

# The Rise of American Ecoliterature

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***Abstract:** The article sketches a brief overview of the American nature-writing tradition, with reference to Thomas Lyon's useful taxonomy of nature writing, offering an updated contextualization of this tradition that takes into account the emergence of modern environmentalism in American culture. Ecoliterature can be understood to encompass not only ideologically driven works of literary environmentalism, but also strains of recent nature writing that in one way or another serve to foreground the non-human environing world and may even explore conceptualizations of nature and culture (especially the nature-culture interface) anywhere along a moderate-to-radical continuum of engagement in environmental ethics or applied principles of ecology. The rise of ecoliterature in late 20<sup>th</sup> century American letters is also discussed in relation to an emergent tradition of environmental literary criticism, or ecocriticism, as it has come to be more widely known. The article briefly surveys some of the contested territories brought to the fore by these cultural and literary developments, while also sampling some salient features of these kindred discourses by offering an illustrative ecocritical reading of model ecoliterary texts.*

***Keywords:** American literature – environmental criticism/ecocriticism – environmental literature/ecoliterature – environmental ethics – literary environmentalism – nature writing – pastoral literature – Edward Abbey – Aldo Leopold – Wallace Stegner – Henry David Thoreau*

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.

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"<sup>1</sup>

Couched in the rhetorical question at the head of this passage from Thoreau's essay "Walking" is a challenge, a call for a new kind of literature that enjoys an authentic relation to nature – or an *original* relation, in Thoreau's and Emerson's mutually intelligible sense of the term. We might call this new variety of literature an ecoliterature – anachronistic as that might be to the letter, though not the spirit, of Thoreau's own literary projects – representing a new stage or (r)evolution in the American literary aesthetic.

Modern literary environmentalism and the burgeoning discourse of ecocriticism may be justifiably viewed as kindred cultural projects with distinct roots in the American nature writing tradition most readily identifiable with writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold and Annie Dillard. This article examines some key literary conceptualizations of nature and culture as broadly promoted in the modern ecocritical community, while it also briefly charts American nature writing's development, as an extension of the emergent ecoliterary culture, into a more politically charged and ideologically loaded genre (or constellation of genres).

Nearly two decades ago Thomas Lyon constructed a useful taxonomy of nature writing in his thorough introduction to *This Incomparable Lande*, an anthology of American nature writings from the colonial period through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> With the caveat that "nature writing is not in truth a neat and orderly field" and that his "categories tend to intergrade...with great frequency" (Lyon: 3), Lyon cautiously identifies seven sub-genres among three broader categories, all of which can best be described as based on content and

1. In Lyon: 211. All subsequent citations from this source will appear in the text hereafter.

2. To any student approaching the expansive tradition of American nature writing for the first time Lyon's introductory discussion in this anthology, which amounts to a short monograph in its own right, is a highly useful if not quite indispensable starting point. Its historicization of the major strains of this tradition usefully situates works of American nature writing in their broad cultural context. Yet it must be said that both the introduction and the selection of works in the anthology suffer from certain limitations that characterized a number of studies in (and, in Lyon's case, directly preceding) the first wave of ecocritical reevaluations of American literature. This limitation is a rather homogenized male-centered view of the field. If one bears in mind that this tradition involves many other voices not present among the writers and works presented, Lyon's book can be of great service as a general introduction to the field; in this respect the historical reevaluation of the tradition in Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* may be a useful complement to Lyon's, even if it is theoretically more ambitious and hence more challenging for the uninitiated.

rhetorical aim rather than on form or topic (which of course is nature, whether broadly or narrowly conceived); these categories include: 1) field guides and professional papers; 2) natural history essays; 3) rambles; 4) narratives of solitude and back-country living; 5) narratives of travel and adventure; 6) narratives of farm life; and 7) analytic and comprehensive works on the human role in nature (Lyon: 4). Lyon's scheme identifies three general dimensions to the otherwise broad and unruly tradition of nature writing; i) *natural history information*; ii) *personal responses to nature*; and iii) *philosophical interpretations of nature*. "The relative weight or interplay of these three aspects determines all the permutations and categories within the field" (Lyon: 3).

