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Styles of the Wild

by

Stuart Cochran

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2000

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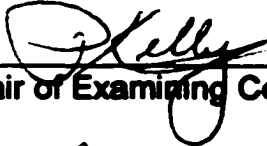
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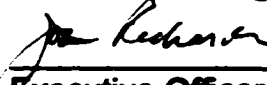
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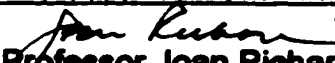
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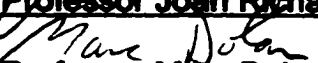
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Abstract
 Styles of the Wild
 by
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This dissertation is both a literary and cultural study of the wild—in American nature writing, popular culture, and theory—which examines the various, often contradictory, constructions and uses of this term. It traces the contemporary proliferation of the wild as a key signifier to a seminal tropological shift from wilderness to wild that Henry David Thoreau enacts in his essay "Walking" (1862), when he writes: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World." The shift begun by Thoreau is completed in Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), when he writes: "Wildness is not just the 'preservation of the world,' it is the world." As cairns are signs comprised of stones, nature and nature writing are signs composed of facts. After tracking the prominence of "facts" in nature writing to the influence of natural history and Transcendentalism, this study concludes that nature writing itself is a semiotic practice, and that Peircean semiotic is a more coherent basis for ecocriticism than poststructuralism (with its implicit Saussurean idealism of the dyadic sign model that excludes any referent). Framed by Thoreau and Snyder, the study focuses on William Bartram's proto-ecological stance in the *Travels* (1791) blending the voices of natural history, sublimity, and Quaker benignity; Barry Lopez' rhetorics of natural and personal history in *Arctic Dreams* (1986) balancing the metaphors of quantum physics and the Eskimo hunter to redefine a competent description of the land by reinscribing its mysteries; Terry Tempest Williams' "erotics of place" in *Desert Quartet* (1995); and Snyder's poetic deep ecology. It also considers recent research (in systems thinking, complexity/ chaos, environmental activism, ecofeminism and ecopsychology) relevant to the wild, and concludes that the virtual field of their interconnections comprises "wild theory" or wildness studies.

Acknowledgments

I shall always be grateful to Prof. William P. Kelly for taking the leap of imagination and faith that led him to support my project, years before ecocriticism had fully emerged on the scene. How bold an act it was to nurture intellectual work on the wild in the midst of the Ph.D. Program in English at the City University of New York! My thanks also to these other scholars at The Graduate Center: Joan Richardson, for her erudition and for never letting Emerson out of sight; Marc Dolan, for his careful reading of the project; and Angus Fletcher, for his interest and encouragement. While this project was completed under the auspices of The Graduate Center, it was also developed through my associations and work with the faculty in the Department of English at Queens College. In this connection, I would like to thank Profs. Fred Buell and George Held, for their creative work—teaching and writing—in this field; and Prof. Janice Peritz, who helped me realize how deeply and mutually constitutive my studies in ecocriticism and composition studies are. And finally, to those who contributed the most to support my effort to complete this project—my wife Karen and my son Daniel—my deepest thanks for your gifts.

Styles of the Wild

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Styles of the Wild

Introduction

I first became aware of how unusually compelling the word “wild” could be when reading Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking.” I came to that essay after reading *Walden*, and with a deep interest in the outdoors I was more than willing to be enraptured with Thoreau’s passion for nature. Nevertheless, the excitement I felt was mixed with critical curiosity: why such emphasis on wildness? Beyond celebrating with Thoreau his paean to the wild, was I prepared to follow the multiplicity and depth of meanings he claimed for the word?

It was about this time that, awoke to the wild, I began to notice its appearance in many different contexts. In an uncanny way, it seemed to crop up—sometimes more, sometimes less, than thoughtfully—almost anywhere: in academic studies, in popular songs and bestsellers, in news coverage. The more attention I paid to what the wild meant in these various contexts, the less singular the sense it seemed to make. The one thing I found almost all its uses had in common, though, was a strangely powerful intensification of meaning.

So my study began with some naïve questions: what is the wild? Why is it proliferating in our culture at this time? And what roles have nature writers played in defining and exemplifying this sign?

What I have found in seeking provisional answers to these questions has taken me far afield. What began as a study of the styles of nature writing grew into an ecocritical study of the wild and its cultural and theoretical significance. I hesitated before this enlargement of purpose, not just for the practical reasons of completing my graduate studies, but also because I was suspicious of a certain tendency on the part of some of my peers to see their fields of interest (whatever they may be) as the centers of the universe. What I could not reckon with, however, was how much of my research would come to me unbidden. It seemed everyday, in one place or another, I would be confronted with the claims of wildness. And so my subject expanded on its own almost organically and with it my study, until I find that it has grown into its present, eccentric shape.

From Thoreau's wood-chuck to Dillard's weasel, the wild underlies American nature writing. This dissertation examines the wild and the central importance it now has in a number of disparate fields which, taken as a whole, I call wild theory. In his early poem *Myths & Texts*, Gary Snyder writes that "Poetry [is] a riprap on the slick rock of metaphysics" (43). What poetry is to metaphysics, nature writing is to the wild. This writing often begins in a confrontation with the concrete facts of natural life only to seek access to a wild ineffability. So nature writing is the riprap over which I will try to explore these encounters and their different constructions of the wild. What I learn there—in nature's wild texts—will

inform the wildness I find elsewhere in the popular imagination and in the systematic thinking of specialists.

Nature and culture. In one form or another these terms have stood in relation to each other at the center of Western civilization. Often in that history, they have been taken to signify the opposition of exclusive domains. This study is based on another assertion, one that ecocriticism—a species of which I intend this dissertation to be—has increasingly embraced: that culture is a part of nature. To quote Snyder again, this time from his 1990 collection of essays *The Practice of the Wild*:

The term *culture*, in its meaning of "a deliberately maintained aesthetic and intellectual life" and in its other meaning of "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns," is never far from a biological root meaning as in "yogurt culture"—a nourishing habitat. Civilization is permeable, and could be as inhabited as the wild is. (15)

The significance of the wild in both culture and nature is my subject.

My methodology—ecocriticism—is a field of literary study that has emerged over the last decade.¹ As Karl Kroeber succinctly puts it in *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (1994): "Ecological literary criticism concentrates on linkages between natural and cultural processes" (1). One of its earliest

¹ For a report on this emerging area of literary and cultural study, see "Inventing a New Field: the Study of Literature About the Environment" by Karen J. Winkler (8+) in the cover story of the 9 August 1996 *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "The Rise of 'Ecocriticism.'"

theoreticians—Cheryll Burgess-Glotfelty—defined ecocriticism in 1989 as a field which considers

the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between the human and the nonhuman. Ecological *literary* criticism is that subset of ecocriticism that focuses specifically on the cultural elements language and literature and their relationship to the environment. ("Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism" 4-5)

Following Elaine Showalter's developmental model of feminist criticism², Glotfelty identifies three kinds of ecocritical studies: of nature as it is represented in a text and the text's impact on environmental practice; of texts which manifest or enact an ecological awareness, including "the influence of place on. . . [a writer's] imagination"; and the study of the theoretical implications which impinge on literature and the environment, including ecofeminism—which examines "the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature"—and the epistemological critique of science (7-8).

While my work at times engages a theoretical approach, I do not subordinate literature to theory, as one might burn a cord of wood to heat the house. But neither do I assume that texts speak for themselves, as if they had voices that spoke unequivocally. My interest is to consider how nature writers through their explorations of inner and outer ecology (of

² Glotfelty cites Elaine Showalter, "Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 3-17.

how human beings both are and are aware of their place in nature) inform some late twentieth-century thinking.

While this study in many ways is centered on Thoreau, it ranges far afield both before and after him in its rhetorical and cultural considerations of the wild. "Wild Texts," the first chapter, focuses on the antithetical meanings³ the wild has and has always had—sometimes used to epitomize both life and death, both mental health and mental illness. It examines the exploits of professional Everest adventurers, an ascetic pilgrim, and a pseudo-revolutionary terrorist in their quests for deeper meanings in the wild. Then it turns to the critical shift in thinking that Thoreau's celebration of the wild in his 1862 essay "Walking" signals—a shift that has been coming to fruition ever since in both ecophilosophy and nature writing. Thoreau's more than forty uses of the wild and its variations can, indeed, must be read polysemously in conventional and unconventional ways. In particular, I suggest that Thoreau uses the wild to suggest both a ground of being and an ἀπείρων⁴—a boundless "area of

³ To echo Sigmund Freud in "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," *Collected Papers*, Vol. 4, 184-191.

⁴ The neologism, ἀπείρων (*apeiron*), although not the myth criticism in which it is embedded, was suggested to me by R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955) 99. He uses it in a more limited sense than I intend in his discussion of James Fenimore Cooper, for whom "the forest and the sea shared the quality of boundlessness; they were the ἀπείρων—the area of possibility." Interestingly, he does not use the word before in his

(continued...)

possibility" that beckons and defies human knowledge. Thoreau's famous dictum in "Walking": "In Wildness is the preservation of the World" is revised and enlarged in *The Practice of the Wild* with Snyder's assertion that "Wildness is not just the 'preservation of the world,' it is the world" (6). Snyder formally completes the shift from wilderness to wild begun by Thoreau and signals the renewed interest wildness now holds at the turn of the century.

The second chapter, "Facts," considers how the genre of American nature writing is defined and the heuristic importance of facts in reading these texts. It traces the key role of facts in nature writing from early natural history through nineteenth-century theological and philological controversies as background to the philosophy of language that informs Emerson's and Thoreau's writings, and ultimately to the Transcendentalists' emphases on the fact as a sign. In addition to Emerson and Thoreau, "Facts" also considers passages on wildness from Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams. These writers use the

⁴(...continued)

discussion of Thoreau's *Walden*, even when he observes that "'Sounds' . . . concludes with a total surrender to the vitalizing power of unbounded nature" (25). I should also note here an important distinction between and shift in criticism "From Myth to Rhetorics" that Philip Fisher makes in his introduction to *The New American Studies*. My treatment of the subject will reflect this shift away from the totalizing master narratives of myth criticism (or what Jean-François Lyotard calls "incredulity toward metanarratives" [xiv] in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*) toward the analysis of specific rhetorical strategies in historically situated texts.

wild stylistically to compose scenes in which they elaborate confrontations with the simple, irreducible facts of natural life, and in the process facilitate access to what they suggest are the deeper levels of nature and imagination.

With the groundwork of facts in place, the third chapter "Signs" traverses the riprap of *Walden's* "Higher Laws" to consider the wild in terms of Charles S. Peirce's notions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness and his system of semiotic. Although this might seem very far afield initially, it will be shown that nature writing and its facts, ever since Emerson and Thoreau consciously viewed them as signs, may be read profitably with a knowledge of how signs communicate. Specifically, Chapter 3 will contend that just as nineteenth-century language philosophy is relevant to their writing, twentieth-century language philosophy, which is a part of semiotics, and in particular Peirce's understanding of signs, may be relevant to our reading. In its light, we may begin to classify Thoreau's uses of the wild into forms of Firstness, such as the ground of being and the ἀπείρων; Secondness, the opposition to domestic or civilized; and Thirdness, the sign of linguistic polysemy itself.

The wild as the experience of both the unknown and the totality of what may potentially be knowable is the focus of chapter 4, "ἀπείρων." In it a contrast is developed between two sympathetic naturalist-observers

that considers the ways a revolutionary-era American and a late twentieth-century American explore the wild and their rhetorical strategies to communicate something of it. In *Travels* (1781), William Bartram's pre-Darwinian voices of natural history, sublimity, and Quaker benignity blend into what is increasingly seen as a proto-ecological stance. In *Arctic Dreams* (1986), Barry Lopez' rhetorics of natural and personal history balance the metaphors of quantum physics with those of the traditional Eskimo hunter to redefine a competent description of the land by reinscribing its mysteries.

In the fifth chapter, "Wild Theory," the dissertation turns to a discussion of contemporary research and writing that places the wild and /or ecological (holistic) thinking in the foreground. I begin with an internecine controversy within the environmental movement before surveying a range of fields including systems thinking, "wild science," deep ecology, ecopsychology, and ecofeminism. In all of these, the wild is a key idea—so much so that I propose calling the virtual field of their interconnections "wild theory." One of the purposes of this project is to consider the proliferation of wild theory at this time and to explore the many ways American nature writing anticipates it.

My own concerns and the research for this project have brought me to think of the wild in far more complex ways than I could ever have anticipated before. For one thing, my developing interest in ecocriticism

has been nourished by my work with students teaching writing at Queens College. At the deepest levels, the theory and practice of ecocriticism and composition have been mutually constitutive. For another thing, the range of wildness I encountered—from my son's delight in Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are* to the conclusion that the wild is an emergent quality of life itself—has uncomfortably cosmic implications. One way I have responded to this range is by coming to think of wildness as a conceptual space carved in Western thought in a deliberate way since the mid-nineteenth century. This space has been opened out of the mainstream scientific and technological effort to name, know, and control nature and its processes. While the political-ecological project to protect certain wilderness areas from development has proceeded since the establishment of a national park at Yellowstone in 1872 and John Muir's subsequent efforts to protect Yosemite, another project of a literary and philosophical nature has also emerged, often in tandem with the first. It sees the wild as the preserve of the playful and the indeterminate, the "area of possibility" (Lewis), of "vitality and freedom" (Turner 179), of what I call polysemy and the ἀνείρων. What is occurring now in many disciplines is an effort to say what we know about nature and our selves as complex, all-encompassing processes in which we are involved that will not pretend to separate the questioner from the experience, the wild from science. My attempt in this dissertation is to inquire into that wild process in this spirit.

Chapter 1

Wild Texts From Wilderness to Wild

In Wildness is the preservation of the World.

– Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (672)

Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world," it is the world.

– Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (6)

Wilderness separates; wildness integrates. Wilderness is a place;
wildness is a condition. Humans are wild too.

– Paul Faulstich, "The Cultured Wild and the Limits
of Wilderness" (168)

The wild is everywhere. Just as borders and contact zones have replaced frontiers as the most favored trope of academic theorists, the wild has supplanted wilderness. It is now a relevant concept in a number of disciplines ranging from the sciences (biology, chaos/ complexity theory) to the social sciences (ecology, environmental psychology, sociology) to the humanities (philosophy, literary studies). From Gary Snyder's collection of essays *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) to Henry Golemba's *Thoreau's Wild Rhetoric* (1990), from Jeanne Addison Roberts' *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender* (1991) to Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead's (eds.) *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day* (1992), from Will Wright's *Wild Knowledge* (1992) to Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996)—evidence abounds that interest in the nature of the wild is exfoliating in and far beyond the field Max Oelschlaeger describes in *The Idea of Wilderness*

(1991).

Wild theory—academic and otherwise—also entails wild fashion.

Some time ago, the *New York Times* ran an article by Patricia Leigh

Brown called "The Thrill Seekers" in the *Styles* section of its Sunday

paper. Subtitled "Is the Call to the Wild Genuine? Or Just a Rugged New

Style for the Ralph Lauren Set?" Ms. Brown noted that

the wild has also become a style, an image harvest, led by Patagonia (called 'Patagucci' by its detractors) and pretenders like Banana Republic; it is most typified by the sepia-tinted ads for the Ralph Lauren Safari cologne for men and its credo, "Living without boundaries." (1)

Lauren's Safari ad also by implication adroitly enacts the

metaphoric shifts both from frontiers to borders and from wilderness to wild.

The proliferation of the wild into literary, academic and advertising discourses is not in itself surprising; to the contrary their blurring is typical of what we now call, albeit problematically, postmodernism.⁵ What is striking, however, is the decidedly positive spin these usages give to the word wild, a word that has had persistently darker overtones historically and still has in the contemporary vernacular. This dichotomy can be illustrated in another contrast of literary and popular usage. Consider, for

⁵ I take note here of Fredric Jameson's caution against "the mischief of premature clarification" in a reductive use of the conceptually "contested . . . [and] internally conflicted and contradictory" (xvii) period marking term *postmodernism* in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

instance, the Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes's popular bestseller *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1992), in which wildness is extolled as a feminist strength; then consider Larry Hogue, "a crack-addicted homeless veteran . . . on Manhattan's Upper West Side" (Ladds A24), about whom the *New York Times* once editorialized in "The Wild Man and the Law." In these two discourses we see the wild succinctly represented as the epitome of both mental health and mental illness.

To further complicate, some might say trivialize, the wild, there is opposed to Estes's "wild woman" the new age marketing of the wild man. A 1997 catalog of Mystic Trader / Whole Life Products™ (Pacific Spirit Corp.) includes an ad for a hand carved Indonesian statue called "Wild Man ~ Consciousness. . . on the Edge"©—

*Wild Man ~
Consciousness . . . on the Edge*

Everyone has a Wild Man deep within their soul. This Wild Man is struggling for his survival. He lives in Irian Jaya, a remote island in the archipelago that makes up what we call Indonesia. The "modern" world is slowly forcing him to change his native ways. Wild men run together unashamed, unburdened by what society dictates. Stress free living with nature. He runs naked through the bush, plays in the sun and dances in the rain. He's never seen a mall, doesn't own a car and has no electricity with which to watch television. Some people find value in his way of being, and others tell him he must adapt to becoming a contributing member of our world economy. But Wild Man knows what he has, and he knows it will endure. He knows that nature and earth abide. I keep this carving to remind me of our past. As a reminder that I too can run free. Hand carved in Indonesia, stands approx. 18". Like people, no two will be exactly alike.
(#G-WM) \$78

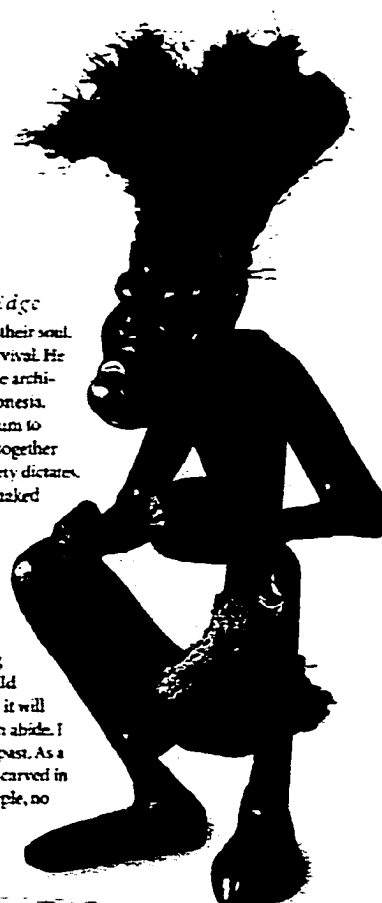


Fig. 1 "Wild Man Consciousness"®
(Reprinted with permission of publisher)

The ad's appropriation of this apparently traditional fertility icon displays the naïve back-to-nature attraction that the West has often felt for the wild in the various forms of primitivism it has promoted. The fantasy of unrestrained sexual freedom is just one of the recurring significations of wildness.

In contrast to this rather sanitized version of the wild, examples of the dark wild are also easily found. Harold Brodkey's 1996 AIDS memoir *This Wild Darkness: The Story of my Death* comes to mind. One of the

darkest connotations of the wild in popular usage occurred in the news coverage of a young woman who became known simply as the Central Park Jogger, an investment banker who was viciously gang raped and beaten nearly to death. Journalists apparently misquoted or misinterpreted a phrase used by one of the adolescents to describe the attack—"doin' the wild thing"—and for a short time the gerund "wilding" re-entered⁶ the vocabulary on the electronic fast track, as a term suggesting not only youthful lawlessness in general, but the new hordes of inner city barbarians poised to overrun a fragile civilization. This wilding, like an American *Clockwork Orange*, implied the unpredictably ferocious yet casually flippant and random nature of inner city danger and crime—a most poetic word for the most degrading violence. We have heard very little about wilding since, perhaps because its use was based on a misquote, perhaps because the media was challenged in its facile identification of the black and Latino gang as a pack of uncontrollably wild

⁶ Since gerunds are verbs with -ing endings that function as nouns (such as driving or dancing), and since we do not use wild as a verb, a reader may wonder how "wilding" may be called a gerund. My analysis is based on a rare verb form of wild, whose usage is cited in the *OED*. As an intransitive verb, wild meant "to be or become wild; to run wild, grow wild"; and as a transitive verb, wild meant "to make wild. . . [:] to affect with frenzy, to madden." This rare usage is why I describe the recent use of the gerund form as a re-entry into our national lexicon. Interestingly, the *OED* also defines a noun form, "wilding," as a "wild apple or apple-tree; crab-apple or crab-tree"; a "wild plant"; or rarely "a wild animal." Some examples of this word applied figuratively "to a person or thing" also come close in meaning to the recent media usage, as in the following citation from the *Athenaeum* (1906): "He was swayed by the wildings of his imagination and his affections"; or this citation from Edith Wharton (1908): "You are not a heathen wilding, but a child of Christ."

animals. The short life of this new word (which even now may be simply dormant not dead) exemplifies the way language changes and the difficulty of fixing lexical meaning. The irreconcilableness of these very different images of the wild in the wolf metaphor as the feminist ideal of Estes's "wild woman" and in the wilding metaphor of the rampaging youths in Central Park as its nightmarish antithesis, entails a cognitive dissonance that suggests the power of the wild in the human psyche.

The lure of this power was demonstrated again in three separate events given considerable news coverage involving rival professional mountaineers; an idealistic, youthful wanderer; and the FBI's most wanted fugitive.

Rob Hall and Scott Fischer died in May 1996 after reaching the summit of Mount Everest as the leaders of two commercial adventure expeditions. Caught in the descent near the summit in a fierce blizzard on May 10, both men froze to death along with eight others who died on the mountain in various expeditions as a result of the same storm. In a grotesque, moving scene emblematic of the extent to which our technology has succeeded in surrounding the earth with an electronic web but failed to subdue the primal forces of the wild, Hall was actually in satellite communication with his pregnant wife in their bedroom in New Zealand as he lay frozen nearly to death just below the summit. Jan Arnold, a physician and experienced Everest summiteer herself, had

"been up there; I knew what it could be like in bad weather. Rob and I had talked about the impossibility of being rescued from the summit ridge. As he himself had put it, 'You might as well be on the moon'" (Krakauer, "Into Thin Air" 158).

The plans, preparations for, and progress of both expeditions were extensively covered on the Internet at three different Web sites. *Life* magazine carried a cover story feature article by Claudia Glenn Dowling in August 1996. *Outside* magazine also carried a lengthy report in September 1996 by one of the participants in Hall's expedition and an experienced climber, Jon Krakauer, titled "Into Thin Air," which was expanded and published as a book in 1997. And the season premier of ABC's *Turning Point* on September 14, 1996 devoted their entire hour to an investigative report of the disaster.

Such widespread interest and reporting was to be expected, since the commercialization of Everest had been growing each year through aggressive marketing by, among others, Hall's Adventure Consultants and Fischer's Mountain Madness. Hall, who had the best record for guiding non-professional climbers to the summit, was reported to have charged a going rate of \$65,000 for such an ascent (Dowling; Krakauer). In 1996, "87 people managed to summit. . . [, and] 11 died in the attempt, more than in any season in history" (Dowling 35).

By the late 1990s, versions of extreme adventure sport like this had

become fair game in the popular media for parodic treatment. John Tierney, a staff writer for the *New York Times Magazine* wrote an account of his adventure entitled, "Going Where a Lot of Other Dudes With Really Great Equipment Have Gone Before: The Call of the Pseudo-Wild" for the July 26, 1998 edition. Tierney's narrative of his High Arctic expedition ran as the *Magazine's* cover story: "Explornography: The Vicarious Thrill of Exploring When There's Nothing Left to Explore," and included references to books like Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* as well as popular movies such as IMAX's "Everest" and "Seven Years in Tibet."

Echoing Brown's critique of the wild "Patagucci" style six years before, Tierney also takes on the "[o]utdoor-equipment stores [who] are the fetish shops of explornography. Even I, who dreaded the prospect of a trek in the Arctic, loved shopping for it" (20). Tierney's self-mockery notwithstanding, the popularity and successful marketing of the vicarious experience of extreme natural challenges continue unabated. In addition to popular books, television programs, and films, museums are also exploring the subject in depth, as evidenced by The American Museum of Natural History's recent elaborate exhibition (April 10 to October 11, 1999) entitled "The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition."

The lure of Everest's "death-zone"—what the area above 25,000

feet is called by climbers—is the lure of the wild in its starkest manifestation. It poses as the ultimate proving ground, a revelatory extremity promising epiphanic insight. While he acknowledges in *Into Thin Air* the admixture of motives among the climbers, Krakauer insists that many were nevertheless driven by a higher quest:

Above the comforts of Base Camp, the expedition in fact became an almost Calvinistic undertaking. The ratio of misery to pleasure was greater by an order of magnitude than any other mountain I'd been on; I quickly came to understand that climbing Everest was primarily about enduring pain. And in subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium, and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace.

Of course for some Everesters myriad other, less virtuous, motives came into play, as well: minor celebrity, career advancement, ego massage, ordinary bragging rights, filthy lucre. But such enticements were less a factor than many critics might presume. (136)

The failure of grandiose expectations and the sometimes deeper meanings realized instead are prevalent themes of nature writing.

Krakauer begins *Into Thin Air* with the disillusionment he feels on attaining the summit, as he recounts his “five minutes on the roof of the world”:

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in Tibet and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently at the vast sweep of earth below. I understood on some dim, detached level that it was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care. It was the afternoon of May 10. I hadn't slept in 57 hours.

The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of Ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&M's. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs, making it excruciatingly painful to breathe. Twenty-nine thousand twenty-eight feet up in the troposphere, there was so little oxygen reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired. (5-6)

By the end of his exhaustively detailed and complex narrative, it is clear that Krakauer is still very much obsessed in the aftermath of the tragedy with the failures of judgment, moral courage, and just plain ill luck that contributed to so many deaths. He leaves the reader with an image of one of the heroic guides—Neil Beidleman—who saved the lives of five climbers yet “remains haunted by a death he was unable to prevent, of a client who wasn’t on his team and thus wasn’t even officially his responsibility.” Struggling to get back to the tents for help in the devastating blizzard, Beidleman walked away from a woman too weak to stand on her own: “She was so little. I can still feel her fingers sliding across my biceps and then letting go. I never even turned to look back” (288). At the end of a quest in the wild for “saving grace,” Krakauer is left with only the poignancy of futility and loss.

The sense of the wild as a laboratory of human nature, a place where we see, perhaps, into something essential in the human psyche, or the human soul, often recurs in nature writing. Whether on the summit of Everest or Khatadin, as Thoreau says in *The Maine Woods*, the “tops of

mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe, whither it is a slight insult to the gods to climb and pry into their secrets, and try their effect on our humanity" (641).

In contrast to the dramatic extremity of the Everest expeditions, Chris McCandless's 1992 death by starvation in an abandoned bus on the Stampede Trail in the Alaskan interior bush near Denali National Park seems almost banal in its understatement. In another probing account by Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (1996) delves into the life and mind of a privileged and talented young man who at first appears merely incompetent or reckless but who, on deeper reflection, can be seen as a complex moral idealist and non-conformist. With his Thoreau and Jack London as guides, the twenty-four year old McCandless undertook a challenge (to live off the land unaided by technology) that was both quixotically romantic and rigorously spiritual in its aspirations. As Krakauer notes,

In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would remain *incognita*. (174)

McCandless's quest can be seen as a simulacrum, of sorts, of so many early explorers, in whose narratives the *terra* was indeed *incognita*. A reader's interest now in those stories tends to focus both on the

adventure and the manner in which the writer/explorer encounters the "new world" and represents it textually. On a simulated wilderness adventure-quest, McCandless ignored the practical discipline of those early explorers and thus tried to construct an experience whose pretense would be masked by risk.

He had a need to test himself in ways, as he was fond of saying, 'that mattered.' He possessed grand—some would say grandiose—spiritual ambitions. According to the moral absolutism that characterizes McCandless's beliefs, a challenge in which a successful outcome is assured isn't a challenge at all. (182)

Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul. He soon discovered, however, what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds. (183)

The impression that remains after reading *Into the Wild* is a sense of loss, not only of McCandless's adventurous spirit but of the textual tracks—the narrative—he doesn't leave behind.

Ironically, McCandless apparently died of eating wild potato seeds, a plant that "was not known to be toxic—indeed, he'd been safely eating its roots for weeks" (194), Krakauer concludes. Like the climbers on Everest, he perished trapped in the wild unprepared to meet demands he could never imagine or anticipate. McCandless's writing journal contains "few abstractions about wilderness or, for that matter, few ruminations of

any kind.” Like another early American text, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. . . , organized largely around the starvation motif and the daily struggle for food, McCandless’s journal was “almost entirely about what he ate. He wrote about hardly anything except food” (183). Unlike Rowlandson, however, McCandless chose his captivity but left us little self-reflection on the encounter he sought at such great pain, as though the closure of the simulacrum, though a real death, is nevertheless but a simulated end. The self-imposed *terra incognita* finally effaced even *terra firma*. Once again, lines from Thoreau, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, seem apropos to such a quixotic venture:

A book should contain pure discoveries, glimpses of *terra firma*, though by ship-wrecked mariners, and not the art of navigation by those who have never been out of sight of land. They must not yield wheat and potatoes, but must themselves be the unconstrained and natural harvest of their author’s lives. (80)

In many respects, the wilderness tragedy recounted in *Into the Wild* makes an ideological contrast with that of the Everest expeditions. Against the isolated individual testing his survival skills, we have the group effort of the expeditions with their power hierarchies of leaders and followers. Against the determined low/non-technology of McCandless—even a willful ignorance—we have the high-tech capabilities displayed on Everest and reverberating through the World Wide Web and beyond.

And against the monk-like vow of the spiritual wanderer's poverty, we have the blatantly commercial and profit-driven sales of leisure time adventure. Yet contrastive as these excursions into the wild may appear, they both end similarly: Hall and Fischer dying alone and beyond the reach of "civilization," interred forever where they fell near Everest's summit; and McCandless, in his last days before starving to death, smiling in a photographic self-portrait, leaning against the abandoned Fairbanks City bus in which he had taken refuge as he held onto the remnants of the civilization that would serve as his coffin.

The "cultural work"—to borrow Jane Tompkins' term from *Sensational Designs*—of adventure story books like Krakauer's, in addition to their entertainment value, is to represent a kind of meaning-making. As Charles Bowden remarks on the book jacket for *Into the Wild*, to view the wild is to view the "place we call nature where we finally face our nature." This inner self is the common territory all nature writers explore, and their wild texts—some cautionary tales—are the tracks they leave behind. Just a few years before these fateful events, Gary Snyder warned in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) that

[f]or those who would seek directly, by entering the primary temple, the wilderness can be a ferocious teacher, rapidly stripping down the inexperienced or the careless. It is easy to make the mistakes that will bring one to an extremity.
(23)

McCandless died at age 24 seeking a Thoreauvian-like test of wild economy and had he survived probably would have headed back to

society. Though he never lived to write about his experience and perhaps never would have had he lived, his project, though impractical and extreme, was nevertheless a classic subject of American nature writing. In contrast to the appealing unconventionality of the youthful McCandless, a much darker emanation of the wild emerged in the 1990s—one rarely associated with nature lovers. Theodore J. Kaczynski—the Unabomber—was a loner like McCandless, but he was not on a temporary excursion into the unknown. He was a confirmed middle-aged recluse living an austere life close to the land in a small cabin in Montana, now convicted of intermittently murdering his victims with meticulously, even obsessively, handcrafted letter bombs. His delusional project, determinedly technophobic, was to bring down the world social, economic, and political order. The "Unabomber's Manifesto"—a would-be jeremiad on the evils of technology and the necessity to undo the industrial revolution—extols wild nature as *the* ideal:

an ideology, in order to gain enthusiastic support, must have a positive ideals [sic; as] well as a negative one; it must be FOR something as well as AGAINST something. The positive ideal that we propose is Nature. That is, WILD nature; those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control. And with wild nature we include human nature, by which we mean those aspects of the functioning of the human individual that are not subject to regulation by organized society but are products of chance, or free will, or God depending on your religious or philosophical opinions. (§ 183)

In defining his terms here, Kaczynski taps into the notion, prevalent since the medieval myth of the wild man and cited above in the ad copy for Wild Man consciousness (13), that the wild is synonymous with freedom. As he attempts to plumb the deep ecology of the social and political order, he needs to find some concept to replace technology in his structural revolution:

Nature makes a perfect counter-ideal to technology for several reasons. Nature (that which is outside the power of the system) is the opposite of technology (which seeks to expand indefinitely the power of the system). Most people will agree that nature is beautiful; certainly it has tremendous popular appeal. The radical environmentalists **ALREADY** hold an ideology that exalts nature and opposes technology. It is not necessary for the sake of nature to set up some chimerical utopia or any new kind of social order. Nature takes care of itself: It was a spontaneous creation that existed long before any human society, and for countless centuries many different kinds of human societies co-existed with nature without doing it an excessive amount of damage. Only with the Industrial Revolution did the effect of human society on nature become really devastating. To relieve the pressure on nature it is not necessary to create a special kind of social system, it is only necessary to get rid of industrial society. Granted, this will not solve all problems. Industrial society has already done tremendous damage to nature and it will take a very long time for the scars to heal. Besides, even pre-industrial societies can do significant damage to nature. Nevertheless, getting rid of industrial society will accomplish a great deal. It will relieve the worst of the pressure on nature so that the scars can begin to heal. It will remove the capacity of organized society to keep increasing its control over nature (including human nature). Whatever kind of society may exist after the demise of the industrial system, it is certain that most people will live close to nature, because in the absence of advanced technology there is no other way that people **CAN** live. To feed themselves they must be peasants or herds-

men or fishermen or hunter, etc. And, generally speaking, local autonomy should tend to increase, because lack of advanced technology and rapid communications will limit the capacity of governments or other large organizations to control local communities. (§ 184)

While Kaczynski weaves wild nature rhetorically into his revolutionary rationale, even citing the “radical environmentalists”—presumably he’s thinking here of deep ecologists like George Sessions or the Earth First movement—the real thrust of his manifesto is against technology. Nature is what shall remain after a technologically driven civilization is destroyed, the ground upon which a post-revolutionary society shall emerge. Kaczynski defines nature as “outside the power of the system,” yet maintains that industrial society has badly damaged it. Eliminate the pressure of human population and industry, and it will heal. The extent to which Kaczynski believes that nature is both independent of humankind and subject to it suggests how powerful an intellectual fantasy the idea of nature can be. Nowhere does Kaczynski acknowledge the awareness or the possibility that nature, or the ideas of nature, wilderness, or the wild, may themselves be human constructs. As William Cronon points out in *Uncommon Ground* (1995), “[t]o gain such remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred” (73). The frightening absolutism with which Kaczynski wields “Nature” like an avenging angel betrays the same

reductiveness of thought that can lead him to dismiss the destructiveness of his proposed revolution with a cliché: "As for the negative consequences of eliminating industrial society—well, you can't eat your cake and have it too. To gain one thing you have to sacrifice another" (§ 185).

Kaczynski, it seems, found solace in the wild from his social alienation while pretending to spearhead "a revolution against the industrial system" (§ 4). His rhetorical argument suggests less an openness to "nature" than an expedient use of it to advance a grandiose, technophobic ideology through the cover of deep ecology. Perhaps the best critique of his glib, sweeping generalizations is an observation in Wallace Stevens' poem "Esthétique du Mal": "Revolution/ Is the affair of logical lunatics. / The politics of emotion must appear / To be an intellectual structure. The cause / Creates a logic not to be distinguished / From lunacy" (324).

The professional adventurers, the ascetic pilgrim, the domestic terrorist, each sought a deeper realization than everyday life could afford and headed into the wild for the space to pursue those meanings. While they met dark fates, the faiths they invested in the wild are remarkable and at least momentarily caught the public's imagination. But as the wolf metaphor epitomized antithetical meanings, the public's reaction to these three men also ranged from awe and fascination to pity and contempt to

revulsion and hatred. As we become more technically proficient, our attraction to the wild intensifies, and with it the ambivalence of our responses to its unpredictability. The more global the network of connections—the web of relations—linking us together, the more central the wild becomes culturally in its growth as a symbol.

With this overview of the contemporary landscape of the wild, and before turning to the critical shift that Thoreau enacted in his use of it, I'd like to consider the roots of the idea of the wild in the myth of the Wild Man, which appears both in "the ancient world and in the Middle Ages," as Edward Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak point out in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*:

This mythic being, reared by bears or wolves, living in isolation, possessed of enormous physical strength and sexual potency, covered with hair, and often without any language, survived the realities of the voyages of discovery and lived on not only in the Western psyche but also in its official taxonomy as developed by Linnaeus. . . . For the purposes of Western thought, the Wild Man and the savage served many of the same purposes. Both belonged to the region of the mind that treasured freedom over control, nature over art, passion over abstract reason. (x)

The wild, like certain other signs in Western discourses, has been used to signify and culturally validate its opposite. In "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," Hayden White writes that the

notion of "wildness" (or in its Latinate form, "savagery") belongs to a set of culturally self-authenticating devices

which includes, among many others, the ideas of "madness" and "heresy" as well. These terms are used not merely to designate a specific condition or state of being but also to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses: "civilization," "sanity," and "orthodoxy" respectively. (4)

It can be argued, as Dudley and Maximillian do, that the wildness of the mythic Wild Man

is far more central to the thought, and indeed the psyche, of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than the theme of insanity which Michel Foucault has so brilliantly delineated in his *Madness and Civilization*, for as Foucault demonstrates, madness at this time was something alien, something to be cast out and separated from the body. The life of the savage, on the other hand, was something in every man, something to come to terms with—not so much a mirror for Western civilization as a fluoroscope, revealing the organs and bones below the clothing and flesh. (x)

In this myth are the roots of the tropological shift Thoreau enacts from wilderness to wild, his extolment of and ambivalence towards the savage within. Wildness is the palimpsest on which natural history was both theorized and written in the eighteenth century and the ethnographic field on which indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere were encountered and removed by colonizing Euro-Americans.

In his essay⁷ Hayden White sorts out the complex "genealogy of

⁷ I've chosen to use White's analysis in "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," because it provides, I think, a condensed conceptual framework that enables us to trace diachronically the dichotomous meanings we associate with the wild. As such, it therefore serves to contextualize the overview of the contemporary wild and the shift I will discuss in connection with Thoreau. But I must refer here, as well, at the first mention of the historical dimensions of the subject, to a number of book-length studies of wilderness, the
(continued...)

the Wild Man myth" (3) as derived from Hebrew and Greco-Roman thought. Commenting on the "gradual demythologization of concepts like 'wildness,' 'savagery,' and 'barbarism'" (6) as the sphere of wilderness exploration and settlement inexorably enlarged, White notes that

the idea of the Wild Man was progressively despatialized. This process of despatialization was attended by a compensatory process of psychic interiorization. And the result has been that modern cultural anthropology has conceptualized the idea of wildness as the repressed content of *both* civilized *and* primitive humanity. (7)

Furthermore, White sees a "remythification. . . [in] the interiorization of the wilderness and . . . the Wild Man. . . [,] with the modern form of the myth assuming a pseudo-scientific aspect in the various theories of the psyche" (7-8). The explanatory power of this analysis is twofold. First, we can trace, on the one hand, the profoundly negative connotations of the Wild Man *from* the monotheistic Hebraist belief in the blessing of the agricultural settler opposed to the wandering hunter's Wild Man accursedness (the fall from God-reliance to animality), to the persistence of the figure of the antisocial outcast—the Upper West

⁷(...continued)

wild, and humanity's relation to nature. Among the earliest such studies are Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) and Clarence J. Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1967). Of more recent vintage are Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980); Keith Thomas' *Man and the Natural World* (1983); Max Oelschläeger's *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991); and Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests* (1992); as well as a recent anthology edited by William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*. As a group, these scholars inform my discussion throughout this dissertation as I will gratefully acknowledge.

Side wild man. On the other hand, we can trace the Wild Man's positive connotations from "the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the social bonds of medieval culture began to disintegrate" and the sexually uninhibited, civilly unrestrained image of the wild man came to represent "a kind of freedom that might be envied by normal men" (22) (an attitude that was powerfully valorized by later Romanticism), to the remythification of Estés's wild woman or the new age "Wild Man Consciousness" as revitalized metaphors for the "natural instinctive psyche" (4). Second, White's insight into myth and its transformation suggests why contemporary writers and thinkers find the wild useful to enact the kinds of change Gary Snyder speaks for in *The Practice of the Wild*, or to argue for an ecological epistemology as the sociologist Will Wright does in *Wild Knowledge*:

It is not surprising that, in an age of general cultural revolution, the popular anti-type of the officially defined "normal" humanity, the Wild Man, should be transformed into the ideal or model of a free humanity, his presumed attributes made the essence of a lost humanity, and his idealized image used as justification for rebellion against civilization itself. (22)

Although White is commenting here on medieval changes in attitude toward the Wild Man, his remarks are strikingly relevant to our present era. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, these historical sources of wildness have been joined by another.

In the annals of nature writing and the genres we relate to it, such

as the literature of exploration, travel, natural history, ornithology, the pastoral, and others, Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking" (1862) stands out as the first in which a writer moves the wild so completely into the foreground. With the seminal statement, "In Wildness is the preservation of the World" (672),⁸ Thoreau's philosophy—measured in terms of its impact on nature writing—finds its most condensed expression. This gnomic sentence, often quoted, sometimes misquoted with wilderness substituting for wildness, can also be said to have ideologically founded the American conservation movement. To this day, the Sierra Club reprints this statement in each edition of its monthly magazine to reaffirm its mission.

