THE TRUTH OF ECOLOGY

Nature, Culture, and Literature in America

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restoration, were the norm. There is considerable irony in the fact that in order to
begin to understand nature, we had first to alter it for the worse. Foursquare real-
ism is not the worldview best suited to helping us understand that irony, just as a
sense of place of the sort displayed by Susan Fenimore Cooper in Rural Hours and
by Thoreau in Walden will not prepare one for life in present-day Cooperstown and
Concord, much less for the complexities of acid rain, global warming, urban sprawl,
and a host of other environmental ills. Today the real is contested not only in the
academy, but in reality as well.

What Do Nature Writers Want?

*Nothing can escape being put into question by History; not even good writing.*

Roland Barthes, Mythologies

**Form**

Before I begin to answer the question posed in the title of this chapter, I need to de-
line my topic and to draw a few distinctions that will help to clarify the lines of my
argument. Judging from the contents of the anthologies, conference papers, and
journal articles ecocritics have devoted to the subject, I find that when they refer to
*nature writing*, they usually have in mind a nonfiction prose essay describing a first-
person narrator’s efforts to establish an intensely felt emotional connection with the
natural world. This emotional connection can be a more or less idiosyncratic one,
depending on the temperament of the individual nature writer, who often lives or at
least writes in relative isolation from other human beings, and who may have no in-
terest whatsoever in being tutored by the natural sciences, preferring instead to find
things out first-hand whenever possible.

Of course, a given example of nature writing will not be readily identifiable as
such if its author’s attempts to forge an emotional connection with the natural
world, however they are conducted, fail to follow a certain script. And yet spelling
out the details of this script in an unambiguous way has turned out to be a difficult
task, as always seems to be the case when we turn from poring over the content of
texts to begin pondering the more difficult question of their form (which is precisely
why, as a critical term, “form” often works in such mysterious ways). For example,
Robert Finch, who in addition to being a student of nature writing as a form is one
of its most distinguished practitioners, argues that “the natural pattern” of nature
writing is “the excursion”—the venture out into something unknown or not famil-
iar—and “then coming back and shaping that experience into something.”[1] Finch’s
description of the “pattern” of nature writing, though it is a very broad one, is accu-
rate enough, I would find it much more apt, however, if Finch had resisted the urge
to define the pattern he has detected in nature writing as a “natural” one. Strictly
speaking, there can be no such thing as a “natural pattern” for nature writing, since
the essay is not, to borrow a phrase from philosophy, a natural kind.
I realize that this may seem to be speaking more strictly than is warranted; but the word "natural" plays a double role in characterizations of nature writing like Finch's, in which many things about nature writing are passed off as natural when it's perfectly obvious that they aren't. Its enthusiasts have a habit of taking nature writing as a given, and of ignoring its cultural peculiarity and particularity—its very formality, you might say (the title of Frank Stewart's book, A Natural History of Nature Writing, is a neat instance of this habit). By contrast, in this chapter I am going to attempt to treat nature writing "unnaturally," or critically and theoretically, and that will mean holding it to tighter standards of consistency than its creators and its critics are used to assuming. The risk here is nit-picking, and obtrusiveness of a sort that belonging to the culture one studies is usually enough to preclude. This is a risk I am willing to run, since I think it is far from being the case that nature is as natural does.

As I have confessed more than once in this book, nature itself (if you'll pardon the expression) seems to me to be much less culturally and socially constructed than has been claimed by the harshest critics of the "natural" point of view. But surely nature writing is culturally and socially constructed, and in a thoroughgoing fashion: its tendency to follow the typical patterns described by Finch is strong evidence that such is the case. Otherwise, a hundred flowers would have bloomed, and it would have been difficult for enthusiasts of the form to agree about nature writing to the remarkable extent to which they have been agreeing, however ambiguous the terms on which they agree seem to be. The eccentric Don Scheese, for example, offers a description of nature writing's form that is much more detailed than Finch's, but otherwise very similar to it. Scheese writes: "The typical form of nature writing is a first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward), of a predominate nonhuman environment, as the protagonist follows the spatial movement of pastoralism from civilization to nature. This description, because it emphasizes that the typical nature writing narrative moves "from civilization to nature," also seems to naturalize the form, just as Finch's does. However, Scheese does omit one essential: the return to home, both literal and figurative, which as Finch rightly points out completes the narrative movement of most nature writing.