The second of these broader categories, that of personal responses to nature, contains the widest and most diverse range of nature writings. Alternatively we could identify this category as involving *experiential treatments of nature*, insofar as the narrator's act of experiencing nature directly (and the mimetic evocation of that experience) is likely to be a pronounced feature of the work, which invariably has a narrative element. Typically there is an implicit invitation to identify the work's narrator with its author, which thus invites us to regard the work as non-fiction, as deceptive as this invitation may sometimes be when extended from writers like Thoreau or Abbey. Experiential works of nature writing, generally comprising sub-genres 3 through 6 in Lyon's taxonomy, tend to be regarded as more literary in design and effect than those at either end of Lyon's spectrum.

A remarkable variety of textual strategies can be said to characterize experiential works of nature writing. In addition to offering an updated cultural contextualization of nature writings that takes account of the rise of modern environmentalism, this article attempts to give readers an introductory sense of the textual approaches that may be employed in such works, not by looking horizontally at a full range of these techniques, but by sampling a couple of them. Finally, the rise of ecoliterature will be discussed in general in relation to an emergent ecocritical tradition, both of which reflect the environmental turn in American culture in recent decades, a trend which shows every sign of intensifying as the global environmental crisis becomes more pronounced.

### Cultural Contexts of the American Pastoral

Higher up the creeklet I encounter an abandoned farm. I try to read, from the age of the young jackpines marching across an old field, how long ago the luckless farmer found out that sand plains were meant to grow solitude, not corn. Jackpines tell tall tales to the

unwary, for they put on several whorls of branches each year, instead of only one. I find a better chronometer in an elm seedling that now blocks the barn door. Its rings date back to the drouth of 1930. Since that year no man has carried milk out of this barn.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand Country Almanac* <sup>3</sup>

In the passage above from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand Country Almanac*, the landmark work of American ecoliterature from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the primary narrative action is the narrator's interpretation of the scene before him, an artifact of a human habitation attempted in what was once a wilder place, then abandoned again to the prerogatives of nonhuman nature. It is an exercise in reading the effects of nature on culture and vice versa, a *topos* pre-dating Thoreau in the nature-writing tradition, though mastered by him<sup>4</sup> and emulated by modern nature writers whose starting point is not a simple pastoralism, in Marx's conception, but a complex pastoralism that acknowledges and often confronts the problem of pastoral longing in an industrial age. In the most cogent cases these confrontations stop short of easy solutions to the intractable ironies implicated in this situation, which would seem to be one of the conditions of modernity. Hence the consolation of paradox in everything from Gary Snyder's nature mysticism to Edward Abbey's existential double-ness; it is there in Dillard and Ehrlich and virtually all the major voices of this tradition, so it is hardly surprising to find Leopold emphasizing it<sup>5</sup> already in the 1940s in his discussion of marshland conservation in the face of an "epidemic" of agricultural expansion (Leopold: 100), an early stage in retrospect of the transition from small-scale local farming to agribusiness and the ascendance of monoculture.

Thus always does history, whether of marsh or of marketplace, end in paradox. The ultimate value in these marshes is wildness, and the crane is wildness incarnate. But all conservation of wildness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish.

(Leopold: 101)

In elucidating what he has argued to be a "distinctively American version of pastoral" Leo Marx sees New World nature writing as having fused two

3. Leopold: 57. All subsequent citations from this source will appear in the text hereafter.

4. Consider *Walden's* chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors."

5. With a certain moral ambiguity built in – how, for instance, can the narrator read the chronometer of the elm seedling short of cutting it down to satisfy this curiosity?