That Gary Snyder would seek to revise the assertion almost one hundred and thirty years later when he writes in "The Etiquette of Freedom," an essay in his collection *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), that "Wildness is not just the 'preservation of the world,' it is the world" (6), suggests the deep resonance Thoreau has had culturally, second only to his stand on civil disobedience. While his interest in the philosophy of language—a field of paramount importance to him and his nineteenth-century contemporaries—and his influence on environmentalists are both widely known, there has been less discussion of the implications of his

⁸ All citations from "Walking" are from the 1937 Riverside Press Cambridge Edition *The Works of Thoreau* edited by Henry Seidel Canby.

shift in use from wilderness to wild on nature writers and ecological understanding in general.

Thoreau's biographer, Robert D. Richardson, Jr., describes the peculiar composition history of "Walking," a combination of two popular talks, the first of which was originally given as "The Wild" in April 1851, that grew over the decade until Thoreau spun off a second, separate lecture entitled "Walking." "The two talks were ultimately reassembled and published in 1862 as "Walking," just after Thoreau's death (224).⁹ By the time Thoreau began lecturing on "The Wild" in April 1851, he had extensively experienced, read, ruminated, and written about the natural world. He had reworked his 1839 river excursion with his brother John into the frame for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which was published in 1849. He had spent a little over two years at Walden Pond in 1845/1847, interrupted by an excursion to Maine in August 1846, during which time "[i]n twenty-six months he wrote two complete drafts of *A Week*, a complete draft of *Walden*, a lecture on his life at Walden, a lecture on Carlyle, and the first third of *The Maine Woods* that is the 'Ktaadn' essay" (Richardson 154). In the fall of 1849, he made the first of three visits to Cape Cod, witnessing the aftermath of the wreck of the "brig

⁹ Ronald Wesley Hoag has a slightly different account in "Thoreau's Later Natural History Writings" (*The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*): "'Walking' is a union of two lectures, 'Walking' and 'The Wild,' that Thoreau wrote in 1851, soon combined, then revised and separated in 1854, and finally recombined in 1862" (153).

St. John, from Galway, Ireland, laden with emigrants" (853) just off shore, which he chronicled in articles that appeared in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1855 and later as the first chapter of *Cape Cod* (1865), "The Shipwreck" (Sayre 1057).

From "Ktaadn" and *Cape Cod*, we know that Thoreau had contemplated nature unsentimentally as both an indifferent, primal presence and a destructive power. In describing the bodies washed ashore from the foundering of the St. John in *Cape Cod*, Thoreau writes:

On the whole it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the wind and the waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity? (*Henry David Thoreau* 856).

Later, Thoreau avers that the

sea-shore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world. . . . It is a wild, rank place, and there is no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor clams, and whatever the sea casts up,—a vast *morgue*. . . . There is naked Nature,—inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (979)

Throughout *Cape Cod*, Thoreau is drawn to the primitive nature of the Cape shore ecotone—the limen of sea and desert—the immensity of the ocean vista. Like his encounter on "Ktaadn," or the Dismal Swamp he extols in "Walking," Thoreau often revels in that part of wild nature least hospitable to human beings—at times foreshadowing what we now think of

as deep ecology or associate with the "Inhumanism" of poet Robinson Jeffers: the de-centering of human experience and perception in and the resulting re-(e)valuation of the natural world.¹⁰

Thoreau often suggests a kind of mythological reading of the primal forces of nature in *Cape Cod*, something he does explicitly in "Walking" as well:

Before the land rose out of the ocean, and became dry land, chaos reigned; and between high and low water mark, where she is partially disrobed and rising, a sort of chaos reigns still, which only anomalous creatures can inhabit. Mackerel-gulls were all the while flying over our heads and amid the breakers, sometimes two white ones pursuing a black one; quite at home in the storm, though they are as delicate organizations as sea-jellies and mosses; and we saw that they were adapted to their circumstances rather by their spirits than their bodies. Theirs must be an essentially wilder, that is, less human, nature than that of larks and robins. (897-898)

How strange is that last sentence, like so many of Thoreau's, if we read it literally—denotatively—without the connotations of the creation myth in which it is embedded. In "Ktaadn," Thoreau takes the confrontation with the "inhumanism" of nature as a wholly Other, not-Me, as far as he could within the bounds of his language. His attempt to represent the sheer materiality of existence threatens the very dissolution of language itself:

I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is

¹⁰ See Max Oelschlaeger's Chapter, "The Idea of Wilderness in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder," in *The Idea of Wilderness* for a discussion of Inhumanism.

this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!—
 Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to
 come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks!
 The *solid earth!* the *actual world!* the *common sense!*
Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? (*The
 Maine Woods* 646).

From scholarly biography and bibliography of Thoreau and his
 work,¹¹ we know that he was widely read in the writings of early
 explorers, natural history—particularly local histories, and travel writing.
 Richardson points out that in 1850 Thoreau was absorbed in reading
 Alexander von Humboldt's *Aspects of Nature* and "*Kosmos (or Cosmos)*,
 the newly translated five-volume survey of the material universe in which
 Humboldt strove, he said, to 'represent nature as one great whole, moved
 and animated by internal forces'" (209).

His ongoing, philosophical correspondence with Harrison Blake,
 "continue[d] to be dominated by such problems as the real versus the
 apparent world, and being versus doing" (Richardson 208). By June of
 1851 we know that Thoreau was reading Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*,
 a narrative which would impress and influence his later revisions of the
 Walden manuscript, ultimately published in 1854; and by the time, nearly
 ten years later, that Thoreau reassembled his two lectures into the essay
 "Walking," just before his death, he had read Darwin's just published *On*

¹¹ See Walter Harding, *Thoreau's Library* (Charlottesville: U VA P, 1957);
 Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with
 Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988); and Robert D.
 Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: U CA P, 1986).

the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (1859).

In addition to his wide reading in natural history, Thoreau, like Emerson and the Transcendentalist Concord group, was also familiar with Wordsworth and Coleridge and, to some extent through the latter, with German idealist philosophy. Sattelmeyer notes how, as a twenty year old Harvard graduate, Thoreau began an in depth study of Goethe and through him of "some of the general ideas of German *Naturphilosophie*."

Throughout *Italian Journey*, the log of his travels from 1786 to 1788, Goethe repeatedly hints at an important sub-text to his journal: his discovery through botanical observations and musings of what he calls "an ἐν καὶ πᾶν" (383)—a key to the "reproduction and organization of plants" (305). Goethe's excitement was in discovering, he believed, "the manner in which Nature, with incomparable power, develops the greatest complexity from the simple" (163):

While walking in the Public Gardens of Palermo, it came to me in a flash that in the organ of the plant which we are accustomed to call the *leaf* lies the true Proteus who can hide or reveal himself in all vegetal forms. From first to last, the plant is nothing but leaf, which is so inseparable from the future germ that one cannot think of one without the other. (363)

In 1790, the musings Goethe hints at throughout *Italian Journey* are developed into a full botanical tract entitled *An Attempt to Interpret the Metamorphosis of Plants*. Here Goethe suggests the key to metamorphosis is the *Urpflanze*, a kind of underlying form to the leaf,

though not the plant leaf, per se: "without pretending to disclose the first springs of Nature's action, we have directed our attention to the manifestation of the forces whereby the plant gradually transforms one and the same organ" (107).

Goethe's quest was by no means *sui generis*. As Lee Rust Brown points out in *The Emerson Museum* (1997),

Romantic organicism [as theories such as Goethe's came to be known] and the gardens of natural history shared a foreground in the commonplace of the book of nature. Dante's and Milton's use of the leaf as a metaphor of the written page derived from the same topical tradition as the discovery, by medieval and Renaissance botanists, of 'signatures' (innate hieroglyphics) in plants. As one could see in leafing through herbaria and botanical catalogs, or in walking through a botanical garden, plants had always been fitted to the model of the book. (124)

The proliferation of natural facts that accompanied the European exploration and colonization of the Western hemisphere beginning in the late fifteenth century had presented Enlightenment science with the challenge of classifying, ordering and explaining observable phenomena. As Gillian Beer points out in her Introduction to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (Oxford UP, 1996),

The Mosaic version of creation presented Adam with a complete roster of living kinds come into being at one time, to name at his own will. . . . Th[at] biblical account had. . . been under persistent pressure, particularly since Linnaeus set out a new scientific taxonomy of the relations between extant plant and animal kinds. Various versions of natural change had woven in and out for centuries. 'Transmutation' was not a new idea; it had been explored in the early

nineteenth century by French scientists such as Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and, long before them, in literary texts such as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in the late sixteenth century. And metamorphosis, with its sideways motion, had been a familiar imaginative resource since Ovid and Apuleius. (x-xi)

Goethe's effort to discern an underlying *type* in the leaf can thus be seen as a perennial quest to conceptualize nature's change. That desire as well as Goethe's avocation as a naturalist would influence both Emerson and Thoreau. We can also see Goethe's striving entangled in the attempt of "Pre-Darwinian science . . . [to] accommodate . . . discovery to design. Each new revelation was quickly enlisted as a proof of providential creation" (Novak 54). Even early "proto-evolutionary" thinkers such as Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus, sought to attribute variations in species to "The First Great Cause" and the "steady movement across all species towards complexity" (qtd. in Beer x). The idea of non-purposive natural selection as the process of evolution would have to await Alfred Russell Wallace's and Charles Darwin's independent formulations.

The emergence of Transcendentalism out of Romanticism's "pursuit of the whole" (Brown) should also be seen in the contexts of German idealist philosophy and Calvinist theological disputes in their effects on nineteenth-century language philosophy, something that will be delved into in greater detail in the next chapter. While Samuel Taylor Coleridge's philosophical criticism served as an important amplification of

German idealism as it took root in America, Emerson and the Transcendentalists also had recourse directly to those philosophers. As Robert D. Richardson, Jr. writes in his essay "Emerson and Nature,"

The central point, the pivot of Emerson's understanding of nature, is his conception of the all-encompassing relationship that exists at all times between the mind—understood as a more or less constant, classifying power—and the infinite variety of external nature. He had read Kant and Schelling and was echoing Kant when he wrote in "The Oversoul" that "the sources of nature are in [man's] own mind." He knew Schelling's breathtaking all-inclusive proposal that "nature is externalized mind; mind is internalized nature." (102)

Philip Gura's *The Wisdom of Words* details the degree to which Emerson's philosophy of language emerged with his separation from the Unitarian church, and how Calvinist and Christian Transcendentalist hermeneutics underlay his fundamental beliefs. For Emerson, at least the "early" Emerson, "nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part". . . .[; t]he Universe is the externisation of the soul. . . .[and] the poet, [he] who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole" (*Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet"* 452;453;455). Nature, thus becomes a sacred text, a book whose leaves are to be read symbolically for their analogy to the divinely infused soul. "We stand before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety" (*The Poet*" 453), and the genius of language is he whose words evoke insight into that secret.

While Emerson posits that "the world is mind precipitated" (in his

Essays: Second Series "Nature" 555), he declines any simple, or definitive interpretation of nature, just as his sentences resist a reductive reading: "The simplicity of nature," he cautions in "Spiritual Laws," is not that which may be easily read, but is inexhaustible. The last analysis can no wise be made" (308). And lest we rush to read Emerson's nature too allegorically or correspondentially, we should also remember his opening in "Circles":

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-moon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. (403)

Emerson's relation to Thoreau can be a vexing problem for critics, one I will explore in greater depths in the following chapter. But this brief overview of the background to Thoreau's intellectual landscape cannot avoid the issue entirely at this point since my reading of the significance of "Walking" depends in part on its context. As Thoreau's mentor, it is generally agreed that Emerson's influence on Thoreau as a thinker and writer is profound. Yet by the 1850s the two had fallen out with each other as friends and Thoreau took pains to distance himself from Emerson—a not entirely unexpected turn of events in light of Harold Bloom's critical insights in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Even more daunting, however, than a biographical understanding of Thoreau's relation to Emerson, is the challenge of reading Emerson himself. There is a danger in over-simplifying Emerson as an "idealist" straw man in order to

emphasize the distance Thoreau moved away from him.¹² This superficial reading ignores his complexity in order to put forward a reductive “aphoristic” Emerson—the very reification of meaning his compositional style consciously resists. As my reading of Thoreau unfolds, so will my provisional, working hypothesis that the differences between him and Emerson are subtle in both degree and kind but distinct enough to have led to very different cultural legacies. In most important ways, however, Thoreau is unimaginable without Emerson who, with the other Romantic writers of the early nineteenth-century, opened Thoreau’s eyes to the potential of the writer’s vocation.

It has already been pointed out that “the aim of representing the whole belongs characteristically to romanticism” (Brown 19):

[T]ranscendentalism is preoccupied with ways of negotiating the interval between the mutually exclusive realms of natural signs and supernatural meanings. . . . Emerson treats

¹² In my opinion, Max Oelschläeger does this in his otherwise perceptive history of the *Idea of Wilderness* (1991). In his chapter “Henry David Thoreau: Philosopher of the Wilderness” Oelschläeger uses Emerson to elevate Thoreau: “Thoreau brilliantly weds the implications of evolution with epistemology itself: *knowledge itself evolves, and intuition is fundamental to the process*. Again, we must emphasize that Thoreau is a thinker far ahead of his time in realizing that humankind is enframed by language and history” (167). Emerson’s “position,” on the other hand, “is conventionally anthropocentric and androcentric, enframed by a Baconian–Cartesian perspective: nature is mere putty in human hands, bestowed by God upon his most favored creation, *man*” (135). At odds with this interpretation is the position taken by Lee Rust Brown, Richard Poirier and others that “[d]espite his popular reputation as an idealist, close readers of Emerson will find him steady in his refusal to put thinking and doing into separate boxes” (Brown 16). While I do not believe we can entirely discount his idealist roots and tendencies, my sense of Emerson is nearer to Brown than Oelschläeger.

wholeness as a relation achieved by the eye rather than as a quality discovered in things; hence organic unity gives way to practical unifications of one sort or another. . . . Nature is [an "open secret"] because it turns out towards interpretation; and yet its interpretation has no end. It is the fact of the openness itself, its endless yield of possible uses, that keeps the larger part of nature a secret. (Brown 53;71-72; 190)

In "Facts" I will take up in more detail Brown's reading of Emerson's use of natural history as a compositional method that enacts that interpretation. Here I want to begin to explicate Thoreau's method in "Walking" and the emphasis he puts on the wild there.

Thoreau's almost daily excursions—literal and textual—around Concord and the record he kept of them in his Journal; his experiment in living and writing at Walden Pond; and his "Ktaadn" and Cape Cod experiences and writings had, by the early 1850s, matured into an attitude (toward himself as a persona and his audience) and a distinct view of nature. Like many of Emerson's essays, Thoreau created "The Wild" as a talk or Lyceum lecture in 1851, reconstructing it with his other, spun-off talk, just before his death in 1862 as the essay we now know as "Walking."

The opening paragraph of "Walking" is a classic of Thoreauvian discourse that, while announcing his intention, implicitly shifts the use of nature to emphasize its wildness and to draw the reader's attention to the way his language will enact that shift:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that." (659-660)

Thoreau's purposeful echo of Emerson's essay *Nature* (1836), in the phrase "to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature," was not lost on his contemporary listeners, familiar with the more famous Concord lecturer's efflorescence:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (10)

While Thoreau shares the language of Transcendentalism, he signals his difference at the very outset of "Walking" when he emphasizes "speak[ing] a word for Nature" in its wildest sense. Through the rhetoric of extreme, and, he hoped, provocative statements, he seeks to shift radically the audience's view of nature to validate wildness as both the vital source of existence and the words in which it is represented in consciousness.

After he establishes the leitmotif of the identity of Nature as wildness and freedom at the outset, Thoreau curiously turns to walking as his subject. For the rest of the approximately first half of the

reconstructed essay (which I infer is derived from the "Walking" rather than "The Wild" lecture material, which comprises most of the second half), he uses the word "wilderness" only three times and the word "wild" only four more times.¹³ One of those usages occurs in Thoreau's identification of the West with "wildness and freedom" as the redemptive possibility of the future: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon" (668). Ultimately, Thoreau uses this second leitmotif of the west to illustrate the larger cultural theme of the redemptive nature of the "New World"—here re-assigned the salvific role as the embodiment of the wild—or, seen obversely, the redemptive role of wild nature in the history of civilization. His rhetoric, as some commentators have noted, echoes the overtones of manifest destiny that were a staple of American discourse at mid-nineteenth century. But significantly, Thoreau does not immediately press his point, nor, in the first half of the essay, does he elevate the wild into a categorical imperative as he does in the second half when he begins to use the capital "W" in certain references to the

¹³ He refers to a "man of wild habits" in the poem, "The Old Marlborough Road" (601); to a flock of geese ("Not a flock of wild geese cackles over town, but it to some extent unsettles the value of real estate here, and, if I were a broker, I should probably take that disturbance into account" [605].); and to the "wilds beasts" (607) of whom "the traveler can lie down in the woods at night almost anywhere in North America without fear."

"Wild."

The point at which "Walking" bifurcates a little before halfway through is evident even to a casual reader. Recapitulating the leitmotifs he has established earlier, Thoreau begins: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild" (672). From this point until a little over three quarters of the way through the essay (when he refers to the Spanish term for what he calls a "wild and dusky knowledge"—"*Gramática parda*, tawny grammar" [681]), Thoreau uses the terms "wild" or "wildness" thirty-three times; the forms "Wild" or "Wildness" four times; and the word wilderness five times. In all his writings, these pages contain his most extended rhapsody on the wild. What Thoreau achieves here is a kind of rhetorical epiphany as he elaborates on the wild in all its ramifications, including his insistence that wildness is a virtual ground of being: "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him" (673).¹⁴

¹⁴ Thoreauvians might be tempted to assert that Thoreau himself realized the wild as a key to his own philosophy, since his influence on this point has grown to that level. But there is little evidence in Thoreau's biography or *Journal* that he was overly preoccupied with wildness as a concept around the time he first delivered the talk in 1851 or in his subsequent natural history essays. In fact, according to the editors of the Princeton scholarly edition of *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal Vol. 3: 1848 - 1851*, Thoreau was deeply disturbed by local events involving the return of an escaped Georgia slave when he first
(continued...)

At the beginning of "Walking," Thoreau establishes his oppositional stance vis-a-vis the reader assumed to be aligned with the "champions of civilization." By opening with "an extreme statement" that situates him outside the boundaries of society, Thoreau enacts the wild both rhetorically and ideologically. By conceptually distinguishing Nature's "absolute freedom and wildness" from human political and social freedom—as if a human being can be meaningfully posited without cultural or social influences or nature posited objectively with absolute autonomy—Thoreau also, through an extreme statement that is characteristically provocative, consciously implicates himself in a traditionally problematic opposition to which nature writers perennially return. When we consider his deep concern with the plight of escaped slaves under the Fugitive Slave Act, Thoreau's extolling of a freedom wholly outside the bounds of society and opposed to it, resonates even more deeply.

Not only what Thoreau says but how he says it, the inversions and paradoxes, the hyperbole of his challenges and assertions to the reader can be read as a kind of wild provocation. Throughout the essay,

¹⁴(...continued)

delivered his talk in: "He may have considered delivering a lecture version of his diatribe at the Concord Lyceum on April 23 instead of the new lecture on "The Wild," but on this occasion he merely prefaced the lecture with an apology for not addressing the Fugitive Slave Law upon which, he said, 'every man is bound to express a distinct opinion'" (492). It has been left to subsequent generations to elevate what in Thoreau was a passionate rhetoric on the wild into a philosophic principle.

Thoreau makes his points through artful exaggerations like this one:

If you are ready to leave your father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk. (660)

Many commentators have picked up on this and related elements of Thoreauvian rhetoric, sometimes disparagingly so.¹⁵ But recently critics have been more sympathetic to what Thoreau in *Walden* calls his "extra-vagance"—a key term in Thoreau's philosophy of the wild. It is derived from the Latin *extrāvagāri*, to wander about, meaning: "spreading or projecting beyond usual limits" (*obs*), "exceeding proper bounds," "wildly excessive," and "very bountiful," among others (*Webster's 3rd New Int'l*). In his essay, "Thoreau's Later Natural History Writings," Ronald Wesley Hoag distills Thoreauvian extra-vagance to "the desire and ability to break the physical, mental, and spiritual boundaries that limit our perception of and relation to wild nature. . . . Indeed, extra-vagance and wildness appear to be synonymous in Thoreau's lexicon" (153).

Thoreau's extra-vagance is not entirely his invention. Emerson

¹⁵ Emerson, in his essay "Thoreau" writes: The habit of a realist to find things the reverse of their appearance inclined him to put every statement in a paradox. A certain habit of antagonism defaced his earlier writings,—a trick of rhetoric not quite outgrown in his later, of substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite. He praised wild mountains and winter forests for their domestic air, in snow and ice he would find sultriness, and commended the wilderness for resembling Rome and Paris. 'It was so dry, that you might call it wet'" (369).

had his *abandonment* in all its ironic multivalency, as at the end of "Circles," he writes: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment" (414).¹⁶ But "Emerson was," as Richardson points out, "finally, a naturalist of mental more than of physical facts" ("Emerson and Nature" 101). In a chiasmus of nature and culture, Emerson takes one through nature into words; Thoreau takes one through words into nature. While he developed a method of natural history as a style of writing, it was Thoreau who ultimately identified his own style with the wild, and the wild as a polysemous signifier.

Thoreau uses the wild in "Walking" to signify all of the following: the wild as opposed to the domestic; the wild as the ultimate, primal source of being that nourishes all life, creates all civilization, enables all meaning; the wild as civilization's antithesis; the wild as the unexplored, unmapped, and unsettled place; the wild as the good, the free, and the savage. Thoreau will reprise many of these meanings in *Walden*, even further complicated by the shifting personas of the narrator there. For instance, the "Higher Laws" chapter's opening paragraph includes the statement: "I found in myself and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or,

¹⁶ Richard Poirier writes that "Abandonment" describes his habit of disavowal, his rhetorical movements of dissociation when it comes to the very things in which he conspicuously puts his trust, like language or literature or nature or even self-reliance" (Introduction, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* 1990, xviii)

as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (490). But it is in "Walking" that Thoreau first celebrates and underlines the wild. That tropological shift has had profound effects ever since on both nature writing and the ecological imagination.

Thoreau's over forty uses of the words wild/wildness/ wilderness in "Walking" is an extravagance that, taken as a whole, impresses us with the polysemy of the wild. The proliferation of meanings in exfoliating contexts is not just about the importance of the wild as a ground of being, it is also about language itself as a wild emanation, about writing as a practice of the wild. The wild, Thoreau seems to suggest, is generative of multiple meanings through which a reader must traverse without nominal preconceptions alert to shifting contexts. Just as the wild is unpredictable and indeterminate, Thoreau makes the word wild an apt sign of polysemy itself.

In *A Week*, Thoreau had written: "Give me a sentence which no intelligence can understand. There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it , and under its words a kind of blood must circulate forever" (122). "Wild rhetoric" is what the critic Henry Golemba calls this quality of Thoreau's writing, "whose meaning always remains elusive and untamable, while its facts provoke readers to interpret, to decode, and

thus to domesticate his sentences" (3). In this connection, I believe it is mistaken to exaggerate Thoreau's differences with Emerson as a writer—the Emerson of "Circles," for instance—as far as their writing is concerned. Both wrote to de-stabilize signs and create sentences that would challenge readers to explore larger worlds and deeper meanings. It is Emerson's "volatile combination of dissociative and performative rhetoric . . . [that] makes him 'the American Scholar,'" Richard Poirier suggests, because he insists that you "[r]ely . . . not on anything fixed or stabilized in your vocabulary but only on movements away from them, movements precipitated by desire whose object is uncertain and which, if too certainly defined, can turn your thinking about it into mere thought and thence into inertia" (xviii). In "Walking," Thoreau adapted Emerson's stylistic innovations to be less self-referential as a language practice and to focus attention more on the underlying connections, even homology, of culture and nature and the currents of wildness that weave them together through language.

One of Thoreau's main objects in his rambles around Concord was to still his mind and clarify his perceptions and awareness of the present moment: "The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses" (663). Deliberate walking is a meditation. Though there is no evidence I am aware of that Thoreau read William Blake, there is no

doubt he shared the Romantic credo, which was as well a core belief of the eastern philosophy that Thoreau did read extensively: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite" (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Pl. 14). Whether or not Thoreau knew Blake, he would have been familiar with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's philosophical criticism and its underlying assumption that "the productive power. . . in nature, as nature, is essentially one (i.e. of one kind) with the intelligence which is in the human mind above nature" (qtd. in Brown 87).

As deliberate walking is a meditation in nature, new possibilities arise if the walker seeks them, if he "take[s] that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world" (667). The fewer the preconceptions, the more elevated the point of view, the less likely we are to allow "mere names to make distinctions" for us: "A familiar name cannot make a man less strange to me. It may be given to a savage who retains in secret his own wild title earned in the woods. We have a wild savage in us, and a savage name is perchance somewhere recorded as ours" (679-680). The more extra-vagant the walk, the more original, lyrical, mythical the means that must be found to evoke the experience.

Much of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is devoted to Thoreau's interest in mythology, but nowhere does he so explicitly identify it with the wild as he does in "Walking." Thoreau's rambles, if we

take him at his words, took him outside, before, beyond the place Euro-Americans had discovered and named:

I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in. You may name it America, but it is not America; neither Americus Vesputius, nor Columbus, nor the rest were the discoverers of it. There is a truer account of it in mythology than in any history of America, so called, that I have seen. (665)

The signal mark of distinction between Europe and America is the wild, and only a wild *Gramática parda* can produce mythology:

Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure—as if we lived on the marrow of koudoos devoured raw. [672]
Mythology is the crop which the Old World bore before its soil was exhausted, before the fancy and imagination were affected with blight; and which it still bears, wherever its pristine vigor is unabated. [677]
Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology. (677)

For Thoreau, nature writing is the ongoing attempt to write the myth of the wild. As Robert Richardson points out, "Myth gives a verbal story-shape to phenomenon in nature. . . . [; it is] the literary form not just of nature, but of that special aspect of nature Thoreau calls the wild" (231). It is also, like the wild, unfathomable in its generative multiplicity of meanings. Thoreau's rhetorical attempt to distinguish mythology from culture by identifying the former with the wild, only serves to reemphasize how culture is a part of nature rather than opposed or superior to it. After

all, what is mythology but an aboriginal cultural product?:

The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. [672]

I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted. You will perceive that I demand something which no Augustan or Elizabethan age, which no *culture*, in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything. (677)

In a remarkable sentence from *A Week*, Thoreau not only adumbrates Jung and ecopsychology, but suggests the significance myth held for him: "In the mythus a superhuman intelligence uses the unconscious thoughts and dreams of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn" (50). From the time Thoreau first gave "The Wild" as a lecture in April 1851, Richardson notes, he devoted ever more effort in his "essays and journals. . . [to creating] fables and mythic parables of his own" (232).

If the wild is nature's boundless plenitude and myth the only way language can, indirectly, convey the nature of the wild, then what we call "knowledge" is a poor accounting of an infinitude. Like the Coleridgean distinction between understanding and reason, fancy and imagination, Thoreau reconfigures the Romantic dyad around the terms knowledge and intelligence, with the latter deeply implicated in the wild:

What we call knowledge is often our positive ignorance; ignorance our negative knowledge. . . . My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. (681)

It is only through access to the wild that we can reconnect our innermost selves with the primal sources of creation and thus renew the world that is re-created in us. As Ronald Wesley Hoag concludes,

Thoreau here [in "Walking"] walks as he talks, extra-vagantly; creating his own myth of the saunterer whose inspired walking takes him ever nearer to the essence of the nature through which he travels. (154) . . . Because a final knowledge of nature is too much to expect from even a lifetime of new prospects, he advocates instead an appreciation of "Useful Ignorance," amounting to "novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we call Knowledge before." A satisfying epiphany in its own right, this recognition of a nature that will not be impounded inspires further saunterings to the holy land. It also teaches the extra-vagant lesson that wildness preserves both walker and the world. (155)

In asserting that the wild is the holistic key to reintegrating humankind and the world, Thoreau explicitly describes what we now call human ecology, from both a psychological and an environmental perspective: "To preserve wild animals implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to. So it is with man" (675). By viewing the wild as an essential part both of human nature or the inner psyche, *and* the natural environment, Thoreau anticipates many of the claims just now being made by ecopsychologists and deep ecologists

when he writes that a

hundred years ago they sold bark in our streets
peeled from our own woods. In the very aspect of those
primitive and rugged trees there was, methinks, a tanning
principle which hardened and consolidated the fibers of
men's thoughts. [675]

I would not have every man nor every part of a man
cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth
cultivated. [680]

We are accustomed to say in New England that few and
fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no
mast for them. So, it would seem, few and fewer thoughts
visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in
our minds is laid waste—sold to feed unnecessary fires of
ambition, or sent to mill—and there is scarcely a twig left for
them to perch on. (684)

For Thoreau, the way to glimpse nature's open secret (a term
coined by Goethe and figured by Emerson as well [Brown]) was less a
transcendental act of mind realizing the forms of phenomena in its own
activity than a descendent act that would find primal nature, including
human nature, at its core to be wild. As Philip Gura suggests,

[W]hile Thoreau's notion of the relationship between
language and nature can hardly be termed "transcendental"
in the Emersonian or "correspondential" in the Sweden-
borgian sense, he arrived at his philosophical and
imaginative conception of language by working through the
linguistic premises of such theories. The significant
difference, of course, resided in his belief that the found-
ation for the "spiritual" life for which he prayed (and which
he described in *Walden*) did not lie so much in the fact of
transcendence to another sphere as in the permanence of
the physical world in which he, as well as his language, was
rooted. Thoreau believed that man did not have to get
anywhere; he was there already, surrounded by the literal
ground of being from which he sprang and to which he
would return. The analogies between words and things

taught him that what correspondence they possessed was not to be understood as raising man to a higher realm of truth but served rather to alert him to the wonder of his sensuous worldly existence [137-138]. Nature is the Spirit, Thoreau declared, and there is no particular moment when we are transported to another field (143).

If the simplified expression in the chiasmus of nature and culture is valid—that Emerson takes one through nature into words; Thoreau takes one through words into nature—it can also serve to “red-flag” a chiasmus of criticism. Certain Emersonian critics tend to exaggerate his idealism and discount his materialism (or realism); certain Thoreauvian critics tend to exaggerate his materialism and discount his idealism. Neither do justice to the complexity of these writers. Thoreau went further than his contemporaries in his tendency to immerse himself in material nature and to identify himself with its processes and substance—a kind of wild monism. This tendency, taken to the extreme or fully realized, is what I call “decendentalist.” But a close reading of Thoreau suggests his hesitation before that extreme. Though he demands that “which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild,” he admits that he “demand[s] something which no Augustan or Elizabethan age, which no *culture*, in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything” (677). Though mythology comes close, there still exists a gap between mind (culture) and nature. Thoreau walks obsessively in nature, yet he admits that his “desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to

bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence" (681). Thoreau's hesitation, even refusal, before a purely materialist outlook will emerge again in *Walden*.

It has been left to Thoreau's heirs to fulfill his proto-shamanistic decendentalist tendencies.¹⁷ More self-consciously than any other, Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* completes the shift from wilderness to wild begun by Thoreau. Thoreau says in *Walden*, "I love the wild not less than the good" (210); and his writing there continually challenges a reader to plumb the meaning of that dyad. When in "Walking" he writes about nature's "absolute freedom" and "man as an inhabitant . . . of Nature, rather than a member of society" (659-660), Thoreau speaks, albeit extravagantly, through a prevailing discourse that opposed nature and society. In the posthumanist late twentieth century, Snyder is less willing theoretically to accept that dichotomy even for rhetorical purposes, but rather sees nature and self inseparable in lived experience and in language: "Wild nature is inextricably in the weave of self and culture"

¹⁷ In the section "Contemplating One's Own Skeleton" in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* Mircea Eliade's writes that "in the spiritual horizon of hunters and herdsmen bone represents the very source of life, both human and animal. To reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth" (62). Gary Snyder's early poem, *Myths & Texts*, the "first shaman song" (Hunting) and "second shaman song" (Burning) enact such a decendentalist vision.

(68).¹⁸ He modifies Thoreau's core assertion by further despatializing the metaphor of the wild, interiorizing it, and paradoxically extending it in space:

Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world," it is the world" (6).
Our bodies are wild. . . . The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. . . . The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is where a bobcat is *right now*. . . . The body is, so to speak, in the mind. They are both wild. (16)

What Thoreau has implied, Snyder makes explicit: that we have moved from the sense of wilderness as a privileged space to the sense of the wild as a despatialized attribute, characteristic and ground of being. Paul Faulstich puts it well in the *Place of the Wild*: "Wilderness separates; wildness integrates. Wilderness is a place; wildness is a condition. Humans are wild too" (168).

Finding the wild everywhere entails linguistic, epistemological, and ecological ramifications. Against the "resourcism" (Oelschlaeger 286)¹⁹ of conservationists and to a lesser extent preservationists with their

¹⁸ Snyder writes that language "is a mind-body system that coevolved with our needs and nerves. Like imagination and the body, language rises unbidden" (*The Practice of the Wild* 17).

¹⁹ "Unquestionably the dominant idea of wilderness, resourcism is the child of Western history, reflecting the intense homocentrism of Judeo-Christianity and the alchemy of Modernism. . . . Resourcism is bereft of any archaic sense of wilderness as the Mother Earth, of any Romantic sense of the connection of human purpose with nature, and of any Leopoldian sense of value in the wilderness. Human life takes place outside of nature, and the boundaries between wilderness and civilization are definite" (Oelschlaeger 286-287).

emphasis on a utilitarian based valuation of wilderness areas and human management of the "ecomachine" (287), Snyder proposes to de-center human subjectivity in the world by re(de)fining the language of that subjectivity in terms of the wild, and opening a "dialogue. . . among all beings, toward a rhetoric of ecological relationships" (68). Those now known as shallow ecologists, a pejorative term introduced by Arne Naess in 1972,²⁰ for the most part work within the existing epistemological and scientific paradigms, while deep ecologists strive to revise them. Thoreau is the tap root of this revisionary tree whose exfoliating branches now include a catalogue of eco's: ecopsychology, ecofeminism, ecophilosophy (sometimes referred to as ecosophy), and ecocriticism, among the most prominent.

The wild continues to have its day, as expected, in the vernacular and pop culture with fashion leading the way.²¹ Less predictable, however, is the vital role the wild is coming to play as a signifier in academic theory and social critique. It is these disciplines taken as a

²⁰ In "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary", Naess distinguished shallow ecologists who "[f]ight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in developed countries" from deep ecologists who reject "the human-in-environment image in favor of *the total relational, total-field image*. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations" (*The Deep Ecology Movement* [1995] 3).

²¹ Not long ago a full-page ad by Macy's appeared in the *New York Times* showing a young woman with a detached gaze in knee-high boots seated in a chair—under which was inscribed: Right now / WILD / feels so right" (*New York Times* 11 Sep. 1997: A7).

**whole that I have subsumed under the rubric "wild theory," to which the
wild texts of nature writers lead.**

Chapter 2

Facts

The Genre of Nature Writing

Everything factual is already theory: to understand this would be the greatest possible achievement. The blueness of the sky reveals the basic law of chromatics. Don't go looking for anything beyond phenomena: they are themselves what they teach, the doctrine.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years

Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series. Every general law only a particular fact of some more general law presently to disclose itself. There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us. . . . Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles"

The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact. . . (249).

—Henry David Thoreau

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

Narrowly defined, the "nonfictional genre of Nature writing. . .

stretches in America from Thoreau, Muir, Burroughs, and Austin, to Aldo Leopold, Rachael Carson, Loren Eiseley, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez, to name only a few" (Burgess-Glotfelty 7). Such a definition, arguably defensible as it is, nevertheless excludes a rich tradition of American encounters with and responses to nature and the wild. Often these writings are classified in other, sometimes overlapping, genres. For instance, John Smith's 1616 *A Description of New England* and William Wood's 1634 *New England's Prospect* are both considered promotional tracts yet are among the earliest attempts at first hand description in English of North America by Europeans. The genres of

captivity narrative, travels and sketches, discovery and exploration, notes, letters, ornithology, natural history, essays, even popular adventure stories can be fertile repositories, at least occasionally, of writing on nature if not nature writing, the signal distinction being the writer's primary focus in the text.

In "Ecology and American Literature: Thoreau and Un-Thoreau" (*American Literary History* 9.2), Karl Kroeber proposes two branches of nature writing: one originates in Thoreau's effort at private transcendence, what he calls his "self-centeredness" or "focus on nature. . . [as] a means of self-evaluation" (315); in contrast to this tradition, the second branch, beginning with William Bartram, is comprised of more socially-oriented, scientific observers such as Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Barry Lopez. Still other critics, such as Michael Branch, suggest both Bartram and Thoreau as co-founders of American nature writing.

There is an interesting discussion on just how to define the genre (and whether we should define it) in *Mānoa* (Fall 1992). In "The Rise of Nature Writing: America's Next Great Genre?" Rick Bass and fourteen other practitioners respond to John A. Murray's contention that the explosion of creative writing in this field since Earth Day 1970 constitutes "arguably *the* major genre in American literature. . . [but that the] great American nature book has not been written yet" (73-74). Predictably enough opinions varied widely. Barry Lopez's opening remarks capture

both the wariness of genre classification and the weight given to this writing however it is described:

My fear for "natural history writing" is that it *will* come to be seen as a genre rather than a tendency in American literature toward justice. In broadest terms, "natural history writing" addresses a breach between human culture and landscape, formalized in the agricultural and industrial revolutions. It seeks to define, in truly myriad ways, just relationships, not simply with all that composes the Earth but between conquering and conquered peoples, for example. (89)

New sub-genres are being defined as critics explore this field.

Thus Pamela Regis proposes to subsume Bartram's *Travels* (1791), Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), and Crèvecoeur's *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782)

within a larger group of texts, the literature of place. The works of Major Robert Rogers, William Smith, William Stork, James Adair, and Jonathan Carver constitute a loosely defined genre, a tradition of writing about the land. . . . As explorers of North America, these men observed and recorded basic information about the natural productions in the territories they visited: the rivers, soils, plants, animals, and inhabitants. (xii)

There is also some controversy concerning the generic classifications of writers by both the writers themselves and the critics. In *The Journey Home*, Edward Abbey spends most of his introduction asserting his non-status as a "nature writer":

I am not a naturalist. I never was and never will be a naturalist. I'm not even sure what a naturalist is except that I'm not one. . . . Much as I admire the work of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Beston, Krutch, Eiseley and others, I have not tried

to write in their tradition. I don't know how. I've done plenty of plain living, out of necessity, but don't know how to maintain a constant level of high thinking. It's beyond me. . . . My literary idols anyway have always been people like Rabelais, Knut Hamsun, B. Traven, Theodore Dreiser, Celine, Steinbeck—the unloved. . . . [My work, a]lthough classified by librarians as "nature books," . . . belong[s] to the category of personal history rather than natural history. . . . If a label is required say that I am one who loves unfenced country. *The open range*. Call me a ranger. . . . So much for the mantle and britches of Thoreau and Muir. Let Annie Dillard wear them now. (xi-xiii)

What are we to make of this strenuous denial? Should we take it at face value? Or as the typically crotchety Abbey persona sounding his note of disingenuous tongue-in-cheek?

To further complicate matters, there are critics who would *dis-*mantle Dillard, too, as the heir apparent of Thoreau. Sandra Humble Johnson argues in *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in The Work of Annie Dillard* that Dillard is an epiphanist, a neoromantic influenced more by Wordsworth than Thoreau. She objects to John Elder's placing her in the "Muir-wilderness tradition" (57)²² and concludes:

Although she has been called a "nature writer," while others edge toward the nature-philosophic essay, employing scientific data to support ecological issues, Dillard is more purely the artist, language-conscious, bound up with the topic of aestheticism and artistic development. (61)

While Johnson's rhetorical analysis is precise and her distinctions

²²The "Muir-wilderness tradition," Johnson writes quoting Elder, "engages the 'close observation of nature, within an awareness of the modern science of ecology.'" But Dillard's detailed observation of nature "becomes [merely] the foil for . . . [her epiphanic] self-engendered moment" (59).

insightful, to separate Dillard entirely from American nature writing seems as critically self-serving and unjustified as it would be to ignore Edward Abbey among the notable writers of the American southwest. It is one thing to say, in effect, that Dillard is not Rachel Carson, but it is another to say by implication that nature writers are less "language-conscious" than a neoromantic writer. Nature writing has produced some of the finest stylists, Thoreau, Henry Beston, and Peter Matthiessen among only the first to come to mind.

In contrast to Johnson's exclusivity, anthologists tend to inclusivity, no doubt for commercial reasons, often mixing British and American, fiction and non-fiction in various assortments. Thomas J. Lyon has edited one of the more authoritative and popular anthologies, *This Incomparable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing* (1989; New York: Penguin, 1991), and written a "Taxonomy of Nature Writing" as part of his introduction that includes the following categories: "Field Guides and Professional Papers," "Natural History Essays," "Rambles," "Solitude and Back-Country Living," "Travel and Adventure," "Farm Life," "Man's Role in Nature" (4). Robert Finch and John Elder edited *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (New York: Norton, 1990) and included British and American fiction and non-fiction, a mixture to which Robert J. Begiebing and Owen Grumbling, editors, added poetry in *The Literature of Nature: The British and American Traditions* (Medford, NJ: Plexus Pub, 1990).