So much, at least for the time being, for descriptions and definitions; now for the distinctions I mentioned earlier. Nature writing is to be distinguished, most importantly, from natural history, in which the narrator, if there is one, is a much more neutral party, whose character need not be all that strongly marked. This narrator is keen to explore and understand the complexities of nature, but stops short of full-fledged scientific investigation and report, though some of the natural historian's best friends are likely to be scientists. Nor is the natural historian, when it comes time to write, going to feel driven in his guise as narrator by the same formal considerations that are important to nature writers.
ogists and eccentrics alike. "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" is, to borrow Paul’s phrase, a definitive example of what is meant by “fine writing.” It is a painstakingly literary text. That it is also a thoroughly constructed text, and a product of Dillard’s very deliberate and quite self-conscious manipulation of nature writing’s key elements, should be more apparent to the book’s many fans than it seems to have been. This is especially true of the book’s academic fans; most of them are aware that not long before she wrote "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," Dillard wrote a master’s thesis on the formal structure of Walden. The non-surprising result is that "Tinker Creek" is more like the book formalist criticism imagined Walden to be than Walden itself is, as Lawrence Buell puts it. By calling into question its originality, I don’t mean to suggest that the popularity of "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," academic and otherwise, is undeserved or that the book has no merit. It is a veritable tour de force, even if a certain amount of its force is siphoned off from the source materials its author taps whenever she skillfully weaves together recollections of the exhilarating little walks she took each day with an account of her adventures as a reader. It is from these adventures in reading that Dillard’s ability to engage in religious and philosophical speculation derives; they also help her to fill out the brief sketches of local natural history she offers along the way. That Dillard’s experience is both framed and informed by her reading helps to ensure that her own reader is never in danger of feeling challenged by the sheer factuality of Tinker Creek and its environs. The creek and its environs remain just as mysterious to her reader as they are to Dillard herself. We know that Dillard finds Tinker Creek and the surrounding Blue Ridge mountains mysterious because she tells us as much as she can at every opportunity. Early in the book, for instance, she writes, "We don’t know what’s going on here." Disarming statements of this sort are one of Dillard’s trademarks; she is adept at suggesting, in an intimate, conversational way, the confusion that dwelling on earth causes those who are as spiritually inclined as she is. "Our life," she explains, "is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what’s going on here." Two things strike me about Dillard’s characterization of mystery, and I want to deal with each of them as thoroughly as I can. The first point I would like to make about mystery has to do with the way in which Dillard’s words on the subject play off of one of recent nature writing’s favorite tropes. To take "a wider view" is to return to wide-eyed innocence, which is both a naïve point of view and something like a full-fledged epistemology (all it really lacks is the philosophical articulation that would make its premises cohere into a theory about how we come by our knowledge of the world). But Dillard has something broader and much more sensual in mind than her suggestion that we should take "a wider view" implies. She does want us to open our eyes, but she wants us to flare our nostrils, peel our cars, cleanse our palates, and awaken our nerve endings, too. She wants us to become, as she claims to have become during her stay at Tinker Creek, "a tissue of senses." For each of us actually to become "a tissue of senses" might be an extraordinary feat, one that would greatly intensify the pleasure we take in daily life; but it would also overwhelm us with information for which we have no use, leaving us helpless. Perhaps this is why Dillard doesn’t relish the enhancement of her sensuality quite so much as she might. For her, to become "a tissue of senses" means reactivating, moment by moment, the passion of the spirit made flesh, in keeping with the Christian themes emerging, submerged, and reemerging throughout her work. In "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" Dillard makes it clear that she is much more vulnerable to earthly disappointments than she might otherwise be, precisely because she can become "a tissue of senses." Again and again, she feels intense satisfaction give way, in the very instance of its recognition, to sharp dissatisfaction. On one such occasion, while she pets a puppy and gazes at a nearby mountain, Dillard briefly experiences both the puppy and the mountain as fully present to her senses: "I am," she writes, "more alive than all the world." And she adds: "The second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy." One would like to think that Dillard doesn’t mean that second assertion literally; and yet it makes very little sense if one chooses to regard it as figurative speech. Dillard seems to be trying to insert a conundrum between herself and her experience, a conundrum she can exploit as a source of dramatic tension—of "mystery"—in her written account of the experience. Her very disavowal of verbalization is meant to be a "writely" gesture. Because Dillard assumes that the experiential and the verbal can be reconciled, she finds nature stimulating and frustrating in equal measure. She hints at the ambivalence of her attitude when, early in "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," she wishes that nature were more reliably present, and thus more readily available to fill her spiritual and literary needs. Unfortunately," she writes, "nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t affair." But Dillard is using the word "nature" in a special sense. For her, "nature" isn’t just whatever happens to lie outside her window and beyond her front door: it isn’t grass, trees, and flowers, or mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, and insects, or the folded hollows and sprawling ridges of the nearby mountains. "Nature" as Dillard characterizes it is at least once removed from all these things; it isn’t the water, it’s the spirit that moves upon the water. And it is revealed only in those moments of epiphany in which Dillard is permitted to pet a puppy and look at a mountain simultaneously, or in which she glimpses a rarity that she hasn’t seen before, but may have read about in the work of a writer more expert in natural history than she is. In "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," the rare things, the magical, "now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t" things, include events like the death of a frog in the jaws of a giant water bug. "He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a
kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football." Dillard says
that she was moved by this sight that she couldn't catch her breath when "the un-
recognizable flap of frog skin settled on the creek bottom, swaying." She also claims
to have been deeply moved by the play of light in the crown of a cedar tree: "I saw
the backyard cedar where the mourning doves root charged and transfigured, each
cell buzzing with flamm. It was grass that was wholly here, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like
being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance." In Pilgrim at
Tinker Creek, events like these become important tokens of Dillard's spiritual
sensitivity. Such events are made all the more token, and turned into literary devices, by
virtue of the fact that at least one of them, the giant water bug's gruesome act of pre-
dation, never occurred, at least not in Dillard's presence; she based her description
of it on a passage from the work of another nature writer. Dillard's handling of episodes like the death by misadventure of the frog and the
transfiguration of the cedar tree in her backyard suggests that nature must be star-
tlingly on display—all aglow and awash in mystery—in order to attract our attention
and capture our interest. Thought of in this way, nature is in danger of becoming
for us yet another form of backhanded entertainment, a procession of visual clichés like Old Faithful, Niagara Falls, Yosemite Valley, and the Grand Canyon.
But considering Dillard's penchant for extreme emotional thrills, I think she is
probably too much the connoisseur and too jaded to be satisfied by anything as tried
and true as Old Faithful: she needs that extra frisson, and seems to be something of a
"traumatophile."