age-old traditions of high literature into a single conflated mode, in effect supplanting its prototypes, georgic and pastoral, in its more accentuated focus on a 'middle landscape'. Though he does not make the claim himself in quite these terms, Marx would probably not argue with the notion that what he calls "American pastoral" developed fairly rapidly from an emergent mode in the 19th century into a dominant tradition in the following century among writers committed to exploring the interface of culture and the natural environment. Marx's nominal identification of this hybrid mode with only one of its tributaries is apt to irritate classicists who view pastoral and georgic modes as distinct in western literature at least from the time of Virgil. Both Marx and Lawrence Buell have noted in different contexts (at times ironically playing off one another) that notions of generic integrity as "absolute, distinct, or stable over time" (Marx in Buell & Marx 1999) simply cannot survive the "messiness of literary history" (Buell 1995: 439), for as Buell goes on to contend in this particular case "by the time American literary culture had taken root traditional genre distinctions had already become porous...[and] 'pastoral' had begun to merge with 'georgic'" (439). American literary culture's avowed appropriation of classically based nature-writing traditions may not provide a flawless explanation for the trajectory which environmentally oriented literature would follow in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, but the notion has provided the basis for any number of models for understanding literary history in relation to "the larger body of meanings and values, the general culture, which envelops it" (Marx 1964: 10-11). Yet to Marx "the physical attributes of the land" in such literature "are less important than its metaphoric powers" and "what finally matters most is its function as a *landscape* – an image in the mind that represents aesthetic, moral, political, and even religious values" (128).

The implications of this last contention separate Marx from scholars like Buell and other ecocritics (of both the first and the second waves) for whom the fidelity of environmental mimesis in literature has become one of the overriding concerns, alongside the homiletic and critical-analytical components of ecoliterature, distinguishing today's literature of the environment from the more traditional modes of nature writing to which it continues to be both profitably and problematically related. In fact, the politicization of nature in American culture at large (as evidenced by the prevalence of what Buell has termed "toxic discourse") seems to make it unlikely that the simple pastoral can again exert the kind of stabilizing influence on the populace, as a tonic against the uncertainty and stress of modernity, that it once did a cen-

tury or more ago. Preoccupations with an embattled natural environment not merely as a symbol of the nation's compromised health and prosperity but as a materially diminished refuge from city centers already succumbing to smog and other environmental degradations have impelled ecoliterary discourse, in step with the general cultural trend, to address head-on the problems of environmental poisoning, species extermination, climate change and a long line of other issues implicated in the environmental crisis. At the same time the scholarly bloc within ecoliterary culture, following the lead of feminist critics, is actively engaged in revisionist and counter-canon building work with the aim of heightening awareness to environmental issues by valorizing texts that in one way or another serve this end.

Whether they seek to "demystify old-style nature romanticism" or problematic dualisms like city/wilderness, human/animal or nature/culture it is essential in Buell's view that both ecocritical revisionist narratives and those which reject the extreme of an ecocentric ideal "be offset by the counter-narrative of the reciprocal construction of human civilization by macro- and micro-environmental forces – including those that it has helped set in motion or awry by anthropogenic change" (Buell in Bak & Hölbling: 46). This of course carries over to the narratives valorized in the emerging ecoliterary canon. Novelist and cultural historian of the American West Wallace Stegner expresses a kindred idea to Buell's in his essay "Thoughts in a Dry Land," which examines the relation between western American culture and the arid western landscape, including how both are intractably intertwined in the poetics of the western writer (and artist) and the reception aesthetics of their audiences.

That is only one sample of how, as we have gone about modifying the western landscape, it has been at work modifying us. And what applies to agricultural and social institutions applies just as surely to our pictorial and literary representations. Perceptions trained in another climate and another landscape have had to be modified. That means we have had to learn to quit depending on the perceptual habit. Our first and hardest adaptation was to learn all over again how to see. Our second was to learn to like the new forms and colors and light and scale when we had learned to see them. Our third was to develop new techniques, a new palette, to communicate them. And our fourth, unfortunately out of our control, was to train an audience that would respond to what we wrote or painted.

(Stegner 1992: 52)

Stegner's observations on the role of landscape as an aesthetic determiner also have a converse implication – that when we cannot appreciate (or when we have not learned to appreciate) the beauty of an environment, we may be

more apt to neglect or abuse it. In Leopold's words, "We grieve only for what we know" (48). Stegner takes it for granted that human adaptation of the environment is inevitable, but he places no less importance on the fact, in his view, that culture is also continually adapted to the conditions of the landscape it inhabits – an environment it progressively alters and is altered by. This is the kind of dynamic view both of culture and of nature that many within the so-called second wave of ecocriticism have been working to emphasize in their attempt to get away from the polarizing rhetoric of simplistic binaries prevalent little more than a decade ago. The passage from Stegner also communicates some interesting reflections on the nature of environmental perception and culturally encoded systems of aesthetic valuation, while in a sense ethicizing mimesis as a literary act by suggesting its basis in a poetics of place. Attempts on the part of artists to influence the development of a reception aesthetic, however "out of our control" Stegner imagines these matters to be, are nevertheless central to how nature writers have engaged their subjects and influenced readers for as long as there has been a distinct nature-writing tradition in America. Is this not at the heart of Thoreau's question in "Walking"?: "Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature?"