One of the finest new anthologies to include world literature in various genres is *Encompassing Nature: A Sourcebook* (1998). This collection of writings on "Nature and Culture from Ancient Times to the Modern World" ends with William Bartram's *Travels* published in 1791. It thus represents an enormous challenge to enlarge and deepen the narrow generic perspective on American nature writing and the romanticism from which it emerges. As its editor Robert Torrance points out in his Introduction,

The Romantic Age was. . . an age of aggravated division of the human from the natural world, and of intense longing for reparation of their shattered communion: an age, Wordsworth wrote, when "little we see in nature that is ours." Not from greater accord with nature, but from the *unnaturalness* of their perceived condition, Schiller contended in his seminal essay of 1795-96, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, did writers of his time seek in the external world what they failed to find within themselves. The ancient Greeks "felt naturally; we feel the natural. . . . Our feeling for nature is like the feeling of an invalid for health." . . . Only when refined urban civilizations begin to undergo breakdown or turbulent change—as in Hellenistic Greece, medieval Japan, and Europe at the convergence of industrial and political revolution—have writers searched in the natural world for a wholeness the human world appears to have lost, and evolved new forms of writing to overcome division from it. (xii)

Adding to the proliferation of the different types of writing in the field of nature are the works of regional and ethnic writers. As anecdotal impression suggests, university presses are now regularly publishing local histories and natural histories, often concerned exclusively with the flora and fauna of a particular state or region and its ecology. Rural

ethnic writers are also of interest because of their close connection to the land. Notable in this respect are Native Americans like Leslie Marmon Silko and other non-Anglo writers of the Southwest, particularly Chicano/a writers like Rudolfo Anaya and Gloria Anzaldúa, who have gained national reputations and are frequently anthologized. Although such ethnic writers are by no means exclusively regionalists, they often take nature as their subject or the landscape as the theater for an ethnic drama that has effects on both the individual and the communal levels in connection with a particular place from which the protagonist cannot be separated. In this respect Leslie Marmon Silko is exemplary for both her fiction (*Ceremony*) and non-fiction ("Landscape, History, and The Pueblo Imagination").

After tracing the lineage of the genre to three grandfathers: Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau; and two fathers: Muir and Burroughs, W. C. Stephenson in "A New Type of Nature Writing" (*Midwest Quarterly*, Winter 1995) attempts to establish five "characteristics of the tradition" (170). 1) "It must be a mixed breed," "creat[ing] its own interesting kind of dissonance. . . [b]ecause so many nature writers express strong sentiments against the separation of objective and subjective knowing"; 2) "Could it be a peculiarly American phenomenon?"; 3) "It must be born of joy and remain wild and free"; 4) "It must not speak with forked tongue"—i.e., it includes "the desire to tell objective

truth. . . [while] celebrat[ing]. . . [the] awakening of perception to an ecological way of seeing. . . [and acknowledging] the necessity of humility" in doing so; and 5) "It must speak and foster inter-connectedness" (172-188). In discussing the first criterion, Stephenson makes an important point that nature writing has traditionally been seen as a blend of "factual" and "personal," a mixture which "erroneously aligns 'factual' with scientific/objective and 'personal' with reflective/interpretive" (176). A better model, he suggests, is triadic: "prose that is more essay than story and that operates in the middle ground between description, persuasion, and reflection" (187).

Stephenson also engages the controversy about whether nature writing as a genre must be in the form of an essay by claiming that "[e]veryone agrees it is nonfiction, but most of us fudge to include our favorite novelists (e.g., Matthiessen, Maclean, Silko, Mowat, Durrell. . .) because, like many novels, the personal tone is at the heart of nature writing" (171-172). Can we justify this "fudge"? While the generic distinction between Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* and *Far Tortuga* or *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is clear (nonfiction and fiction), must we feel compelled to exclude Silko's *Ceremony* (fiction) from a discussion of nature writing because the novel is primarily about the reconstitution of a native American identity? What do we consider *Walden* or a *Sand County Almanac*? Non-fiction novels? or "interconnected chapters we

can call essays" (Stephenson 172)? While these may be valid questions for a few academic taxonomists, they are not the reason these texts taken as a whole are now the subject of so much interest. Glotfelty's three criteria for ecocritical studies,²³ it seems to me, are much more useful in approaching this writing than failed, or questionable genre distinctions.

Reflecting how problematic genre classification can be for non-traditional writings, including but not limited to nature writing, W. Ross Winterowd in *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature* simply gives up the effort to create a term to define the category of texts he discusses (the "non-fiction novel," so-called, and the "New Journalism"; "essays. . . [some of which he terms] 'lyrics in prose'; 'confessions'; and "'the nature meditation'") and settles on "the 'Other' Literature" of the title. Winterowd acknowledges the difficulty of categorizing texts such as *In Cold Blood*, "The Angry Winter" by Loren Eiseley, *Armies of the Night*, and *The Snow Leopard* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—the texts of his categories respectively—under an adequate rubric:

"The literature of fact"? But factuality is not really a central issue. "Non-imaginative literature"? Hardly, since one of

²³ From the Introduction (page 4), ecocriticism can be thought of as the study 1) of nature as it is represented in a text and the text's impact on environmental practice; 2) of texts which manifest or enact an ecological awareness, including "the influence of place on. . . [a writer's] imagination"; and 3) of the theoretical implications which impinge on literature and the environment, including ecofeminism—which examines "the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature"—and the epistemological critique of science (7-8).

my purposes is to argue that the texts I discuss are just as imaginative as the poems, stories, novels, and plays that are generally considered to constitute "imaginative" literature.
(ix)

Winterowd steps around the textual classification problem by centering his approach on the reader's response: how does a reader use a text to create meaning, and which textual qualities and elements lead a reader to collaboratively construct meaning with the writer or deconstruct a text whose gaps the reader will (or can) not bridge. He transforms the generic questions, "What is this text [and how do I classify it]?" into "What can I take this text to be?" That is, "What sort of illocutionary force do I attribute to this text?" (x). The terms Winterowd uses to analyze the "form or structure" of a text are "ethos, logos, and pathos" or "elements of expression, information, and appeal to an audience" (xiii).²⁴ Winterowd thus approaches a text with a view toward the impression it makes and whether (and how, if so) that impression is the result of "an esthetic whole." We can "interpret. . . *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* ethically, as expressive discourse. . . [or] as referential, . . . [while] *The Snow Leopard*. . . [has] elements of *ethos* and *logos* [that] add up. . . to an esthetic whole" (xiii). Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, on the other hand Winterowd concludes, though informative, even "encyclopedic" (130), is a text in

²⁴ *Ethos*: expressive discourse, emotive discourse, agent, illocution
Pathos: persuasive discourse, conative discourse, identification, perlocution
Logos: referential discourse, scene, locution" (Winterowd xiii).

which “*logos* dominates *ethos*” (130) . . . [and] is too disunified to sustain itself” (133). Winterowd’s approach is useful in focusing on how we engage a text and to some extent on the “cultural work,” as Jane Tompkins puts it, a text does. It thus makes a good fit with the first type of ecocritical study Glotfelty describes: how nature is represented textually and how that representation effects environmental practice. And to the extent it demands that we be self-conscious readers, it may also promote the growth of ecological awareness. The process by which we read and, “[i]n attempting to account for the dynamics of a text, . . . privilege” (xiii) *ethos*, *pathos*, or *logos*, amplifies the force a text may have to change the way we think. *A Sand County Almanac*, for instance, has each of these discourses but in different blends in different sections. “Thinking Like a Mountain” may strike us more ethically (expressive) than pathetically (persuasive), while “The Land Ethic” may be primarily pathetic but also referential (informative).

What can be said definitively at this point is that there are no clear and generally agreed upon boundaries to the genre of nature writing beyond the narrow definition with which we began: the non-fiction nature/philosophic essay or book.

It is interesting that while most critical discussions will not cross certain borders (for instance, will not take up both the nature essay and poetry, or the nature essay and fiction), many of the practitioners of

nature writing do. Since any exclusion is more practical than ideologically meaningful, it is doubtful a highly exclusive canon in this field can be defended. Although my study is largely confined to the nonfiction of American (nature) writers and will discuss few poems or novels, I am intrigued with the possibilities of cross generic study: of, for instance, how Peter Matthiessen's work and writing as a naturalist inform his novels; or how the philosophy Gary Snyder articulates in his essays enriches his poetry; or how nineteenth century language philosophy is manifested in Melville's attitude toward nature in *Moby Dick* or "The Encantadas." If we trace the nature essay, *per se*, to its Thoreauvian origins, as some critics do, then any texts we look to before Thoreau for evidence of how nature was thought of and represented must be in related genres. I see no reason to exclude from consideration William Bartram's *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida*. . . or even Mary Rowlandson's *A Narrative of The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, certainly a text no one would classify as nature writing. Yet both reveal the authors' and the eras' cultural attitudes toward nature.

Since this study encompasses literary and non-literary discourses, like journalism and advertising, and since nature writing is not a homogeneously defined genre, I have cast a wide net as I explore attitudes toward the wild. One of my organizing principles of selection has been writers' confrontations with or "fronting the facts." Why "facts"?

Because most nature writers to one extent or another begin there, often consciously foregrounding the issue of what constitutes a fact and why in an essay. As the philosopher William James once commented on his own writing in a letter to his brother Henry: "I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts. It is like walking through the densest brush-wood." One can hear echoes of Emerson and Thoreau in James' assertion.

Though perhaps in a different sense than he meant, I disagree with Winterowd when he says that "factuality is not really a central issue" (ix) in the "literature of fact." To the extent that we associate nature writing with the "literature of fact," facts are at issue. Stephenson, commenting on a point Winterowd makes, writes that "whereas nature writers almost always claim both truth and factuality for their discursive prose, Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Mailer in *The Armies of the Night* claim truth, but not factuality" (175). Just as some writers may invent a fact to assert a truth (Annie Dillard has been taken to task for admitting she did just that at times in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), the process in which nature writers perceive and select *their* facts among myriad others and embed or elaborate them within a rhetorical structure is the core through which we attain access to the deeper levels of their imagination, of nature, and the wild. As Stanley Cavell points out in *The Senses of Walden*,

To write standing face to face to a fact, as if it were a scimitar whose sweet edge divides you, is to seek not a

style of writing but a justness of it, its happy injuries, ecstasies of exactness. The writer's sentences must at each point come to an edge. He has at all times to know simultaneously the detail of what is happening, and what it means to him that it happens only so. A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world. (44)

The fact, therefore, can serve heuristically in the exploration of nature writing, and what writers "do" with their chosen facts opens us as readers to a range of questions—philosophic, linguistic, spiritual, literary. As cairns are signs comprised of stones, nature / writing are signs composed of facts. And as the meaning of a cairn, while made of stones, is not so much in the size or number of stones but in their characteristic shape and the direction to which they point in an evolving sequence as they demarcate a path through unknown territory, the facts of nature / writing can be of any size, number, or shape as long as we discern their meaning as signs in an evolving interpretation that enables us to traverse a text. As I have already noted, Gary Snyder suggests in *Myths & Texts* that "Poetry [is] a riprap on the slick rock of metaphysics" (43). In this analogy, nature is the "riprap on the slick rock" of the wild, and facts are the riprap on nature. What begins in a confrontation with a mosaic of facts, often ends with a meditation on the ineffable.

In a brief, though elegant, book, *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape*, Terry Tempest Williams collaborated with the artist Mary Frank to depict her sensuous walk through "the canyon country of

southern Utah" (4-5). Organized around the elements, Earth, Water, Fire, and Air, Williams explores through the medium of her body ways of relating her self to the land as, Mary Frank's drawings make clear, the woman she loves. Heading toward Druid Arch, Williams confesses that what she "fear[s] and desire[s] most in this world is passion" (5).

Commenting on where she's heading, she cannot be sure just how to get there:

I have no map, only cairns to guide me, the hand-stacked piles of rocks that say, "Trust me, turn here, I know the way—"

Many resist cairns in the desert, kick them down, believing each traveler should walk on their own authority. It is also true, some cairns have been designed to fool people, to trick them off the trail so they will become lost forever, a quick lesson in self-reliance, to never believe in the stories of others. But I believe our desire to share is more potent and trustworthy than our desire to be alone. And so I do not anticipate these markers will lie. To walk in this country is always an act of faith.

The cairns I have followed have not secured my own path to intimacy as much as they have given me the courage to proceed—one foot in front of the other in a landscape mysterious, unpredictable, and vast. Nobody really knows the way, that is the myth of convention. (6-7)

It was while reading this passage for the first time that I was struck by the analogy of stones to cairns as facts to signs, and Williams here exemplifies a classic move by nature writers as she translates selected facts into her personal experience.

While passing through Elephant Canyon, Williams reenacts this template of close observation leading to personal reflection:

And the potholes, sinks of water in the sandstone, beckon me down on hands and knees for a closer look. The minutia of mosquito and mayfly larvae, fairy shrimp, tadpoles, and diving beetles is swirling with its own sense of urgency. Perhaps this is the mind of the lover, manic and driven, the shallow pools of expectation that inevitably dry up.

Why is it for most of us the vision of the erotic comes as a rare event, a shooting star, a flash flood, a moment of exotic proportion and not in a stable condition? (13-14)

Williams eroticizes the landscape by incorporating her observations of the pothole into her erotic imagination, using the example of the teeming water life as an ironic comment on how human beings are both driven by their natural, sexual urges and separated from them. While squeezing sideways through two massive rocks on the trail, the extent of Williams erotic identification of her mental and physical geography is made explicit:

Once I enter the Joint Trail, it is as though I am walking through the inside of an animal. It is dark, cool, and narrow with sheer sandstone walls on either side of me. I look up, a slit of sky above. Light is deceptive here. The palms of my hands search for a pulse in the rocks. I continue walking. In some places my hips can barely fit through. I turn sideways, my chest and back in a vise of geologic time. I stop. The silence that lives in these sacred hallways presses against me. I relax. I surrender. I close my eyes. The arousal of my breath rises in me like music, like love, as the possessive muscles between my legs tighten and release. I come to the rock in a moment of stillness, giving and receiving, where there is no partition between my body and the body of Earth. (8-10)

Williams ends this first "Earth" section of *Desert Quartet* wondering "what it means to be human and why at this particular moment, rock

seems more accessible and yielding than my own species" (16). Her responsiveness to the Earth-lover is a kind of wildness and is offered as an elaboration on her attention to and intention with the facticity of the sandstone, a relatively soft, "yielding" rock.

As evidence of the currency and circulation of cultural ideas like this one on wildness and an erotic landscape, Kivacki Press—a small ecologically oriented publishing house in Asheville, North Carolina—used the photograph "Embryo" © 1994 by Wilton Jones as the background to its Fall 1994 Titles.²⁵

²⁵ This is the way Kivacki Press describes itself on page 10 of its catalog: "The books in this catalog demonstrate why Kivacki Press exists: to provide people with practical strategies for restoring their ecosystems, for reconnecting with their places and local cultures, and for renewing their bodies holistically. We publish books out of the recognition that these three levels of being—body, community, and ecosystem—are not only mutually instructive metaphors for each other, but that the very fact of their interconnectedness is becoming less apparent to increasing numbers of people. The consequence of these growing semiotic rifts among civilized humans, their bodies, and the rest of nature is alienation, ignorance, and ultimately violence on those very levels. Through informing people about alternative ideas and practices, Kivacki Press assists in countering the discouraging social and ecological trends we witness every day. . . ."

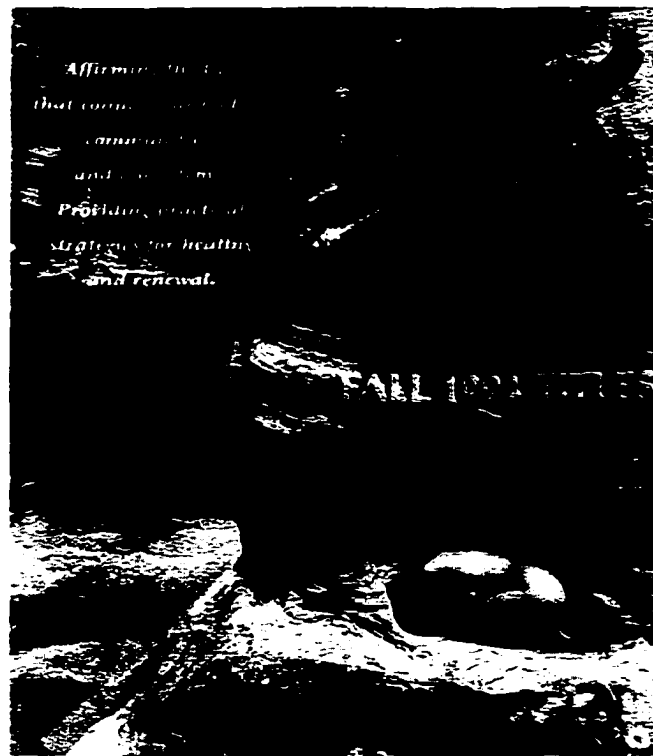


Fig. 2 "Kivaki Press Fall 1994 Titles" catalog.
(Reprinted with permission)

Even "hard" facts can be made to yield when probed. Take a comment by Annie Dillard in her collection of essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*—a title she means us to take literally, by the way, inferring the potentiality of even so-called inert matter—

The mountains are no more fixed than the stars. Granite, for example, contains much oxygen and is relatively light. It "floats." . . . The Galápagos archipelago as a whole is surfing toward Ecuador; South America is sliding toward the Galápagos; North America, too, is sailing westward. We're on floating islands, shaky ground. (129)

Except for the last phrase, Dillard's play with earth tectonics could be taken as merely lyrical geology, but "shaky ground" elevates this

discourse to a kind of existential philosophy. The passage is from her essay, "Life on the Rocks: The Galápagos," a place and a subject replete with historical resonance ever since Charles Darwin visited it in September 1835 and wrote about it in the nineteenth chapter of his *Voyage of the Beagle*. One of Dillard's strengths as a writer is an ability to elicit philosophical, even religious, interpretations from observed facts, or "as Winterowd says of Dillard and Matthiessen, 'the information they supply is only a vehicle for the attitudes they dance'" (qtd. in Stephenson 175).

In the following, Dillard summarizes the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' revolutions in thought that underlie her conclusion that we're on "shaky ground." She begins with the pre-Darwinian theological world view which held that an orderly nature was created by God to serve mankind:

We were all crouched in a small room against the comforting back wall, awaiting the millennium which had been gathering impetus since Adam and Eve. . . . The Darwinian revolution knocked out the back wall, revealing eerie lighted landscapes as far back as we can see. Almost at once, Albert Einstein and astronomers with reflector telescopes and radio telescopes knocked out the other walls and the ceiling, leaving us sunlit, exposed, and drifting—leaving us puckers, albeit evolving puckers, on the inbound curve of space-time. (123)

As Williams' facts evoke a wild "erotics of place," Dillard's facts often seem determined in her world view both to confront and take

account of the radical uncertainty to which scientific materialism leads and to find a spiritual home in the wild therein. She sympathizes with the eccentric effort of a fellow island "crank"—"a man in his thirties who lives alone with a stone he is trying to teach to talk" (67), because "Nature's silence is its one remark, and every flake of world is a chip off that old mute and immutable block" (69). In contrast to John Muir in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, who prayed to "hear the stone sermons" (198) at Cathedral Peak because the "very stones seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly" (238), Dillard hears the resounding emptiness of nature:

It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind used to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few. Birds may crank out sweet gibberish and monkeys howl; horses neigh and pigs say, as you recall, oink oink. But so do cobbles rumble when a wave recedes, and thunders break the air in lightening storms. I call these noises silence. (70)

Even an essentially religious mind, like Dillard's, can no longer "read" the facts of nature with the naïve optimism and enthusiasm that led Muir to see transcendently "every tree harmoniously related to every other; definite symbols, divine hieroglyphics written with sunbeams" (21). Although she strenuously resists at times, Dillard, in her own way like Williams in hers, still writes from the "feeling for nature"—a sense of oneness with nature whether loquacious or laconic—that Joseph Wood

Krutch identifies as the hallmark of virtually all nature writers since Thoreau. Even Edward Abbey, while later denying his identification with naturalists or nature writers, accords the "simple fact" a central place in *Desert Solitaire*:

In recording my impressions of the natural scene I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact. But the desert is a vast world, an oceanic world, as deep in its way and complex and various as the sea. Language makes a mighty loose net with which to go fishing for simple facts, when facts are infinite. (x)

The prominent place of facts in nature writing goes back to Thoreau and Emerson, as well as the traditions of natural history writing. In the essay he adapted from his eulogy "Thoreau," Emerson wrote:

He would not offer a memoir of his observations to the Natural History Society. "Why should I? To detach the description from its connections in my mind would make it no longer true or valuable to me: and they do not wish what belongs to it." His power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses. He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. And yet none knew better than he that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole. (364)

In his long Prologue to *Great American Nature Writing* (1950), Joseph Wood Krutch traces the emergence of the nature writing river from its many streams, including natural history, medieval theology, Enlightenment philosophy, and Augustan, pre-Romantic, and Romantic poetics. While admittedly only glancing at other themes which have also

contributed to the development of nature writing,²⁶ Krutch carefully recapitulates the complex evolution in thought he calls the "feeling for nature," whose "highly personal expression" by Thoreau was "an attitude which history had made possible" (7).

That history included the writings of natural historians going back to Aristotle and Pliny. With the European colonial expansion that began during the Renaissance, the observation and collection of natural facts exploded. The attempt to classify and synthesize those facts and to draw conclusions about nature coincided with the development of a scientific methodology which came to fruition in Darwin's articulation of the theory of the evolution of species through natural selection in the mid-nineteenth century.

Krutch traces the dialectic of two ideologies which had to evolve before nature could be viewed sympathetically. The first was the dominant religious cosmology which held that nature was primarily of interest insofar as it revealed God's plan for humanity. The second emerged during the Enlightenment spearheaded by Descartes' rationalism which propounded a mechanical view of nature in a vast cosmos whose mathematical laws could be discerned by an objective

²⁶ "Like the search for peace, the dream of the golden age, and that whole nostalgia for a more primitive way of life which is no doubt central in such diverse phenomena as the boy's delight in playing Indian or the Rousseuistic conviction that man is evil only insofar as civilization has corrupted him" (Krutch 74).

observer standing outside of nature. As these two positions evolved in dialogue with each other over the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, they were enjoined by various aesthetic (on the sublime and picturesque) and poetic (neo-classic and romantic) theories which also took their stands in or about nature. In 1935 Alfred O. Lovejoy cited sixty-six separate definitions of "nature" in "Genesis of the Conception of 'Nature' as Norm"—an indication of just how complicated the meaning of nature is in the history of ideas in the West.²⁷

Within the complex development of this intellectual history, Krutch notes some shifts in emphasis that were critical for nature writing. Medieval writers had "neither a sense of fact nor, above all, a sense of the wonder of fact. . . . The meaning of the universe, the proper place of man in it, was already known, completely and finally" (9-10). By the sixteenth century, there was "a new sense of fact and of the importance of fact [emerging] in both botany and zoology. Such a sense of fact began to manifest itself in natural history long before any new emotional attitude toward our fellow creatures began to appear" (12). Konrad von Gesner's *Historia Animalia* attempted to "depict as completely as possible the beasts of the field, and to display the variety of life for some purpose. . .

²⁷ Lovejoy's Appendix, "Some Meanings of 'Nature,'" appears in *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*. In the chapter titled, "'Nature' as Aesthetic Norm" in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (1948) originally published in *Modern Language Notes* in 1927, Lovejoy attempts a comprehensive taxonomy of the word.

more than merely the practical. . . or the homiletic" (13). By the time Cartesian rationalism and Hobbesian/Lockean empiricism were coming into play in the seventeenth century, even some men of faith like Sir Thomas Browne in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), intent on debunking received superstitions, "felt the new urgency of fact" (14).

With the publication of John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifest in the Works of the Creation* in 1691, Krutch notes a subtle shift in emphasis. While suggesting the patently religious view expressed in its title, the real significance of Ray's work was the independence it accorded nature from its utility to man:

God's wisdom is manifest, not so much in the adaption of nature to men's needs as in her adaption to her own. We have, so Ray implies, learned to use the natural world as no doubt God intended that we should. But the other living things are fulfilling themselves, not merely serving us, and the greatest profit we can draw from them is often the contemplation of this fact. . . . The importance of Ray from our point of view is in part that he was a popularizer, but in perhaps even greater part that he managed, despite the implications of his title, a shift in emphasis. His point seems to be hardly more that nature manifests God's wisdom than it is that this fact furnishes a motive—gives, if you like, an excuse—for the study of Nature herself. (22-23)

Scientific, aesthetic, and philosophical developments all converged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to alter attitudes toward facts, nature, and the wild. The pursuit of domination both of the environment and its representation by European colonialism was given powerful instrumentality through the system of nomenclature first put forward in

Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* in 1735. This system, Pamela Regis explains in *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Rhetoric of Natural History*, was a "system of classification, based, in the botanical field, upon the differences of the sexual organs of plants.' . . . It was reduced to a one-page chart and often amounted to little more than counting stamens and pistils" (12).

In his discussion of "Classifying" in *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes that natural history "is the space opened up in representation by an analysis which is anticipating the possibility of naming . . . [-]the possibility of seeing what one will be able to say" (130). What a literate Westerner saw after 1735, in other words, was in large part determined by the fields of classification required by the Linnaean system. "The process of naming will be based, not upon what one sees, but upon elements that have already been introduced into discourse by structure" (139). The rhetoric of natural history was a prescription for recording carefully observed novel details within a preconceived order and language. As Regis points out, Linnaeus facilitated and confirmed the prevailing eighteenth-century world-view of Western civilization by making

the conception of the Great Chain of Being completely rational. After Linnaeus, the binomial label pointed both to a species or kind unique from all others, and to a link on the Chain. It evoked, at once, the very specific and the whole order of the universe. (12)

As a uniformly regular and simple system of representation,

Linnaean nomenclature also furthered, subtly if not covertly, the exercise of dominant European political and cultural power. "Linnaeus and his army of field-workers reducing the natural world to order is the deceptively apolitical face of Europe's imperial push" (62), according to Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*. The aboriginal inhabitants who were encountered and colonized from the fifteenth century on were scrutinized and classified as rigorously as the flora and fauna. The habit of spurious racial categorization developed during this period still bedevils societies.

Refinements in aesthetic theory occurred in tandem with the rhetorical deployment of Linnaean natural history. As early as 1712, Joseph Addison would write that

Our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity. We are flung into a pleasing astonishment at such unbounded views and feel a delightful stillness and amazement in the soul at the apprehension of them. . . . [A] spacious horizon is an image of liberty, where the eye has room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the immensity of its views, and to lose itself amidst the variety of objects that offer themselves to its observation. ("The Pleasures of the Imagination" 2179).

Addison's comments here adumbrate Burke's and Kant's later theories of the sublime, which would add power and terror to the mix of beauty and pleasure. "There was 'nothing sublime' that was not 'some modification of power,' said Burke; and, likewise, he connected the sublime to qualities such as vastness, infinity, and magnificence" (qtd. in Albanese 59).

Until it was re-figured largely through eighteenth century aesthetic theories of the sublime, wilderness and the wild were not so much viewed as the ideal of nature but as its fall from grace. One thinks of the Puritan William Bradford's narrative of landfall on Cape Cod in 1620 in *Of Plymouth Plantation*: "what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not" (62). The ideal was the garden, derived in part from the Garden of Eden, and celebrated as a kind of rationalized, ordered nature by both the aristocracies of the Continent and England and seventeenth and early eighteenth-century poets. The minor genres of the pastoral and the country house poem, epitomized in Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" and "Upon Appleton House, To My Lord Fairfax" respectively, while often situated in a natural scene, are notable more for their withdrawal from the active life into an insular meditation than for their engagement with the wild. But by the time the so-called poets of sensibility like James Thomson were writing (his popular nature poem *The Seasons* was published in 1730 and contributed to the fashion of natural history study in England noted above), the ground was already shifting toward a new view of nature that would find expression in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

In *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century*

England (1935), Samuel H. Monk notes that "Kant's theories of æsthetic, particularly of the sublime, are largely a synthesis, a reinterpretation, and a deepening of the kaleidoscopic æsthetic of the eighteenth century" (5):

Beauty is concerned with limited objects, with forms; the sublime is to be found in objects that are limitless, that have no form, though they are always accompanied with a "super-thought" of totality. The beautiful, therefore, implies an effort of *understanding*, the faculty that determines objects by specific conceptions; the sublime implies an effort of the *reason*, the faculty that seeks an unconditioned totality. Hence delight in the beautiful is associated with a representation of quality; in the sublime, with a representation of quantity. Pleasure in the beautiful arises from "a feeling of the furtherance of life," and is compatible with charm and a playful imagination; the feeling of the sublime is brought about by "a momentary check to the vital forces, followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful" for having been restrained. Therefore pleasure in the sublime is secondary, a negative pleasure, unlike the positive pleasure experienced in the beautiful.

In experiencing the sublime, the imagination seeks to represent what it is powerless to represent, since the object is limitless, and thus cannot be represented. This effort and this inevitable failure of the imagination are the source of the emotions that accompany the sublime, which achieves its effect by the opposition between the object and our faculties of knowledge; but beauty achieves its effect through their complete harmony. It is upon this lack of harmony between object and subject, upon the futile effort on the part of the imagination to grasp and represent the formless, that Kant erects his theory of the sublime. (6-7)

The eighteenth century distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, particularly in its emphasis on theories of perception and emotion—an aesthetic of the visual arts, for the most part—contributed to a rethinking of the meaning of wild nature that would not find literary

expression until the turn of the century when Wordsworth and Coleridge ushered in British Romanticism.

Addison's linking of the "spacious horizon" to "an image of liberty," also foreshadows what would materialize politically in the United States as the doctrine of manifest destiny. In a passage that marks the earliest stirrings of the Romanticism that would flower at the end of the century, Addison writes that there

is something more bold and masterly in the rough, careless strokes of nature than in the nice touches and embellishments of art. The beauties of the most stately garden or palace lie in a narrow compass: the imagination immediately runs them over, and requires something else to gratify her; but in the wide fields of nature, the sight wanders up and down without confinement, and is fed with an infinite variety of images, without any certain stint or number [2180]—

As Martin Price suggests in his Introduction, "The Garden and the Wild," the "movement away from a poetry of social reality [like Alexander Pope's neoclassicism] is a movement toward more mysterious and less conscious aspects of mind, both grandeur and terror" (*The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* v. 1, 2165).

The notion of the picturesque landscape, which also emerged in the eighteenth-century, further codified wilderness as a Western construct. In "The Uses of Landscape," Alison Byerly notes that

The British cult of the picturesque originated with Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorrain, whose landscape paintings were seen and occasionally brought back to England by the travelers who had seen Italy and the Alps

while on the Grand Tour wanted to recapture their experience in Britain, and suddenly the Lake District, the Wye Valley, the West Country, and parts of Scotland became fashionable destinations. (54)

What we now call eco-tourism had its counterpart two hundred years ago in such nature excursions, which included the popular practice of framing a landscape composition in special "tinted convex mirrors usually oval or circular," dubbed "Claude glasses" (54). This aesthetic appropriation of the natural scene was an extension of the

idea of wilderness [itself, which] refers to the absence of humanity, yet . . . has no meaning outside the context of the civilization that defines it [54]. . . . It is the spectator who engages the machinery of the picturesque aesthetic, mentally manufacturing a work of art where before there had been a work of nature. The defining feature of the picturesque scene is not chance but its opposite: pure intentionality. (55)

To the changes in attitude toward nature affected by scientific and aesthetic developments, the philosophical notion of deism should be added. Following the publication of John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifest in the Works of the Creation* in 1691, the sense of nature as a sign of divinity grew—though it never entirely displaced—the idea of the wild as demonic or inert. Michael Branch writes in "Indexing American Possibilities: The Natural History Writing of Bartram, Wilson, and Audubon" that

[a]ccording to deism, the "wilderness pleases" because it is the landscape least encumbered by humans, and therefore most directly illustrative of the Creator. . . . Once deism had

introduced the maxim that nature was an expression of divinity, a rescission of the seventeenth-century notion of "howling wilderness" was inevitable. A primary catalyst for change in this perception of nature came in 1756, with the publication of Edmund Burke's treatise upon the sublime and beautiful. Reviving Longinus's concept of the sublime from antiquity, Burke's influential distinction reshaped conventional aesthetic categories to include as ennobling the feelings of awe and terror. (283)

These appropriatively exploratory and classificatory, representational, and conceptual practices—the rhetorics of natural history, the sublime and picturesque, against the background of deism—all came to fruition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They comprised the intellectual milieu from which Darwin's and Wallace's theories of evolution eventually emerged. American writing through the nineteenth century is replete with narratives of surveying, mapping, and the rhetoric of natural history writing as a means of textualizing the wild—including internally colonized indigenous peoples. Narratives of discovery, promotion, settlement, exploration, natural history, and what Regis calls the "literature of place" (xii) come to mind.²⁶

Gilbert White's local history, *The Natural History and Antiquities of*

²⁶ Some examples include John Smith's *A Description of New England* (1616), William Wood's *New England's Prospect* (1634), William Byrd's *Histories of the Dividing Line* (1728), the texts Regis cites as "the literature of place" ("The works of Major Robert Rogers, William Smith, William Stork, James Adair, and Jonathan Carver" [xii]), Jefferson's *Notes on State of Virginia* (1781/87), William Bartram's *Travels* (1791), *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (1804-06), and John Wesley Powell's *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (1895).

Selborne was so popular when first published in 1789 because there had been an extensive audience for natural history building from at least mid-century.²⁹ Linnæus' *Systema Naturæ* (1735), already in its tenth edition by 1758, "made it possible for even the amateur quickly to find his way among the genera and species without relying, as preceding botanists and zoologists had been compelled to rely, upon a brute memory which required a lifetime to stock" (43). Both White's *Natural History* and William Bartram's regional exploration of the southeastern United States, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (1791), reflect a collector's passion for the carefully observed fact.³⁰

There is an interesting parallel between England and America on

²⁹ Krutch points out that, as "a matter of fact, from 1759 on, *The Annual Register*, that indispensable contemporary record of current events, devoted a section to natural history; and in 1763 a reviewer for the *Monthly Review* remarked in connection with John Hall's expensive three-volume *Natural History* that "Natural History is now, by a kind of national establishment, become the favorite study of the times" (55).

³⁰ Part of the early eighteenth-century English passion for natural history includes a precursor to Bartram's *Travels* by the Englishman Mark Catesby. While his two volume *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1731-1743) is not in the tradition of the personal nature essay, Thomas Lyon points out that it was "the first attempt at a comprehensive natural history of the colonies" (30). In addition to drawing from life—which marked him in stark contrast to the now better known Audubon—Catesby also "attempted a broad-gauge ecological overview by dividing the Carolinas into four main zones, each denoted by a dominant vegetation type: rice country, oak and hickory country, pine barrens, and scrub oak land. This is one of the earliest attempts to describe an ecotype by means of key species" (Lyon 31).

the simultaneity of the loss of the wild and the instinct to preserve it. Just after the demarcation of the English commons was completed through a series of Enclosure Acts, the idea of the wilderness preserve as a kind of public property or national trust first emerges in 1835 in Wordsworth's *Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*. . . .³¹ And just as the confinement of Native Americans to reservations in the post-Civil War period was being accomplished (and Frederick Jackson Turner would soon mark the closing of the mythic frontier in 1893), the first U.S. national wilderness park at Yellowstone was established in 1872, fifty years after it was first suggested by the American Indian portrait painter George Catlin in 1832 (Nash, *American Environmentalism* 31).

To the naming and measuring project of identifying nature's facts and circumscribing the wild, there also developed in the nineteenth century an overlay of the rhetoric of manifest destiny—a peculiarly American adaptation of the three hundred year thrust of European hegemony into the so-called “New World.” As Branch points out, the

³¹ Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) points out that Wordsworth suggested the idea of “deem[ing] the district a sort of national property,” (47) which was the genesis for the National Trust and the Lake District National Park. In “The Uses of Landscape,” Alison Byerly reminds us that the drive to preserve wild nature emerged as an aesthetic response within an economic context: “Raymond Williams has suggested that the landscap-ing of parks and the eighteenth-century enclosure of land are ‘related parts of the same process. . . in the one case the land is being organized for production. . . while in the other it is being organized for consumption—the view, the ordered proprietary repose, the prospect’” (55-56).

"early romantic natural history" work of William Bartram, Alexander Wilson, and John James Audubon occurred during "the most active years of frontier expansion, a time when wilderness and the settlement of it were fiercely competing interpretations of a single landscape" (297). As progenitors of the genre of nature writing, they bequeath a mixed legacy. On the one hand, it can be said that "Bartram writes in a genre that has, with reason, been attacked for its complicity in and furtherance of colonizing projects" (Buell 62). On the other hand, these writers are increasingly extolled for the ecological awareness they displayed, albeit problematically in some cases, as a counter to the dominant, expansionist tradition of wilderness expropriation. As the discovery and representation of American "nature" in literature, natural history writing, and collections and museums became evermore appropriated to the celebratory formation of a national identity, the proto-ecological sympathies of these early naturalists sometimes became entangled, paradoxically, in arrogant and exploitive attitudes towards nature.

The theory and practice of manifest destiny—emerging from the republican notion of the power of the sublime vastness of nature, particularly in the American West, and its importance in the formation of a national identity—were also ways of literally and textually traversing the wild. Their pervasiveness seeped into the rhetoric of even as strident a social and political critic as Thoreau, when, in "Walking," he develops the

leitmotif of a West synonymous with "wildness and freedom" as the redemptive possibility of the future: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. Thither no business leads me. It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon" (668). While speaking here of his rambles around Concord, the thrust of his rhetoric in "Walking" is to assert the possibility of the "New World" redeeming the Old and of wild nature refreshing, if not redeeming, civilization.³²

This admittedly thumbnail sketch suggests how complex the origins of the nineteenth-century nature writing genre are. The book of nature had, by then, been interleaved with pages of theology/ philosophy, science/natural history, and aesthetics/poetics. By the early 1830s, when Darwin embarked on his five year voyage as a naturalist aboard the H.M.S. Beagle (1831) and Emerson embarked for a tour of England and the continent (1832-1833) following the death of his wife and his

³² In *Nature Religion in America*, Catherine L. Albanese discusses the American sublime as a manifestation of national identity and power. In sorting out the historical Tennessee politician, David Crockett from the legendary construct, Davy Crockett, Albanese notes that "the demands of manifest destiny represent, in fact, the underside of revolutionary idealism. The twisted vision of Crockett and the contorted figures with whom he grappled [in his widely read almanac that was published in one form or another from 1834 to 1856] reflect the twists in a popular American mentality grown arguably overlarge. In this nineteenth-century American enactment of its themes, nature religion had become dominance over the land and, simultaneously, escape and illusion. The [Jeffersonian] embrace of matter had become the avoidance of matter, the celebration of a grandness that glanced off the reality of the continent and its peoples in fulfillment of the urge to empire. (78)

resignation from an uneasy Unitarian ministry in Boston, the *facts* of nature had become a primary field of scientific investigation and interpretative hypothesis and their relation to the *facts* of language had become a central concern of theologians and philosophers. For Emerson, the controversy of biblical exegesis, or how to read the divine revelation of scriptures, converged with the discoveries of natural history, or how to read the "book of nature."

Just as Goethe recalls in *Italian Journey* how it came to him "in a flash" on July 31, 1787 as he walked in the "Public Gardens of Palermo" that the leaf type or *Urpflanze* was the key to metamorphosis (363), Emerson found himself in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1833 when he realized the powerful connection between the means of natural history and his own style of writing. Not long after his visit, Emerson delivered a lecture in November 1833 before the Natural History Society in Boston, entitled "The Uses of Natural History," in which he celebrated the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle—"the richest collection in the world of natural curiosities arranged for the most imposing effect" (7):

Moving along these pleasant walks, you come to the botanical cabinet, an inclosed garden plot, where grows a grammar of botany—where the plants rise, each in its class, its order, and its genus, . . . [forming] a natural alphabet, this green and yellow and crimson dictionary, on which the sun shines, and the winds blow. (8)

"Nature is a language," Emerson asserted, "and every new fact we learn

is a new word."

Two things are striking about this early lecture. Its subject matter, for one; and Emerson's alliance of nature and language, specifically in its form or grammar, for the other. Whicher and Spiller, in their introduction to *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Vol. 1), point out that the

first four lectures of Emerson's new career were on natural philosophy, or science. . . . Emerson's interest in science was lifelong, but his closest study of it is coincident with the intellectual crisis which led to his resignation as pastor of the Second Church (1832) and culminated in the publication of *Nature* (1836). It was perhaps the principle agent in his shift from a theological to a secular base for his moral philosophy. (1)

Nature was and had been a popular subject in England and America, as already noted, and Emerson's personal crisis of faith recapitulated the dialectic of science and religion that had long been underway. In the early Emerson, we have a synthesis of the natural historian's view of nature, based on the insights of a classificatory system, amalgamated to a language philosophy derived from the conflicts of Unitarian and Trinitarian exegesis.