The term "traumatophile" is one I'd like to borrow from Walter Benjamin, who
in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" reports that the poet "made it his busi-
ness to parry the shocks, no matter where they might come from, with his spiritual
and psychological self." This habit, Benjamin argues, reduces "experience" or Er-
fahrung to "the sphere of a certain hour in one's life," or Ereleusis. Experience as
Erfahrung is know-how, expertise, skill; experience as Ereleusis is adventure, chance
occurrence, a passing sensation. I'd like to suggest that natural historians are inter-
ested in Erfahrung, and that nature writers like Dillard are interested in Ereleusis.
And even though the distinction between the two kinds of experience is a sharp one
(at least in German), they are easily confused. Ereleusis is "a passing moment," Ben-
jamin writes, "that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience" and conceals the
fact that it is only a flash in the pan. The borrowing of authority from experience (Erfahrung, knowledge, expertise, skill) in order to dress up the insight of "a
passing moment," of an occurrence real or imagined or merely appropriated from
another's text, is one of Dillard's specialties.

Ecocritics have pointed out that many nature writers are seeking a nonverbal,
more sensual awareness of nature, which they must find some way to verbalize and to
make sense of, owing to the demands of their vocation. Only in this way can nature
writers "truly become, as well as write, nature," as one ecocritic has argued Dillard
wants to do. Yet Dillard always insists that her efforts to "truly become" nature
while trying to write about it, too, are more or less futile and doomed from the start.
"We don't know what's going on here," she says in the opening pages of Pilgrim at
Tinker Creek, before suggesting, later in the book, that her habit of putting things
into words robs her of whatever small knowledge of nature that she manages, how-
ever fleetingly, to acquire. But Dillard seems to think that, all worries about verbal-
zation set aside, nature is extremely direct: the mere fact of our self-con-
sciousness, she says, is enough to separate us from our fellow creatures. She adds
that self-consciousness is "the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies."
But since Dillard also believes that the city is "the novelist's world, not the poet's," I
would argue that her problem is actually not one of "self-consciousness" so much as
it is one of genre and form. She is trying to force essentially lyric thoughts into the
prosaic container of the nature essay.