### **Discourses of Environment and the Rise of Ecoliterature**

Two early definitions by Lawrence Buell suggest the outlines of the contested territories claimed by ecocriticism already in the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the first of these Buell defines ecocriticism succinctly "as study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (Buell 1995: 430). Michael Cohen points out that "what Lawrence Buell calls praxis...most of us call activism," and this politicized conception of ecocriticism during its earliest phase as a formalized area of scholarly inquiry became at one and the same time a stepping stone for the committed adherents of this new theoretical current and a red flag for skeptics concerned over whether it had the proper detachment from its own activist beginnings to investigate its unquestioned assumptions about ecology and the environment – whether it was truly capable, as Cohen puts it, "of creating its own critique of environmental literature, or whether it is only capable of praising certain modes of it" (Cohen par. 71). In Cohen's own formulation ecocritical theory should structure "discussions of environ-

mental literature, drawing upon science, history, and philosophy, while critiquing these sources.” This certainly comes closer to Buell’s second early definition of ecocriticism “as a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions” (1995: 430). In 1995 Buell produced *The Environmental Imagination*, the first major revisionist study of American nature writing to have emerged from the new theoretical current. As of his last study in what came to be a trilogy of major ecocritical works of scholarship, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* published in 2005, Buell has widened and rethought many of his assumptions about ecocriticism from the previous decade. His own movement away from a relatively narrow focus on nature writing from a fairly strict ecocentric vantage to a broader examination of urban and mainstream literature informed by social and environmental-justice platforms reflects in general some key trajectories ecocritical discourse has followed over its first decade and a half. Notwithstanding Buell’s exemplary status as ecocriticism’s leading theorist, or the many provocative and memorable articulations he has provided in its defense as a theoretical current, it may be hard to find a more succinctly satisfying account of ecocriticism’s intellectual and discursive indebtedness to American literary and cultural studies than the following capsule historicization from one of Buell’s critics from within the movement itself, Michael P. Cohen:

Imagine that ecocriticism has evolved in a constrained design-space that includes certain privileged discourses. Call this space the landscape of ecocriticism. Imagine that this landscape was constructed not by biologist Carson or ecologist Aldo Leopold, but by a tradition of American literary studies that includes Marx, Henry Nash Smith, and Roderick Nash. Marx himself inherited the pastoral as part of a discourse where there are poles along a linear array of possible landscapes, from wilderness to garden. Marx projected these as ideological positions from which speakers emerged. For us these have become speakers from wilderness to civilization, or alternately from nature to culture; as understood in political terms, from preservation to conservation; or in philosophical terms, from biocentric or ecocentric to anthropocentric; or as inherited from Frederick Jackson Turner, from the West to the East.

(Cohen: par. 13)

Much of ecocriticism’s first decade as an institutionalized theoretical approach within literary studies entailed a necessary period of maturation and conceptual refinement, catalyzed and directed considerably by challenges from within and outside the ranks of the ecocritical discourse community. A mixed bag of distinguished old-guard opponents like cultural historian Leo Marx

and antagonistic up-and-comers like Dana Phillips have been skeptical of the ideologically driven agenda of many ecocritical projects. Though generally speaking these critics do not tend to fit a particular disciplinary or theoretical mold, post-structural theorists may be overrepresented among ecocriticism's discontents, except among those (like Sue Ellen Campbell) who have begun to apply post-structural methods to traditional ecocritical problems (if we can use the word *traditional* in reference to a movement that hasn't yet reached the two-decade milestone). From the views that many first-wave ecocritics in particular have expressed on the merits of post-structural critique (particularly deconstruction) it would seem that antipathies may be mutual. In fact, it has become a bit of a commonplace in the debate for some commentators (a minority, actually) to regard post-structural theory as having come to the rescue of ecocriticism in its second wave, as if to save it, in a sense, from itself. The majority of ecocritics are apt to view the so-called anti-theory bias within ecocriticism as overstated, while some others see post-structural critique as on the wane in an academic climate that they feel is swinging demonstrably toward a new pragmatism driven by so-called *real-world* concerns.