In *The Wisdom of Words*, Philip Gura details the prevailing controversy between Unitarian and Trinitarian theologians. While ostensibly focusing on how the bible should be read, these debates also entailed different philosophical positions on the nature of God, reality and language. Whereas Trinitarians stressed the orthodox meaning of

Scriptural texts in their exegesis, Unitarians tended to be empiricists:

In the empirical system, words were perceived merely as external stimuli, and the "truth" of language consisted of its utility. The source of meaning was simply "rational usage derived from sensory perception." Words were a contrivance designed for human convenience, and if they came to be used by men as the "*Signs of their Ideas*," this was not through 'any natural connection, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain *Ideas*,' but only through a "voluntary Imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an *Idea*." (20)³³

The Unitarian's emphasis on the denotative as opposed to symbolic meaning of words was utilitarian but ultimately incompatible with the ambitions of Emerson's own emerging view of language:

According to Lockean premises, if the Bible was the word of God, it was also the word of God set down by men *in a particular place at a particular time* and so had been affected by the vagaries of historical circumstance. Language itself was not divinely inspired but was inspiration affected by the limitations of time and chance above which no human artifact could rise. Thus the Unitarian's main interest was in the *reliability* of the empirical evidence surrounding scriptural testimony. It never occurred to them that words themselves could be viewed as vitally provocative symbols, which transported men to an awareness of universals that might be apprehended through sensory experience but that lay

³³ Empiricism's doctrine of the arbitrary nature of signs arose from the conviction that all knowledge was derived from the senses and was an attempt to explain human consciousness in purely materialist terms. It is ironic that it eventually evolved into both Hume's skepticism, the modern linguist Ferdinand Saussure's theory of signs, or semiology, and through it into structuralism. In Chapter 3, "Signs," I will take up Charles Sanders Peirce's relevance to nature writing in his effort to establish a non-arbitrary theory of signs based on his triadic model—opposing the nominalism of scientific mechanists with what he came to call his "logical-realism" (Brent345)—in order to resolve the apparent riddle of the mind-body duality and the unbridgeable gap (at least philosophically) between the natural fact and the mind apprehending it.

beyond it. (Gura 24)

By the 1820s, a more figurative reading of the bible was emerging among some theologians, the view that

Scripture was best viewed as a kind of poetry of the human soul, . . . couched most effectively in the imagery of nature, a concept they had absorbed from readings in European romantic literature and philosophy. Natural eloquence, they believed, stemmed from the imagery nature lent to men. If this were true, and if one also believed that all verbal signs originally stemmed from man's observations of the natural world, the issue was raised of a "natural" language analogous to the spiritual truths for which men had so long sought adequate expression. (Gura 31).

While "Christian transcendentalist" ministers like "James Marsh and Horace Bushnell were quite literally the spiritual midwives of the symbolic consciousness in the New England Renaissance" (Gura 31), it was Emerson who delivered the progeny with his 1836 essay *Nature*.

In *The Emerson Museum*, Lee Rust Brown details the importance of natural history for Emerson's style.

Natural history leads us into the enormous institution of Emerson's writing. And Emerson teaches his readers, just as thoroughly as the Muséum taught him, that deeds of classification (or "generalization") inform writing as both content and instrument, *logos* and *techné*. [122]. The Muséum taught Emerson to treat his journal fragments as if they were specimens of natural history. This had extreme implications for his writing practice, which like Coleridge's came to rely on the most jagged fragmentariness in passionate pursuit of the whole. [73]. Emerson finds that a fragmentary object can serve as an aperture for a view of conceptual removes comprising the real interior of a natural fact. Thus he discovers a new world lying inside of each of nature's old things: "Every particular

in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particular is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" [from *Nature* qtd. In Brown 72].

Given Coleridge's role in consolidating and disseminating European romanticism, and given Emerson's unrivaled role as founder within the American tradition, I would submit that natural history, as Emerson seized upon it, was one of the major means by which romanticism, already run to seed in England and Europe, was not merely imported but naturalized, scientifically "restored," on American grounds. (89)

While viewing the Cabinet of Natural History in Paris, Emerson sounds a note that Thoreauvians sometimes overlook in their haste to distance their disciple from his mentor, a note of Emerson's proto-ecological awareness:

The limits of the possible are enlarged, and the real is stranger than the imaginary. The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you look along this bewildering series of animated forms, the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, insects, snakes, fish, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aping organized forms. Whilst I stand there I am impressed with a singular conviction that not a form so grotesque, so savage, or so beautiful, but is an expression of something in man the observer. We feel that there is an occult relation between the very worm, the Crawling scorpions, and man. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say I will listen to this invitation. I will be a naturalist. (10)

As Brown explains, the syntactical homology of nature and language made a lasting impression on Emerson and opened his eyes to the expanded possibilities of the methods of natural history on his compositional practice:

[a]s Cuvier's gifted and belated disciple, Louis Agassiz, would explain in his *Essay on Classification* (1857), the naturalist's compositions sought to clarify the order "inherent in the objects themselves, so that the intelligent student of Natural History is led unconsciously, by the study of the animal kingdom itself [and particularly the morphological study of anatomy], to these conclusions, the great divisions under which he arranges the animals being indeed but the headings to the chapters of the great book which he is reading." The *Essay on Classification* unfolds points that Agassiz, like Emerson, had seen presented with great force in the visual compositions of the Muséum. Chief among these was the notion that each layer in the hierarchy of organizational forms was equally real and necessary; thus each stage of classification combined the actual with the provisional. The chapters, sections, and paragraphs in nature's book—even the book as a whole—repeated the same representational form found in seemingly elemental units like sentences and words: this was the form of the classification. The lesson of the Muséum was that all particulars stood for the propositions of classifications. On the smallest scale—the micropaedic scale of the single living animal or plant, the mineral sample, the fossil, even the heart or skull shown in the Comparative Anatomy cabinet—the representative aspect of the thing superseded the thing itself. (61-62)

While this method leveraged immense attention on the individual fact, it paradoxically could do so even as it diminished an appreciation for it:

So instead of particular creatures the visitor beheld "specimens," the representatives of species; and just as "species" were the conceptual containers of specimens, a shift upward in the conceptual register resulted in species themselves being treated as "specimens" placed within the more abstract container of the genus; and so on to the family, the order, and the class. . . . We might say that, in the Muséum, the significance of natural facts shone forth in the semiotic mode Samuel Taylor Coleridge had called "symbol" as opposed to "allegory"; once displayed as

specimens of their classes, natural facts introduced the eye into an otherwise invisible world of referential and compositional practice. That invisible world was revealed as belonging equally to the latent reality of nature and to the intellectual prospects of the spectator. (62-63)

After Paris, natural facts, for Emerson, were not only important in themselves but insofar as they invoked an apprehension of the hierarchy of signification as well. In his eulogy for Thoreau written thirty years after he said in "The Uses of Natural History," "the knowledge of all the facts of all the laws of nature will give man his true place in the system of being" (23), Emerson admired his protégée's ability to read those higher meanings almost intuitively:

His determination on Natural History was organic. . . . He was equally interested in every natural fact. The depth of his perception found likeness of law throughout Nature, and I know not any genius who so swiftly inferred universal law from the single fact. (364-365).

The early Emerson strove to learn the language and grammar of nature, because "the whole of Nature is a metaphor or image of the human Mind" ("Uses" 24). Natural facts were the words of "the great book which is written in that tongue" (26). Three years after delivering the "The Uses of Natural History" lecture, Emerson would elaborate his ideas in his essay *Nature* (1836), the most influential Transcendental text of the American Renaissance. In Chapter IV, "Language," Emerson draws out the implications of "Uses":

Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double,

and threefold degree.

1. Words are signs of natural facts.

2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.

3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.

All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life. Whole Floras, all Linnæus' and Buffon's volumes, are but dry catalogues of facts; but the most trivial of these facts, the habit of a plant, the organs, or work, or noise of an insect, applied to the illustration of a fact in intellectual philosophy, or, in any way associated to human nature, affects us in the most lively and agreeable manner.

There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preëxist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections, in the world of spirit. A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. (17;19; 22)

Emerson's first assertion that "Words are signs of natural facts"

follows his earlier claim that "Nature is a language and every new fact we learn is a new word." Significantly for Emerson, though, "[i]t is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (18).

Emerson revisits the subject of *Nature* in 1844 with another essay of that title published in his *Essays: Second Series*. Though only seven years later, the two essays are markedly different in tone, with the youthful optimism of the former essay tempered with the seemingly middle-aged doubts of the latter—certainties replaced by reservations:

there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith

with us. All promise outruns the performance. We live in a system of approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere. We are encamped in nature, not domesticated. . . . What is the end sought? Plainly to secure the ends of good sense and beauty, from the intrusion of deformity or vulgarity of any kind. (552)

In much of "Nature," Emerson seems to be fending off the sense of "disappointment. . . felt in every landscape":

It is the same among the men and women, as among the silent trees; always a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and satisfaction. Is it, that beauty can never be grasped? in persons and in landscape is equally inaccessible? The accepted and betrothed lover has lost the wildest charm of his maiden in her acceptance of him. She was heaven whilst he pursued her as a star; she cannot be heaven, if she stoops to such a one as he. (553)

Part of the doubt with which Emerson seems to grapple comes from recent findings of science: "Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature, and taught us to disuse our same-school measures, and exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her large style. We knew nothing rightly, for want of perspective" (546).³⁴ He strives in this

³⁴ In his essay "Uniformity and Catastrophe," Stephen Jay Gould discusses the revolutionary impact Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, whose first volume was published in 1830 had on nineteenth-century thinking. Lyell's so-called uniformitarianism had four components: "1. Natural laws are constant (uniform) in space and time. . . . 2. Processes now operating to mold the earth's surface should be invoked to explain the events of the past (uniformity of process through time). . . . 3. Geologic change is slow, gradual, and steady, not cataclysmic or paroxysmal (uniformity of rate). . . . 4. The earth has been fundamentally the same since its formation (uniformity of configuration)" (150-151). Lyell's theory was at odds with the "great nineteenth-century catastrophists—Cuvier, Agassiz, Sedgwick, and Murchison in particular" (*Ever Since Darwin* 149).

essay, as always, to be “man thinking”—to “make friends with matter, which the ambitious chatter of the schools would persuade us to despise” (542). In his heroic fashion, Emerson asserts the “uneasiness which the thought of our helplessness in the chain of causes occasions” (554); asserts both knowing nature’s secrets (“Motion or change, and identity or rest, are the first and second secrets of nature” [547]) and, in the end denying that we can finally know them:

To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained. Her secret is untold. . . . And the knowledge that we traverse the whole scale of being, from the center to the poles of nature, and have some stake in every possibility, lends that sublime lustre to death, which philosophy and religion have too outwardly and literally striven to express in the popular doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The reality is more excellent than the report. Here is no ruin, no discontinuity, no spent ball. The divine circulations never rest nor linger. Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. (554-555).

If a major text like *Nature* was published more than a decade before Thoreau’s earliest work, why is Emerson not generally credited with originating the genre of nature writing, although he is sometimes grandfathered in as a progenitor? The reason, I believe, is in their different emphases and in their bodies of work, taken as a whole. Emerson is remembered not only for his essays on nature but for his other essays too—on “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” “The Poet,” in

addition to his Lectures and Addresses like "The American Scholar" and the "Divinity College" Address. Almost all of Thoreau's published work, on the other hand, is centered in nature: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Cape Cod*, *The Maine Woods*, *Walden*, as well as the late natural history essays "Walking," "Autumnal Hints," and "Wild Apples." And as Robert Richardson points out, the work not published in Thoreau's time—his Journals of almost two million words and his extensive notebooks on the natural history of Concord, which he spent the last years of his life filling with detailed observations and records, confirm his late interest and work as a naturalist. Thoreau read and supported the conclusions in Darwin's *Origin of Species* as soon as it was published in 1859. In the months before he died, Thoreau sent "Autumnal Hints," "Life without Principle," "Walking" and "Wild Apples" to *Atlantic Monthly* for publication (*A Life* 388). In his Introduction to the 1993 publication *Faith in a Seed* of a previously unpublished manuscript of Thoreau's entitled *The Dispersion of Seeds*, Richardson contrasts *Walden* (1854) and the work Thoreau did in his last years:

Walden is a great—perhaps our greatest—celebration of the sweet freedom of a life in nature that is single, unattached, and uncommitted. *The Dispersion of Seeds*, in contrast celebrates fertility, fecundity, and interconnectedness. *Walden* is about the growth and cultivation of the self; *The Dispersion of Seeds* is about the growth of communities and the rise of new generations. *Walden* is the acknowledged masterpiece of Thoreau the poet-naturalist; *The Dispersion of Seeds*, even in its rough draft-form, is the culminating

work of Thoreau the writer-scientist [4].
 Thoreau aimed to pin down exactly when each tree and shrub leafed out, exactly when single fruit in Concord became ripe. By reducing the scope, he could aim at comprehensiveness. He seems to have wanted to produce a microcosmic version of Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos*, a multivolume work of the 1840s that aimed to give a complete account of the natural world, including the history of previous attempts at the same subject.
 It is possible, then, that Thoreau spent the best energies of his later years on the first stages of a book in which he would have revealed the world around us in so concentrated and passionate a way as to convince us that every single day is a whole new season. (11)

With some of his historical context in place, it is possible to consider more fully Krutch's claim that "Thoreau was less fundamentally original than he himself supposed. Insofar as he was original in any absolute sense, the originality consisted in the extent to which he succeeded in giving highly personal expression to an attitude which history had made possible" (7). For Krutch, Thoreau's originality resides in "a shift in emphasis" which creates

in effect, a new form of nature writing. What is occasional and incidental in others is with him the main theme. His book is not "about" plants or animals or birds. It is about his relation with them; one may almost say about "himself in connection with nature." (Krutch 91)

Karl Kroeber also tends to disparage Thoreau's apotheosis in the nature writing pantheon. In "Ecology and American Literature: Thoreau and Un-Thoreau" (*American Literary History* 9.2), he makes much of Thoreau's effort at private transcendence, what he calls his "self-

centeredness"—his "focus on nature. . . [as] a means of self-evaluation" (315)—in contrast to the more socially-oriented scientific observations of the tradition of nature writing originated by William Bartram and practiced by Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Barry Lopez. While I question Kroeber's emphasis on the "extremely personal, even private, nature of Thoreau's writing" (314), which ignores the voluminous natural history writings in his last years; I agree that Thoreau at times posits the opposition of nature and society or culture. He does so, for example, at the very beginning of "Walking" when he writes about nature's "absolute freedom" and "man as an inhabitant. . . of Nature, rather than a member of society" (592). Kroeber attributes Thoreau's pervasive influence on nature writers to "his representations; his greatest skill is as a rhetorician." By contrast, Kroeber points out, the

un-Thoreauvian tradition more deeply explores the relation of observation to reporting of observation, which constitutes the essential paradox of almost all writing about nature: the experience represented is simultaneously distinct from, yet inextricably entangled with, the representation of the experience. (313)

While this is undoubtedly true of the "un-Thoreauvian tradition" it is also true that Thoreau himself addresses this paradox—something Kroeber recognizes but largely dismisses:

Although Thoreau did learn and change, even his notebooks, let alone *Walden*, focus on personal perception becoming timeless revelation. Processes of time, change, and evolution (what had fascinated Wordsworth) Thoreau

downplayed as he pursued metaphysics and personal psychology rather than conditions of human interrelations with the material world. (317)

While I agree there is a critical danger in overestimating Thoreau's originality by ignoring the massive, centuries-old, historical context to his work, I believe Krutch's appraisal of Thoreau's importance to the genre of nature writing and to the culture at large also ignores his late work and thus misses the point. While he, no doubt, emerges on a continuum with Emerson and the naturalists and natural historians who preceded him, it is Thoreau more than any other American who made nature, and on important occasions, the wild in particular, the primary fact of his writing. His insistence on coming to terms with these facts in whatever form coalesced a tendency in American letters into the distinct genre we now call nature writing. Both Krutch and Kroeber in emphasizing Thoreau as a master rhetorician of the self in nature—a stylist—overlook the fact that it is in terms of the wild that Thoreau is most deeply, albeit problematically, revealed as an ecological thinker.

In his early work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau emphasizes the importance of living deliberately, even heroically, on one's own terms. The passage in which "The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact. . ." appears, begins with Thoreau's lamenting the shallowness of men's lives. Thoreau's facts, though multifarious, in their denotation as "facts" share

the sign of the real. In lines adumbrating the experiment in living at

Walden Pond, Thoreau avers:

. . . though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and *it*. Let him build himself a log-house with the bark on where he is, *fronting* IT, and wage there an Old French war for seven or seventy years, with Indians and Rangers, or whatever else may come between him and the reality, and save his scalp if he can. (249)

A fact as the sign of reality can as likely be within Thoreau's mind as in his experience of the world, a fact that plants one of his feet firmly in the romantic and transcendental traditions:

What, after all, does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. (113)

The attention he pays to his "inner" facts and his privileging of them sometimes blurs Thoreau's differences with Emerson, leading critics to either disparage Emerson's importance to nature writing or to diminish Thoreau's transcendental debt in their haste to establish his ecological *bona fides*. Even late in his career, after years of daily excursions in and around Concord and thousands of pages of Journal writing on the natural facts he had observed there, Thoreau could write in December 1856 to his friend and long-time correspondent Harrison Blake a letter that

Thoreau's biographer Robert Richardson, Jr. points out includes

the astonishing accusation that "nature is *emphatically* wrong." Now he was noting how "the seasons and all their changes are in me." And he added that even in his moods he now felt "the perfect correspondence of Nature to man." (357)

While we may conclude that Thoreau either made little intellectual progress beyond Emerson or was strutting extra-vagantly, a glance at one of the later natural history essays he began composing and delivering as a lecture just after he wrote that letter suggests a theory of perception underlying his comments to Blake.

"Autumnal Hints" was composed as a lecture for the most part in the fall of 1857 (Richardson 360-361). Permeated with his reading of John Ruskin, "Autumnal Hints" outlines Thoreau's late position (he would die within five years at the age of forty-four) on perception and nature, anticipating the theory William James would espouse in his *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892) that "Perception is of definite and probable things" (298)³⁶: "The scarlet oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads--and then we can hardly see anything else" (709). Thoreau was legendary among the locals for his ability to find Indian

³⁶ In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, Scott Slovic has used James's axiom to look at "The Inner Life and the Outer World: Thoreau's 'Habit of Attention' in His Private Journal" as well as the writings of Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez.

arrowheads and to spot various flora and fauna around Concord, and in "Autumnal Hints" he offers an explanation:

Why not take more elevated and broader views, walk in the great garden; not skulk in a little "debauched" nook of it? consider the beauty of the forest, and not merely of a few impounded herbs? . . . All this you surely *will* see, and much more, if you are prepared to see it—if you *look* for it Objects are concealed from our view, not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them; for there is no power to see in the eye itself, any more than in any other jelly. We do not realize how far and widely, or how near and narrowly, we are to look. The greater part of the phenomena of Nature are for this reason concealed from us all our lives. The gardener see only the gardener's garden. Here, too, as in political economy, the supply answers to the demand. Nature does not cast pearls before swine. There is just as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate—not a grain more. The actual objects which one man will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the beholders are different. (708-9)

In 1793, William Blake wrote "The *Marriage* of Heaven and Hell," in which, in the voice of the devil, he asserted among his "Proverbs of Hell" that "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees" (35); and that "Where man is not nature is barren" (37). These and other basic tenets of Romanticism are incorporated into the transcendentalized vision that Emerson and Thoreau both espouse with little alteration when, for instance, in *Nature* (1836) Emerson writes that "All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life"; or when Thoreau

writes that "The actual objects which one man will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the beholders are different."

If, as Thoreau concludes in "Autumnal Hints," a "man sees only what concerns him. . . . How much more, then, it requires different intentions of the eye and of the mind to attend to different departments of knowledge! How differently the poet and the naturalist look at objects!" Thoreau's project as a writer was to do both, to blend different ways of seeing and knowing using nature as his almost exclusive field of inquiry and study. As Joseph Wood Krutch concludes in *Great American Nature Writing*, the "scientist sought fact for fact's sake; the Romantic was all too prone to neglect any fact except the fact of his inner consciousness. Thoreau knew both that the fact existed and that it could mean something—could, perhaps, mean almost everything—to the seeker of wisdom" (63–64).

Chapter 3

Signs Thoreau's "Higher Laws"

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and I felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw, not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. (490)

– Henry David Thoreau
Walden

A WEASEL IS WILD. Who knows what he thinks? . . .
I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. (11;15)

– Annie Dillard
"Living Like Weasels"

We dwell not in nature but in the relation to nature. (201)

– Robert Pogue Harrison
Forests

A fact is a sign, whether that fact is what philosophers call the thing-in-itself, an idea, or a word; and facts are where nature writing begins. When Thoreau says that he "was strongly tempted to seize and devour. . . [the woodchuck] raw. . . [for] that wildness which he *represented*" (emphasis added); or Dillard says that she "would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should"—they are selecting, representing, and creating facts. After all, is wildness an attribute of the woodchuck and weasel or the quality of a feeling (understood as an idea and translated into a symbol) which those animals inspire in the writers and in us?

Thoreau's woodchuck and Dillard's weasel are facts on all three levels, but as readers we apprehend them in reverse order: first as words,

then as ideas, and finally as conjurations of some natural phenomenon or thing-in-itself. Since all three of these facts are perceived and realized as forms of mental activity, we could say (and some post-structuralists do) that all facts are linguistic—that the world, including nature and our selves, are functions of our language. But since there are many languages and ways of describing the world and of dwelling in relation to it, are we not constrained by such an *idealist* conception in an entirely indeterminate, relativistic, and human-centered existence? Because we apprehend it only in or through our consciousness, must we conclude that the world has no weight or existence apart from us?

The nature of the object, thing- or entity-in-itself has been a perennial subject of philosophy for millennia, beginning with the pre-Socratics Heraclitus and Parmenides and debated ever since by opposing schools of thought, variously known as realists and idealists, empiricists and transcendentalists, phenomenologists and post-structuralists. How does the thinking subject stand in relation to the objects of his or her perception and thought? As SueEllen Campbell points out in "The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet,"

Like the idealist, the post-structuralist thinks the world into being; like the realist, the ecologist insists that "out there is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours" (Abbey 37). (Echoing Samuel Johnson's refutation of Bishop Berkeley,

Edward Abbey also says, "To refute the solipsist or the metaphysical idealist all that you have to do is take him out and throw a rock at his head: if he ducks, he's a liar" [Abbey 97]). (205)

In his typically reductive way, Abbey both gets to the point and distorts it. Granting the validity of his conclusion, one might still ask why historically so many have labored to construct systematic descriptions of the world that are so counter-intuitive? And why even today, based largely on the sign theory (semiology) of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, so many critical theoreticians are so convinced that everything in our world that we can know is a social construction of language. Below Campbell draws the conceptual lines between theory and ecology and by implication suggests how they may meet in the matrix of nature writing:

Theory sees everything as textuality, as networks of signifying systems of all kinds. Foucault sees an idea like madness as a text; Lacan sees a human being as a text; Derrida argues that everything is text in the sense that everything signifies something else. But ecology insists that we pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world—the non-human part—exists apart from us and our languages. . . . The systems of meaning that matter are ecosystems. (208-209)

What follows is an attempt to see how nature writing and its facts, ever since Emerson and Thoreau consciously viewed them as signs, may be read profitably with a knowledge of how signs communicate. Just as nineteenth-century language philosophy is relevant to their writing, twentieth-century language philosophy, which is a part of semiotics, may

be relevant to our reading. What I propose, however, is a semiotically *informed* reading of some nature writing, in particular some parts of *Walden*, *not* a semiotic reading *per se*, if by that is meant a narratologist's or structuralist's analysis of the text. My concern is not so much to use the text to elucidate semiotically the underlying language and cultural codes; it is to read nature writing in the light of an understanding of sign theory and thus to "unpack" the significance the wild has come to have both in nature writing and postmodern theory in general.

Emerson was deeply engaged in philological issues of theological exegesis, and *Nature* (1836) was written in part as his articulation of a philosophy of language—a text and a field of study Thoreau was deeply interested in all his life as well. In *The Wisdom of Words*, Philip Gura discusses the influence on Thoreau of the Hungarian immigrant philologist, Charles Kraitsir, who began lecturing after he arrived in Boston in 1844 and whose *Significance of the Alphabet* (1846) Thoreau owned shortly after it was published. Gura tells us that Thoreau "later extended his knowledge of Kraitsir's philology by reading his *Glossology: Being a Treatise on the Nature of Language and on the Language of Nature* (1852), a book he encountered while making revisions in *Walden* and whose influence permeates that masterpiece" (126).

Kraitsir's aim was to discover and conceptualize how diversity of speech had occurred from the original unity of mankind "attested by Gen.

xi.1, 'And the whole earth was of *one language*, and of one speech'" (20).

In what Gura calls that "phantom of uniformity for which the nineteenth century yearned" (127), Kraitsir tried to prove "that at the roots of all languages was a unity of meaning and symbol. . . [derived from] the sounds [speech] man could produce through his vocal organs [which] were limited in number" (126). Like a kind of proto-semiotics, Kraitsir's distinction between "speech" and "languages" and his glossological theory has a curious affinity conceptually (i.e., minus the physiological basis) to what Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure would later independently attempt to describe in comprehensive theories of signs. Language, "what eventually happened to speech. . . [after] it was brought under the influence of local and personal circumstances" (Gura 128), Kraitsir writes in his first chapter

might be . . . defined as *the manifestation of our internal state by articulate sounds*, i.e. not restricting it to the manifestation of *thought*, but extending it to that of *feeling* also.
 Language, in its totality as well as every sound or aerial fibre of it, is a symbol, a paradigm, an index, a finger-board, pointing in one direction to what is brought in and how it is brought within us: in another direction, to what is uttered and how it is to strike the minds of our fellow men. Man is a mirror of, but also a mediator between, all objects felt without and within himself, as well as between these objects and his own spirit on the one side, and between his spirit and that of his neighbors on the other. (22-23)

As Gura points out, it was Kraitsir's belief that while "languages now appear so different, in reality there was only one way words *originally*

could be formed, 'according to the triad' of the interaction of mind, object, and vocal organs. . . . The theoretical implication of Kraitsir's work, then, suggested that men had forgotten how a sound itself might symbolize something greater than the word in which it was embedded" (Gura 128-129):

"Each people's genetic power of speech, peculiar in each, amalgamates the phonetic (sound) elements with the feelings and mental conceptions into an organic unity." Speech became, in Kraitsir's memorable phrase, "the explosion of reason," and the word itself—that is, the series of sounds of which the word was composed—became a "new outward object, linking the world with man and man with man." (Kraitsir qtd. in Gura 128)

Gura's recovery of Kraitsir's glossological theory is important not only because it illuminates our reading of *Walden* in the light of Thoreau's philosophy of language, but also because glossology indirectly anticipates contemporary language theory as a bridge from transcendentalism to semiotics.

Concerning *Walden*, for example, Gura discusses the thawing sand bank passage in the "Spring" chapter, in which Thoreau describes the first appearance of the patterns of "sand foliage," as directly influenced by Kraitsir. The suddenness with which these designs manifest and the intricacy of their details transport Thoreau to an original moment of creation and lead him to speculate that you "find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf"—the formal prototype or

Urpflanze Goethe sought. Thoreau then attempts to demonstrate the homology of nature and language in terms of such a form viewed etymologically and glossologically:

No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick lobe, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, (λεῖβω, *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; λόβος, *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,) *externally*, a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or *B*, double lobed,) with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus also you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butter-fly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. Even ice begins with delicate, crystal leaves, as if it had flowed into moulds which the fronds of water plants have impressed on the watery mirror. The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils. (Thoreau qtd. in Gura 133).

Thoreau uses Kraitsir's glossological theory *rhetorically* to determine an organic basis for the underlying uniformity he desires of nature, thus grounding the formal unity he seeks in language itself. As Gura concludes,

What Thoreau had done here was to show—through an elaborate hermeneutical exercise—how all words, derived from the basic “germs” of sound as described by Kraitsir, are reflections of the grand purpose of nature. . . . What

Thoreau offered as his most important "lesson" from the worlds of matter and spirit was that words were not merely steps to a higher reality but themselves embodied and reflected the reality. (134)

To see how thoroughly nineteenth-century philology generally permeates Thoreau's thinking, we have only to consider further a Journal entry dated January 27, 1853, in which he speculates on some other words:

Trench³⁶ says a wild man is a *willed* man. Well, then, a man of will who does what he wills or wishes, a man of hope and of the future tense, for not only the obstinate is willed, but far more the constant and persevering. The perseverance of the saints is positive willedness, not a mere passive willingness. The fates are wild, for they *will*; and the Almighty is wild above all, as fate is.

What are our fields but *felds* or *felled* woods. They bear a more recent name than the woods, suggesting that previously the earth was covered with woods. Always in the new country a field is a clearing. (106)

Whereas Odell Shepard calls these word associations "purely fanciful" (fn. 106), there is apparently some basis for relating "wild" to "will" in Old Norse, according to the OED, although its primary etymology is to the Old English word for wild deer. But Thoreau's play on fields as *felds* is pure poetic license, we must assume.³⁷

³⁶ According to Odell Shepard, the editor of *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals* (New York: Dover, 1961), "Richard Chevenix Trench (1806-1896). . . [was an] "Anglican archbishop, poet, and etymologist. Thoreau had in hand his book *The Study of Words*, 1851" (fn. 106).

³⁷ According to the OED, "wild" is derived from the OE., eventually in the form "*wilddeor*, *wildeddeor* WILD DEER"; with links to common Teutonic roots that
(continued...)

What is interesting about this Journal passage, however, is not so much whether he really believed these spurious etymologies, but that he was musing with them rhetorically. As we'll see, his use of the wild as "will" appears in *Walden's* central thesis that we must live deliberately, *willfully*, in order to be alive to the wild and awake to the meaning of the signs and selves we are. Throughout his work, Thoreau's writing reflects a persistent effort to persuade us that "language was not an arbitrary imposition of sound upon object but stemmed organically from the very core of the empirical objects themselves, thus offering men profound clues to the organization of the universe" (Gura 110). In contrast, it was precisely the arbitrariness of the sign relation (between the signifier and the signified) that "the undisputed founder of modern linguistics" (Nóth 56) Ferdinand de Saussure would soon insist upon.

The history of the sign can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. But if we define semiotics as the attempt to describe a comprehensive system of how signs communicate, two nineteenth-century thinkers are

³⁷(...continued)

eventuated in Old Norse "*villr* bewildered, astray, whence WILL," among other words in old European languages. "Field" is "prob[ably] related by ablaut and Verner's law to OE. *folde* earth" with possible, though "uncertain," links to pre-Teutonic roots represented in Old Slavonic "*pol'e* plain" or the "Aryan root *pelth* or *pelt*" that led to the Sanskrit word for earth, the Greek word "*πλῆτος* broad."

generally credited with having independently founded modern semiotics: the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).³⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, I will take up Saussure first before contrasting Peirce with him and showing the latter's advantage to ecocriticism.

Saussure's system of signs (semiology) is based on a dyadic model, and his "theories of language have profoundly influenced the development of structuralism" (Nöth 56) and its theoretical aftermath post-structuralism. But it has led to what John K. Sheriff in *Charles Peirce's Guess at the Riddle* calls "the sharp cleavage between the formal and the ontological that is found in all theory arising from. . . Saussure's definition of a sign" (60). According to Saussure, a sign is the relation between a signifier and the idea to which it refers, the signified. Thus the word eagle is the signifier for the mental image—the signified—it conjures of the living creature. Noticeably absent from Saussure's model is any reference to the thing-in-itself—the actual existent eagle, in this case.

³⁶ In his *Handbook of Semiotics*, Winfried Nöth explains that, "[a]ccording to Todorov. . . , four traditions have contributed to the 'birth of Western semiotics,' semantics (including the philosophy of language), logic, rhetoric, and hermeneutics. [11]. . . .

The etymology of *semiotics* is related to the Greek words σημεῖον 'sign' and σῆμα 'signal, sign.' The related roots *semio-* (the Latinized transliteration of the Greek form *semeio-*), *sema(t)-* and *seman-* have been the basis for the derivation of various terms in the field of semiotics and semantics. . . . The first explicit mention of semiotics as a branch of philosophy is in Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (IV. 21.4), where the 'doctrine of signs' is defined as Σημειωτική" (13).

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it "material," it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract" (Saussure 66)

Insisting on his "mentalistic conception," the "distinctive feature of. . . [the] bilaterality [of the sign] is the exclusion of the referential object" (Nöth 59).

After defining the sign in terms of the signifier and signified, Saussure's first principle is that the "bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary. . . . [; the signifier] actually has no natural connection with the signified" (67;69). According to this analysis, meaning lies only in the difference a sign has from all others in the system in which it arises:

[In this] structuralist view of semantics, meaning is the *value* of a concept within the whole semiological system. . . . These semantic values form a network of structural relations, in which not the semantic concepts as such, but only the differences between them are semiotically relevant. (Nöth 61)

Saussure's insistence that the "*linguistic sign is arbitrary*" (67) was determined not only on the basis of his understanding of language but on his objection to the belief that "ready-made ideas exist before words" (65). Combined with his exclusion of the referential object in a purely psychological model of the sign, Saussure effectively rejected the possibility of the so-called "objective world" itself. His semiology avoids solipsism by claiming that, "In fact, every means of expression used in

society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention" (68).

While language is not the only system of signs in Saussure's semiology, it is the most widespread and fully developed and thus became the heuristic model for semiological analysis of other non-linguistic systems as well. It has led with modifications to the emphasis on textuality and the social construction of knowledge so prevalent in late twentieth-century theory. But it has also led to the disjunction Sheriff alluded to above between "the formal and ontological," to the conclusion that "beauty, goodness, and truth can be whatever we think they are and that to ask if our perceptions correspond to anything in reality is to be guilty of yearning for a transcendental signified" (60). The tendency to see things only in terms of our ideas about them is the bedrock of many commentators, as the following passage on the "discontinuity between humanity and nature" from Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* suggests:

This discontinuity manifests itself in the phenomenon of language, which does not belong to the order of nature. Language is a differential, a standing-outside of nature, an *ecstasis* that opens a space of intelligibility within nature's closure. Understood not merely as the linguistic capacity of our superior intelligence but as the transcendence of our manner of being, language is the ultimate "place" of human habitation. Before we dwell in this or that locale, or in this or that province, or in this or that city or nation, we dwell in the *logos*. . . . [200] We dwell not in nature but in the relation to nature. (201)

Saussure's semiology and the modern theories based on it are problems for ecological thinking, if not ultimately incompatible with them.

As Kroeber observes,

All contemporary critical theories assume, explicitly or, usually, implicitly, that the cultural is distinct from, even oppositional to, the natural. The root premise of ecological thinking is that culture is no more unnatural than dirt, paramecia, rhinoceroses, or the ozone layer. Human culture is not merely a product of, but a process within, ongoing natural evolution. (ALH 9.2; 313)

Having said that, it still remains to ask, How then do we systematically theorize nature and culture? How can we understand Snyder's claim that "Wild nature is inextricably in the weave of self and culture" (68)?

One way to do this in my estimation is through the triadic model of the sign developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. At a time when environmentalists are currently caught-up in internecine debates between deep ecologists and social ecologists,³⁹ why introduce Peirce and the abstractions of semiotic(s) into the theoretical quagmire? Because neither deep nor social ecologists provide the basis for a coherent epistemology, one which both accounts for the existence of a referential object *and* the social construction of knowledge through a dynamic theory

³⁹ See *Uncommon Ground* (1996), edited and with an introduction by William Cronon, for an account of this and other controversies of ecological thought and action, in particular Jeffrey C. Ellis's "On the Search for a Root Cause: Essentialist Tendencies in Environmental Discourse" (256-268).

of signs. Peircean semiotic(s)⁴⁰ provides a means to navigate between naive essentialism and constructionism, insisting on the basic dialogism of thought while retaining a sense of the material world in its own right. Peircean semiotic(s) both models and historicizes, thus avoiding the shortcomings of Saussurean synchrony. It also illuminates our thinking on nature as a sign and on the texts which provoke such thinking.

As Saussure constructed his general theory of the sign from his position as a linguist, Peirce constructed his from his position as a logician and scientist.⁴¹ While Peirce did not originate the triadic model

⁴⁰ In deference to and to signify Peircean semiotic while conforming with most contemporary usage, I will use the plural *s* in parenthesis after semiotic(s)-although as Nöth points out, "From Locke's σημειωτική, Peirce adopted the term *semeiotic*. Sometimes he uses the form *semiotic* or *semeiotics*, rarely *semeotic*, but never *semiotics*" (13-14).

⁴¹ Peirce, Joseph Brent's biography, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (1993) makes clear, was a remarkable polymath and the most problematically original American philosopher. Shunned for the most part by his contemporaries (his good friend William James being the notable exception), there has lately been a resurgence of interest in and an appreciation for Peirce studies. Looking beyond whatever cachet Peirce may now have in academia—itsself some cause for skepticism—Peirce scholarship affords both extraordinary challenges and opportunities. Peirce is a challenge first because while he developed his theory of semiotic(s) over a lifetime of intensely focused thought and writing (Brent estimates his oeuvre would fill 105 volumes of 500 pages each), little of his work has in fact been published and nowhere has Peirce systematically outlined his philosophy. Thus even for those who grasp the essential outlines of his thought, Peirce's shifting and evolving terminology can be difficult to sort out. For a literary critic, there is a necessary danger in relying for the most part on Peirce's interpreters and proselytizers. Peirce is also a challenge because of his position as a bridge from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. While there are those, myself among them, who believe Peirce anticipates and explains much late twentieth-century thought (herein lies the extraordinary opportunity), there are those who believe it is possible to overrate this essentially Victorian thinker who believed the universe was evolving

(continued...)

of the sign,⁴² he did develop it along with his theory of universal categories, Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness, into a "pansemiotic view of the universe." As Nöth points out, "Peirce even went so far as to conclude that 'the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign'" (41).

Peirce's irreducibly triadic conception of the sign posits the relation of a *representamen* (or the "sign vehicle" in terms of standard semiotic relata) to an *interpretant* (the "sense" of the sign) to an *object* (its "referent")—or the nexus of *sign-interpretant-object*. Every *sign* (including thoughts which are *signs*) stands in relation to an *object* it stands for and an *interpretant* it entails (which is itself another *sign* standing in relation to an *object* [the previous *sign*] and its *interpretant* and so on). According to Peirce, therefore, this process of semiosis (of *signs* generating *signs*) is unending.

An important distinction of Peircean semiotic(s), and one often confused, is that by *interpretant*, Peirce does not mean the psychological

⁴¹(...continued)

agapastically towards an evermore rational state of being. What can be said with confidence is that in the field of semiotic(s), Peirce's theory of the triadic sign is generally regarded as more comprehensive and effective an analytic model than the bilateral model. Whether Peirce's more far-reaching cosmogony and cosmology will stand the test of time remains to be seen.

⁴² Nöth details ten major triadic sign models with differing "Correlates of the Triad" espoused by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Boethius, Bacon, Leibniz, Peirce, Husserl, Ogden and Richards, and Morris (90). The dyadic model has had fifteen major adherents dating to Augustine and including Hobbes, Locke, Saussure, Hjelmslev, Cassirer, Jakobson, and Goodman (88).

or mental functions of any individual interpreter, as John Dewey points out:

The misrepresentation in question consists in converting *Interpretant*, as used by Peirce, into a personal user or interpreter. To Peirce, "interpreter," if he used the word, would mean *that which interprets*, thereby giving meaning to a linguistic sign. I do not believe that it is possible to exaggerate the scorn with which Peirce would treat the notion that *what* interprets a given linguistic sign can be left to the whim or caprice of those who happen to use it. But it does not follow from this fact that Peirce holds that the interpretant, that which interprets a linguistic sign, is an "object" in the sense of an existential "thing." On the contrary, the interpretant, in Peirce's usage, is always and necessarily *another* linguistic sign—or, better, set of such signs. (87)

In "Peirce and the Semiotic Foundations of Openness" in *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco holds that the *interpretants* are something like "all the facts known about its object" (182), suggesting in other words that *interpretants* of linguistic signs are themselves additional signs, which entail a culturally determined consensus of knowledge and meaning. Since facts may exist independent of human consciousness but can only be known as signs, Eco's reading seems sound, providing we keep in mind Eco's basic difference from Peirce, which Vincent M. Colapietro points out in *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*:

For Eco, following Saussure and Morris, nothing is intrinsically a sign. . . . Signs are made by us by means of the application or creation of a code. This would, for Peirce, be a form of nominalism, since it results in stripping reality of

its intrinsic connections and in attributing these connections *exclusively* to the human mind. According to Peirce, signs are part of the very fabric of reality. They are, in some sense (admittedly in an extremely *vague* sense), there in reality, independent of our conventions and our consciousness. This marks a very deep division between Peirce and Eco. (33)⁴³

What both intrigues and confounds many readers of Peirce is his understanding that the *interpretant* is not a function of any conscious user of signs and yet as conscious users of signs we interpret them.

Colapietro reminds us how Peirce held these two notions—since for him “the self is itself a sign. . . . The subject in its innermost being is itself a form of semiosis” (37).