In any case, I think it's clear that Dillard protests too much when she claims not
to know "what's going on here." To hear her tell it, she suffers from a paradoxical
form of aphasia, in which linguistic fluency isn't impaired but heightened, only to
be offset by a leaching away of the very experience about which the afflicted speaker
has said something fluent, perhaps even something brilliant. The more articulate
the statement made about the experience, the more the experience itself withers
away and the less immediate it becomes, so that lucid understanding of and memo-
rable statement about anything, no matter how simple that thing may be (the profile
of a mountain on the near horizon, or the warm fur of a puppy), begins to seem like
evidence of mental impairment and spiritual poverty. The cure for this affliction is
only too obvious: falling silent, and finding another line of work.

This brings me to the second point I want to make about Dillard's insistence on
mystery, which has to do with the ironic way in which the idea of mystery actually
depends on an assumption about alienation, from which it derives most of its force.
Dillard assumes that human consciousness is alienated from the natural world,
which is less rationally ordered and therefore more mysterious than the human mind
would like it to be. Because she is so heavily invested in the idea of mystery, or in the
idea of alienation, which amounts to the same thing, she often seems both awe-struck
and angst-ridden at the same time, and it's hard to see how she can have it both ways.
Notice how carefully her figure for mystery is gleaned from her reading in ramotol-
ogy: mystery is "like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf."
Where, exactly, is the mystery here? Not "on the face of a leaf," not if one knows that
these tunnels are made by leaf miners, but in the eye—and the prose—of the
beholder. This eye isn't so wide open after all: Dillard very carefully selects the figures
she uses to suggest the presence of mystery in her writing. Arguably, it is only because
she tends to use details like the leaf miners' tunnels to illustrate her points that she has
any reputation as a nature writer at all; the habit of illustrating her points with ex-
amples drawn from natural history is in keeping with the persona she has adopted in
imitation of Thoreau. But her true interest seems to lie elsewhere.
Walt Whitman's true interest also lay elsewhere when he employed aesthetic strategies like Dillard's a century and a half ago in order to celebrate his own mystical experiences and yearnings. Consider the following passage from "Song of Myself," in which a figure similar to that of the leaf miners' tunnels, the "little wells" of brown ants hidden beneath withered leaves, is used in order to suggest the ineffable:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . . and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a keelson of the creation is love;
And limitless are leaves still or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And many scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullein and pokeweed.  

One has to wonder why a celebrant of nature would want to credit, as Whitman does here, a notion like the "peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth." "The art and argument of the earth" (human art and argument not excluded) should be of great concern to any writer about nature. But Whitman wants to have all of the art, without having any of the argument. Like Dillard, he thinks of argument as something that belongs in the "novelist's world" of the city: it has no rightful place either in poetry or in nature. Like Dillard, he too is forced to become something of a genre-bender.

In the 1890s, Whitman enjoyed moments of lyrical transport alongside southern New Jersey's Timber Creek, and recorded them in a series of memoranda punctuated by untutored meditations on natural history, memoranda he later collected and published in Specimen Days (which he might have entitled Excelsior Days, though we probably should be grateful that he didn't). I think the poet's experience at Timber Creek, much more than Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond, establishes the model Dillard was to apply alongside Tinker Creek in the 1970s, even as the two place names are near echoes of one another, and despite Dillard's faithfulness to the template provided by Walden. The guidelines laid down by Thoreau are honored by later nature writers as much in the breach as in the observance, and Dillard, whatever she may have had in mind when she wrote Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, is no exception: her sensibility is much closer to Whitman's than it is to Thoreau's.

That Whitman was quintessentially an urban poet and a rough-hewn American version of the Baudelairean flairueur only strengthens the similarity between him and Dillard. Like Whitman at Timber Creek, Dillard is posing as an exurban writer (she is city-bred, but rusticated herself when she began to write). And just as Whitman's verse, Dillard's creek-side excursions are a rural version of the flairueur's promenades in search of something that Benjamin identifies as the "shock factor," the intense but fleeting moments of sensuous disorientation and psychic reinvigoration that the modern city provides in abundance. 