Major theoretical contributions to the field have come from Glen Love, Lawrence Buell, Greta Gaard, Ursula Heise, Val Plumwood and Kate Soper, these last critics and theorists representing ecofeminism, which Ian Marshall identified already in 1994 "as a branch [of ecocriticism] that at present is bigger than the rest of the tree" (Marshall in Branch & O'Grady). Ecocritics now see their work as involving not only a critique of literary representations of nature but also non-literary discourses implicated somehow in environmental issues (be they scientific, medical, sociopolitical or ethical, to name only some). As Buell cautions, "issues of vision, value, culture and imagination are keys to today's environmental crisis at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (2005: 5). At the same time ecocritics are continually interrogating the very idea of nature itself not only as it relates to any number of cultural phenomena but also for its relation to the material environing world that seems, in all its complexity, rather cavalierly minimized by the trope *nature*, whose expansive semantic field is nothing if not culturally overloaded. In fact, a number of the prevailing assumptions about nature as a grand abstraction that held sway in ecocritical discourse only 15 years ago have now begun to seem naïve or dated in that same discourse, often enough by many of the same people who then held those assumptions.

Since ecocriticism's inception an avowed aim to be as multidisciplinary as possible has been embraced by most of the discourse community, so contributions by philosophers, historians and cultural anthropologists (among many other disciplinary representatives) to a discourse largely focused at present on environmental issues as evinced in literature and culture is far from unusual. Environmentally focused scientists, historians and philosophers unlikely to count themselves among the ecocritical community are nevertheless considered important theorists within ecocritical scholarly frames of reference.

The past decade has seen numerous anthologies of ecocriticism published, though a handful stand out as the major collections of scholarly articles in the field (including Glotfelty & Fromm 1996, Coupe 2000, and Branch & Slovic 2003). Numerous scholarly journals now routinely publish ecocriticism and ecoliterature. The leading journal is *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)*, published by the Association for Study of Literature and Environment, a professional organization of ecocritics, with approximately 1000 members from more than 20 countries worldwide and parent organization to seven international affiliate organizations. A special issue of *New Literary History* was published in 1999 devoted entirely to ecocriticism as a "newly prominent movement in literary studies" (*NLH*: 505) whose "advances in theoretical awareness," stemming from "productive tensions" within its own interpretative community, have enabled it to extend the reach of its inquiry "well beyond 'environmental' or 'nature' writing, narrowly conceived, and into portions of the literary canon which can now be freshly seen to have recognized...[similar]...tensions all along" (*NLH*: 507). Important theoretical introductions to this research area for literary theorists outside the ecocritical community have appeared in major series designed to introduce significant trends in recent cultural theory and philosophy to the broader academic world (Garrard 2004 and Buell 2005). Beyond these resources, a number of well received studies have been carried out on 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century American nature writers. Among the most often cited are studies by James Aton, James I. McClintock, Don Scheese, Scott Slovic, and Lawrence Buell (for complete bibliographic details see the list of works cited). Twentieth-century works that have drawn scrutiny in these and other recent studies of nature writing constitute the core of a modern American ecoliterary canon; these include: Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*, Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand Country Almanac*, Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*, Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Desert Year*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of*

*America*, Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* and Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*.<sup>6</sup>

## Interviews and Translations: The Ethics of Dialogism

Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communicating through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.