As part of his “pansemiotic view of the universe,” Peirce developed the categories Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness which he applied to all phenomena, including his theory of signs. As Joseph Brent recounts in *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (1993), Peirce establishes these logical categories in his essay “The Architecture of Theories”:

First is the conception of being or existing independent of

⁴³ I am indebted to Colapietro for this line of thinking about Peirce’s distinction between the hermeneutic and the semiotic: “The semiotic level is that of the sign itself as an intrinsically meaningful phenomenon. . . . The hermeneutic level is that of the various kinds of interpretive responses natural agents make to semiotic processes (20). . . . Nominalism, for Peirce, is the view that the fabric of intelligibility we weave by our interpretations of experience is simply spun out of our own minds (21). . . . [I]f we are to avoid nominalism, then we must distinguish between the *hermeneutic* level (the level of natural beings responding meaningfully to various complexes encountered in the empirical world) and the *semiotic* level (the level of intrinsically meaningful or inherently intelligible phenomena)” (25).

anything else. Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation. . . . The origin of things, considered not as leading to anything, but in itself, contains the idea of First, the end of things that of Second, the process mediating between them that of Third. . . . In psychology, Feeling is First, Sense of reaction Second, General conception Third, or mediation. In biology, the idea of arbitrary sporting is First, heredity is Second, the process whereby the accidental characters become fixed is Third. Chance is First, Law is Second, the tendency to take habits is Third. Mind is First, Matter is Second, Evolution is Third. (Peirce qtd. in Brent 207)

With these categories, Peirce classifies a number of variations of possible signs into a complex system of "trichotomies," which, Sheriff points out, establishes the inseparability of formal and ontological categories—thus theoretically integrating consciousness and the world:

Literary theorists and linguists who accept a Saussurean, dyadic conception of a sign[, on the other hand,] and focus only on linguistic signs obviously see only the relational-differential character of the sign. . . . [I]n Peircean theory signs of Thirdness (thought) could not be without signs of Firstness (quality) and Secondness (existent fact) to work upon. Consequently, there is never a complete break between the ontological and phenomenological. (Sheriff 41)

For Peirce, "brute actuality," or what I have called a "fact" as the thing-in-itself is always Secondness. But those facts can only be known as signs through the mediation of thoughts and words. While rejecting the nineteenth century's quixotic search for the necessary connection of words to things (*à la* Charles Kraitsir's glossology), Peircean semiotic(s) nevertheless recovers the world from the radical arbitrariness and

necessarily human-centeredness of Saussure's semiology:

[our] situation is that we never experience objects except through previous signs and are not even conscious of particular signs except as they are denoted in subsequent signs. Therefore, "everything which is present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves." However, Peirce said, "This does not prevent it being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and the rain" (5.283). Since Peirce saw reality and thought as interdependent rather than incompatible, he could say, "There is nothing. . . to prevent our knowing outward things as they really are, and it is most likely that we do thus know them in numberless cases, although we can never be absolutely certain of doing so in any special case." (5.311). (Sheriff 57)

Peircean semiotic(s) accommodates the polysemic nature of words as an aspect of their categorical Thirdness without accepting the radical ontological destabilization of the "fact" as a categorical Secondness. It not only provides a reader one way to fathom the wild and its positive and negative oscillations, but it also provides an ecological semiotic model that acknowledges both the ontological status of that which the word "nature" signifies and the role of consciousness in the act of its signification.

Peirce's insistence on the essential dialogism of thought is shared by most postmodern antifoundationalists, but in contrast to them, he refuses to locate all meaning in human consciousness and language. Distinguishing the hermeneutic level from the semiotic, Peirce suggests that thought may be "out there" as well as within the mind. By

conceptually reconnecting human perception to nature holistically, Peircean semiotic(s) allows one to conceptualize texts, language, thought, lived experience, and the world in a systematic way. Such an understanding would not only encourage more rational ecological policies but could accommodate the new ethic that would be necessary to forge a consensus for those decisions.

Before turning to the wild, its relation to food in *Walden*, and the effect of looking at both of them through a Peircean lens, a brief detour should be made into another genre—the captivity narrative. The earliest and in many ways most remarkable of these texts, "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. . ." was published in 1686. It is interesting not only for its historical account of the tensions between the discourse of individual insight and Puritan typology but also for its description of an early Euro-American's confrontation with the wild in her captors, in the wilderness in which she wanders, and in the food she must ingest to stave off almost constant starvation.

Food and starvation motifs pervade early American captivity narratives, at times comprising the diurnal structure of the narratives themselves. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Euro-Americans captured by Amerindians, food is a sign of the ethnologic field of intercultural exchange upon which personal and societal attractions and repulsions are displayed. At times food is used as a means of social

control by a captor to punish and reward a captive. Together with the captives' experiences of being in the wilderness with "wild" or "savage" peoples, their literal ingestion of food involves an unwelcome intimacy with nature. Wild foods—uncooked meat such as raw intestines or strange, new forage like tree bark—become complex signs in the captives' experiential hermeneutics, and emblems of their perception or misperception of the captor's "otherness."⁴⁴ In the absence of any coerced sexual contact, which the early captives themselves and commentators such as Cotton Mather all confirm, the intimacy of the meal may take on the symbolic weight of potential miscegenation, and adumbrate what would evolve into the nineteenth-century's obsession with the amalgamation of races. In short, wild food is often the signal narrative element which most reveals the writer's deepest attractions and repulsions toward nature, race, and culture.

The captivity narratives are not unique in furthering ethnocentric sub-texts through attitudes about wild food. In fact, many of the captives' concerns and ambivalences toward food are reflected in later writings in different genres, suggesting the powerful, cultural significance food may have as an embodiment of the wild. In "Feasting in the Wilderness" (*ALH*

⁴⁴ The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his ground-breaking structuralist analysis of the mythologies of northern and southern Amerindians, *Mythologiques*, has examined the cultural and ritual significance of food. *The Raw and the Cooked* (Vol. 1) and *The Origin of Table Manners* (Vol. 3) are of particular interest in this respect.

6.1) SueEllen Campbell, discussing nineteenth-century Eastern tourist accounts of travels among the trappers of the West, notes that

"[s]avage" food. . . points us in two opposing directions. One follows the Euro-Americans' fear of, the other their desire for, becoming as "wild" as they considered the Native Americans to be. They immersed themselves in the wild but wrote for city readers; they called their wilderness diet "savage," but it nourished them and they relished it. [7]. . . . In some basic way, the structure of the wilderness experience is always the same: the traveler takes a civilized body (itself essentially wild) into a place that is (necessarily) conceived as wilderness (wilder at least than that body's usual place). And so the opposition between the civilized and the wild—that dense tangle of tensions and intimacies—remains at the core of the experience, made visible by food, today as in the nineteenth century. (13)

The "Higher Laws" chapter of Thoreau's *Walden* does precisely "point. . . us in two opposing directions," as its opening passage makes clear. In a typically paradoxical gesture, Thoreau begins with an acknowledgment of his own potential savagery, a word in his lexicon virtually synonymous with wildness. In another writer, we could perhaps read this opening as a Calvinist confession of depravity in the light of what comes. But Thoreau not only acknowledges the wild, he makes a point of telling us he reveres it, as well. He asserts a kind of Blakean contrariety that he will, as in "wild," not reconcile. In a chapter devoted largely to the need to overcome the demands of the sensual appetites, a reader may well ask why Thoreau makes a point of prefacing his discussion of "Higher Laws" this way.

As the chapter begins, the narrator/Thoreau is heading home from "Fair-Haven" when he notices a woodchuck crossing his path in the dark:

[I] felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. (490)

This passage is key to understanding what follows in "Higher Laws" and how that chapter reconfigures the hermeneutical circle that is *Walden*. In a blatantly extra-vagant statement, Thoreau posits an instinctual continuum at whose poles he places the "higher. . . spiritual life" and the "primitive rank and savage one" of the wild, and he embraces them both, at least intellectually. The tensions which Thoreau finds in himself are reflected in his vacillating attitudes toward food. Before considering those vacillations though, it is important to read this opening in the light of an earlier passage in which Thoreau suggests a representation of the self that is akin to Peirce's semiotic sense of the self.

In the chapter entitled "Solitude," Thoreau writes:

We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on

it. I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. (429-430)

Three crucial elements of Thoreau's thinking on consciousness (self) and its relation to nature are revealed in this paragraph: that we are both within and without Nature (a generative opposition he sets up and explores throughout *Walden*); that "we" experience ourselves as the "scene. . . of thoughts and affections"; and that to our inner selves our lives are a "work of the imagination only." The doubleness of consciousness, about which Emerson also writes, can be taken as the basis for a semiotic reading of the self, and a way of understanding the familiarity Thoreau feels at one moment in the wild at the beginning of "Higher Laws." "The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar" because Thoreau's thinking on the sign had made a self at home in the wild.

According to Peirce, both the self and thinking are forms of semiosis. All thought is in signs which must be interpreted by further thought with the triadic elements comprising shifting relations. As James

Hoopes points out in his Introduction to *Peirce on Signs*, quoting the philosopher,

"When we think, . . . we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign." The relation of object and interpretant through the sign or feeling is therefore also "a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. . . , just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and the rain." Like the rainbow, the self is manifested in a sign relation; indeed, the self is a sign relation, since feeling is meaningless unless it is interpreted as the sign of an object.
(8)

Applying Peircean semiotic(s) to the scene about which Thoreau writes in the opening of "Higher Laws," assuming the author had that actual experience at Walden Pond, we can say that the animal darting across his path became an object of Thoreau's perception that elicited a feeling in him (a representamen) which he experienced as a thought (the interpretant wildness) in relation to the woodchuck (object) as a sign of the wild that he then had to interpret for meaning. That interpretant (meaning) was itself a sign entailing a new triad of representamen-interpretant-object in an ongoing generation of signs that is semiosis. Thoreau's only awareness of his self would have been as a part of this process. His self is itself a sign that is manifested through the semiotic process. The doubleness of which Thoreau speaks is the triadic mediation of the "relation of object and interpretant through the sign of feeling" of self.

When we understand thoughts and selves as signs in a semiotic

process, the following simile in the "Bean-Field" chapter can be read as a sign of ecological thinking: "[S]ometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts" (449). Peircean semiotic(s), rightly understood, involves us wholly in nature and the "world [which] is our consciousness, and. . . [which] surrounds us" (Snyder 16). In this light, the loss of a species directly diminishes us as the loss of our thoughts and possible selves, as Thoreau has pointed out in "Walking":

We are accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no mast for them. So, it would seem, few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste—sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition, or sent to mill—and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on. (627)

Since Thoreau is a writer and writing is the generation of linguistic signs, we may infer that his nature writing is yet another form of semiosis that is carried on simultaneously with thinking or consciousness. In fact all acts of writing are forms of semiosis, which is why we often discover what we think and who we are in the act of composition.

It is possible, if not probable, that the opening woodchuck scene and the "pair of hen-hawks" were purely acts of imagination, that the author never otherwise experienced them at Walden Pond. For our inner spectators, it would not matter whether what is represented is fact or

fiction because the semiotic process can as easily apprehend an object actually *in* the world as it can project an image of one *into* the world. This, after all, is the basis for the suspension of disbelief that occurs when we are engaged in an aesthetic experience.

Thoreau's text is for us, his readers, an object we also experience as a sign comprised of innumerable signs. In this sense, the wild and the domestic, nature and culture, animal and vegetable quality food, the savage and the civilized, the laws of nature and higher laws, are all variously signs that occupy shifting relations to each other sentence by sentence, chapter to chapter. Just as Thoreau considers many variations or interpretations of different signs—different selves—in *Walden* through a shifting (appearing and disappearing) persona, *Walden* itself may be considered a complex sign.

Beginning in *Walden's* first long chapter, "Economy," the "Thoreau" persona or narrator/Thoreau (hereafter simply Thoreau) spends considerable time commenting about food—animal and vegetable. These comments all point to the extended treatment given the subject in "Higher Laws," which in an early manuscript was provisionally entitled "Animal Food."⁴⁵ Thoreau's disquisition on food in "Economy" is adumbrated by a farmer's objection early in the chapter that you "cannot live on vegetable

⁴⁵ According to a note, p. 339 in Philip Van Doren Stern's *The Annotated Walden*.

food solely" (330), which he later answers with the affirmation that it "was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who loved so much the philosophy of India" (370). But while Thoreau sometimes sounds like a philosophical vegetarian, he also expresses countervailing thoughts:

I learned from my two years' experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength. There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once,—for the root is faith,—I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say. (371;373-374)

Thoreau takes pains not to exclude animal food *ideologically*, since any "wild food" [could be the] means [of] an ecological and spiritual communion," as Campbell suggests:

Thoreau was intensely interested in wild edible plants (and their use by Native Americans) and alert to their symbolic possibilities; his narratives, especially of his Maine woods journeys, tell in detail of trying to immerse himself in the wilderness through food. But despite his celebrated claim in *Walden* that he could devour a woodchuck raw to share its wildness, he was never happy about eating meat. In *The Maine Woods* when his companion kills and cooks a moose, which Thoreau describes as the image of the forest, he evades rather than embraces the metaphoric possibilities. ("Feasting in the Wilderness" 16)

The "Bean-Field" chapter anticipates and provides an ironic context for what follows in "Higher Laws," with its opening statement in regard to the cultivation of Thoreau's field of beans that his "enemies are

worms, cool days, and most of all *woodchucks*" (emphasis added, 446).

Thoreau mentions the woodchuck a number of times in this chapter, which is suffused with a kind of tongue-in-cheek posture. For instance, knowing the author's fierce moral opposition to the U.S. war with Mexico in 1848 suggests the disingenuousness of his comment on hearing a patriotic military celebration going on in town:

I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland were in such safe keeping; and as I turned to my hoeing again I was filled with an inexpressible confidence, and pursued my labor cheerfully with a calm trust in the future.
[S]ometimes it was a really noble and inspiring strain that reached these woods, and the trumpet that sings of fame, and I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good relish,—for why should we always stand for trifles?—and looked around for a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry upon.
(450)

We hear a similar play on the *double entendre* of "relish" in "Higher Laws" when Thoreau says: "Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could some-times eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary" (495). The rhetorical flourish and its antecedent suggest the ironic twist of this latter statement, an undercurrent that surfaces throughout *Walden*.

Just as he cultivates beans in "The Bean-Field" not for food but for "tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (451), Thoreau strikes the pose of one who would devour a woodchuck not for food but for the wildness it signifies. Anticipating the mediation he will

attempt in "Higher Laws," Thoreau inquires:

[W]ho estimates the value of the crop which Nature yields in the still wilder fields unimproved by man? . . . Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. (448).

In the "Baker Farm" chapter, which immediately precedes "Higher Laws," Thoreau picks up the food motif again as he recounts a fishing excursion to nearby "Fair-Haven," during which he sought shelter in a heretofore abandoned hut he had known, which was occupied by the recent Irish immigrant family of John Fields. In a thematic synopsis of *Walden's* opening chapter, "Economy," Thoreau assures the "honest, hard-working but shiftless man. . . [who] 'bogg[ed'] for a neighboring farmer" (486), that he did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, and milk,

nor fresh meat, and so did not have to work to get them; again, as I did not work hard, I did not have to eat hard, and it cost me but a trifle for my food; but as he [Fields] began with tea, and coffee, and butter, and milk, and beef, he had to work hard to pay for them, and when he had worked hard he had to eat hard again to repair the waste of his system. (486)

In a fundamental sense, Thoreau is here applying what we might call ecological thinking to economy by explicating the interrelationships of consumption to production. Although the Irishman (evidently a refugee from the Irish potato famine of the 1840's) is thankful that in America with hard work he could get "tea, and coffee, and meat everyday" (486),

Thoreau draws another moral:

the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things. (486)

Thoreau concludes "Baker Farm" using the hapless Fields (who has now joined him fishing) as a foil to contrast further the "old country" ways ("to catch perch with shiners") "in this primitive new country" (489)—implying the identification of the West with wildness and freedom, a leitmotif that also appears in "Walking."

Thoreau's dichotomous method is to posit and hold opposing ideas that, while dialectically modifying each other, nevertheless do not fall into a stable synthesis. He introduces "Higher Laws" with the admission that he reveres the savage as well as the spiritual. But he spends most of the chapter suspended in the tension between these two tenets, elaborating the premise that "[a]ll sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one" (498).

Though he carefully establishes the poles of the instinctual continuum at the outset, he soon comes to the conclusion that "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" (498). After seeing the woodchuck as a venison sign of wildness, Thoreau is soon expressing strong reservations about animal food in general. In the following

passage, he alludes to the mid-nineteenth-century vegetarian reform movement, reiterating the abstinence he has just advocated to John

Fields:

[I]ike many of my contemporaries, I had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee, &c.; not so much because of any ill effects which I had traced to them as because they were not agreeable to my imagination. The repugnance to animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct. It appeared more beautiful to live low and fare hard in many respects; and though I never did so, I went far enough to please my imagination. I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind. (493-494)

Besides admitting the essentially aesthetic nature of his Walden experiment—the project of self-cultivation through the “higher or poetic faculties”—it is particularly revealing that Thoreau calls the repugnance to animal food an “instinct,” again implicating the continuum along which so much of “Higher Laws” vacillates.

Throughout the chapter, Thoreau struggles rhetorically to come to terms with sensuality—the compulsive feeding of the senses. He subsumes both gluttony and sexuality, which he refers to as chastity, under this rubric, and both appetites disturb him.

Thoreau carefully distinguishes a gross appetite from an appetite for animal food (especially the wild game he calls venison), which he admits to having occasionally: “Yet, for my part, I was never unusually

squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary" (495). But we've already seen the irony that may well undercut that assertion. In the following lines he speaks of the gluttony of the pious in the characteristically Thoreauvian trope of the subject seen in terms of its opposite:

A puritan may go to his brown-bread crust with as gross an appetite as ever an alderman to his turtle. Not that food which entereth into the mouth defileth a man, but the appetite with which it is eaten. (496)

And in a figure that will reverberate in *Walden's* "Conclusion" with the salvific story of the "strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-wood" (587), Thoreau underscores his repugnance for the sensual in "Higher Laws" when he writes: "The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them" (494).

As the instinctual tensions play out, "Higher Laws" continues to enact the polarities of Thoreau's thought. On the one hand, he contends that:

We are conscious of an animal within us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; . . . [and its] animal health and vigor [may be] distinct from the spiritual. (497)

On the other hand, he includes a citation from Hindu Vedic

scripture—an allusion that apparently illuminates the reference to eating “board nails” in “Economy”—about “one of those privileged ones to whom the Ved refers when it says that ‘he who has true faith in the Omnipresent Supreme Being may eat all that exists’” (496). But Thoreau introduces this citation through a disclaimer—one of many qualifications and negations throughout “Higher Laws” and *Walden* in general: “My practice is ‘nowhere,’ my opinion is here. *Nevertheless I am far from regarding myself as one of those privileged ones. . .*” (emphasis added, 496). If Thoreau is far from being such a “privileged one,” how are we to understand his earlier assertion to the farmer in “Economy” that “the root is faith . . . [—] I can live on board nails”?

It would be uncharacteristic of Thoreau merely to ingratiate himself to the reader by confessing his own failed humanity. Yet here he virtually undercuts his own authority in the act of asserting it. He has done this before, in “The Bean-Field” when he proposes to plant not “beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like”—only to jump *immediately* to a point in time after the following summer to admit: “I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they *were* the seeds of those virtues, were worm-eaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up” (453).

Throughout *Walden* Thoreau forces the deliberate, attentive

reader, to question who is speaking and at what point in time. He conflates temporally his narrative voices just as he compresses his two years of life at Walden Pond into one year in *Walden*. As we read, the "Thoreau" persona appears and disappears, affirms and denies, qualifies and disclaims, is absolutely certain and thoroughly ambivalent with a baffling regularity that suggests a process designed to overwhelm the spuriously exclusive positive and negative categories of habitual thought: "I love the wild not less than the good" (490), he has pointedly reminded us at the beginning of "Higher Laws." Just as the parable of the artist of Kouroo in *Walden's* "Conclusion" (in which *καίρως* collapses into *χρόνος*) describes the opening of the deliberately lived present moment into eternity, the unfolding of *Walden* itself suggests an analogue for wilderness space collapsed into the wild within us as an attribute of being.

The critic Henry Golemba describes Thoreau's writing as a "wild rhetoric—a style that mirrored the 'style' of nature":

Thoreau sought to write clearly, forcefully, and solidly, but he also developed what in "Walking, or The Wild" he called "*Gramatica parda*, a tawny grammar" a concept that might with good cause be phrased in more modern terms as a "language of desire," a language whose meaning seems to evaporate as the reader's eye follows Thoreau's words, enticing the reader to fill the gaps with his or her own meaning, transforming the reader to a co-author of the text. . . . Through a language of desire that creates vacuums and erases statements as soon as they are made, Thoreau makes readers feel more intensely compelled to discover the text's "true meaning" and to experience a sense of communication, even communion, with its author [7-8]. . . .

Thoreau. . . insinuate[s] that, while an eternal truth may be enjoyed as a private experience, the only shared sense of a transcendent truth was *in* language. The impression of a profound truth existed only in the smoky words, the thawing sentences, the self-dissolving statements of a transient, fluctuating language of desire (234).

It is interesting to speculate that this "language of desire"—signified by the wild standing for the necessity to interpret words whose nature is inherently unstable or polysemic—is for Thoreau associated with the material or sensual instinct. Opposed to this instinct is the spiritual impulse toward transcendence, which he associates with the rhetorical fixity or grounding of meaning promised by Kraitsir's glossological theories.

In *The Senses of Walden*, Stanley Cavell notes that in the heroic prophetic tradition, Thoreau had a constant sense of America's "unparalleled opportunity. . . lost forever[,] . . .[a] mood at once of absolute hope and yet of absolute defeat, his own and his nation's" (9)—a sense Thoreau shared with the Whitmanian persona in *Leaves of Grass* and with Melville's Ishmael. "His prose must admit this pressure and at every moment resolutely withstand it. It must live, if it can, pressed between history and heaven" (9).

We can see this "pressure" in "Higher Laws" manifested in the tension he feels between the savage and the spiritual, which is enacted in Thoreau's account of his own rhythms ("By turns our purity inspires and

our impurity casts us down" [497].) It is as if in the unfolding semiosis of his consciousness he were surveying the range of his selves in time and space as he struggles to reconcile his own polarities: his impulses both to descend into (revere) and transcend (overcome) Nature, both to fix and destabilize meaning.

Thoreau's prose rises and falls on his wide swings of mood, as sentence follows sentence, scene follows scene, and each informs and reforms what has come before. It is possible in "Higher Laws" to track the correlation of Thoreau's disclaimers as rhetorical signs of his instinctual tensions.

Homeward bound from Fair-Haven, a "string of fish, trailing my pole," Thoreau experiences a "savage delight" at the wildness of the woodchuck. He uses the occasion to extol the importance of hunting and fishing in the development of a young man (and by extension the young species), but admits that

when I have done I feel that it would have been better if I had not fished. . . . [W]ith every year I am less a fisherman, though without more humanity or even wisdom; at present I am no fisherman at all. But I see that if I were to live in a wilderness I should again be tempted to become a fisher and hunter in earnest. (493)

Later, commenting on vegetarianism, he also qualifies his belief:

Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they

came in contact with the more civilized. (emphasis added, 494-495)

As the narrative unfolds, the swings in Thoreau's mood enlarge to include extreme statements on the higher reaches of spiritual aspiration alternating with admissions of failure and equally extreme statements on the mortification of the flesh. The paragraph beginning, "If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius," has Thoreau soaring into ethereal "higher principles," concluding with: "The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched" (495).

But in the next paragraph, we are startled with a new ironic thrust into ferity: "Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could some-times eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary" (495). Thoreau then once again extols sobriety and water—"the only drink for a wise man"—while he denounces: "dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea!" Typically, he then admits to a different practice than the one he is espousing:

But to tell the truth [and what are we to make of what has come before?], I find myself at present somewhat less particular in these respects. I carry less religion to the table, ask no blessing; not because I am wiser than I was, but, I am obliged to confess, because, however much it is to be regretted, with years I have grown more coarse and indifferent. Perhaps these questions are entertained only in youth, as most believe of poetry. My practice is "nowhere,"

my opinion is here. (496)

Thoreau begins the next paragraph on another high note:

Who has not sometimes derived an inexpressible satisfaction from his food in which appetite had no share? I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hill-side had fed my genius. (496)

He then delves into the distinction between "the true savor" of food (taste—perception—severed from all appetite) and gluttony (sensual desire), before closing with a strongly repellant contrast: the former "inspire[s] our spiritual life," the latter is "but food for the worms that possess us. . . . The wonder is... how you and I . . . can live this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking" (496).

From the "slimy beastly life" Thoreau once again ascends in the next line—the first line of the next paragraph—"Our whole life is startling moral." Here, although "the youth at last grows indifferent [a tacit reference to himself], the laws of the universe are not indifferent, but are forever on the side of the most sensitive" (497)—an affirmation Thoreau's prose and our probing of it must confirm.

The following paragraph, however, begins a new downward spiral:

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. (497)

In this seminal paragraph, Thoreau ruminates—sometimes painfully—on the nature of “That in which men differ from brute beasts,” as he puts it in Mencius’ words (497). In a veiled reference to the awakening of Kundalini in eastern yogic practices, Thoreau writes:

The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied. I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace. (497–498)

It is a curious place to which Thoreau has brought us at this point from his opening “hunger” for some raw animal wildness.

The first two lines of the poem he quotes next from John Donne’s “To Sr. Edward Herbert. . . being at the siege of Iuliers” (Stern, note 31, 347) includes another subtle indication of Thoreau’s apparent ambivalence—the linguistic indeterminacy that Cavell and Golemba point out pervades *Walden*: “How happy’s he who hath due place assigned / To his beasts and *disaforested* his mind!” (emphasis added). To disaforest a mind⁴⁶ seems precisely contrary to Thoreau’s experiment at Walden, or

⁴⁶ According to the OED, to disafforest means “to free from the operation of (continued...) ”

his comments in "Walking" that "few and fewer pigeons visit" New England each year because of the diminishing forests, as "few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste" (627). Yet he seems to use it without irony to underline his thesis that "all sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one. . . . [; that] Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome."

The parable with which Thoreau ends "Higher Laws" should be seen as a frame with his opening woodchuck scene. After a hard day's labor, John Farmer sits down one evening "to recreate his intellectual man." He hears someone playing a flute in the distance, the sound of whose notes

came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him,—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these.— But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect. (499-500)

⁴⁵(...continued)

the forest laws [in medieval England]; to reduce from the legal state of forest to that of ordinary land [; or] to strip or clear of forests or trees." These definitions are not without ambiguity, as I read them, in the sense that freeing a forest from land use laws might be construed as returning it to a "wild" or unregulated state. I surmise, however, that it more often meant deregulating a wilderness for development—just as ordinary land was available for clearing or hunting therein.

Thoreau's generic John *Farmer* like John *Fields* in the previous chapter carries forward the *every man* motif he distilled in "Economy" into his observation that the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (329). "Those same stars twinkle over other *fields* than these" (emphasis added)—thus reads as a sign of other selves, the possibilities of which *Walden* is intent on exploring. Thoreau's notion of "let[ting] his mind descend into his body and redeem[ing] it"—despite the grudging qualifier, "All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity"—is a synopsis of "Higher Laws." The redeemed body—the necessary savage or wild pole of the instinctual continuum—once it is enlightened through spiritual insight, is as worthy of reverence as the good itself. Thus does Thoreau strive for transcendence by descendance into Nature and wildness.

Thoreau describes many objects—including himself—as signs of the wild, but leaves other natural objects unheralded as such: the ants at war, huckleberries (although some apples are wild), fish (can a cat be wild but not a fish? Yes, if the cat is used to denote the opposition of domestic and wild, just as apples are so used). H. Daniel Peck points out that the "naturalist's view of nature makes itself felt often in the *Journal*, but in *Walden* it is generally subordinated to other, more 'aesthetic' modes of apprehension" (119). In other words, sometimes the wild signifies a subset of Nature as a naturalist might use the term: that which is not

domestic. "Nature has a place for the wild clematis as well as for the cabbage" (617), Thoreau writes in "Walking." Here we can fathom the meaning in the Saussurean sense that "semantic values form a network of structural relations, in which not the semantic concepts as such, but only the differences between them are semiotically relevant" (Nóth 61).

But in another sense, the wild is also used by Thoreau apparently to signify what Peirce calls categorical *Firstness*—that which is ineffable and can never be adequately expressed in words or thoughts because they are categorically *Thirdness*. From the first chapter of a never completed book, "A Guess at the Riddle," Peirce writes:

"The idea of the absolutely First must be entirely separated from all conception of or reference to anything else; for what involves a second is itself a second to that second. The First must therefore be present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. It must be fresh and new, for if it is old it is second to its former state. It must be initiative, original, spontaneous, and free; otherwise it is second to a determining cause. It is also something vivid and conscious; so only it avoids being the object of some sensation. It precedes all synthesis and all differentiation; it has no unity and no parts. It cannot be articulately thought: assert it, and it has already lost its characteristic innocence; for assertion always implies a denial of something else. Stop to think of it, and it has flown! What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence,—that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it." (qtd. in Hoopes 189)

Thoreau writes in "Walking" that "Life consists with wildness. The

most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him" (611):

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. (616)

In *Walden* the ineffability of Firstness at times permeates the wild as a sign and impels Thoreau to continually create and recreate his selves, "[a]s if only the savage dwelt near enough to Nature and the Truth to borrow a trope from them" (517). What Golemba describes as "wild rhetoric" is one way to acknowledge not only the ineffable but the dilemma of all thought and words which in the act must falsify the object of representation.

Cavell has written that for Thoreau "Our relation to nature, at its best, would be that of neighboring it—knowing the grandest laws it is executing, while nevertheless "Not wholly involved" in them" (105):

Walden is. . . a response to skepticism, and not just in matters of knowledge. Epistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German idealists and Romantic poets

picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. [95]
 The externality of the world is articulated by Thoreau as its nextness to me. (fn. 106-107)⁴⁷

This "nextness" of the world for Thoreau implies a relation always infused with the wild if we are awake to the presence of things. But that "nextness" cannot be described formulaically in the mathematical laws of Newtonian physics. What Thoreau gives us are various perspectives on or ways of recognizing this relation—a kind of ecological thinking and writing.

In the night-fishing scene in "The Ponds," Thoreau directly links what is within and without Nature, the wild and the cosmogonical in one paradigm. In "Higher Laws," he enacts another paradigm in which the woodchuck is an object (animal food) embedded in a sign of the wild about which the chapter itself is the interpretant. In "Brute Neighbors," the chapter immediate following "Higher Laws," Peck suggests yet another paradigmatic variation in the well-known scene of the loon's wild laughter which "emphasizes the independence of object from subject" (120):

⁴⁷ "The idea of the thing-in-itself is the idea of a relation in which we stand to the world as a whole; call it a relation of the world's externality (not each object's externality to every other—that is the idea of space; but the externality of all objects to us). When I said that Kant ought to have provided a deduction of the thing-in-itself, I meant that he had left unarticulated an essential feature (category) of objectivity itself, viz., that of a *world apart from me in which objects are met*. The externality of the world is articulated by Thoreau as its nextness to me" (fn. 106-107).

The loon's laugh, as well as its "long-drawn unearthly howl." . . . are the sounds of the uncanny: "the wildest sound that is ever heard here." . . . In contrast to the winged cat, here is a creature that can never be domesticated. (120)

There seems to be no fixed meaning to the wild in *Walden* or in "Walking,"—except perhaps as a sign of the nature of polysemy itself. The wild and the texts in which it appears are generative signs as much for the fictive "spectator" in us as in Thoreau, if we can distinguish between the two. Like the eternally present moment he illuminates in the parable of the artist of Kouroo, Thoreau collapses the spatial terrain between the sacred and the profane, the material and transcendental, from a wilderness around Concord into the wild through which he roams literally and figuratively in *Walden*. As he suggests in his Journal entry on August 30, 1856:

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. . . . I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, i.e. than I import into it. A little more manhood or virtue will make the surface of the globe anywhere thrillingly novel and wild.

When Thoreau says in "Where I Lived, and What I Loved For" that

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out the marrow of life" (394)—

we are to understand that a savage *but* spiritual man is speaking.

That paradox (signified by the wild as a kind of Peircean Firstness, wholly the ground of being) is rendered in the experience of reading *Walden* and in heeding Thoreau's exhortation to become a "seer"—"one who practices the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen. . . [:] Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity" (411). For that practice, "we need the tonic of wildness," as Thoreau affirms in "Spring." "We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander" (575).

Thoreau's striving to be detached, even from the demands of biology, while at the same time acknowledging both his origin and destiny in nature, informs his contrary impulses toward the good and the wild in *Walden*. In discussing the projects Thoreau took up in his last years between the publication of *Walden* in 1854 and his death in 1862, Richardson notes that "Thoreau's interests. . . shifted to a profound new focus on production and dissemination, in generation and creative effort. The center of *Walden* is the desire to be free. The center of the late work is the desire to connect. The movement is from economy to ecology" (*A Life* 384). It is this movement that has had such a profound effect on nature writers and American culture.

Chapter 4
ἄπειρων
Bartram and Lopez

The miraculous lies out there in a misty territory just beyond the known. If medieval peasants believed in monstrous Wild Men and Wild Women lurking in the gloom of their own forests, it's not much of a step in fact from that to belief in eueptic Isles of Flowers and Isles of Angels—so short a step in fact that early cartographers drew such islands on maps, as their fancies moved them. (ix)

—Donald A. Barclay, *et al.*
Into the Wilderness Dream

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. (575)

—Henry David Thoreau
Walden, "Spring"

The land retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know. Our obligation toward it then becomes simple: to approach with an uncalculating mind, with an attitude of regard. To try to sense the range and variety of its expression—its weather and color and animals. To intend from the beginning to preserve some of the mystery within it as a kind of wisdom to be experienced, not questioned. And to be alert for its openings, for that moment when something sacred reveals itself within the mundane, and you know the land knows you are there. (228)

—Barry Lopez
Arctic Dreams

If we can read the wild as a sign of polysemy itself, we may also read it as an emblem of boundlessness, of what by definition defies all human efforts to bind or control it. There is a word in the Greek lexicon, ἄπειρων, which suggests both what is "boundless, endless, countless" as well as "without trial or experience of a thing"—a sign that connects the landscape and the mindscape that perceives it like two sides of a coin. The latter definition is related in its root to another word, ἀπειρό-τοκος, which means "without experience of childbirth, not having yet brought

forth" (Liddell and Scott 80)—and it is in this sense of virgin, uncultivated land, that the American wild as an ἀνείρων was often perceived by early European explorers and settlers who projected their own want of experience onto the undeveloped and in their eyes unproductive land they gazed upon and appropriated. Thus far, this study has focused on Thoreau, in particular, and some of those contemporary authors who write in his self-reflective tradition. This chapter will turn to the so-called "Un-Thoreau" branch of nature writing (Kroeber)—those "more socially-oriented, scientific observers"—and focus in particular on the works of two sympathetic naturalist-observers: William Bartram in the late eighteenth century and Barry Lopez in the late twentieth century.

Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws* (1791)⁴⁸—his botanical explorations beyond the frontier into the wilderness of the southeast—will be seen in the light of both the eighteenth century sublime and the rhetoric of natural history. His experiences of the people, wildlife, and land will be juxtaposed with Barry Lopez's travels to one of the last remaining wildernesses of our time, recounted in *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, and his experiences of

⁴⁸ Hereafter *Travels*. All references are to *William Bartram: Travels and Other Writings*, The Library of America (1996).

the wild, the relation of hunter to prey, and the native inhabitants of the northern extremis. Bartram's observations and rhapsodies, both of which presuppose genre and discourse, will be contrasted to Lopez's approach, which as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, begins and ends in a very different orientation.

William Bartram, the son of the most prominent pre-revolutionary botanist in the American colonies—John Bartram—moved through the southeast from 1773 to 1778 collecting specimens and making observations for his wealthy and somewhat condescending British patron Dr. John Fothergill, who aspired to be at the center of natural history practice in England. Like a kind of prototypical Rip Van Winkle, Bartram went into the wilderness a British subject and emerged a citizen of the United States. As Regis notes, upon returning home to his father's "botanical garden on the banks of the Schuylkill" river outside of Philadelphia, Bartram would re-compose scenes from notes and memory, eventually publishing his *Travels* in Philadelphia and London in 1791, and in other European capitals throughout the decade. "This book, Bartram's only major publication, found an audience in England and on the Continent, eventually entering the canon of American literature through the auspices of readers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, and Thoreau" (42-43).

In his long introductory essay to *This Incomparable Land: A Book*

of American Nature Writing, Thomas J. Lyon describes Bartram's work as
a

kind of wandering botanizing, done in an exploratory, discovering, goal-less frame of mind, so that the forest world, as he walked slowly through it, became a garden of delight and revelation. [37].

[The *Travels*] is rambling, diverse, florid, oddly put together in places, sketchy on dates and distances traveled, clogged in places with long lists of Latin names of plants, and probably more than a little repetitive, to most readers. But it is also the first fully developed nature essay in this country; it is a brilliant evocation of a mind and vision, and the land that inspired them. Perhaps the greatest single impression is of the author's receptivity, and of the fluid ease with which his mind followed the hints that nature provided. (38)

Lyon's apt description suggests why this work is still interesting and important, with the very "oddness" of its structure and sometimes discontinuous, patchwork rhetoric providing critical aporias that reveal the underlying tensions of the text and the historical moment that produced it. Written as it was on the cusp of political, scientific, and philosophical changes, the *Travels* can be usefully read for analyses of the discursive practices that encompassed those changes. That deconstructive reading aside, however, the *Travels* is also an important text for ecocriticism, not only as a primary document of early exploration and observation but for Bartram's pre -ecological and -anthropological awareness as well. While Thoreau has more often than not been accorded recognition as the founder of the genre of American nature writing, Bartram—whose travels

were published just two years after the English "Thoreau" Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* appeared in 1789—is increasingly seen as either the founder of a co-branch of nature writing (Kroeber 314) or as "an essential source of the American nature-writing tradition" (Branch 297).

Regis identifies two key generic precursors to the "literature of place": the narration of the travel memoir⁴⁹ and the description of eighteenth-century natural history writing (26). Both of these are present in Bartram's *Travels*, in effect producing three quite distinctly identifiable voices: of Quaker benignity, of natural history, and of sublimity.

While many commentators (Regis and Albanese, in particular) have noted the influence of the Burkean sublime on Bartram, and some have also considered the rhetorical uses of natural history in his and other texts (Regis, Albanese, Looby, Porter, *et al.*), most have underestimated the importance of Bartram's Quaker ideology and the way it complicates and destabilizes the expectations of particular discourses. The Society of Friends encouraged in its members an openness and ideologically non-dogmatic, even individualistic, spiritual striving. That religious attitude catalyzed in William, "the son of an ardently anticlerical naturalist" (Branch 287), into an "idiosyncratic spirituality [that] leads him to the brink of cultural relativism and biotic egalitarianism. He is as

⁴⁹ Regis cites Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) as one of the most influential "guidebook[s], both for travelers and travel writers" (26).

interested in and almost as non-judgmental towards the Creeks and Seminoles as he is toward the white planters who also host him" (Buell 63).

In Bartram we can see the mutation of deism verging into pantheism or panentheism. The transcendence of the Creator from creation was a tenet of both deism and Christianity. That belief as well as the understanding of physical nature in terms of a rigid, mechanical order—a conception reinforced through Copernican-Newtonian mathematical laws and their success in describing and predicting natural events—sometimes seem untenable in light of observations in the *Travels*.

Bound only by his own pre-conceptions, Bartram vacillates between inscribing a Linnaean chain of being and deconstructing it at the same time as he is ever alert to recognize the divine spark in animals and even plants. His openness to and appreciation for all forms of life occasionally leads to an enthusiasm we most readily associate with the ecstatic Muir. Bartram's incredible excursion onto the shore to get a closer look at crocodile nests reflects the single-minded determination and fascination with nature that adumbrates John Muir's inching himself along a narrow rock ledge for a better view of Yosemite falls (*My First Summer in the Sierra*, July 15).

In his Introduction to the *Travels*, Bartram both affirms the categories of biological taxonomy through his Linnaean notations and

questions some of their sharp, absolute distinctions; just as he both represents nature in the traditional, deistic conception as the work of a transcendent Creator and suggests that the inner, "vital principal" and "intellectual system" of life itself "must be divine and immortal" (19). For instance, Bartram's argument attempts to show that plants may be sentient, somewhat like animals; and that animals—in contrast to the Cartesian mechanical view of them—may partake of more than mere instinct, may like human beings partake through their "parental and filial affections" of a kind of "moral system" heretofore denied them by philosophers. Using the *Dionaea muscipula* or Venus' fly-trap as his example, Bartram concludes that "vegetable beings are endued with some sensible faculties or attributes, familiar to those that dignify animal nature; they are organical, living, and self-moving bodies, for we see here, in this plant, motion and volition" (17). He goes on to further blur the distinction between the animal and plant kingdoms by pointing out that the

most apparent difference between animals and vegetables is, that animals have the powers of sound, and are locomotive, whereas vegetables are not able to shift from the places where nature has planted them: yet vegetables have the power of moving and exercising their members, and have the means of transplanting and colonizing their tribes almost over the surface of the whole earth. (18)

It is Bartram's tendency to take the widest possible view of things and to see everything as interconnected that we now recognize as proto-

ecological thinking. While he expresses his piety through traditional figures of speech, as when he refers to "the great Author" (15) or the "world, as a glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator" (13), he also at times suggests a more radical re-vision of those figures:

We admire the mechanism of a watch, and the fabric of a piece of brocade, as being the production of art; these merit our admiration, and must excite our esteem for the ingenious artist or modifier; but nature is the work of God omni-potent; and an elephant, nay even this world, is comparatively but a very minute part of his works. If then the visible, the mechanical part of the animal creation, the mere material part, is so admirably beautiful, harmonious, and incomprehensible, what must be the intellectual system? That inexpressibly more essential principle, which secretly operates within? that which animates the inimitable machines [i.e., animals in the Cartesian view], which gives them motion, impowers them to act, speak, and perform, this must be divine and immortal? (19)

The odd syntax of Bartram's last sentence—beginning "That inexpressibly more essential principle. . . ," and ending with the declarative statement "this must be divine and immortal?" but with the interrogative question mark—perfectly captures the rhetorical give and take of Bartram's text.

