere with attentiveness (by causing excessive comfort and ease), but rather fuels it, deepens it. When asked by Kenneth Margolis how he served the community, Lopez responded that "There has always been this function in society of people who go 'outside.' . . . [I]f you come face to face with the other you can come home and see the dimensions of the familiar that make you love it" ("Paying Attention," 53). The writer who goes "outside" in order to help himself and his audience understand both the exotic and the familiar forces his readers to draw upon their "capacity for metaphor," to associate their own landscapes with the writer's, their language and conceptual patterns with those of the story. Lopez's own multi-disciplinary approach, as he suggests in his public dialogue with E. O. Wilson (published as part of Edward Lueders's *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors*, 1989), has profoundly impressed him with the idea that people "all see the world in a different way": "And I lament sometimes," he says,

that there are those who lack a capacity for metaphor. They don't talk to each other, and so they don't have the benefit of each other's insights. Or they get stuck in their own metaphor, if you will, as a reality and don't see that they can help each other in this inquiry that binds people like ourselves together. So this issue arises for me: what do we know? how do we know? how do we organize our knowledge? (14-15)

In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez "organizes" his own knowledge about the Arctic in a way designed to prompt his readers' vicarious engagement with the place, relying upon a multiplicity of eye-opening metaphors and alternative modes of perception/conception. Much like Thoreau, who demonstrates a constant shuffling of perspectives in both *Walden* and his private Journal, Lopez interweaves the perspectives of various disciplines, cultures, and physical vantage points in an attempt to make us conscious of the constraints of static perspectives. I would say that both Berry and Lopez attempt in their work to demonstrate and explain the process of achieving "intimacy" with the landscape, but while Berry (to adapt his metaphor) establishes a monogamous relationship with one particular place and peels away layer after layer of surface appearance in coming to know this place, Lopez travels to remote places throughout the world and then re-

turns to Oregon to write about them. However, just as Thoreau dreamed of world travel before deciding it was enough to become "Expert in home-cosmography" (*Walden*, 320), Lopez has told recent interviewers, "I'd be happy for the rest of my life to just try to elucidate what it is that is North America" (Aton, 4).

My goal here has been to offer a quick overview of the purposes and processes of "paying attention" in American nature writing since Thoreau. By beginning with a discussion of Thoreau's Journal, I have tried to demonstrate the two principal relationships between the human mind and the natural world—"correspondence" and "otherness"—which the more recent writers have continued to investigate. Thoreau's Journal marks the obvious beginning point of this psychological tradition in American nature writing because it records the author's sustained empirical scrutiny of his own internal responses to the world. The more recent works which I consider in this essay differ in important ways from Thoreau's Journal—I have not traveled to Tucson to read Edward Abbey's Journal, nor have I bothered Barry Lopez for a peek at his (though he told Bonetti that he has kept one as a way to "make sense—daily sense—out of [his] life" since the age of nineteen—68). Instead, I have tried to focus on what I consider to be the primary investigatory genres of each author: Dillard's lyrical, elaborately structured collections of nonfiction essays; Abbey's aestheticized prose in *Desert Solitaire* and, more exaggeratedly, in his fiction; Berry's individual essays of exile and return; and Lopez's psychological essays in *Arctic Dreams* and self-reflective interview performances (he has participated in so many interviews in recent years that perhaps it would be reasonable to regard "the interview" as one of his chief modes of communication).

Although I recognize that several of these writers have political agendas, I prefer to view them all as *epistemologists*, as students of the human mind, rather than as *activists* in any concrete sense of the term. Contemporary nature writers tend to resist openly espousing one particular attitude toward nature, their goal being instead the empirical study of their own psychological responses to the world—or, in other words, objective scrutiny of subjective experience. And yet, having said this, I would be remiss not to admit that there is, in the very concern for the human process of becoming alert to the nonhuman environment, an implicit belief that we need this awareness. Thoreau, although he has served well as the post-humous spokesman for numerous environmental organizations, seems to have been motivated in his musings about nature by an ingenuously philo-

sophical impulse—a desire to know the “truth” about the world and himself. However, it is no coincidence that Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez have produced their works during or just after the surge of environmental consciousness which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. These writers, although they may be elusive, nondirective, and even anti-ideological (as is the case with Dillard and Abbey, at least), are hardly as neutral as Thoreau. They may hedge in their pronouncement of why they and their readers ought to be more aware (not just of the environment, but of existence in general), but their advocacy of heightened attentiveness is difficult to miss. However, in Wendell Berry’s work, and similarly in Barry Lopez’s writings during the 1980s, there is a new sense of timeliness, of urgency—a sense that awareness is not a mental game, but a condition which helps us to act responsibly and respectfully.

Lopez himself has boldly proposed that nature writing might “provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought” (*Antaeus*, 297). Ray Gonzalez gave his 1990 interview with Lopez the title “Landscapes of the Interior: The Literature of Hope”—and this captures precisely my own approach to these five important nature writers in this essay. Nature writing is a “literature of hope” in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness may lead to wholesome political change, but this literature is also concerned, and perhaps primarily so, with interior landscapes, with the mind itself.

NOTE

A slightly different version of this essay appeared as the introduction to my book *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez* (1992). It is reprinted here with the permission of the University of Utah Press.

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The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight



From Thoreau onward, American literature has had a minority tradition of landscape writing¹ that has countered the values of progress, development, and improvement celebrated by a dominant tradition. These marginalized writings have become increasingly important to us because, as Philip Slater says in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, alternatives that are antithetical to dominant emphases of a social system function as "a kind of hedge against social change" (Slater 110-11). These alternative values in the margin often rescue the dominant culture in difficult times.² Today, a growing number of landscape writers offer essays, poems, and fictions that represent the human relationship to the natural landscape in ways that are often antithetical to our culture's usual emphases.³

One of the major shifts in our scientific world view in the twentieth century has been to recognize the importance of systems and relationships in the phenomenal world. We've begun to realize that an entity is largely created and undergoes change by its interaction with other entities; nothing has an unchangeable essence that it can maintain in isolation, and no one can change in isolation merely through the effort of a transcendental ego. As Katherine Hayles (*Chaos Bound*) and others have pointed out, the twentieth century has seen the hope for absolute, discrete facts disappear, to be replaced by Einstein's theory of relativity, by quantum mechanics, by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, by chaos theory, and by such sciences as ecology. More recently, many have celebrated the rise of a holistic world view that is more compatible with the ecological discoveries of the past thirty years than Cartesian dualism is. But literary studies have been slow to abandon the nineteenth-century certainty of approaches to litera-