William Howarth<sup>7</sup>

At least since the appearance of the works of Muir, and to some extent Thoreau before him, nature writing in its dominant mode has been more than casually concerned with the problems of environmental endangerment. But in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century this sometimes implicit feature of nature writing became more and more explicit. The shift among nature writers to an ethos of activism, and the attendant growing pains that this to some degree must have occasioned, is suggestively captured in a 1979 entry in Edward Abbey's journal recounting an exchange he had with fellow nature writer Edward Hoagland. "I said to Hoagland: 'It is no longer sufficient to describe the world of nature. The point is to *defend* it.' He writes back accusing me of trying to 'bully' him into writing in my manner. Which is true, I was. He should." (Abbey 1994: 264-265) The idea that "basic structures of thought, values, feeling, expression, and persuasion may indeed be more influential in the remediation of environmental problems than the instruments of technology or politics" (Buell 2001: 31) is something that Abbey seems to have recognized early on in his career and like many environmental writers, especially in the generation that immediately followed him, he seems to have sought out strategies in his writings to transmute his personal environmental revelations into a motive power capable of triggering reflection or action, a poetics of eco-

6. A number of these writers have multiple works in the ecocanon, yet since this article is meant to be introductory in nature I have opted to list only one title from each writer, even if one or more other titles would have served just as well.

7. In Glotfelty & Fromm, 77. Subsequent citations from this source will appear in text hereafter.

logical ethics. It says a great deal about the efficacy of Abbey's own textual incitements that so many readers today claim to have found inspiration in his works to reconsider their relation to the wider world.

In this connection it may be worth taking a closer look at what Geoffrey Paul Carpenter terms the "rhetoric of advocacy" in American nature writing. The advocate of nature, Carpenter argues, "works to alter destructive conduct towards nature by changing our perceptions of the natural world" and he or she can only do so by transforming "the way we talk about nature" (Carpenter: 89). Because the non-human world is denied a voice through our "long standing tradition of defining language as exclusively a human prerogative, the nature advocate invests the non-human world with its own voice. . . . [and] asserts that we can know, even if imperfectly, the interests of an animal, a species, or an ecosystem by interpreting the non-linguistic phenomena of the natural world as the meaningful expression of an animate and purposeful community" (Carpenter: 90-91).

Interpreting nature's non-linguistic expression of meaning thus involves translation, for lack of a better term. Yet because translation is a means of negotiating between otherwise mutually unintelligible forms of expression, its utility as a metaphor for the rhetoric of advocacy is greatly limited unless we can see the process as a dynamic one involving a flow of information in both directions. Such a view is likely to open up an epistemological can of worms whose implications go far beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Edward Abbey's major work of environmental non-fiction, *Desert Solitaire*, attempts to acknowledge these implications and in some measure to address them, if not to resolve them. Abbey is preoccupied not simply with comprehending nature's non-linguistic meaning in terms we can appreciate and respect, but with speaking back to the natural world in a way that grants that world at least a surrogate agency. In one interesting passage in *Desert Solitaire* taken up by Carpenter, the Abbey narrator interprets a meaningful non-linguistic sign left by a coyote ("two gray-green droppings knitted together with rabbit hair") and attempts to speak back to the animal in terms it might somehow understand: "With fingertip I write my own signature in the sand to let him know, to tip him off; I take a drink of water and leave" (Abbey 1990: 33). Interestingly, the same benevolent impulse finds expression elsewhere in the narrator's choice *not* to communicate with the non-human world. Lost in his thoughts as he rounds the corner of a cliff face, the narrator stumbles upon a doe and her fawn browsing on desert flowers ten yards away from him. A

frozen moment follows as the narrator stops abruptly and holds his breath while the deer try to determine whether he poses a threat to them.

I breathe out, making the slightest of movements, and the doe springs up and away as if bounced from a trampoline, followed by the fawn. Their sharp hooves clatter on the rock.

"Come back here!" I shout. "I want to talk to you."

But they're not talking and in another moment have vanished into the wind. I could follow if I wanted to...But why should I disturb them further? Even if I found them and somehow succeeded in demonstrating my friendship and good will, why should I lead them to believe that anything manlike can be trusted? That is no office for a friend.

(Abbey 1990: 32)

The sharp disparity between the narrator's desire to communicate with the non-human world and in this case his choice *not* to communicate with it underscores the ethics of Abbey's ecological engagement. Advocacy cannot eradicate the uneven distribution of power between human beings and the rest of the natural world (largely a measure of our destructive capacity). Nature's advocates may try to compensate for the human being's failure to communicate on equal terms with the other resident entities that share its world, but they also assume responsibility (culpability) for their species' continuing disregard for the wild. Accordingly, literary advocates choose to act symbolically on nature's behalf (as Abbey does with the deer and the coyote) in the hope that such symbolic acts may inspire their readers to alter their own attitudes toward the wild.