The deep compassion toward and faith in the family of Creation that Bartram establishes in the Introduction is manifest throughout the *Travels* as it leads him to inspect and respect all nature. Throughout Parts 1 through 3, Bartram pleads for the lives of various animals he

encounters, such as a deer and rattlesnake, sometimes unsuccessfully against the prevailing attitudes of the hunters who accompanied him. Although Bartram, like Audubon, was an illustrator of the specimens he described, his ethics in this regard are in sharp contrast to the younger painter who readily appropriated birds as specimens for his artistic rendering by killing them.⁵⁰

True to his role as both a natural historian and a Quaker, Bartram ends his Introduction with some comments on the "manners of the Indian nations" (24)—thus objectifying and representing them as any other specimen for study—but he does so characteristically in the context of questioning the usual, derogatory opinion of them "among the white

⁵⁰ John James Audubon, in the ornithological tradition that also includes the naturalists Mark Catesby and Alexander Wilson, is a complex figure in both history and literature, "delicately balanced among four rival identities—the hunter, exulting in triumph over his prey; the artist, enjoying the play of colors; the scientist, observing behavior; and the nature lover, regretting the death of something beautiful" (Sanders 7). While in "The Eggers of Labrador," Audubon remarks sympathetically on the "depredations" of the "Gulls, Guillemots, and Ducks [whose eggs] are searched for [and stolen] with care; and the Puffins and some other birds [whom] they massacre in vast numbers for the sake of their feathers" (*Audubon Reader* 82). In his sketch "Golden Eagle: (*Aquila chrysaetos*)" from *The Ornithological Biography*, he gives us the narrative of his incredible four day encounter with his subject prior to immortalizing the creature on canvas. First, he studies the captive bird for a day, then determines "the position in which. . . [he] might best represent him" on the second day, and spends the third day attempting to kill the bird "with the least pain to him"—trying suffocation by burning charcoal, eventually adding sulphur, and when unavailing after many hours finally "thrust[ing] a long pointed piece of steel through his heart" the next day (150). Audubon's passion was less for nature itself or even nature as the field of self-reflection than for his art and the monumental "Birds of America" which he worked on from 1820 to 1838. For a discussion of Bartram, Wilson, and Audubon, who "understood the role of natural historian to be complementary with that of romantic author" (293), see Michael Branch's "Indexing American Possibilities" in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996).

people." Bartram's openness and compassion, while remarkable for his time, perhaps, surely had its limits; and may still strike many as "complicit . . . in. . . [the] furtherance of colonizing projects" (Buell 62). At the end of the Introduction, he proposes what we would now think of as an anthropological study of indigenous peoples for the purpose of advising the Congress. But his premise is assimilationist: "they were desirous of becoming united with us, in civil and religious society" (24); and the ultimate goal was "a judicious plan for their civilization and union with us" (25).

A number of critics have made much of Bartram's natural history writing—usually to the effect that it was a stratified, hierarchical discourse that created static, synchronically totalizing representations. It may be difficult for many contemporary readers to understand how central the importance of the dry, arcane discourse of natural history was to the early republic and its intellectual elites, and why. Commenting on the physician Benjamin Rush's advocacy in 1791 of the study of natural history for the education of the early republic's new citizens, Christopher Looby writes in "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram," that

knowledge of the names and qualities of the beings in nature was not only the basis of the American's control over his environment, but might also be, in some sense, the foundation of the collective life of the new nation of which he was a member. Not only could it serve to make the elements

of the new world familiar to him and render them useful for his purposes, but it could also help him to imagine the shape of the new society that he was then in the midst of making. [252]

The Linnaean system, since it represents the whole natural world, necessarily exceeds the experience of any single knowing subject, since such an individual subject, no matter how extensive his acquaintance with the plants and animals of the earth, could still know only some of them. The natural world, *in toto*, then, according to Durkheim, is "an object [that] can be embraced only by a subject which contains all the individual subjects within it." It is, we might say, an imaginary object, only visible to an imaginary subject—the collective subject. Durkheim, of course, in this connection concluded with a famous dictum: "The concept of totality is only the abstract form of the concept of society." (258)

Looby rightly discerns an effort in writers of this generation to coalesce a fragmented, centrifugal society into the naturalized unity of a national identity by figuratively positing an essentialized order in nature constructed through the Linnaean system of nomenclature, although a stronger case can be made for Jefferson's and Peale's intentions in this respect than for Bartram's.⁵¹ The corollary to the Euro-American explorer ranging over the wild confidently fixing names onto the strange, new flora and fauna he encounters while classifying them into a pre-defined order of things, is the revolutionary intellectual and political elite conceiving of the order of society based on an imagined order of nature.

⁵¹ In addition to Christopher Looby, "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram" (*AL* 22): 1987. 252-273, and Pamela Regis, *Describing Early America: Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Rhetoric of Natural History* (1992), see Charlotte M. Porter's *The Eagle's Nest: Natural History and American Ideas, 1812-1842* (1986) for a discussion of the succeeding generation's uses of natural history.

While Looby stresses the importance of natural history in the rhetoric of early nation building, Regis emphasizes both its hierarchical implications (Bartram's movement in the Introduction up the Great Chain of Being from plant to animal to human being, for instance); and, based on a Foucaultian analysis, its static, ahistorical descriptions in the

Travels:

In these passages, particularly in the lists of plants with their Linnaean names, the temporal element present in the narrative drops out, and we are presented with a list located in space, but no longer in time. An observer moving through time, Bartram disappears. He reappears as the describer who is not in time ("throughout the seasons"). Time suspends before the calling of the eternal Linnaean names. The static, curiously still descriptions partake of the verbless nature of the Linnaean names themselves. The reader reconstitutes the scene, but does so in the historyless "now" that is a consequence of the Linnaean rhetoric. (61)

Just as his analogical thinking in the Introduction ("plants are like animals, animals are like men, and American Indians are like Europeans" [Regis 53-54]) fixes the indigenous people Bartram encounters in a hierarchy of political and cultural power, so also does the end frame of the *Travels*, Part 4. It is a standard "manners and customs" report which, as Mary Louise Pratt notes, explorers and natural history writers sometimes used when describing encounters with indigenous peoples, ultimately relegating them to a kind of textual homeland.⁵²

⁵² In her essay, "Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushman," which has been collected in *"Race," Writing*, (continued...)

While both Looby's and Regis's analyses are constructive and, in places, persuasive, they tend to ignore or de-emphasize those rhetorical elements which do not further their arguments—which happen to be just those points in which Bartram subverts discursive expectations and reveals his strengths as a proto-ecological thinker. For instance, in order to hold that Bartram in the Introduction is reinforcing the Great Chain of Being through his analogical thinking, as Regis suggests, we have to accept her gloss that "science shows Bartram a way of blurring these categories [the animal, mineral, and plant kingdoms]"—the very categories she claims that the science of Linnaean nomenclature is intent on fixing. Looby, too, while claiming that Bartram described a "stiff and immutable world. . . as a figure for social stability" (257), nevertheless admits that

in those places where he seems to have transcribed most faithfully (or unselfconsciously) in his prose the impressions nature made on him, [Bartram] described not a harmonious order of things, but a nearly random set of motions, a concatenation of fortuitous processes, an intersection of unpredictable transformations. That is, he observed a world of things that moved, a world of change and becoming, rather than one of static being. (256)

⁵²(...continued)

and *Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Pratt claims that the "portrait of manners and customs is a normalizing discourse, whose work is to codify difference, to fix the Other in a timeless present where all 'his' actions and reactions are repetitions of 'his' normal habits. Thus, it textually produces the Other without an explicit anchoring either in an observing self or in a particular encounter in which contact with the Other takes place. 'He' is a *sui generis* configuration, often only a list of features set in a temporal order different from that of the perceiving and speaking subject" (139-140).

Since neither Looby nor Regis acknowledge Bartram's "idiosyncratic spirituality" (Buell 63) and the rhetorical aporias and disjunctions that occur in his text, neither recognizes his value to eco-criticism. In her determination to demonstrate the static, synchronic treatment of Native Americans in the *Travels*' descriptive prose, Regis overlooks the many instances in which Bartram remarks on the historical enmities between tribes or comments, almost elegiacally, on the differences in the landscape over time. To illustrate this point, I quote a lengthy passage in Chapter IV, Part II, not only for the ecological history Bartram attempts but for the extraordinarily detailed composition he creates of two scenes, then and now:

At about fifty yards distance from the landing place [near Mount Hope in East Florida], stands a magnificent Indian mount. About fifteen years ago I visited this place [with his father, John], at which time there were no settlements of white people, but all appeared wild and savage; yet in that uncultivated state it possessed an almost inexpressible state of grandeur, which was now entirely changed. At that time there was a very considerable extent of old fields round about the mount, along the banks, downwards, all of which has since been cleared away to make room for planting ground. But what greatly contributed towards completing the magnificence of the scene, was a noble Indian highway, which led from the great mount, on a straight line, three quarters of a mile, first on a point or wing of an orange grove, and continuing thence through an awful forest of live oaks, it was terminated by palms and laurel magnolias, on the verge of an oblong artificial lake, which was on the edge of an extensive green level savanna. This grand highway was about fifty yards wide, sunk a little below the common level, and the earth thrown up on each side, making a bank of about two feet high. Neither nature nor art could any

where present a more striking contrast, as you approached this savanna. The glittering water pond played on the sight, through the dark grove, like a brilliant diamond, on the bosom of the illumined savanna, bordered with various flowery shrubs and plants; and as we advanced into the plain, the sight was agreeably relieved by a distant view of the forests, which partly environed the green expanse on the left hand, whilst the imagination was still flattered and entertained by the far distant misty points of the surrounding forests, which projected into the plain, alternating appearing and disappearing, making a Grand sweep round on the right, to the distant banks of the great lake. But that venerable grove is no more. All has been cleared away and planted with indigo, corn, and cotton, but since deserted: there was now scarcely five acres of ground under fence. *It appeared like a desert to a great extent, and terminated, on the land side, by frightful thickets, and open pine forests.*

It appears, however, that the late proprietor had some taste, as he has preserved the mount and this little adjoining grove inviolate. The prospect from this station is so happily situated by nature, as to comprise at one view the whole of the sublime and pleasing. (100-101; emphasis added)

Bartram felt so strongly about the ecological degradation which occurred between his two visits that he comments on it again in Chapter VIII, Part II:

I have often been affected with extreme regret, at beholding the destruction and devastation which has been committed or indiscreetly exercised on those extensive fruitful Orange groves, on the banks of St. Juan, by the new planters under the British government, some hundreds acres of which, at a single plantation, have been entirely destroyed, to make room for the Indigo, Cotton, Corn, Batatas, &c. or, as they say, to extirpate the musquitoes, alleging that groves near the dwellings are haunts and shelters for those persecuting insects. Some plantations have not a single tree standing; and where any have been left, it is only a small coppice or clump, nakedly exposed and destitute. . . . (215)

While Bartram often strove to represent Native Americans as

representative types, as the rhetoric of natural history and the demands of the "manners and customs" report required, he could also depict them as idiosyncratic individuals to whom he responded with full, Quaker humanity. In a telling passage early in the *Travels*, Bartram narrates an event which to him demonstrated "a remarkable instance of Indian sagacity" (57). While traveling from Savanna to Augusta in Chapter IV, Part I, Bartram reports on a "survey of the New Purchase" (5) in which a surveyor had set a course by compass direction of about seventy miles to the Savanna river—only to be challenged by an Indian chief who

said it was not right; but that the course was so and so, holding up his hand, and pointing. The surveyor replied, that he himself was certainly right, adding, that that little instrument (pointing to the compass) told him so, which, he said, could not err. The Indian answered, he knew better, and that the little wicked instrument was a liar; and he would not acquiesce in its decisions, since it would wrong the Indians out of their land. This mistake (the surveyor proving to be in the wrong) displeased the Indians; the dispute arose to that height, that the chief and his party had determined to break up the business, and return the shortest way home, and forbade the surveyors to proceed any further. (57)

Bartram goes on to say that the

chief became reconciled, upon the condition that the compass be discarded, and rendered incapable of serving on this business; that the chief himself should lead the survey; and, moreover, receive an order for a very considerable quantity of goods. (58)

That "a very considerable quantity of goods" be part of the deal to the benefit of the chief, and that Bartram sees all of this as "sagacious"

rather than naïve or cunning, suggests not only his sense of humor but his appreciation for the superior power being subverted here by superior insight. The suspicion of white technology and cartography as instruments of deceit and the superior topographical knowledge of the Indian (the "chief, heading the party, conducted us on a straight line, as appeared by collateral observation, to the desired place" [58], Bartram notes) reads like a faithful record of the scepticism with which Native Americans viewed the early explorers, surveyors, and settlers.

Like Mary Rowlandson's effort to account for her experiences in captivity through a Puritan world view and thereby exert rhetorical if not actual control over the representation of the circumstances of that captivity, Bartram's *Travels* sometimes reflects tensions between the parameters of well-defined discourses like natural history and Bartram's Quaker sympathies and proto-ecological sensibility. These tensions are revealed in the discontinuous patchwork of rhetorics that comprise the *Travels*. In addition to the voices of Quaker benignity and natural history, Bartram self-consciously re-composed narrative scenes with an understanding of the power of the eighteenth-century sublime to affect a reader's emotional response. Regis reminds us that

Bartram wrote the *Travels*, including the reactions to sublime scenes, from the garden on the Schuylkill, within an hour's ride of Philadelphia. How could he have done this? Trained as a painter, Bartram must have had a good visual memory. And the field journals contained enough detail to

remind him of what he had seen and when—to a point. The rest was a matter of considering the objects he had encountered—the stimulus—and applying the appropriate term of sublimity or beauty—delineating the response. This somewhat mechanical procedure accounts for the repetitive, formulaic effusions over yet another sublime forest, yet another vast savanna. (66-67)

An example of just this kind of disjunctive and formulaic rhetorical turn occurs at the end of the long passage cited above (p.177-178) on the ecological degradation of the Orange grove by British planters, when Bartram suddenly concludes that despite the appearance of the surrounding landscape as a "desart," the Indian mount itself had been preserved "inviolat[e]" through the *fastefulness* of the "late proprietor": "The prospect from this station is so happily situated by nature, as to comprise at one view the whole of the sublime and pleasing" (101).

Regis points out that even before Bartram begins to narrate his journey through the southeast, he relates a scene of an ocean storm on his voyage down the Atlantic coast that closely parallels "[Edmund] Burke's textbook example of sublimity" (63) in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

Before he has even gotten off of the boat that took him south, Bartram's retrospective narrator has offered us a compendium of the sublime ["terror and devastation"; "vastness and intensity of light"; "magnificence"; "power"; "suddenness"; "and his own contribution. . . , 'the air impregnated with the breath of fragrant aromatic trees and flowers'"]. All of these elements reappear in the narrative, over and over, as Bartram beholds still another prospect whose awesome or terrible appearance compels him to

convey his reactions." (64)

Bartram's self-conscious construction of his narrative—the infusion of an emotional mindscape into the description of a landscape—is everywhere evident, but it is usually read as a kind of artistic flaw or narrative lapse, rather than an intentional destabilization of the discourse. In a single paragraph in Chapter III, Part I, Bartram describes an encounter with an outcast Seminole who he later learns was "one of the greatest villains on earth, a noted murderer" (44). He begins the paragraph noting that he "had now passed the utmost frontier of the white settlements on that border" and then proceeds to describe a pastoral scene at sunset: "the skies serene and calm, the air temperately cool, and fragrant zephyrs breathing through the fragrant pines; the prospect around enchantingly varied and beautiful" (43). This happy scene of "evening contemplation" is suddenly interrupted with the appearance of the Seminole—who startles and terrifies Bartram. After resigning himself "entirely to the will of the Almighty," Bartram greets the Indian "with an air of confidence. . . hailing him, brother" (43). The "intrepid Seminole" initially recoils "with a look of malice, rage, and disdain" but then offers Bartram his hand and departs "in a friendly manner" (44). Bartram takes pains to imagine the inner "silent language of his soul," according him both the dignity of a soul and the status of a subject worth understanding:

"White man, thou art my enemy, and thou and thy

brethren may have killed mine; yet it may not be so, and even were that the case, thou art now alone, and in my power. Live; the Great Spirit forbids me to touch thy life; go to thy brethren, tellest thou sawest an Indian in the forests, who knew how to be humane and compassionate." (44)

That this is the language of the noble savage, a discourse James Fenimore Cooper would perfect a few decades later, is obvious enough. But no one has remarked on how Bartram then destabilizes both that stereotype and his white audience's expectations by projecting it onto a type of the ignoble savage through the facility of his Quaker imagination. The final sign of this instability is Bartram's concluding, after interrupting the pastoral scene of quiet beauty with the sudden danger of sublime, overpowering terror, that "they parted in a friendly manner, *in the midst of a dreary wilderness*" (44; emphasis added). The "serene and calm" skies, the "enchantingly varied and beautiful" prospect had been transformed in Bartram's mind into "a dreary wilderness"—a description reminiscent of his Puritan forebearers.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Bartram's conscious intentions as a writer and powers of observation as a naturalist, and their connection, occurs in his well known description of the "crystal bason, . . . the inchanting and amazing crystal fountain, which incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute (149; Part II, Chap. V). Beyond noting this passage as a likely source of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," it is even more important to recall that it is here that

Bartram has us question appearances, both in reality and in representation.⁵³ After describing the many varieties of fish and reptiles "all in their separate bands and communities, with free and unsuspecting intercourse performing their evolutions; there are no signs of enmity, no attempt to devour each other" (150-151), Bartram goes on to say:

This amazing and delightful scene, though real, appears as first but as a piece of excellent painting; there seems no medium; you imagine the picture to be within a few inches of your eyes, and that you may without the least difficulty touch any one of the fish, or put your finger upon the crocodile's eye, when it really is twenty or thirty feet under water.

And although this paradise of fish may seem to exhibit a just representation of the peaceable and happy state of nature which existed before the fall, yet in reality it is a mere representation; for the nature of the fish is the same as if they were in Lake George or the river; but here the water or element in which they live and move, is so perfectly clear and transparent, it places them all on an equality with regard to their ability to injure or escape from one another. (151)

Bartram's written medium, to extrapolate from his visual analogy, though occasionally transparent, more often than not leaves traces of its rhetorical brushwork. He roamed the ἀνείρων with an open and inquisitive mind that was nevertheless informed by what his culture, his

⁵³ For a discussion of Bartram's influence on Coleridge see N. Bryllion Fagin's *William Bartram: Interpreter of the American Landscape* Part III "Bartram's Influence on Literature" pp. 128-149. Fagin notes that "Kubla Khan" owes to Bartram a great deal of its imagery" and on pages 145-149 points out a number of specific instances, including the crystal fountain passage, in which Coleridge drew inspiration from the *Travels*. In his discussion Fagin also cites the research of "Professor Lowes, Mr. E.H. Coleridge, and Dr. Bersch [who] believe that into this reworking of Bartram's chrysal fountain enter also descriptions of other fountains found in Bartram" (147).

historical moment, and its discourses suggested he see. Similar to the transcendentalists a half-century later, the “universal behind the particular is Bartram’s aim, reducing experience to a set of responses that the responder can count on simply because he is in possession of the same set of equipment as other responders” (Regis 66). This universalizing tendency of Bartram and the fixed conventions of the rhetorics of natural history and the sublime in which he wrote, rightfully noted, has led some critics to underestimate, even ignore, both the places in which he exceeds those conventions and those in which he expresses a kind of ecological insight. In a solidly synchronic discourse like descriptive natural history, Bartram continually insinuates diachronic echoes in the narrative he weaves throughout the *Travels*, whether he is discussing ecological degradation or the historical conflicts of Indian tribes. Representative as his descriptions are often meant to be, there is little doubt that they were carefully observed and deeply felt, and are still able to convey something of the real power and dignity of his subjects. As Michael Branch suggests,

Philosophically closer to the late-twentieth- than the late-eighteenth-century view of the human place in the cosmos, Bartram’s advocacy of nature and this criticism of anthropocentric pretensions to superiority clearly prefigure the “ecocentric egalitarianism” of much contemporary ecophilosophy; his criticism of the traditional hierarchical paradigm of the chain of being suggests a respect for the *dignity of all nature*, and powerfully expresses the romantic belief that divinity is diffused throughout nature. By uniting

natural history with literature, science with spirit, Bartram exemplified the "enlightened naturalist" whom Emerson and Thoreau—as well as Coleridge and Goethe—held in such high esteem. (289)

For those who lived in the wild and were themselves deemed wild or savage by encroaching Euro-Americans—those whom Roderick Nash suggests "[t]here are good reasons for regarding. . . as the first American environmentalists" (13)—neither the terms nor ideas of wilderness or the wild have been used very often to express their own relation as Native Americans to their physical environments.

It is difficult if not impossible to find linguistic or figurative references to *wilderness*, *the wild*, or *wildness* in many Native American languages and oral or written texts. As John Elder and Hertha D. Wong write in their introduction to *Family of Earth and Sky: Indigenous Tales of Nature from Around the World* (1994),

It has become almost a cliché to note the distinction between Western and non-Western notions of nature. Westerners, as the generalization is most often articulated, see nature as a force to be conquered and tamed, as a resource to be utilized, and see themselves as separate from, most often superior to, nature; non-Westerners, particularly indigenous people, view nature as a powerful force to be respected and honored, as a life-giving Mother to be cherished, and themselves as part of the intricate web of the natural world. Such a generalization overstates the case, since there are certainly respecters of nature in Western cultures and exploiters of nature in non-Western cultures. At the same time, the broad dichotomy does describe accurately many of the fundamental assumptions, as well as the dominant behavior, of these two sets of cultures. (7)

A brief passage from John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* illustrates this point and inscribes it in a larger methodological one: "Forest Eskimos, who live in five small villages on the Kobuk, [Alaska,] do not tend to think in landscape terms that are large. They see a river not as an entity but as a pageant of parts, and every bend and eddy has a name" (24). The very intimacy of the specific home locality that this passage reveals is found in many Native American cultures, and the particularity of such dwelling in the natural world and the imaginative nomenclature and story-telling associated with it argue against facilely generalizing or essentializing indigenous practices. Perhaps the valid distinction I'm groping for here is best made by an elder of "the Western Apache community at Cibecue," Arizona. In "Stalking with Stories': Names, Places, and Moral Narratives Among the Western Apache," Keith H. Basso quotes Nick Thompson: "White men need paper maps,' he observes. 'We have maps in our minds'" (100). Put somewhat differently, but to similar effect I think, are Simon Ortiz' lines from his poem, "A Designated National Park": "This morning, / I have to buy a permit to get back home" (235).

In "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," Leslie Marmon Silko explains that

Pueblo potters [distinct from the Western Apache yet within their Uto-Aztecan language family], the creators of petroglyphs and oral narratives, never conceived of

removing themselves from the earth and sky. So long as the human consciousness remains *within* the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky, the term *landscape*, as it has entered the English language, is misleading. "A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view" does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow *outside* or *separate from* the territory he or she surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on. (84)

The Pueblo identity of landscape and mindscape manifests itself in a cosmogony that familiarizes (in the sense of making all Creation part of one's family) both the animate and inanimate phenomena in the physical environment:

The ancient Pueblo people called the earth the Mother Creator of all things in this world. Her sister, the Corn Mother, occasionally merges with her because all succulent green life rises out of the depths of the earth. . . . Rocks and clay are part of the Mother. . . . A rock has being or spirit, although we may not understand it. . . . Human identity is linked with all the elements of Creation through the clan: you might belong to the Sun Clan or the Lizard Clan or the Corn Clan or the Clay Clan. (84-85)

Pueblo culture through its stories created a spiritual home of the natural topography, and those places in turn always oriented or located its people. In "The Ethnic Implications of Stories, Spirits, and the Land in Native American Pueblo and Aztlán Writing" (*Melus* 20.2, summer 1995), I attempt to distill Silko's comments on the complex process of imagination and cultural identity or the formation of Pueblo ethnicity into "a double analogy of spirit and imagination to the land and storytelling:

while the spirit inspires imagination that creates a world of spirit, the land inspires stories that create an identity for the land" (71).

Most European and Euro-American observers, on the other hand, without the cultural and spiritual practices to integrate and *familiarize* them with the natural environment, associated such places with a wildness that was tinged both by a sense of loss and longing for their own suppressed vitality (the Wild Man) and the aesthetic experience of and separateness from that which exceeds the grasp of imagination (the sublime). When confronted with the wild, the impulse arose to dominate it literally and rhetorically.

As the revolutionary era was marked by non-fictional accounts of nature that emphasized its order and its figurative uses for a new society,⁵⁴ the last quarter of the twentieth century has been marked by a resurgence of nature writing as part of an effort to rethink and rhetorically affect political change through a growing environmental movement. That movement, to one extent or another, has tended to divide preservationists intent on efficient management of the eco-machine from deep ecologists

⁵⁴ As Christopher Looby suggests in "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram," the "stiff and immutable world that men like Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram constructed was their rhetorical invention: it was a figure for social stability and . . . for an intensely desired end to the flux of revolutionary social-historical change. . . . [They] felt deeply the lack of social unanimity in late eighteenth-century America, and they imagined that in nature—pre-arranged nature—they saw a powerful totality that might be of use in constructing the collective American subject" (257-258).

determined to de-center human agency in nature and recover the mystery that inheres in the wild. It has also focused renewed attention on non-Western, particularly Native American attitudes, toward the land.

Nearly two hundred years separate Bartram's *Travels* (1791) and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986), and their sub-titles tell of vastly different expectations, both of the authors and their respective audiences. Bartram's extended sub-title suggests the particularity with which he approaches his subjects, the specificity and objectivity of the cartographic, ethnographic, and natural history descriptions his text promises: *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws. Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of those Regions; together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians*. Lopez's title, on the other hand, seems to emphasize the subjectivity of his text: *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. And indeed, while hardly eschewing scientific knowledge, of which *Arctic Dreams* is full, Lopez does set out to explore not only the ἀρεῖαν of a wild landscape but the writer's engagement with that landscape, the way it changes him and he it. We read *Arctic Dreams* not only for what it sees and says about a region but for what we can learn about the process of seeing a geographical place for the first time. *Arctic Dreams* tries to look at the

process of *seeing* as it sees; it is about seeing *seeing* seeing.

There are interesting similarities to note in Bartram and Lopez. Both spend almost five years—in a self-directed, somewhat open-ended wandering process—traveling and living in the regions about which they write. Both are profoundly humble—Bartram in a spiritual sense, Lopez intellectually—and exhibit deep empathy with the land, its animals, and its aboriginal inhabitants. Both write, at a time when natural history is raising critical questions about the nature and order of society, from the margins of their scientific establishments for scientific and general audiences, and produce texts that are popular and acclaimed.⁵⁵

To compare these parallels of personality and historical moment only serves to highlight Lopez's differences with his predecessor, and what those differences say about the two eras. As the difference in the titles suggests, Bartram foregrounds natural history description—the naming, knowing, surveying—and submerges questions of how he knows; Lopez literally backgrounds (in *Appendix II*) the “Scientific Names of Animals and Plants” but gives equal weight both to what he knows and how he knows it. Bartram strives for a definitiveness, a certainty, that we

⁵⁵ For the high regard with which Lopez is held by scientists, see his public dialogue with Harvard scientist Edward O. Wilson in *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (1989), edited by Edward Lueders. *Arctic Dreams* received the American Book Award, and Lopez is a recipient of an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts, among other honors.

may now consider naïve but which his pre-Darwinian audience expected and consented to. Lopez, in a post-Darwinian universe, strives in his accounts of both perception and representation to factor in the uncertainty and perspectivalism of a modern, even non-linear postmodern world. For Bartram there are the implicit metaphors of the great chain of being; for Lopez the explicit metaphors of quantum physics. Without reducing either of these authors, it can be said that Bartram writes to dispel the mystery of the ἀνείρων, Lopez to reinscribe and honor it.

It may be Lopez's multiple, often paradoxical purposes that have given some readers doubt about the basic unity of *Arctic Dreams*. W. Ross Winterowd, while granting that it is informative, even "encyclopedic" (130), nevertheless concludes that *Arctic Dreams* is a text in which "logos dominates *ethos*" (130) . . . [and] is too disunified to sustain itself" (133). Just as Bartram's *Travels* can be read as a patchwork of rhetorics, *Arctic Dreams* can be read as a series of provisional assessments of landscape: from the historians', contemporary scientists', explorers', art critics', philosophers', travel writers', Eskimos', animals', even the land's points of view. Lopez is as intent on providing us in "Ice and Light" with detailed scientific explanations of various atmospheric events like the aurora borealis (232-235) or optical phenomena such as the "arctic mirages, the fata morgana" (237) as he is in "The Country of the Mind" with persuading us that, quoting a "Lakota woman named Elaine Jahner,"

“at the heart of the religion of hunting peoples is the notion that a spiritual landscape exists within the physical landscape” (273). In other words, for Lopez, science is one way of seeing but not *the* way of seeing:

In the face of a rational, scientific approach to the land, which is more widely sanctioned, esoteric insights and speculations are frequently overshadowed, and what is lost is profound. The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent, it is transcendent in its meaning, and it has the power to elevate a consideration of human life. (274)

The method in *Arctic Dreams* is to present multiple ways of encountering the ἀνεῖπων and through their accretion to realize that the land, mysteriously, exceeds them all. Early on, Lopez recounts the cautionary experience of the Dutch explorer Willem Barents who, “icebound and shipwrecked” in 1597 “was forced to overwinter with his crew in wretched circumstances at the northern tip of Novaya Zemlya. They awaited the return of the sun in a state of deep anxiety,” and when it came twelve days sooner than they expected, they attributed it to “divine intervention.” “What they saw that January day,” Lopez concludes,

was not the sun but only a solar mirage—the sun was still 5° below the horizon, its rays bent toward them by a refractive condition in the atmosphere. Such images, now called Novaya Zemlya images, are common in the Arctic. They serve as a caution against precise description and expectation, a reminder that the universe is oddly hinged. (24)

The Arctic, Lopez’s treatment of it makes clear, is an exemplary environment in which to investigate, literally and rhetorically, just how “oddly hinged” the universe is—something quantum physics tells us but we

persist in denying. By noting how space and time appear to warp at the extremities of the pole, Lopez suggests just how arbitrary many of our assumptions about them are in the more accustomed temperate zones: "It is precisely because the regimes of light and time in the Arctic are so different that this landscape is able to expose in startling ways the complacency of our thoughts about land in general" (12).

As Lopez notes in his "Preface," *Arctic Dreams* sets out to inquire: how do "people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? How does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it? How does desire itself, the desire to comprehend, shape knowledge?" (xxvii). In the "Prologue," Lopez further refines those questions into "three themes: the influence of the arctic landscape on the human imagination. How a desire to put a landscape to use shapes our evaluation of it. And, confronted by an unknown landscape, what happens to our sense of wealth" (13). These themes order the sequence of chapters in *Arctic Dreams* so that, perhaps unexpectedly, we are not given the history of the region's exploration until the last two chapters, "The Intent of Monks" (Chapter 8) and "A Northern Passage" (Chapter 9). After an initial orientation in Chapter 1, "Arktikós," Lopez gives us three chapters each of which focuses on a particular animal closely associated with the Arctic: the muskox in Chapter 2 ("Banks Island: *Ovibos moschatus*"); the polar bear in Chapter 3 ("Tôrnârssuk: *Ursus maritimus*"); and the narwhal in

Chapter 4 ("Lancaster Sound: *Monodon monoceros*").

Chapter 5, "Migration: The Corridors of Breath," is also about animals, their patterns of movement into and within the area. Chapter 6, "Ice and Light," as the title suggests, is about icebergs; and Chapter 7, "The Country of the Mind," is about a slim barrier island off the Brooks Range in Alaska, Pingok Island. Lopez frames each of these chapters with a personal narrative, a story, beginning with where he is and what he is doing, often ending with the way the chapter's narrative affects his imagination of and feeling for the landscape. Since many of the chapters contain detailed scientific information about their subjects as well as the evocation of traditional, aboriginal—sometimes mythological—ways of knowing, the effect broadly speaking is to embed recent Western knowledge within a personal context informed by an understanding of the remnants of paleolithic hunting cultures.

The Arctic, Lopez intermittently reminds us, although a frozen ocean, paradoxically,

**has the classic lines of a desert landscape: spare, balanced, extended, and quiet. [xxiii].
No more moisture falls on the arctic tundra in a year than falls on the Mojave Desert. [28] The Arctic receives, strangely, the same amount of sunshine in a year as the tropics, but it comes all at once, and at a low angle of incidence—without critical vigor. [29]
The region turns in on itself like any nation. It is organized like Australia, around an inland desert sea, with most of its people living on the coastal periphery. It is not vast like the Pacific. It is vast like the steppes of Asia. It has the heft,**

say, of China, but with the population of Seattle. (284)

Seen in this light and alongside other classics of desert nature writing such as Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* or Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, we can assess Lopez's effort as part of the necessary attempt by writers of these landscapes to break their own and their reader's perceptual habits in order to really see and respond to the land. As Wallace Stegner suggests in *Where the Bluebird Sings. . . to the Lemonade Springs* (1992), writers of the west and its deserts must learn to like new forms, colors, light, and scale and to describe them in new ways to evoke an appreciation in their audience.

In addition to describing it as a desert, Lopez also points out in "Arktikós" that the region is "the youngest ecosystem on earth," about the age of recorded human history, "only 10,000 years old, the time since the retreat of the Wisconsin ice": "Arctic ecosystems and civilized man belong, therefore, to the same, short epoch, the Holocene" (37-38). Since, geologically speaking, this period is considered merely an interregnum between ice ages, Lopez underscores the fragility of both the Arctic and human experiments, the "freshness and urgency" (37) of both.

As a region, the Arctic refracts time in its unique prism, both distorting the customary diurnal cycle of morning, afternoon, evening, night and revealing evidence of long, evolutionary patterns. Because of

the very cold, dry atmosphere and historically sparse populations, it is not unusual to come upon sites showing remnants of Dorset (c. 800 BC - AD 1400) or Thule (AD 900 - 1100) habitations, thus bringing evolution—biological and cultural—into the foreground. Since humankind, like the animals without whom we cannot know the land, has also evolved, Lopez looks at the present human condition as a result of that evolution:

Human beings dwell in the same biological systems that contain the other creatures but, to put the thought bluntly, they are not governed by the same laws of evolution. With the development of various technologies—hunting weapons, protective clothing, and fire-making tools; and then agriculture and herding—mankind has not only been able to take over the specific niches of other animals but has been able to move into regions that were formerly unavailable to him. . . . [T]he same technological advances and the enormous increase in his food base have largely exempted man from the effect of natural controls on the size of his population. Outside of some virulent disease, another ice age, or his own weapons technology, the only thing that promises to stem the continued increase in his population and the expansion of his food base (which now includes oil, exotic minerals, fossil ground water, huge tracts of forest, and so on, and entails the continuing, concomitant loss of species) is human wisdom. (38)

Among humankind's key tools, and one of the likely sources for the explosive increase in hominid cranial capacity two million years ago is "language processing" (Lueders 31).⁵⁶ For Lopez, the "continuous work

⁵⁶ In his dialogue with Lopez, E.O. Wilson replied to a question from the audience about increased brain capacity in hominid evolution "that some sort of threshold was reached in which a reciprocity between cultural evolution and genetic evolution ignited so that culture broke free to act like rapid-fire mutations. New choices of behavior then put intense pressures on the
(continued...)

of the imagination. . . to bring what is actual together with what is dreamed is an expression of human evolution" (414). At this point in time, nature writing, as the conscious manipulation of symbolic language towards that end, is a significant ecological effort to advance "human wisdom."

Wisdom, it has been said, is not so much in what we know as in what we can let go of knowing. In his way, Lopez is a great nay-sayer, a hold-out for that something that is beyond what we think we know, even if that something is the mystery. Beginning with another long meditation on Arctic time, Lopez concludes with a critique that is as applicable to Bartram's natural history as to the contemporary scientists he probably has in mind:

Long, unpunctuated hours pass for all creatures in the Arctic. No wild frenzy of feeding distinguishes the short summer. But for the sudden movements of charging wolves and bolting caribou, the gambols of muskox calves, the scamper of an arctic fox, the swoop of a jaeger, the Arctic is a long, unbroken bow of time. Twilight lingers. There are no summer thunder-storms with bolts of lightening. The ice floes, the caribou, the muskoxen, all drift. To lie on your

⁵⁶(...continued)

underlying genes for capacitation of that potential, and that in turn caused the culture to leapfrog still farther ahead, and so on. The two then became a kind of oscillating motor that drove the cerebral cortex to a more than threefold increase in capacity. A large part of the change, when you think about it, was in straight long-term memory capacity. The mind consists substantially of processing of immense stores of memory, mostly symbolic but some episodic as well, through the channel of short-term memory whenever we do conscious thinking. We have this immense store up here, combined with changes in the parietal region of the brain, that has to do strictly with language processing. That in a nutshell is the key to human evolution, in my opinion" (31).

back somewhere on the light-drowned tundra of an Ellesmere Island valley is to feel that the ice ages might have ended but a few days ago. Without the holler of contemporary life, that constant disturbance, it is possible to feel the slope of time, how very far from Mesopotamia we have come. We move at such a fast clip now. We draw up geological charts at a snap, showing the possibilities for oil in Tertiary rocks in the Sverdrup Basin beneath Ellesmere's tundra. We delineate the life history of the ground squirrel. We list the butterflies: the sulphurs, the arctics, a copper, a blue, the lesser fritillaries. At a snap. We enumerate the plants. We name everything. Then we fold the charts and the catalogs, as if, except for a stray fact or two, we were done with a competent description. But the land is not a painting; the image cannot be completed this way. (172)

If "the land is not a painting," what in Lopez's view is it? If "the image cannot be completed this way," how can it be represented? One answer, no doubt, is *Arctic Dreams* itself, a text that attempts one kind of "competent description." But beyond that, Lopez continually suggests other clues to how he would represent the land. If Bartram creates patchworks of various rhetorics—Quaker benignity, sublimity, natural history—Lopez recurs most often to the ecotones of quantum physics and traditional hunters. By holding each of those figures of rhetoric in mind at once, he strives to satisfy the needs science and mythology have traditionally addressed. He comes close to making this figuration explicit near the end of *Arctic Dreams*, when he points out that while we may think of the largely uninhabited regions of the world—the north and south poles and the great deserts—

as primitive, . . . there are in fact no primitive or even

primeval landscapes. Neither are there permanent landscapes. And nowhere is the land empty or under-developed. It cannot be improved upon with technological assistance. The land, an animal that contains all other animals, is vigorous and alive. The challenge to us when we address the land, is to join with cosmologists in their ideas of continuous creation, and with physicists with their ideas of spatial and temporal paradox, to see the subtle grace and mutability of the different landscapes. (411-412)

If the land, then, is like an animal, how would Lopez have us think of animals? In the following lengthy passage from "Migration," he suggests the startling comparison of animal movements in a landscape to the complex, ultimately unchartable movements of sub-atomic particles:

We have long regarded animals as a kind of machinery, and the landscapes they move through as backdrops, as paintings. In recent years this antiquated view has begun to change. Animals are understood as mysterious, within the context of sophisticated Western learning that takes into account such things as bio-chemistry and genetics. They are changeable, not fixed, entities, predictable in their behavior only to a certain extent. The world of variables they are alert to is astonishingly complex, and their responses are sometimes highly sophisticated. The closer biologists look, the more the individual animal, like the individual human being, seems a reflection of that organization of energy that quantum mechanics predicts for the particles that compose an atom.

The animal's environment, the background against which we see it, can be rendered something like the animal itself—partly unchartable. And to try to understand the animal apart from its background, except as an imaginative exercise, is to risk the collapse of both. To be what they are they require each other.

Spatial perception and the nature of movement, the shape and direction something takes in time, are topics that have been cogently addressed by people like Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Paul Dirac, and David Bohm, all writing about subatomic phenomena. I believe

that similar thoughts, potentially as beautiful in their complexity, arise with a consideration of how animals move in their landscapes—the path of a raven directly up a valley, the meander of grazing caribou, the winter movements of a single bear over the sea ice. We hardly know what these movements are in response to; we choose the dimensions of space and the durations of time we think appropriate to describe them, but we have no assurance that these are relevant.

To watch a gyrfalcon and a snowy owl pass each other in the same sky is to wonder how the life of the one affects the other. To sit on a hillside and watch the slow intermingling of two herds of muskoxen feeding in a sedge meadow and to try to discern the logic of it is to grapple with uncertainty. To watch a flock of snow geese roll off a headwind together is to wonder where one animal begins and another ends. Animals confound us not because they are deceptively simple but because they are finally inseparable from the complexities of life. It is precisely these subtleties of fact and conception that comprise particle physics, which passes for the natural philosophy of our age. Animals move more slowly than beta particles, and through a space bewildering larger than that encompassed by a cloud of electrons, but they urge us, if we allow them, toward a consideration of the same questions about the fundamental nature of life, about the relationships that bind forms of energy into recognizable patterns. (177-178)

The mystery which Lopez insistently reprises in *Arctic Dreams* is not the obfuscation or denial of religious faith but a recognition of the limits of present knowledge, like the acknowledgment that light can be described as both a particle and a wave. That uncertainty, rightfully understood, opens a space for renewed wonder and respect for the natural world. The second point this passage makes clear is that an understanding of the land—prerequisite to realizing wisdom toward it—requires the time to watch and the patience to wait as nature's

complexity reveals itself in our awareness. Lopez's paradigm for such patient observation is the traditional hunter.

In "Tórnárssuk" Lopez mentions the loss of what is referred to as "a native eye' among civilized cultures." In studying the polar bear, Lopez had learned from the Eskimos that it "not only takes a long time of watching the animal before you can say what it is doing; it takes a long time to learn how to watch" (96). "Hunting," Lopez later relates in "Migration," "simply mean[s] being out on the land—[it] is a state of mind. All of one's faculties are brought to bear in an effort to become fully incorporated into the landscape" (199). Contrary to some non-hunter's revulsion at the thought of the hunt, Lopez emphasizes that for aboriginal people, the "focus of a hunter . . . was not killing animals but attending to the myriad relationships he understood bound him into the world he occupied with them." The practice of hunting is a kind of meditation, a point Gary Snyder has also made. To hunt,

means to release yourself from rational images of what something "means" and to be concerned only that it "is." . . . The mind we know in dreaming, a nonrational, non-linear comprehension of events in which slips in time and space are normal, is, I believe, the conscious working mind of an aboriginal hunter. It is a frame of mind that redefines patience, endurance, and expectation. (200).

Lopez abjures the kind of romanticization of native people which has been common in American history, together with their denigration. What the Eskimo knows about arctic animals is neither infallible nor

comprehensive. "No one knew that much. No one would say they knew that much. They [the Eskimo] faced nature with fear, with *ilira* (nervous awe) and *kappia* (apprehension). And with enthusiasm" (201). But what the traditional hunter knows, complements and often corrects what, for instance, a Western biologist would know even through years of study. And perhaps even more importantly, the respectful understanding of the complex interrelationships that comprise the natural world and each animal's "*Umwelt*, or self-world" (268 fn.) is a model of ecological thinking. In short, "it is wrong to think of hunting cultures like the Eskimo's as living in perfect harmony or balance with nature" (201), but it is right to emulate the "aspiration of aboriginal people throughout the world. . . to achieve a congruent relationship with the land, to fit well in it" (297).

Lopez looks to Native American cultures as a model in another respect too, for the central importance storytelling has in their societies. In an essay "Landscape and Narrative" in *Crossing Open Ground*, he ties the landscape and mindscape together in the well constructed, well told story, and suggests why it may have such healing potency:

A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of story—syntax, mood, figures of speech—in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual's interior. Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call "the land." (67-68)

Without claiming too much for *Arctic Dreams*, it is possible to see some of Lopez's narrative strategy in this account. All but the last two historical chapters are framed with a personal narrative in a way that brackets "natural history" with "spiritual autobiography," the "convergence" of which Scott Slovic notes in *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*. Slovic goes on to say how many

of the best American nature writers have long realized that the anecdotal imagination—the affinity for the specific, the experiential—plays an important role in our reception and expression of information about the world. . . . [W]riters from Thoreau to Lopez have discovered how the insertion of an occasional personal narrative, whether as a sustained structural trope or as a segue from one topic to another, can transform a dispassionate treatise into a lush, evocative story, with the experiencing, writing self becoming an inextricable part of the subject matter. (152)

Arctic Dreams effectively balances its rhetorics of natural history and personal history, just as it balances the metaphors of quantum physics with those of the traditional Eskimo hunter. In its insistence on the mystery that inheres in the ἀνείρων, it is a key text in the newly emerging field of ecopsychology. Among his final words in the "Epilogue" to *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez writes:

It is in the land, I once thought, that one searches out and eventually finds what is beautiful. And an edge of this deep and rarefied beauty is the acceptance of complex paradox and the forgiveness of others. It means you will not die alone. [410]
When I stood I thought I glimpsed my own desire. The landscape and the animals were like something found at the end of a dream. The edges of the real landscape became

one with the edges of something I had dreamed. But what I had dreamed was only a pattern, some beautiful pattern of light. The continuous work of the imagination, I thought, to bring what is actual together with what is dreamed is an expression of human evolution. (414)

The “work of the imagination” that is manifested through nature writing, since before Bartram to Lopez and beyond, will continue as long as there are those who seek the wildness of the ἀμείπων and to represent it in words.

Chapter 5

Wild Theory: Growth of a Symbol

Wildness leads to wild talk and wild knowledge, forcing us to realize that there is a natural semiosis, a deep and abiding structure to the world, that is beyond human intervention and artifice. (139)

—Max Oelschlaeger

"The Idea of Wilderness as a Deep Ecological Ethic"

The core of the mind is the ecological unconscious. For ecopsychology, repression of the ecological unconscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society; open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity. (320)

—Theodore Roezak

The Voice of the Earth

Seeing Western history as a recovery narrative, with feminism and environmentalism as reversals of the plot, brings up the question of the character of the plot itself. The declensionist and progressive plots that underlie the meta-narrative of recovery both gain power from their linearity. Linearity is not only conceptually easy to grasp; it is also a property of modernity itself. . . . Chaos theory and complexity theory suggest that only the unusual domain of mechanistic science can be described by linear differential equations. The usual—that is, the domain of everyday occurrences, such as the weather, turbulence, the shapes of coastlines, and the arrhythmic fibrillations of the human heart—cannot be so easily described. The world is more complex than we know or indeed can ever know. The comfortable predictability of the linear slips away into the uncertainty of the indeterminate—into discordant harmonies and disorderly order. (158)

—Carolyn Merchant

"Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative"

The 1972 iconographic image of the earth seen from space is one of the most powerful photographs of the latter twentieth century.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ This image was downloaded from a NASA Web site, from which the following was taken: "Probably the most requested picture of the Earth, this picture was taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts as they left earth orbit en route to (continued...)"

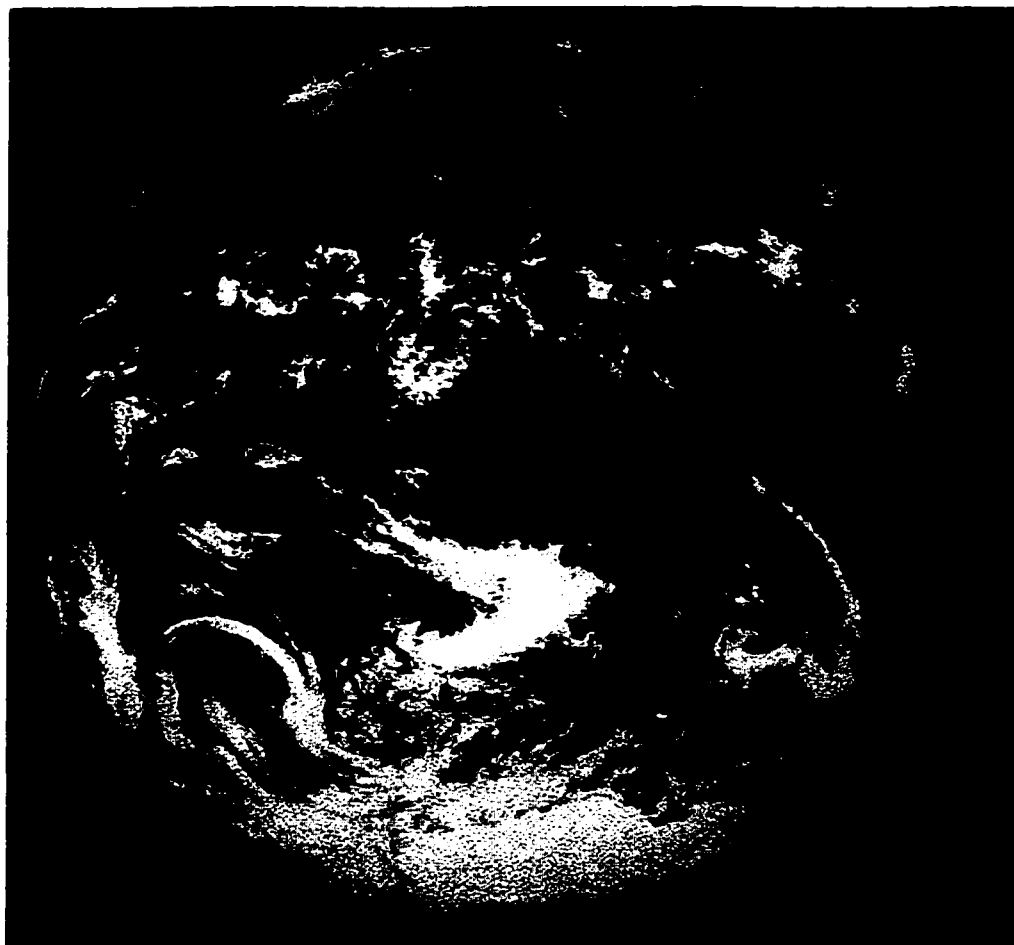


Fig. 3 NASA photograph of Earth, Apollo 17: 7 Dec. 1972.

It is sometimes invoked with the first Earth Day observance in 1970 to

⁵⁷(...continued)

the Moon. Taken on Dec. 7, 1972, it was the first time that the trajectory of an Apollo mission enabled a view of the south pole. . . . NASA generally does not assert copyright in its imagery, and therefore, permission to reproduce is not required. However, NASA photographs and other imagery may not be used in any manner such as to state or imply an endorsement by the Agency or any of its employees of any commercial product or process. NASA, or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, should be credited as the source of the imagery."

mark the beginning of the modern environmental movement, with due respect to earlier events like the 1964 Wilderness Act and forebears like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. As a symbol of the "whole earth" in its fragility and vulnerability, it has had a galvanizing effect on ecological awareness—an impact reinforced by the notion of the earth personified as Gaia, a systems theory which James Lovelock and Lynn Margulies also first proposed in 1972.⁵⁸ In his influential 1977 essay "Re-inhabitation" from *The Old Ways*, Gary Snyder summarized the impact of this image already rippling through the culture:

Stewart Brand [founder and editor of the *Whole Earth Catalogs* from 1968 to 1985] said that the photograph of the earth (taken from outer space by a satellite) that shows the whole blue orb with spirals and whorls of cloud, was a great landmark for human consciousness. We see that it has shape, and it has limits. We are back again, now, in the position of our Mesolithic forebears— working off the coasts of southern Britain, or the shores of Lake Chad or the swamps of southeast China, learning how to live by the sun and the green at that spot. We once more know that we live in a system that is enclosed in a certain way; that has its own kinds of limits, and that we are interdependent with it. (62-63)

While Snyder no doubt reads this unique symbolic image accurately and optimistically for its impact at the time, other readings have since emerged in the 1990s which are less sanguine in their interpretation. Take, for instance, Denis Cosgrove's critique "of much

⁵⁸ See Lovelock's "Gaia as Seen through the Atmosphere." *Atmospheric Environment* 6, 579-80.

contemporary wilderness ideology. . . [with] its continued attachment to the mentality of imperium." Cosgrove writes that since

the early 1970s one of the most popular icons of the wilderness movement has been a photograph of the earth taken during the 1972 *Apollo 17* lunar mission. In Green movement literature especially, this image has replaced conventional cartographic representations of the earth based upon the graticule of coordinating latitude and longitude—from the late fifteenth century the tool and image of European expansion and spatial control. *Apollo's* elemental picture of earth, water and atmosphere, the very image of Gaia, originated as a celebration of American imperial reach, produced en route to the act of placing the U.S. flag on the moon, in the time-honored motif of imperial claim-staking." (38)

The controversy entailed in these two readings suggests a sort of "coming of age" of wildness studies—the loose affiliation of ideologies, social critiques and political and environmental activism I call wild theory. The 1990s, especially, has seen interest in the wild proliferate to an extent unanticipated even twenty years ago, well beyond the confines of nature writing and ecocriticism. My purpose in concluding this study is to survey, document, and interrogate this virtual field and to pose some questions for its future.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The decade just ended has seen an unprecedented number of books and articles either on the wild or in which wildness is a key concept, as I have suggested at the beginning of Chapter 1 (10-11). At the risk of repeating myself, that list can be augmented even more by the following partial annal. Beginning with Gary Snyder's influential collection of essays in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), new titles can be added every year: Henry Golemba's *Thoreau's Wild Rhetoric* (1990), Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991) and Jeanne Addison Roberts' *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender* (continued...)

The shift in nature writing from wilderness to wild, begun by Thoreau in "Walking" and completed by Snyder in *The Practice of the Wild*, has focused considerable conceptual interest on the wild. The American nature writing essay since Bartram has always blended the sciences with the humanities, observation with rhapsody, natural history with philosophy. While most ecocritics trace the apotheosis of wildness to Thoreau, it has since the late nineteenth century also been entangled with attitudes towards wilderness in the conservation and preservation movements. Since the political and social activism of the 1960s, the

⁵⁰(...continued)

(1991), Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead's (eds.) *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day* (1992) and Will Wright's *Wild Knowledge* (1992), Donald Worster's *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (1993) and Theodore Roszak's *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (1993) and Greta Gaard's (ed.) *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993), David Clarke Burks' (ed.) *A Wildlands Anthology: Place of the Wild* (1994) and Patrick D. Murphy's *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1994) and Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (1994), David Rothenberg's (ed.) *Wild Ideas* (1995) and Michael E. Soule and Gary Lease's (eds.) *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (1995) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) and William Cronon's (ed.) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1995), Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's (eds.) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) and Jack Turner's *The Abstract Wild* (1996) and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996), Donald Worster's "The Wilderness of History" (*Wild Earth* 7.3, 1997), Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy's *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy (The Environmental and the Human Condition)* (1998) and Linda Hogan, Deena Metzger, Brenda Peterson's (eds.) *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals* (1998), Bill Willers' *Unmanaged Landscapes* (1999) and Freeman House's "Engaging the Wild: Community Building in the Context of Living Places" (*Orion Afield* 3.3, 1999).

environmental movement has emerged in tandem with the peace and social justice movements of the Left, until, as one critic recently put it, it has "become a generous generic term for a cacophony of bickering ideologies. . . . fall[en] into disarray" (Sauer 31). In addition to deep ecologists, there is now a catalogue of eco-specialists: ecophilosophers, ecofeminists, ecopsychologists, as well as sociologists, theologians, scientists, artists, and growing numbers of activist citizens who all take issue with the ecological and personal devastation they attribute to the fundamental premises of our culture, economic organization, science and the technology it facilitates—in short, the structure and practices of the modern industrial state. Support for national lobbying organizations like the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and the Audubon Society has grown to historic proportions. Whether soft or hard, deep or shallow, the range of responses to ecological matters often includes a renewed concern for wildness, even if those concerns are not always coherent or compatible.

Take, for instance, the controversy ignited with the publication of *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1995). That collection of essays edited and introduced by William Cronon, an environmental historian, was the production of a 1994 seminar (by a diverse group of academicians and writers) on "Reinventing Nature" at the University of California's Humanities Research Institute in Irvine. In his

"Introduction: In Search of Nature," Cronon summarized two key insights of recent scholarship:

- **the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about "the balance of nature" have typically acknowledged. (24)**
- **The work of literary scholars, anthropologists, cultural historians, and critical theorists over the past several decades has yielded abundant evidence that "nature" is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead, it is a profoundly human construction. This is not to say that the non-human world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations—far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. (25)**

In his essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," Cronon elaborates further on the dangers of an unexamined environmental rhetoric:

The removal of the Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness"—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is. . . . [T]here is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. Seen as the frontier, it is a savage world at the dawn of civilization, whose transformation represents the very beginning of the national historical epic. Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is a place of youth and

childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. Seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrows. No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us. (79-80)

Cronon's acknowledgment of the social construction of the idea of wilderness was not universally well-received. While *Uncommon Ground* was by no means Cronon's project alone (other notable contributors included Carolyn Merchant, Richard White, Donna Haraway, and Robert P. Harrison), he seems to have acted as a lightening rod temporarily illuminating a number of rifts in the late twentieth-century environmental community. The strong reaction by many to his essay illuminates the fault lines in contemporary thinking about wilderness and the wild by revealing an overlay of intersecting oppositions. Many wilderness advocates believe Cronon and the wide publicity his essay received in the mainstream press gives tacit support to the mostly conservative Wise Use Movement, which promotes land management and resource extraction policies favoring private, often corporate capital. On the activist level, therefore, Cronon highlights the struggle between preservationists who advocate planet or ecological management and those who advocate "leaving it alone"—who believe we neither know enough (now, or possibly ever) nor are wise enough to manage something as complicated as an

ecosystem or a planet.

Many of the wilderness advocates also objected to what they perceived as Cronon's cultural studies/social justice theoretical bent. Gary Snyder, for one, led the critical charge against Cronon in the winter 1996/1997 *Wild Earth* 6.4, a journal published by Dave Foreman—the founder of Earth First! Under the cover title, "Opposing Wilderness Deconstruction," Snyder wrote a response to Cronon in an essay, "Nature as Seen from Kitkitdizze Is No 'Social Construction.'" That same issue also contained articles by the deep ecologist George Sessions ("Reinventing Nature? The End of Wilderness?"), the emeritus professor of biology Bill Willers ("The Trouble with Cronon") and a number of others. While each of these writers had his own point of view, most of them agreed that Cronon was aiding and abetting the "enemies" of environmentalism—developers and resource extractors who would welcome the idea that the "nature" protected through federal legislation was an arbitrary, human "invention."

A later issue of *Wild Earth* 7.3 (fall 1997) contained another critique by a fellow environmental historian, Donald Worster, entitled "The Wilderness of History." This essay called "for a more mutually respectful and probing debate than we have had so far" (10). While acknowledging that the "wilderness movement needs more self-scrutiny, needs a larger commitment to social justice—and, above all, needs the patience to read

its critics more carefully" (10), Worster nevertheless took issue with some of Cronon's key arguments, which he labeled "Errors." "Error #1: North America (we are told) was never a 'wilderness'—not any part of it. . . . Error #2: The wilderness is nothing real but is only a cultural construct dreamed up by rich white romantics. . . . Error #3: The preservation of wilderness has been a distraction from addressing other, more important environmental problems" (10-12). Worster's critique avoids the confusion of many others by not conflating wilderness and wildness, and not dismissing out of hand the historical roots of the rhetoric of the wilderness movement in a peculiarly American exceptionalist mythology of paradise regained, lost, and now through atonement to be regained again. (For the important role of this nostalgic mythology, see a recent essay by Worster, "The Nature We Have Lost," in *Unmanaged Landscapes*.)

The wilderness has been a symbol of freedom for many people, and it is a primordial as well as cultural sense of freedom that they have sought. Freedom, it must be granted, can become another word for irresponsibility. Yet almost always the preservation of wilderness freedom in the United States has been interwoven with a counterbalancing principle of moral restraint. In fact, this linkage of freedom and restraint may be the most important feature of the wilderness movement. Those 100 million acres [now under official wilderness protection] exist not only as a place where evolution can continue on its own terms, where we humans can take refuge from our technological creations, but also as a place where we can learn the virtue of restraint: this far we drive, plow, mine, cut, and no farther. . . . A place of restraint as well as a place of freedom for all living things, the wilderness has promoted, I believe, a broader ethic of environmental responsibility all across this nation. Far from

being an indefensible obsession, wilderness preservation has been one of our most noble achievements as a people. (12-13)

At the core of some of the controversy over Cronon's position and the "disarray" of the environmental movement, I believe, is the tendency to not carefully distinguish wilderness from the wild—the separate but related necessity and logic of both. In his recent collection of essays, Jack Turner excoriates what he calls "the abstract wild" [in a book of that title]—wildness objectified and filtered through concepts, theories, institutions, and technology" and argues for the unmanaged landscape, for a "preservation ethic. . . [of] leaving things alone" (121). He takes on both the conservation biologists who dominate contemporary ecological science and deep ecologists who he accuses of incoherence.

Ecological management is Foucault's normalization and disciplinary control projected from social institutions onto ecosystems. . . . The autonomy of natural systems is the skeleton in the closet of our conservation ethic, and although it is recognized, no one is dealing honestly with the issue. . . . The radical environmentalist's obsession with roads and dams betrays a crude, industrial idea of destroying nature and blinds us to less visible modern control technologies that imply even more potent modes of destruction. But instead of a general critique of control we have deep ecologists like George Sessions and Arne Naess supporting, in principle or in practice, genetic engineering. Somehow the key issue is increasingly veiled by lesser issues. We need big wilderness, big natural habitat, not more technological information about big wilderness. . . . Let whatever habitat we can preserve go back to its own self-order as much as possible. Let wilderness again become a blank on our maps. Why don't the radical environmental organizations push for that? I suspect a large part of the

answer is this: there is no money in it, and like all nonprofits, they need a lot of money just to survive, much less achieve a goal. (118-120)

As acute and comprehensive a critic as Turner is, however, even he occasionally appears to slide down the rhetorical slope of wildness and to fall into the wilderness mode—the belief that wildness is *best* epitomized in large, predatory mammals and expansive, unmanaged spaces. Bill Willers makes a similar argument in his Introduction to a collection of essays he recently edited, entitled *Unmanaged Landscapes: Voices for Untamed Nature* (1999):

Unmanaged landscapes are the focus of the struggle to protect and restore wildness—Nature's autonomy—and to allow for its return on grand scale. . . . When a living system becomes fragmented or manipulated, its internal pattern of relationships is destroyed. When managed for some human-centered purpose, autonomy is lost. Restoring wilderness conditions on landscapes of all sizes can allow for self-regulation in a state of ancestral wholeness. . . . Exactly what constitutes "management" continues to be a subject of debate among wilderness advocates. Where wilderness is to be restored, some insist on a sudden and complete hands-off policy. . . . But intervention geared toward the return to a biologically diverse ancestral condition of self-governance—the essence of wildness—is the opposite, both philosophically and in practice, of the resource-oriented management one sees, for example, in the culturing of favored game animals, such as deer, or of commercially-valuable trees, such as aspen. (1-2)

There are good reasons for setting aside large, unmanaged wilderness areas and Turner and Willers each make cogent arguments for doing so. While the vastness of autonomous land is undoubtedly necessary to

preserve wildness on certain scale, it seems to me that these writers claim too much when they make wildness *depend* exclusively or essentially on that scale.

Turner's claim is especially confusing when his sixth chapter of *The Abstract Wild* is precisely about mistaking wilderness for wildness: "we are confused about what Thoreau meant by wildness, we aren't sure what we mean by wildness, and we aren't clear how or what wildness preserves" (80).

So in the broadest sense we can say that Thoreau's "In Wildness is the preservation of the World" is about the relation of free, self-willed, and self-determinate "things" with the harmonious order of the cosmos. Thoreau claims that the first preserves the second. The problem is this: it is not clear to any of us, I think, how the wildest acts of nature—earthquakes, wildfires, the plagues, people being killed and eaten by mountain lions and grizzly bears, our lust, the open sea in storm—preserve a harmonious cosmic order. . . . Absolute freedom. Absolute wildness. Human beings as inhabitants of that absolute freedom and wildness. This is not the usual environmental rhetoric. . . . Unfortunately, without sufficient space and time the experience of wildness in the wilderness is diminished or simply doesn't exist. (82-84)

While there are good arguments against the "pervasive Disneyesque and museumlike quality of wilderness areas, national parks, and wildlife preserves" (110) he describes, Turner adds rather than detracts from the confusion when he invokes Thoreau and wildness in supporting large, unmanaged lands: "Wilderness tourism is not a free lunch. Its worst consequence is that it conceals what should be its

primary use: the wild as a project of the self" (86). That last phrase, "the wild as a project of the self," may be closest to Thoreau's meaning, but we should keep in mind that Thoreau never connected this project to wilderness areas *per se*. To the contrary, at a time when the second wave of the Hudson River School painters Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran were heading to the expansive vistas of the west and even South America for their sublime, constructed representations of the wild (see Church's *Heart of the Andes*, and Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* to name but two), Thoreau spent the last years of his life exploring the domestic wild around his native Concord. In his eulogy, Emerson reminded his audience of a characteristic of Thoreau's too often overlooked by many of our contemporaries:

I think his fancy for referring everything to the meridian of Concord did not grow out of any ignorance or depreciation of other longitudes or latitudes, but was rather a playful expression of his conviction of the indifference of all places, and that the best place for each is where he stands. He expressed it once in this wise: – "I think nothing is to be hoped from you, if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you to eat than any other in this world, or in any world." ("Thoreau" 361-362)

To many well-meaning wilderness advocates, the wild has come to be associated rigidly with unmanaged lands, either unpopulated or impinged at worst by low technology. For instance, Rick Bass in an OP-ED piece for the *New York Times* ("Roaring Through the Wilderness" 7 Aug. 1999) argues against the proposed incursion of ORVs (off road

vehicles) on widened foot and horse trails on Forest Service lands. While taking a laudatory position, Bass once again appears to conflate wilderness and the wild and thus to muddle his argument somewhat:

Even as the Forest Service reforms itself under Mike Dombeck, perhaps its most environmentally minded chief ever, the ORV industry and its coalitions are pressuring Congress to create "back-country recreation areas," a kind of "wilderness lite" that would allow motorized vehicles into the last roadless corners of unprotected wild areas, into forests where they are not allowed. Americans may no longer be able to tell the difference between the real wild and the near wild." (A13)

Attempting to argue in terms of wildness for or against a land use based on one kind of recreational experience or the other (hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, or OVR) is problematic. There are excellent reasons for lobbying against the OVR in certain areas (noise and air pollution for one, increased human presence and the ancillary support structure they will bring with them for another). But it is shortsighted to make wildness (real, near, or otherwise) *depend* on large unmanaged land areas or the kinds of human presence permitted in those areas. There are arguments to be made both ethical and biological for large wilderness areas to be left alone—unmanaged and wild—to their own evolution. But if Thoreau insisted he could find the wild in his own backyard, as it were, we probably shouldn't insist now that real wildness is only to be found in certain kinds of wilderness areas, particularly those that support the recreational activities or life style that happens to appeal

to us.

Much confusion follows from confounding wilderness and wildness: we do not need to find a blank place on the map, even if like Chris McCandless it's only in our own ignorance, to plumb our own wild roots—at least not according to Thoreau. Neither need we participate in extreme sports like canyoneering or high altitude climbing. For some, those activities might be appropriate, but they have little to do with wildness in any profound sense. The genetic modification of seeds and crops, on the other hand, might have everything to do with wildness, with whether evolution occurs autonomously or under or human control. While issues and beliefs overlap, wilderness preservation—its logic and necessity—is not synonymous with Wildness and its "preservation of the World," even though preserving the unmanaged autonomy of the former will no doubt enhance the latter.

Interestingly, it seems Snyder has been advocating something like "local wildness" even long before his seminal *The Practice of the Wild*. In his 1977 essay "Reinhabitation" (*The Old Ways*), he spoke of the

[c]ountless local ecosystem habitation styles [that have historically] emerged. People developed specific ways to *be* in each of those niches: plant knowledge, boats, dogs, traps, nets, fishing—the smaller animals, and smaller tools. From steep jungle slopes of Southwest China to coral atolls to barren arctic deserts—a *spirit of what it was to be there* evolved, that spoke of a direct sense of relation to the "land"—which really means, the totality of the local bio-region system, from cirrus clouds to leaf-mould.

We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles, as sacramental—and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple: gratitude to it all, taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (i.e. dirt, water, flesh). (59; 63)

This thorough grounding in a sense of place almost inevitably entails a rediscovery of the wild, whether on the micro- or macroscopic levels or both. It is possible to trace a direct line from Snyder's "Reinhabitation" to a recent account by Freeman House in "Engaging the Wild: Community Building in the Context of Living Places" *Orion Afield* 3.3 (Summer 1999) in which he concludes:

Engaging the lives of wild salmon in a single watershed has created a situation wherein the peoples of our place have begun to experience themselves as functional parts of the place itself. Engaging the lives of any part of the wild in any self-defined natural area will lead to the same experience. We find ourselves reintroduced to our most ancient teachers of moderation of human behavior—the other species that occupy our particular terrain of interdependence. (14)

Echoing through House's conclusion are both the Thoreauvian "project of the self" Jack Turner noted and Donald Worster's assertion that wilderness preservation, rightly understood, is about both freedom and restraint.

While I began this chapter focusing on the advocative differences of the rhetorics of the wild, I would like to proceed with a somewhat more

systematic survey at this point. By way of mapping the ideological territory, I want to borrow a schematic diagram from Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998). Whether or not we accept Wilson's quixotic search for a grand "unity of knowledge" or "consilience world view" (268) as he puts it—and epistemological social constructionists with whom I identify do not—I believe it is useful to see how wildness may be relevant to, even at the center of, this type of positivist search and may help explain or account for the prevalence of such a search at the close of the twentieth century.

Acknowledging the first use of the term by "William Whewell, in his 1840 synthesis *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*," Wilson defines consilience as "literally a 'jumping together' of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation" (8). He offers the following example:

Think of two intersecting lines forming a cross, and picture the four quadrants thus created. Label one quadrant environmental policy, the next ethics, the next biology, and the final one social science. . . . We already intuitively think of these four domains as closely connected, so that rational inquiry in one informs reasoning in the other three. Yet undeniably each stands apart in the contemporary academic mind. . . . As we cross the circles inward toward the point at which the quadrants meet, we find ourselves in an increasingly unstable and disorienting region. The ring closest to the intersection, where most real-world problems exist, is the one in which fundamental analysis is most needed. Yet virtually no maps exist. Few concepts and words serve to guide us. Only in imagination can we travel clockwise from the recognition of environmental problems and the need for soundly based policy; to the selection of solutions based on moral reasoning; to the biological foundations of that reasoning; to a grasp of social

institutions as the products of biology, environment, and history. And thence back to environmental policy. (9-10)

When I first studied Wilson's chart, it occurred to me that one idea which runs through all four quadrants is wildness. Wilson suggests that the "greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities" (8)—something I have pointed out that nature writing has always attempted to do. Lately it seems, the wild is increasingly the focus of such possible linkages both for nature writers and specialists in other disciplines far afield.

I fully realize how grandiose a claim this is for wildness, and, trained as I have been in a postmodernist academy, how skeptically received are all master narratives and grand unifying theories.⁶⁰ To elevate wildness to the levels of religion, or science, economic materialism, or globalization—all of which have been proposed at one time or another as the driving forces of history—is an extreme claim. But to borrow from Thoreau's opening in "Walking," for the purposes of this study, "I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an

⁶⁰ Wilson himself, a Research Professor of Biology and Curator in Entomology of the Museum of Comparative Biology at Harvard, acknowledges that he is swimming against the tide of fashionable, academic thinking with his argument: "The main thrust of the consilience world view. . . is that culture and hence the unique qualities of the human species will make complete sense only when linked in causal explanation to the natural sciences. Biology in particular is the most proximate and hence relevant of the scientific disciplines. I know that such reductionism is not popular outside the natural sciences. To many scholars in the social sciences and humanities it is a vampire in the sacristy" (267). Richard Rorty is the most prominent social constructionist philosopher opposing this world view. Will Wright's *Wild Knowledge* makes, perhaps, the most explicit claims for the relevance of the wild to the social construction of knowledge.

emphatic one" (660).

In 1949, Aldo Leopold made an extreme statement, one that still reverberates through wilderness studies and the environmental movement. In his essay "The Land Ethic" from *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold claimed that the "extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequences may be described in ecological as well as philosophical terms. An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence" (238). Leopold goes on to trace the evolution of ethics from individuals to an expanded idea of the community:

The first ethics dealt with the relation between individuals; the Mosaic Decalogue is an example. Later accretions dealt with the relation between the individual and society. The Golden Rule tries to integrate the individual and society; democracy to integrate social organization to the individual. There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to the land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus' slave-girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. (238-239)

In an often-quoted formulation, Leopold suggests that we "quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. *A thing is right when it tends to preserve*

the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (emphasis mine 262).

Leopold's ethical analysis and his insistence that the next ethical step is not only an "ecological necessity" but an "evolutionary possibility" puts wildness at the core of human concerns. His environmentalism was given dramatic amplification in the 1950s and early 1960s with Rachel Carson's scientific studies of the ocean in *The Sea Around Us* (1951) and of widespread pesticide pollution in *Silent Spring* (1962). By coincidence, the same year *Silent Spring* was published, another influential study appeared, which has also had an important ideological impact on the environmental movement and in particular on the many different social critiques I include under the rubric wild theory. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas S. Kuhn wrote that science undergoes periodic alterations or revolutions in its world-view and practice, which he denotes a prevailing paradigm.⁶¹ Increasingly, so-called "new age" popularizers of recent scientific thought are claiming that such a revolution is underway and that the paradigm in ascendancy is

⁶¹ Kuhn uses "the term 'paradigm' . . . in [at least] two different senses. On the one hand [in the "sociological" sense], it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science. [175] . . . A paradigm is what the members of a scientific community share, and, conversely, a scientific community consists of men who share a paradigm" (176).

based on an ecological model. It is necessary, they claim, to live in and think about the world in new ways in order for humankind to survive. A culminating historical moment is coming upon us in which dissenting ideas that have been the oppositional subtext to the majority opinion in the West are finally being heard.

It is possible at this juncture both to disavow exaggerated millenarian claims and to acknowledge considerable evidence that a revolution in the scientific paradigm may be underway.⁶² Even Edward Wilson, who believes "the Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries got it mostly right the first time" (8)—hardly a "new age" popularizer—writes that

As the century closes, the focus of the natural sciences has begun to shift away from the search for new fundamental laws and towards new kinds of synthesis—"holism," if you prefer—in order to understand complex systems. That is the goal, variously, in studies of the origin of the universe, the history of climate, the functioning of cells, the assembly of ecosystems, and the physical basis of mind. The strategy that works best in these enterprises is the construction of coherent cause-and-effect explanations across levels of organization. . . . No compelling reason has ever been offered why the same strategy should not work to unite the natural sciences with the social sciences and humanities.

⁶² In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., Kuhn argues that "[N]ormal science repeatedly goes astray. And when it does—when, that is, the profession can no longer evade anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice—then begin the extraordinary investigations that lead the profession at last to a new set of commitments, a new basis for the practice of science. The extraordinary episodes in which that shift of professional commitments occurs are the ones known in this essay as scientific revolutions" (6).

The difference between the two domains is in the magnitude of the problem, not the principles needed for solution. The human condition is the most important frontier for the natural sciences. Conversely, the material world exposed by the natural sciences is the most important frontier of the social sciences and humanities. The consilience argument can be distilled as follows: The two frontiers are the same." (267)

To jump somewhat ahead of myself, the proliferation of interest in the wild as both a symbol and a theoretical constant, albeit at times ambiguously, may be at the center of that with which the new scientific paradigm and ecosophy— broadly defined as systematic ecological thinking—are struggling to come to terms.

Why this proliferation just as we enter the 21st century? Perhaps because, as Wilson suggests, we are approaching the third and final phase in the "history of human evolution" (275)—the "full volitional period of evolution" (276). Through the "engineering of the human genome" (274), for "the first time people are using scientific knowledge to gain conscious control of their heredity" (275). Wildness has become a nexus of concern over precisely these issues of knowledge and control.

While theoretical physics underwent a revolution in the early twentieth century with Einstein's theory of general relativity and the subsequent investigations of quantum mechanics, it has taken much longer for a correspondingly "radical change" to occur in our "vision of nature . . . toward the multiple, the temporal, and the complex" (xxvii), as Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers put it in *Order Out of Chaos* (1984).

Alfred North Whitehead pointed this out as early as 1925 in his *Lowell Lectures*, published as *Science and the Modern World*:

The progress of science has now reached a turning point. The stable foundations of physics have broken up: also for the first time physiology is asserting itself as an effective body of knowledge, as distinct from a scrap-heap. The old foundations of scientific thought are becoming unintelligible. Time, space, matter, material, ether, electricity, mechanism, organism, configuration, structure, pattern, function, all require reinterpretation. (16)

While new technology based on scientific advances in many fields has been developed apace since Whitehead spoke, the change in world view has lagged far behind. Only recently has it begun to catch up with the labilities implicitly and explicitly found in the new physics. As Prigogine with Grégoire Nicolis points out at the beginning of *Exploring Complexity* (1989):

Our physical world is no longer symbolized by the stable and periodic planetary motions that are at the heart of classical mechanics. It is a world of instabilities and fluctuations, which are ultimately responsible for the amazing variety and richness of the forms and structures we see in nature around us. (ix)

The "radical change" struggling to emerge cuts across many fields and thus to coalesce must reach a critical mass in many spheres of study. As Jack Turner suggests in "The Quality of Wildness: Preservation, Control, and Freedom," which is anthologized in *The Place of the Wild*:

[p]erhaps we need to imagine a new conservation ethic based on wildness. What we would come to mean by wildness could evolve from current interdisciplinary efforts

by feminists, mathematicians, philosophers, and physicists to understand control, prediction, dominance, and their opposites—autonomy, self-organization, self-ordering, and autopoiesis. It would provide a new understanding of wilderness in its original sense of self-willed land. And it would promote Thoreau's project of understanding the wild within us and within nature as being fundamentally the same because of its association, conceptually, with vitality and freedom. (178-179)

In *The Web of Life*, the "new age" physicist Fritjof Capra attempts just such a synthesis—weaving various strands of recent scientific research into the tapestry of the emerging ecological paradigm he advocates. His thesis is "that a theory of living systems consistent with the philosophical framework of deep ecology, including an appropriate mathematical language and implying a nonmechanistic, post-Cartesian understanding of life, is now emerging" (158). Capra "believe[s] that the key to a comprehensive theory of living systems lies in the synthesis of . . . the study of pattern (or form, order, quality) and the study of structure (or substance, matter, quantity)" (158). It is his view that human inquiry into nature from the time of the pre-Socratics has oscillated between these two poles:

The basic tension is one between the parts and the whole. The emphasis on the parts has been called mechanistic, reductionist, or atomistic; the emphasis on the whole holistic, organismic, or ecological. In twentieth-century science the holistic perspective has become known as "systemic" and the way of thinking it implies as "systems thinking." (17)

Capra sees the unfolding of Western thought in these terms, a

master narrative to be sure, but an arguable and sophisticated synthesis of the underlying philosophy of science nevertheless. From the early Pythagoreans' focus on patterns (or numbers) to Aristotle's understanding of "*entelechy*" as the "self-completion" or "self-realization of the essence [form] in the actual phenomena [matter]" (Capra 18), to the ascendancy of Cartesian mechanism with its exclusive emphasis on the part or substance in the seventeenth-century, the pendulum has swung between these poles:

The paradigm that is now receding has dominated our culture for several hundred years, during which it has shaped our modern Western society and has significantly influenced the rest of the world. This paradigm consists of a number of entrenched ideas and values, among them the view of the universe as a mechanical system composed of elementary building blocks, the view of the human body as a machine, the view of life in society as a competitive struggle for existence, the belief in unlimited material progress to be achieved through economic and technological growth, and—last, but not least—the belief that a society in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male is one that follows a basic law of nature. (6)

Beginning with British and continental Romanticism—Blake's diatribes against Newton's sleep come to mind—there has been an uninterrupted series of opposing voices to this dominant paradigm: the women's rights movement (usually dated from the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848); vitalism, Whitehead's process philosophy, organismic biology, Gestalt psychology, quantum physics, and the environmental movement with its roots in Thoreau's wildness (Capra 18-

35). Recent scholarship by ecopsychologists and ecofeminists has begun to theorize the connections between nature, mind, and social organization—to think imaginatively, in effect, around Wilson's four quadrants. Before turning to those inquiries, however, it is important to consider what Capra means scientifically by the emerging ecological paradigm and how the wild is a conceptual key in fields as disparate as the study of dissipative structures, the mathematics of complexity, cognitive science and deep ecology.

Systems thinking is a key to the new paradigm, according to Capra, because of two salient characteristics: its holistic emphasis validates properties that only "arise from the 'organizing relations' of the parts" and which are therefore "destroyed when a system is dissected into isolated elements" (36); and the shift from "mechanistic. . . to systems thinking" is fundamentally a shift to "contextual" or "environmental thinking" (37). To consider the historical details leading to Capra's synthesis would take this study far afield, but his conclusion comes down to a simple assertion: the "pattern of life . . . is a network pattern capable of self-organization" (83)—where "self-organization is the spontaneous emergence of new structures and new forms of behavior in open systems far from equilibrium, characterized by internal feedback loops and described mathematically by nonlinear equations" (85).

From the different branches of systems thinking, a tantalizing

possible identification of an origin of wildness emerges. To illustrate it, it is necessary to consider further Ilya Prigogine's study of what are known as "dissipative structures." Prigogine is generally credited with introducing time and thus irreversibility into the theory of dynamic systems. In contrast to the nineteenth-century formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics which held that "entropy is . . . merely a downward slide to disorganization" (Toffler, *Order Out of Chaos* xxi), Prigogine and Stengers discovered that "dissipative structures require far-from-equilibrium conditions" (189) and can lead to ever higher levels of order and self-organization. As such, Capra sees such structures as models of various dynamic systems:

[T]he behavior of a dissipative structure far from equilibrium no longer follows any universal law but is unique to the system. Near equilibrium we find repetitive phenomena and universal laws. As we move away from equilibrium, we move from the universal to the unique, toward richness and variety. This, of course, is a well-known characteristic of life. [182]

The conceptual shift implied in Prigogine's theory involves several closely interrelated ideas. The description of *dissipative structures* that exist *far from equilibrium* requires a *nonlinear* mathematical formalism, capable of modeling multiple interlinked feedback loops. In living organisms these are catalytic loops (that is, *nonlinear, irreversible* chemical processes), which lead to *instabilities* through repeated self-amplifying feedback. When a dissipative structure reaches such a point of instability, called a *bifurcation point*, an element of *indeterminacy* enters into the theory. At the bifurcation point the system's behavior is inherently *unpredictable*. In particular, new structures of higher *order* and complexity may emerge spontaneously. Thus self-organization, the spontaneous emergence of

order, results from the combined effects of nonequilibrium, irreversibility, feedback loops, and instability.

The radical nature of Prigogine's vision is apparent from the fact that these fundamental ideas were rarely addressed in traditional science and were often given negative connotations. This is evident in the very language used to express them. *Non-equilibrium, nonlinearity, instability, indeterminacy*, and so on, are all negative formulations. (192)

Though neither Prigogine nor Capra use the word wild to describe the phenomenon of dissipative structures, it seems likely that what arises or emerges at a bifurcation point, that which is "inherently *unpredictable*" and may lead spontaneously to "new structures of higher order and complexity" is what in other contexts we call the wild. In other words, *wildness is an inherent quality that emerges in the self-organization of certain complex systems, including living systems.*

In noting the "negative connotations" in the scientific terms used to describe such phenomena—"non-equilibrium, nonlinearity, instability, indeterminacy"—Capra echoes a parallel insight to one Gary Snyder puts forward in *The Practice of the Wild* when he attempts to define wildness: After remarking on the negative connotations from the Oxford English Dictionary, Snyder writes:

Wild is largely defined in our dictionaries by what—from a human standpoint—it is-not. It cannot be seen by this approach for what it is. Turn it the other way:

Of animals—free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems.