Abbey's symbolic act of writing his signature in the sand to "tip...off" the coyote has an interesting parallel in Thoreau's *Journal*. In an entry on November 4, 1857, Thoreau notes "How swift Nature is to repair the damage that man does!" (Thoreau 1906 Vol. X: 160)<sup>8</sup> He describes "the rescue" nature effects with "her chemistry" when trees are cut down, by covering the bleeding stumps with "a thick coat of green cup and bright cockscomb lichens." Recounting a walk he has recently taken through the woods, Thoreau remarks seeing "some rank thimble-berry shoots covered with that peculiar hoary bloom very thickly."

It is a very singular and delicate outer coat, surely, for a plant to wear. I find that I can write my name in it with a pointed stick very distinctly, each stroke, however fine, going down to the purple. It is a new kind of enamelled card. What is this bloom, and what purpose does it serve? Is there anything analogous in animated nature? It is the

8. November 4, 1857. All subsequent quotes in this paragraph come from the same journal entry.

*coup de grace*, the last touch and perfection of any work...If it is a poem, it must be invested with a similar bloom by the imagination of the reader. It is the subsidence of superfluous ripeness. Like a fruit preserved in its own sugar. It is the handle by which the imagination grasps it.

(Thoreau 1906 Vol. X: 161)

Attempting to interpret nature's non-linguistic signs – the “poem” his imagination invests “with a similar bloom” – Thoreau also engages in a symbolic act of communication by writing his own name on the thimble-berry shoot. A journal entry from January of the same year complements this entry. In familiar terms Thoreau describes his aversion to the petty forms of society offered by village life: “I am not...expanded, recreated, enlightened, when I meet a company of men,” for in their ritual forms of social intercourse “I do not invariably find myself *translated*”<sup>9</sup> (Thoreau 1906 IX: 209). Outside the village, however, in the “stillness, solitude, wildness of nature,” Thoreau claims to find meaningful social intercourse in the companionship of a non-human society. “I love the scenery of *these interviews and translations*. I love to remember every creature that was at this *club*...I do not consider the other animals brutes in the common sense” (Thoreau 1906 IX: 210).<sup>10</sup>

The ecological ethic that so saturates Abbey's writings (which we are apt to think of as a modern sensibility) is abundantly evident in such statements, right down to Thoreau's admission that he himself is an animal – “I do not consider the *other* animals brutes.”<sup>11</sup> Thoreau's interspecies discourse occurs through “interviews and translations,” negotiations through which communicants investigate and respond to one another, through which they read and interpret each other's meaningful signs by absorbing them into their own semiotic system.

Here as well we find obvious parallels with Abbey's parables of interspecies communication in *Desert Solitaire*. The very language through which Abbey frames these parables recalls Thoreau's journal entries from January and November 1857. Both authors, for instance, use the term “office” in one of its less common senses, as denoting a duty or responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Both also depict themselves reading the “tracks” or “traces” of flora and fauna as mean-

9. January 7, 1857. Emphasis added.

10. Emphasis added: “these interviews and translations”.

11. Emphasis added.

12. Abbey: “That is no office for a friend” (32); Thoreau: “[In the society of other animals] my nerves are steadied, my senses and my mind do their office” (*Journal* IX: 209).

ingful non-linguistic signs. "In the dust and on the sand dunes I can read the passage of other creatures," Abbey writes (with an apparent pun on "passage"), "from the big track of a buck to the tiny prints of birds, mice, lizards, and insects." "Hopefully," he continues, "I look for sign of bobcat or coyote but find none" (Abbey 1990: 31). And yet soon he does find a meaningful sign of coyote: "I find the track of a coyote superimposed on the path of many deer....His trail comes down off the sandstone from the west, passes over the sand under a juniper and up to the seep of dark green water in its circle of reeds. Under the juniper he has left two gray-green droppings knitted together with rabbit hair. With fingertip I write my own signature in the sand to let him know, to tip him off" (32-33).