Of plants—self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities.

Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.

Of foodcrops—food supplies made available and sustainable by the natural excess and exuberance of wild plants in their growth and in the production of quantities of fruit or seeds.

Of societies—societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem.

Of individuals—following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. "Proud and free."

Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, "bad," admirable.

Of behavior—artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic.

Most of the senses in this . . . set of definitions come very close to being how the Chinese define the term *Dao*, the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma* with its original senses of forming and firming. (9-10)

Here Snyder weaves the wild with the sacred, just as Capra had

years before in *The Tao of Physics* (1976) attempted to synthesize East and West, science and metaphysics. The emerging ecological or "systems thinking" paradigm foregrounds the wild as both a literal and figural fact. We can see it woven throughout each of the "three kinds of living systems—organisms, parts of organisms, and communities of organisms—all of which are integrated wholes whose essential properties arise from the interactions and interdependence of their parts" (Capra 34).

The Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm generated key metaphors to convey its world view: a detached, thinking self separate from nature, the object of its analysis; a clockwork universe; knowledge as architecture. In contrast, contextual or environmental thinking proposes the figure of a "web of life [that] consists of networks within networks. At each scale, under close scrutiny, the nodes of the network reveal themselves as smaller networks. . . . There are only networks nesting within other networks" (Capra 35). Until now, some of the patterns formed by such networks have been too intricate, seemingly too "chaotic" to grasp. Only recently have mathematicians been able through fractal geometry to reproduce the complexity of these patterns we observe in nature: the irregular outlines of clouds, lightening, coastlines and mountains.⁶³ Could

⁶³ Capra summarizes some of the recent major findings in his chapter, "The Mathematics of Complexity." Of particular interest is the work of Benoit Mandelbrot, the founder of fractal geometry, and "the rich variety of forms, many of which are reminiscent of living things" which his work with "Julia sets" reveals:
(continued...)

"the nonlinear, highly complex, and unpredictable processes known technically as chaos" (Capra 126) be simply another manifestation of, another term for—wildness?

James Lovelock's "Gaia" hypothesis, developed with the biologist Lynn Margulis and first put forward in the 1970s (*The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* xviii), is the most widely and popularly known, misunderstood, and influential systems theory. Though it was often misinterpreted by his scientific critics at the time as teleological, even mythologically purposive, Gaia is actually based on an understanding of the self-organization of complex systems. In 1988, when *The Ages of Gaia* was published, Lovelock accepted some responsibility for the confusion about "intentionality" while defending the major premises of his revolutionary theory:

As first proposed the Gaia hypothesis was, I accept, badly worded. It arose from chemical evidence that showed the

⁶³(...continued)

"As in the case of a cloud or coastline, the same richness is displayed across all scales. With increasing resolution . . . more and more details of the fractal contour appear, revealing a fantastic sequence of patterns within patterns—all similar without ever being identical" (Capra-447). The unique set made from the "infinite number of Julia sets" is known as the Mandelbrot set. "This strange figure . . . [,] the most complex mathematical object ever invented" (148), "appeared on the cover of *Scientific American* in August 1985" (150). Like Julia sets, the Mandelbrot set reveals ever more complicated "patterns within patterns"—of "swirling spirals, of whirlpools generating seahorses, of organic forms burgeoning and exploding into dust" (150)—"a 'superfractal' of inconceivable complexity. Yet this structure whose richness defies the human imagination is generated by a few very simple rules. Thus fractal geometry, like chaos theory, has forced scientists and mathematicians to reexamine the very concept of complexity" (151).

Earth's atmosphere far departed from the equilibrium state expected of a lifeless planet. We knew that this disequilibrium comes from the presence of life. We also knew that living organisms affect all of the gases of the air, other than the inert noble gases. Some, like oxygen, are direct biological products, and organisms modify the abundance of others, like carbon dioxide. Unwisely we stated the hypothesis as "Life or the biosphere modulates the environment to keep it comfortable" or "The biosphere sustains the environment by and for itself."

We should have said, "Living organisms and their material environment are tightly coupled. The coupled system is a superorganism, and as it evolves there emerges a new property, the ability to self-regulate climate and chemistry." It took ten years and a mathematical model, "Daisyworld," to define Gaia, the superorganism. (212-213)

Theodore Roszak uses the phrase "wild science," in reference to the Gaia hypothesis, among others, "ideas still in the formative stage and susceptible to bizarre formulations" (*The Voice of the Earth* 17-18).

Efforts like his and Capra's *The Web of Life*—to think imaginatively around Wilson's grid and thus across disciplines and as near to the intersection of contemporary research on the real world as possible—is bound to be controversial and at times speculative. That the idea of Gaia, "the superorganism," is perhaps inextricably linked in the popular mind to an Earth Mother goddess mythology is undeniable. Whether or not its many adherents understand the arcane science of dissipative structures and complex systems that inform the hypothesis, Gaia together with the iconic NASA photographs of earth seen from space have had a galvanizing effect on environmental awareness and what has come to be known as

deep ecology.

Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, first attempted to clarify the different approaches to conservation and the human relation to nature based on the science of ecology in a 1972 lecture (Drengson and Inoue xvii). His essay published the following year, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary" introduced the key terms by which these approaches are still known. Naess, rather contemptuously, summarized shallow ecology⁶⁴ in a few phrases: "Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in developed countries" (Naess, *The Deep Ecology Movement* 3). Naess made clear in this first lecture that his concerns were "deeper," "touch[ing] upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness" (3). The first tenet he put forward was an affirmation of the holistic, systems thinking view that Capra claims is now central to the ecological paradigm: "Rejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of *the relational, total-field image*. He went on to list six other tenets, as follows: "*Biospherical egalitarianism*" . . . [:] "*Principles of diversity and symbiosis*" . . . [:] "*Anti-class posture*" . . . [:]

⁶⁴ What Naess calls "shallow ecology," others have referred to as "resourcism," the conservation principles first formulated around the turn of the century by the U.S. Forest Service administrator under Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot. See p. 59, footnote 19 above for Max Oelschlaeger's definition of "resourcism."

"Fight against *pollution and resource depletion*" . . . [;] "*Complexity , not complication*" . . . [; and] "*Local autonomy and decentralization*" (4-6).⁶⁵

The key to Naess's deep ecology—the philosophy of which he calls Ecosophy-T—is the concept of "self-realization," if we understand self not as the limited individual ego of Descartes' philosophy, but as that which identifies "with all living beings" ("Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" 13). Naess, who "practiced Gandhian nonviolence. . . [during] the Norwegian resistance to Nazi occupation" (Drengson xviii), openly admits that the "platform of the deep ecology movement is grounded in religion or philosophy" ("The Apron Diagram" 11) and purposely formulates his principles to accommodate a plurality of views based on their overlapping fundamental agreements. By

⁶⁵ Twelve years later, Naess and George Sessions collaborated on a refinement of these tenets that was published in their essay, "Platform Principles of the Deep Ecology Movement": 1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes. 2. Rich-ness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. 3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. 4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease. 5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. 6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present. 7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great. 8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes. (*The Deep Ecology Movement* 49-50)

articulating a total-field or holistic perspective, the relationality of all being, and self-realization as the highest purpose of life, Naess situates his Ecosophy-T at the very center of the emerging ecological paradigm. As Freya Mathews writes in "Conservation and Self-Realization: A Deep Ecological Perspective" (124-135):

Deep ecology is concerned with the metaphysics of nature, and of the relation of self to nature. It sets up ecology as a model for the basic metaphysical structure of the world, seeing the identities of all things—whether at the level of elementary particles, organisms, or galaxies—as logically interconnected: all things are constituted by their relations with other things.
I cannot be said to flourish, to actualize the potentialities of my nature—in a word, to be fully self-realized—unless I do stand in these relations. Moreover, in order for me to stand in these relations, and thus achieve self-realization, the elements in question must exist. Thus, it is in my interests to ensure that those elements exist. (Mathews 126;128)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ As Mathews notes, "This point raises the question of what it means to say that a being has interests. A being may be said to have interests if it has needs, and it may be said to have needs if it is seeking to maintain or realize its own existence—it *needs* those things which contribute to its self-maintenance or self-realization. A rock cannot be said to have interests because it has no investment in its own existence—it in no way resists causal inroads into its physical integrity. The rock possesses a contingent unity only—it waits passively to be ground to dust, or worn away by wind and rain. An organism, in contrast, is essentially a system for realizing and perpetuating itself, and the more complex it is the more efficiently it resists the forces of disintegration. To have interests, then, is to be ruled by the principle of self-realization, a principle to which medieval philosophers referred as the "*conatus*." The *conatus* was the impulse, not only for self-preservation or self-maintenance, but also for self-increase or self-perfection—an impulse that is present in all living beings. [129]. From the point of view of deep ecology, what is wrong with our culture is that it offers us an inaccurate conception of the self. It depicts the personal self as existing in competition with and in opposition to nature. Our *conatus* is accordingly unduly limited, and therefore cannot succeed either in its long-term aim of maintaining us in existence or in its immediate aim of self-realization." (132)

If we are, indeed, in the midst of a major shift to a new way of thinking that will recognize holistic patterns of self-organization at all levels of the "web of life," of "networks nesting within other networks" (Capra 35), then assertions such as the following by Gary Snyder must be read as more than mere poetic license:

Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world,"
it is the world" (6).
Our bodies are wild. . . . The world is our consciousness,
and it surrounds us. . . . The depths of mind, the
unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is
where a bobcat is *right now*. . . . The body is, so to speak, in
the mind. They are both wild. (16)

As I have already pointed out, Snyder's revision of Thoreau's classic statement—"In Wildness is the preservation of the World"—highlights two important tropological shifts: Thoreau's shift from wilderness to wild, and Snyder's shift from the wild as contingent on "preservation" to the wild as a necessity of being itself. In the light of systems or environmental thinking, the latter shift takes on even deeper meanings.

Snyder's notion that the "world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us" has long been anticipated figuratively by artists. Nature writers, in particular, have seen themselves reflected in the wild or have seen the wild in themselves resonating in nature. In "The Bean Fields" chapter of *Walden*, for example Thoreau observes that he "sometimes. . . watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternating soaring

and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts" (449). We now read statements like this as the deep tap roots of ecopsychology.

In *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* Scott Slovic suggests that there are direct connections among nature writing, perception, and awareness, and that the works of various investigators in this area are increasingly relevant both to ecocriticism and wild theory. For instance, Slovic uses William James's theory of perception and the work of the environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachael Kaplan to look at the way nature writing describes and enacts a state of enlarged and clarified awareness. Similarly, in *The Experience of Place*, Tony Hiss discusses the difference between "the pinpoint focus of ordinary perception, which lets us shut ourselves off from surroundings, and our broad-band focus of simultaneous perception, which keeps us linked to our surroundings. . . . [—both of which] are inherited skills built into each of us" (3–4). Simultaneous perception, a kind of heightened awareness, is what the experience of certain landscapes may afford, and it is the sense of "connectedness" (27) that Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted sought to create in their great urban parks (42–48).

Ecopsychologists take the work of environmental psychologists even further, by putting the relation of the self to nature in the foreground of their study. With roots in Jungian psychology, the groundwork for the

field was prepared through Gregory Bateson's work on systems thinking and its applicability to human psychology in the 1960s and 1970s. Paul Shepard's 1982 *Nature and Madness* is one of the groundbreaking texts, and the cultural historian Theodore Roszak's *The Voice of the Earth* brought ecopsychology to the attention of an even wider audience in 1993. As evidenced by his Foreward to the 1995 anthology Roszak edited with Mary Gomes and Allen D. Kanner, *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, the field is also allied with James Hillman's archetypal psychology.

As Freud sought to explain the origins of human aggressive and self-destructive tendencies in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) through a psychoanalytic theory of mind that posited an instinctual struggle within the individual between Eros and death, ecopsychology seeks answers explicitly in the human relation to the environment. In *Nature and Madness*, Shepard sets out to answer a basic question: "why does society persist in destroying its habitat?" (22). He rejects as "too easy and too academic" the "idea that the destruction of whales is the logical outcome of Francis Bacon's dictum that nature should serve 'man,' or René Decartes's insistence that animals feel no pain since they have no souls"—and thus is driven to look beyond the "history of ideas . . . to explain human behavior" (23). What Shepard proposes instead is an "ontogenetic crippling" (31)—obstacles to our full growth or maturity, our

"coming into being"—that began with changes in child rearing over the millennia since the first agricultural settlements disrupted the "mystery of kinship" once felt by the child immersed in nature: "likeness but difference" (28). Our own era, "the technological / urban society" has in short been created out of neurosis:

White, European American, Western peoples are separated by many generations from decisions by councils of the whole, small-group nomadic life with few possessions, highly developed initiation ceremonies, natural history as every person's vocation, a total surround of non-human-made (or "wild") otherness with spiritual significance, and the "natural" way of mother and infant. In the city-world of today, infinite wants are pursued as though the environment were an amnion and technology a placenta. The West is a vast testimony to childhood botched to serve its own purposes, where history, masquerading as myth, authorizes men of action to alter the world to match their regressive moods of omnipotence and insecurity. . . . From the epoch of Judeo-Christian emergence is an abiding hostility to the natural world, characteristically fearful and paranoid. The sixteenth-century fixation on the impurity of the body and the comparative tidiness of the machine are strongly obsessive-compulsive. (32;35;37)

As technology expands the senses ever more extensively, individual neurosis shapes and drives the neurotic form of civilization itself, which in turn structures the possibilities of human fulfillment. Nature, in the process, becomes the mere background for the satisfaction of infantile needs.

The rediscovery of the mystery of the wild, so prominent a theme in Barry Lopez's writing, has at least some of its roots in Shepard's eco-

psychology. So too does the so-called Men's Movement and popular books like Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990), which owe much to Shepard's claims that modern Western societies—cut off from the wild—have lost any real connection with the father or mentoring figure and lack meaningful rituals or ceremonies to mark the transition from child to adult.

Shepard's idealization of the primitive and his sweeping indictment of Western civilization may strike some as simply another deconstructionist master narrative—a reversal of the usual progressive view of "Western history as a recovery narrative"—as Carolyn Merchant points out in the epigraph to this chapter from "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative." Its condemnation of Judeo-Christian ideology also echoes Lynn White, Jr.'s influential though much contested early essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (*Science* 10 March 1967). But with its shortcomings, *Nature and Madness* nevertheless re-contextualized psychology and gender relations in a broader purview—one not limited to just the "human-in-environment image" Arne Naess had rejected but one more compatible with his first tenet of deep ecology: "the relational, total-field image" (3).

In *The Voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak takes the theory of ecopsychology even further with his speculation that the "core of the mind is the ecological unconscious." An exemplary practitioner of what he

himself coins "wild science," Roszak draws on the now largely forgotten work of Peter Kropotkin's 1914 *Mutual Aid*⁶⁷ and amalgamates it with Jungian and Gestalt psychologies, Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, and even the discredited Anthropic principle,⁶⁸ to conclude that the

collective unconscious, at its deepest level, shelters the compacted ecological intelligence of our species, the source from which culture finally unfolds as the self-conscious reflection of nature's own steadily emergent mindlikeness. The survival of life and our own species would not have

⁶⁷ "Kropotkin was among the foremost critics of Darwinism at the height of its intellectual dominance. He was convinced that evolution had more to do with complex systems of cooperation within and between species—'mutual aid' as he called it—than with competition between individuals (154). . . . Kropotkin was always careful to insist that the mutual aid he discerned among all living things was not primarily an altruistic virtue. It went much deeper. It was an instinctual, utterly spontaneous impulse welded into the foundations of animal consciousness and evolving throughout the history of life on Earth. The contrast with Freud could not be more dramatic. . . . Kropotkin concluded that human nature was fundamentally ethical; kinship and moral concern come to it as naturally as the song comes to the bird. At the foundations of the unconscious one finds *conscience*, the moral energy of the personality as firmly rooted in the psyche as patricidal jealousy or the death instinct—possibly more so" (Roszak 228). In this connection, it appears Kropotkin may have anticipated the recent findings of the systems view of evolution. As Capra notes, "Throughout the living world evolution cannot be limited to the adaptation of organisms to their environment, because the environment itself is shaped by a network of living systems capable of adaptation and creativity. . . . Thus our focus is shifting from evolution to co-evolution—an ongoing dance that proceeds through a subtle interplay of competition and cooperation, creation and mutual adaptation" (*The Web of Life* 227).

⁶⁸ Citing "Harvard biochemist Lawrence Henderson," Roszak defines "the Anthropic Principle. . . [as the hypothesis] that all time and all matter are implicated in the creation of life. . . . 'We must assume that the origin of environmental fitness lies at least as far back as the phenomena of the periodic system, as least as far back as the evolution of the elements, if they were ever evolved'" (122). Roszak cites another commentator, John Wheeler, on the implications of the Anthropic Principle: "The universe. . . is adapted to man. . . . [A] life-giving factor lies at the center of the whole machinery and design of the world" (125).

been possible without such a self-adjusting, system-building wisdom. (304-305)

Roszak's formulation of a hypothetical ecological unconscious echoes and elaborates Snyder's assertion that "the depths of our mind are our inner wilderness areas" (16). It is also anticipated by the ethical response of many nature writers, as Roszak acknowledges when he cites Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) as one of the forebears of deep ecology (245) and the kind of revolutionary paradigmatic shift that his writing seeks to advance.

Just as the roots of deep ecology and ecopsychology can be traced to the nineteenth-century, so can the separate roots of ecofeminism. There has been considerable feminist research over the last twenty years that has brought the diverse writings of nineteenth-century women out of the archives and to the attention of literary critics. Of particular interest to the nature writing genre are the works of Dorothy Wordsworth, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Margaret Fuller, Celia Loughton Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary Austin.⁶⁰ Annette Kolodny and others have also studied the incidental writings, journals and diaries of pioneer women in an effort to reimagine history with a fuller understanding of the roles and points of view of the women traditionally effaced from

⁶⁰ One of the best anthologies to survey the range of women writing about nature is *Sister of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature* edited by Lorraine Anderson (New York: Vintage, 1991), though most of the brief selections—a few pages in length—can merely whet a reader's appetite.

those narratives.

One example of a nineteenth-century matriarch of ecofeminism and one of those whose ethical response to nature anticipates deep ecology is Sarah Orne Jewett. Her short story "The White Heron" (1886) is remarkably prescient by exactly a century of one kind of ecofeminist critique of society and male power relations with women. In the story, Jewett, who grew up and lived on the seacoast in South Berwick, Maine, writes about a young girl's protective identification with a wild bird that is threatened by the nascent love interest of an attractive young hunter-ornithologist. By choosing not to reveal the heron's whereabouts to the hunter, Sylvia not only resists the overtures of traditional love by protecting the endangered wild, she also rejects, it would seem, the attitude of nineteenth-century natural history represented in that century's most famous ornithologist-hunter-artist—John James Audubon. By privileging her secret knowledge, Sylvia—whose name echoes the woods (from the Lat. *silva*) and the *Sylvidae* family of "[t]iny active birds with small slender bills . . . [including] Old World warblers"⁷⁰—quietly defies both her grandmother and the social expectations of her time in order to have an adventure in the wild. Symbolically she preserves her private sense of an inclusive relation to nature and her own autonomy rather than

⁷⁰ Roger Tory Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, 4th ed., The Peterson Field Guide Series 1 (Boston: Houghton, 1980) 216.

acquiesce to the prevailing cultural prescription of male mastery over both nature and herself.

There is a direct line from the ecofeminist critique implied in Jewett's short story to some current nature writing and ecofeminist literary criticism, which argues that the oppression of nature and the oppression of women both result from the exercise of patriarchal power. Between 1975 and 1980, three texts appeared that, combined, would have a significant impact on the emerging field of ecofeminism.

Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) makes the examination of the gendered figuration of nature—the "land-as-woman"—the focal point of her study of the rhetoric of American writing from the earliest exploration tracts to the twentieth-century. In a follow-up study, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630 - 1860*, Kolodny also casts a skeptical eye on some of the master narratives of such 1950s American Studies classics as R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955). Underlying this and other studies of the time like Henry Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land* (1950) was a thesis of national expansion and identity that valorized both the uniqueness and superiority of the English occupation of North America (and the Cold War critical preoccupation with it)—indeed, of the unquestioned congruence of America with the United States.

Susan Griffin's 1977 *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* is considered a landmark work of ecofeminism, one whose unconventionally personal and passionate style is emblematic of the feminist claim that "the personal is political." Griffin begins by "tracing a history of patriarchy's judgements about the nature of matter, or the nature of nature, and plac[ing] these judgements side by side, chronologically, with men's opinions about the nature of women throughout history" (xvi). The common link, as she sees it, is passivity. She then examines "those separations which are part of the civilized male's thinking and living—mind from emotion, body from soul." Having separated the reader's "consciousness from the consciousness of patriarchy," Griffin finally offers "Her Vision" by revisiting what had formerly been seen through "the eye of patriarchy" (xvi). Griffin's writing interweaves different texts, sometimes in alternating sentences, at other times in blocks, creating the effect of a dialogue, an amplification, a critique. Drawing from diverse sources, her juxtapositions often yield unexpected insights. In "Timber," for example, she interleaves passages from a U.S. Department of Agriculture forest management text with lines from *The Office Supervisor* and *Textbook of Office Management* to create parallels between managed timber ("Saw logs are a form of circulating capital. . ." [Zaremba qtd. in Griffin 56]) and efficient, female office workers. Erudite yet lyrical, Griffin's aim is to draw the reader in to hear

"the great chorus of women and nature, which will swell with time" (xvii).

Though she subtitles one of her final sections, "Our Nature: What Is Still Wild in Us" (217), for the most part, the wildness in *Woman and Nature* is implicit. Unlike later inspirational texts that will foreground the wild, nature is still Griffin's key signifier.

Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) followed by *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (1989) continues the deconstruction of patriarchal views of the relation of nature and women and expands on an "ecological approach to history [that] reasserts the idea of nature as historical actor" (7). In *The Death of Nature*, Merchant takes up the connections between the history of science and the social status of women, in particular the "reconceptualiz[ation]. . . [of] reality as a machine rather than a living organism, [which] sanctioned the domination of both nature and women" (xxi). In *Ecological Revolutions*, Merchant proposes a complex "Conceptual Framework" in which "ecology, production, reproduction, and consciousness interact over time to bring about ecological transformations" (6).

Non-academic nature writers have also explored the relation of nature and women, often in deeply personal ways. In Terry Tempest Williams' autobiographical short story "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," for example, the narrator finally realizes the connection between

the breast cancer mastectomies of several generations in her family and the cavalier defilement of western lands by post World War II atomic weapons testing. This theme has been recently given new impetus with the publication of Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment* (1998) and the connections she makes between her disease and the toxicity of her rural Illinois homeland.

In a search for a reconfigured metaphor for the relation of woman and nature, some writers have developed the figure of the border or, using the ecological term, the ecotone. Thus Florence Krall orients her place-centered autobiography, entitled *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* (1994), around the idea that just as in "the natural world, edges where differences come together are the richest of habitats," so too "margins in social and cultural contexts . . . like the ecotones in biotic communities, . . . may be rich and dynamic transitional zones and may provide great learning as well as suffering" (4). While Krall acknowledges Julia Kristeva for the understanding that "this edge is, in fact, an abode" (4), the resurgence of the borderlands metaphor has even deeper historical roots in this century, which reveal yet another line of inquiry that has led to renewed interest in wildness.

Although Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," signaled the closing of

the frontier, or as the new historians of the west would suggest the closing of the mythology of the frontier, the popularity of that rhetoric has persisted throughout this century until it was, in academia at least, recently supplanted by the borderlands trope.

Since Turner's essay the framework of intellectual inquiry has been complicated by a seductively cogent yet flawed hypothesis. Although Turner's thesis influenced generations of critics (and still ripples through popular culture and political discourse), it has long been questioned by scholars. A student of Turner's, Herbert E. Bolton, was among the first to "discard the narrowly national method of historical presentation. . . [by recognizing] the fundamental unity of New World development" (*Wider Horizons of American History*, vii). As early as 1929, Bolton wrote about the "Defensive Spanish Expansion and the Significance of the Borderlands" (55-107); and by 1932 he had articulated a revision to frontier historiography in a presidential address before the American Historical Association, "The Epic of Greater America" (1-55). Near the end of his address, Bolton said that :

Borderland zones are vital not only in the determination of international relations, but also in the development of culture. In this direction, one of the important modifications of the Turner thesis is to be sought. By borderland areas not solely geographical regions are meant; borderland studies of many kinds are similarly fruitful. (52)

When Aldo Leopold suggested the need for a "Land Ethic" and "an

ecological interpretation of history" in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) to counteract our Abrahamic concept of land as a commodity that we can use and abuse, he focused scholarly attention on yet another redefinition of meaningful boundaries which has developed into the field of ecological or environmental history. Recent environmental historians such as William Cronon (*Changes in the Land* [1983]) and Donald Worster have researched and described the effects of human and ecological interaction. Their researches have led to historical narratives that foreground the importance of the land and modify or supplant conventional anthropomorphic and political boundaries with ecological boundaries, something Gary Snyder has also done with a kind of ecological regionalism that defines an area as a watershed, for instance.

In 1986, the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* reinvigorated academic interest in borderlands as a metaphor for ethnogenesis. Anzaldúa's opening paragraph from her Preface staked her claim:

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest / Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (n. pag.)

With increasing academic interest in race, class, gender, and sexuality,

critics struggling to conform their practice to a postmodernist / postcolonialist ideology have found the borderlands trope with its privileging of the margins more comfortable to inhabit than the frontier with its manifestly destined past, just as they prefer the palimpsest trope to the tabula rasa. For multiculturalists, the appeal is obvious: a leveling of the United States' political and economic dominance with its less powerful neighbors, usually Mexico; and an internalization of the borderlands metaphor to describe the interplay at the edges of a new cultural model: the mosaic. Although the origin and impetus of the borderlands trope comes from Aztlán and recent Chicano writing and criticism, it has been linked through ethnocriticism to the now preferred cultural model—the mosaic—just as that model has replaced the long discredited (though still stubbornly persistent) melting pot metaphor. With the adoption of ethnic models to describe heretofore unrelated issues, such as gay and lesbian identity (Epstein), the extent to which the borderlands trope is employed and serves a wide variety of contemporary concerns becomes clear.

In some ways, it is possible to view the shift from frontiers to borderlands as parallel to the shift from wilderness to wild, and ecology continues to spin off even more new figures.⁷¹ Krall's *Ecotone* is

⁷¹ For example, the figure of the *patch*—derived from ecology—has also found favor in certain postmodernist discourses. In *The Postmodern Condition*:
(continued...)

exemplary for her synthesis of the two tropes, as well as for her blend of ecopsychology, ecofeminism, and nature writing.

With the implicit critiques of nature writers—not all of whom may be comfortable with the label “ecofeminist”—and the growing body of formal work in the field by scholars, a kind of systematic, though pluralistic, field has begun to emerge in an area that originated academically largely in departments of philosophy and women’s studies. Two anthologies, in particular, have aided in the self-conscious delineation of this field:

Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature (1993) edited by Greta Gaard and

Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy (1998)

edited by Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy. In “A Root of Ecofeminism:

Ecoféminisme” in the latter anthology, Barbara Gates credits a

Frenchwoman, Françoise d’Eaubonne, with first coining the term

ecofeminism and with laying the analytic ideological foundation which,

⁷¹(...continued)

A Report on Knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard writes: “Thus the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches—local determinism” (xxiv). In “The Ecology of Order and Chaos” (*The Wealth of Nature*), the historian Donald Worster notes how some scientists in the mechanistic tradition have reacted to the ideological impact of chaos and complexity theory: “[T]he climax notion is dead, the ecosystem has receded in usefulness, and in their place we have the idea of the lowly “patch.” . . . For some scientists [whom he calls “the Social Darwinists”], a nature characterized by highly individualistic associations, constant disturbance, and incessant change may be more ideologically satisfying than [Eugene] Odum’s ecosystem, with its stress on cooperation, social organization, and environmentalism. (165-66)

together with activism, has led to a worldwide movement. In

Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature, Janis Birkeland offers this definition:

Ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is "an awareness" that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man's attitude toward women and tribal cultures or, in Ariel Salleh's words, that there is a "parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other." ("Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice" 18)

In *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*, Carolyn

Merchant offers a taxonomy of the field that is useful in sorting out the different strands of ecofeminisms and their sometimes contradictory impulses. She connects ecofeminism to four categorically different feminist approaches—"Liberal Feminism," "Marxist Feminism," "Cultural Feminism," and "Socialist Feminism"—each with a different view of "Nature," "Human Nature," the "Feminist Critique of Environmentalism," and the "Image of a Feminist Environmentalism" (Table 8.1, 186-187):

Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature from within existing structures of governance through the passage of new laws and regulations. Cultural ecofeminism analyzes environmental problems from within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature. Social and socialist ecofeminism ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy. (184)

Liberal feminism is aligned with the preservationist branch of the environmental movement, what is sometimes referred to as resourcism. Cultural ecofeminism subsumes both the "history of ideas" critique that Paul Shepard rejected as "too academic" and the turn to non-Western spiritual traditions. Merchant herself straddles both the cultural ("history of ideas") and socialist camps.

The spiritualist branch of ecofeminism manifests itself in a variety of practices ranging from Goddess spirituality and Native American rituals to animism, paganism, witchcraft, and other so-called "New Age" Earth Mother beliefs. "Often stemming from an anti-science, anti-technology standpoint," Merchant points out, "cultural ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists" (191).

With so many multifaceted contributors to the field, it is not surprising that ecofeminisms would proliferate and inconsistencies arise in the process. The two biggest challenges to the stature of the scholarship have concerned its theoretical and political bases. Ecofeminisms have been criticized theoretically for a tendency to essentialize gender in the very act of deconstructing patriarchy, resulting

in a simple inversion of gender values. Politically, ecofeminists have been challenged for their narrow cultural and national perspectives, and for assuming that their concerns and prescriptions would be universally applicable. In "A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism," for instance, Huey-li Li writes:

To ecofeminists, a recognition of the conceptual connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature is essential for any adequate understanding of both forms of oppressions. Yet. . . [many] analyses. . . are based mainly on Western culture. A lack of global cultural awareness in the theorizing of ecofeminism inevitably weakens ecofeminists' claims. The origins of the woman-nature affinity require further elaboration from a cross-cultural perspective. My suggestion is that this affinity is probably a social construction. Women's closeness to nature, as perceived by Western people, is not biologically determined, and the perception of an affinity between woman and nature is not an essential feature of the human unconscious. We need more cross-cultural studies of the relations between various conceptualizations of nature and the corresponding social treatment of women, and these studies must take sociohistorical conditions into consideration. (280)

Spiritualist ecofeminism is particularly susceptible both to the theoretical and political critiques, though it is often the most popular of all with a non-academic audience.⁷² A "self-help" text such as *Women Who*

⁷² By as early as 1991, Merchant points out in *Radical Ecology*, some ecofeminists—Janet Biehl in particular—had already abandoned the field as hopelessly muddled, so "fraught with irrational, mythical, and self-contradictory meanings that it undercut women's hopes for a liberatory, ecologically-sane society" (Biehl qtd. In Merchant 195). In "Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures: Pushing the Limits of Cultural Imperialism" Greta Gaard also cautions against the shallow co-optation of Native traditions and states flatly: "Native (continued...)"

Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype by the Jungian analyst and storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés is a case in point. Estés, a “cantadora, [or] keeper of the old stories” (1) presents a blend of traditional stories as well as stories from her family and of her own creation and adaptation as a celebration of the instinctual power of women with wildness as the central theme. From her study of wolves and the similarities she saw between them and women, Estés found that

[h]ealthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mates, and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave. (2)

Estés is in good company with her choice of genus *Canis Lupus*, which has undergone a significant rehabilitation in the West and only recently been reintroduced with much fanfare into Yellowstone National Park.⁷³ But the centerpiece of her psychology is wildness, and wildness, she makes clear, is merely the incantatory signifier of an archetypal force, the vehicle for an ineffable tenor:

⁷²(...continued)

American spirituality is inseparable from Native American cultures, a unity little understood by white Euro-Americans” (*Ecofeminism* 308).

⁷³ Barry Lopez’s major study, *Of Wolves and Men*—a natural history or biography of the species, published in 1978—was a significant contribution to this rehabilitation.

I call her Wild Woman, for those very words, *wild* and *woman*, create *llamar o tocar a la puerta*, the fairy-tale knock at the door of the deep female psyche. *Llamar o tocar a la puerta* means literally to play upon the instrument of the name in order to open a door. It means using words that summon up the opening of a passageway. No matter by which culture a woman is influenced, she understands the words *wild* and *woman*, intuitively. [4]

So, the word *wild* here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the *criatura*, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries.

These words, *wild* and *woman*, cause women to remember what they are and what they are about. They create a metaphor to describe the force which funds all females. They personify a force that women cannot live without. [6] . .

In actuality, in the psychoid unconscious—an ineffable layer of psyche from which this phenomenon emanates—Wild Woman has no name, for she is so vast. (7)

In its affirmation of the power of the instinctual woman, Estés's approach is at best an indirect critique of patriarchy, but one that nevertheless bridges ecopsychology and ecofeminism through the sign of the wild. Though popular with the general reading public, on one hand (the cover of the Ballantine paperback edition touts "The Million-Copy Bestseller; Two Years on the *New York Times* Hardcover Bestseller List"), Estés's tendency to reductive and essentialist descriptions of women and her claim to universal applicability across cultures and historical conditions are problematic.⁷⁴ On the other hand, her work as a

⁷⁴ Estés claims what she calls the Wild Woman has its counterparts throughout the world: "So, in Spanish I call her *Río Abajo Río*, the river beneath the river; *La Mujer Grande*, the Great Woman; *Luz del abismo*, the light from the abyss; *La Loba*, the wolf woman, or *La Huesera*, the bone woman.

(continued...)

cantadora is firmly within the traditions of Native American and Chicana writing—one thinks of Leslie Marmon Silko or Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, both of whom are well known, influential writers working in fields that are allied to nature writing and ecofeminism, and who are generally respected in academia.

Though perhaps less artful, one can reasonably ask how different Estés' use of the wild is from mainstream nature writers like Annie Dillard or Gretel Ehrlich. The opening story in Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, for example, is the often anthologized "Living Like Weasels," which begins: "A WEASEL IS WILD. Who knows what he thinks?" (11). Dillard goes on to elaborate:

I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. . . . I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular. . . . [.] but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive. [15] The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way. . . . I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. (16)

Dillard's meditation on the weasel and the wildness he represents

⁷⁴(...continued)

She is called in Hungarian, *Ő, Erdőben*, She of the Woods, and *Rozsomák*, The Wolverine. In Navajo, she is *Na'ashjé'ii Asdzáá*, The Spider Woman, who weaves the fate of humans and animals and plants and rocks. In Guatemala, among many other names, she is *Humana del Niebla*, The Mist Being, the woman who has lived forever. In Japanese, she is *Amaterasu Omikami*, The Numina, who brings all light, all consciousness. In Tibet she is called *Dakini*, the dancing force which produces clear-seeing within women. And it goes on. She goes on." (7)

echoes Thoreau's impulse at the beginning of *Walden's* "Higher Laws" chapter when he is "tempted to seize and devour. . . [a woodchuck] raw . . . for that wildness he represented" (490). In another short story, "The Source of a River" from *Islands, the Universe, Home* (1991), Gretel Ehrlich captures even more of the nuances of wildness that make it an untiring subject, it seems, for nature writing meditation:

I'm looking for the source of the Yellowstone River, and as we make the day-long ascent from a valley, I think about walking and wilderness. We use the word "wilderness," but perhaps we mean wildness. Isn't that why I've come here, to seek the wildness in myself and, in so doing, come on the wildness everywhere, because after all, I'm part of nature too. [27-28]

Wildness has no conditions, no sure routes, no peaks or goals, no source that is not instantly becoming something more than itself, then letting go of that, always becoming. It cannot be stripped to its complexity by CAT scan or telescope. Rather, it is a many-pointed truth, almost a bluntness, a sudden essence like the wild strawberries strung on scarlet runners under my feet. For half a mile, on hands and knees, I eat and eat. Wildness is source and fruition at once, as if this river circled round, mouth eating tail and tail eating source. (30-31)⁷⁵

If the "fundamental principle of ecofeminism is the interconnectedness of all life," as Greta Gaard suggests (308), here we have an invocation of that relationality through the occult image of the snake eating its tail: wildness as the psychic holy grail of nature writers, that which they are drawn to without and strive to cultivate within.

⁷⁵ This story appears in a slightly different version in *Sisters of the Earth* with the title "River History" (113-117).

Each of the many fields and writers I have surveyed in this chapter has at least one thing in common: a constructive effort to think across disciplines in what may be termed an ecological or holistic manner. Since the wild is at the center of ecology, it is also of necessity at the core of each of their concerns, whether the field is environmental policy, ethics and deep ecology, systems thinking and "wild science," or ecopsychology and ecofeminism. Just as wildness crosses the boundaries of the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities in the academy, it also crosses the cultural boundaries of high and low art, in advertising and popular culture and "New Age" thinking. This dissertation has been about the practice of ecocriticism as it takes up the wild and relates it to both nature writing texts and other cultural manifestations.

As I approach a conclusion, I would like to return to my own home base of ecocriticism and state what it is I think I have accomplished in this many tentacled study.

One of my objects has been to show that since the mid-nineteenth-century there has been a deliberate effort to shift rhetorically from a discourse of wilderness to one of wildness. This shift took on increased momentum with the closing of the American frontier in the late nineteenth-century and the exploration of virtually all the planet's *terra incognita* in the twentieth-century. As we begin the twenty-first century and its either utopian or dystopian—depending on your point of view—promise of

increasing human exploitation/ degradation of the environment and control of the process of evolution itself through genetic engineering, wildness has taken on even more critical importance. The nature writers were there first: "In Wildness is the preservation of the World" (Thoreau, "Walking"); "The continuous work of the imagination, I thought, to bring what is actual together with what is dreamed is an expression of human evolution (Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* 414). The natural sciences have confirmed their conclusions, if we can only learn to think across traditional boundaries and affect the necessary political and social change:

To move ahead as though scientific and entrepreneurial genius will solve each crisis arising in turn implies that the decline of the global biosphere can be similarly managed. Perhaps that might be possible in future decades (centuries seem more likely), but the means are not yet in sight. The living world is too complicated to be kept as a garden on a planet that has been converted into an artificial space capsule. No biological homeostat is known that can be worked by humanity. To believe otherwise is to risk reducing Earth to a wasteland, and humanity to a threatened species. (Wilson 280)

Another of my efforts has been to show in one place just how widespread the use of the wild as a signifier has been in various fields of thought, social criticism, and activism, and to suggest why that may be. To that end I have proposed the heuristic device of calling the hypertext of their links wild theory. Using the metaphor of hypertextuality to define wildness studies has the added benefit of foregrounding the mimesis of the wild in the field itself: wild theory is non-linear, and one can enter it

almost at random from many directions. The hypertext form is reflected in the field.

There is, I believe, an interesting and generative tension in wildness studies between the fragmentation and pluralities of post-modernism and the unities (real and virtual) of ecological thinking. One surprising arena in which this tension appears is the writing classroom. Wildness suggests what is integral, self-organizing, and beyond control. I like to think writing itself shares some of those qualities. The research, writing, and thinking process I went through as I delved into the meanings of the wild in various contexts is applicable to my understanding of what goes on in the writing classroom: as a community, we construct meanings, we interpret, and interpret our interpretations always with the goal of refining our communicative skills. Wildness is an inherent quality that emerges in the self-organization of certain complex systems, including living systems. I am intrigued with the notion of the classroom as a kind of ecosystem, a web in which every part is connected and related to every other. College studies based on a spiral curriculum in which theories and practices are revisited on different levels is a wonderful manifestation of that concept, but making those connections between ecocriticism, composition studies, and higher education more explicit is another project.

I don't know whether a "consilience world view" is really possible and if so whether it must be based on the privileged findings of natural

science, as Edward O. Wilson asserts. Some critics, like Karl Kroeber seem to think so ("An ecological view of the world, even a proto-ecological one, must be fundamentally materialistic, since its basic premise is that human beings are appropriately situated here on earth" [*Ecological Literary Criticism* 9].) I do know that it has been enormously useful for me to hold seemingly contradictory claims in mind (the plurality of rhetorics *and* the grand master narrative) as I explored this subject. The practice of ecocriticism, like nature writing itself, is a blend of the particularity of facts and the impossibly complex synthesis entailed in the natural ecological order of those facts.

And finally, having put the wild center stage in a constellation of texts, it has been my aim to take nothing for granted. Just as wilderness (and frontiers) can no longer be used naively as if they had no rhetorical past, neither can the wild (and borderlands). Like "nature" itself, the more pervasive these signs become both in popular culture and academic theory, the more problematic their usages. A term as pervasive as the wild may epitomize the postmodernist impulse, but, perhaps for that reason alone, it is time to examine this rapid exfoliation. I hope my study has made a contribution to this process of taking stock. If the wild comes laden with multiple meanings as it takes center stage at the turn of the millennium, it is to play out some of humanity's deepest and most far-reaching hopes and desires. Wild texts lead to wild theory, and wildness may yet once again change the human mind.

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