In his journal entry from January 1857 Thoreau interprets the non-linguistic signs of flora and fauna – their "traces" or "tracks" – in terms very similar to those used by Abbey in the preceding passage from *Desert Solitaire*. Recounting a walk he has taken along a forest path after a recent snowfall, Thoreau remarks how the snow

. . . is all scored with the tracks of leaves that have scurried over it. Some might not suspect the cause of these fine and delicate traces, for the cause is no longer obvious. Here and there is but a leaf or two to be seen in the snow-covered path. The myriads which scampered here are now at rest perhaps far on one side. I have listened to the whispering of the dry leaves so long that whatever meaning it has for my ears, I think that I must have heard it.<sup>13</sup>

(Thoreau 1906 IX: 211)

More than mere listening and reading, the receptive end of communication is a function of interpretation: meanings "whisper[ed]" by the leaves are "heard" by the speaker, yet to infer the "cause...no longer obvious" he must read and interpret the "delicate traces" of these leaves in the snow. The agency of his non-human communicants can only be asserted by anthropomorphizing them, by *translating* their signs into intelligible human metaphor (the pathetic fallacy of their *scurrying*, their *scampering*, their *whispering*). Thoreau is no more able than Abbey "to suppress" or "eliminate for good" his tendency to personify the natural (Abbey 1990: 6), yet both authors seeks a means, however imperfect, by which to grant the wild its say. As he continues his walk along the forest path, Thoreau remarks seeing "where some fox (apparently) has passed down it, and though the rest of the broad path is else perfectly

13. January 7, 1857.

unspotted white, each track of the fox has proved a trap which has caught from three or four to eight or ten leaves each, snugly packed; and thus it is reprinted" (Thoreau 1906 IX: 211). Thoreau's journal entry ends on this metonymic chain – linking tracks to signs, signs to texts, texts transformed into a new language, "and thus...reprinted." The "reprint" is as much the fox's tracks superimposed on the leaves' own "delicate traces" in the snow as it is Thoreau's translation of this spectacle into his journal account. We have very good reason to believe Abbey was familiar with this journal entry, since he quotes a line from it in his lengthy essay on Thoreau (Abbey 1991: 17). Certainly Abbey's coyote track "superimposed on the track of many deer" (Abbey 1990: 32) is a "reprint" in a sense virtually identical to that of Thoreau's metonymy, with one important addition – it also reprints Thoreau's literary translation of this sign.

Thus the strong sense among modern American nature writers of their rootedness in a tradition of literary environmentalism is hardwired into their textual strategies as a means of counteracting – to the extent that literary agency can exert such an influence – a potentially destructive lack of ecological awareness among individuals and their institutions. Any yet, as ecocritic Jonathan Levin has sagely warned, there may be another danger lurking "in the impulse among American literary naturalists to underscore the interrelatedness and mutual dependency of natural and cultural processes: ecological holism has a way of shading into a quasi-mystical embrace of the All, making it that much harder to distinguish and respond to the rich particularity and plurality of things" (Levin: 216). The evidence in recent ecocritical discourse indicates that this warning and others like it (both from within and beyond the ranks of the ecocritical community) are being heeded seriously. Environmentally engaged artists and scholars have begun to formulate responses both to green issues and to a range of problems within the environmental movement itself that may derive, at least in part, from the relatively narrow cultural and ideological frames of reference which served to catalyze environmental consciousness and activism as modern social phenomena.

The discourse of nature writing may be one such frame of reference, particularly if conceived in fairly homogenous, class-bound terms. Yet our notions of what properly constitutes nature writing are changing in line with a widening of the discourse to include spheres with which it has not been traditionally identified (such as urban-industrial environments), as well as through the historical recovery of previously ignored voices who do not fit this mold. Here ecoliterary culture as it further develops is likely to have as much in common

with the literary cultures of post-colonial theory and gender studies as it has with antecedent traditions of literary pastoralism. This is to say nothing of its interface with grass-roots cultures of activism such as the environmental-justice movement. But these and other narratives are just beginning to stir in more visible and interesting ways, and it remains to be seen just how these literary cultures and traditions may morph or coalesce. In one form or another nature writing has been a part of American culture since there was an American culture to speak of, and in its revitalized mode as ecoliterature it is bound to be with us for some time to come.

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