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek has been a cornerstone of most ecocritical attempts to construct a genealogy for American nature writing, so recognition of just how problematic Dillard's pursuit of "mystery" and her relationship to Thoreau are is long overdue. Like Dillard, ecocritics have assumed that nature writing has the power to move us because it is evocative of experience. But what sort of experience is it that the contemporary nature writer actually has and evokes? It seems to be an entirely literary one, in the sense that it involves a great deal of self-fashioning by way of self-conscious imitation. Regardless of whether Dillard modeled Pilgrim at Tinker Creek narrowly on Walden or more broadly on a variety of texts including Thoreau's, there is no doubt that the formal conventions of the nature essay are worked with great fluency in the book. From the point of view that I am trying to establish here, Dillard's fluency seems almost cynical.

Resonance
Nature: How beautiful nature is! Say this every time you are in the country.
Gustave Flaubert, The Dictionary of Received Ideas

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is designed to flatter a certain kind of contemporary sensibility. Its ideal reader is someone who feels almost entirely cut off from the natural world, who interprets ignorance of natural history as a symptom of a debilitating spiritual malaise, and who imagines that an intense experience, perhaps only one such experience, of some natural phenomenon will provide a means of resuming intimacy and daily commerce with the earth—that it will be an epiphany, in short. And "in short" isn't a phrase I use idly: Dillard's book is well-stocked with epiphanies, which come at its reader thick and fast. I imagine that the keenest of its admirers collect butterfly cocoons, sleep with their windows up, and wait hopefully, just as its author did, for revelations to emerge and unfold, or to leap through the open sash like Dillard says her sarcastic used to do.

While we are pondering the role that epiphany plays in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, we should recall the argument that Philip Rahv makes in his classic essay on "The Cult of Experience in American Writing." "The Transcendentalist movement is peculiar in that it expresses the native tradition of inexperience in its particulars and the revolutionary urge to experience in its generalities," Rahv argues. "No wonder, then, that Transcendentalism declared itself most clearly and dramatically in the form of the essay—a form in which one can preach without practicing."
point is that innocence and experience cannot be had simultaneously. Yet something of this sort—something distinctly unnatural, you might say—seems to be what Emerson (in essays like “Nature” and “The American Scholar”) urges his readers to attempt in order to find American culture and literature on an appropriately “natural” footing. Was Emerson really suggesting that we just fake it, in order to get our culture and our literature off the ground? And are nature writers like Dillard following medly in the train of someone who, to put the point bluntly, may have been a bit of a charlatan, intellectually speaking?

In order to help sort out the conflicting (and hence transcendental) claims about the potentialities of experience that seem to be essential to the Emersonian tradition, we also should recall, once more, the arguments Benjamin makes in his essay on Baudelaire. There Benjamin suggests that “conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry” are unfavorable: a result of “a change in the structure” of the lives of lyric poetry’s readers, lives which have been fragmented and objectified by the forces of history, especially capitalism. In lyric poetry, experiences of the kind celebrated by Emerson, and by the nature writers who wittingly or unwittingly have followed his example, are centrally important; but such experiences are increasingly remote from the realities of everyday life, according to Benjamin. He writes: “Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the ‘true’ experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. It is customary to classify these efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life.” But early-twentieth-century attempts to found a “philosophy of life,” Benjamin adds, were not conducted on the most promising basis: “Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not man’s life in society. What they invoked was poetry, preferably nature, and most recently, the age of myths.”

The pessimist in Benjamin insists that philosophy’s attempted revival of a more immediate notion of experience is an outright falsification of the historical moment, in which the poet who “has been cheated out of his experience” is, like everyone else, “a modern man,” which given the turmoil of the times (the 1920s) does not strike Benjamin as a very good thing to be. But the optimist in Benjamin, who seems inseparable from the pessimist in him (thus the meditative, nonargumentative character of his essay), insists that philosophy’s attempt to recapture a sense of lived immediacy is a vital expression of resistance to the very forces of modernity that make having such a sense impossible in practice, practice being, as Benjamin says, “in decline,” which is also why “the lyric poet with his halo is antiquated.”

Benjamin therefore argues that lyric poetry, even though it celebrates antique values and is steeped in philosophical anachronism, does reveal some vital truths about the present moment; but it does so in much the same way that the flash of lightning reveals the surrounding darkness of the night. For this reason, it isn’t the conjunction of expression and practice in lyric poetry, but the rift between them, that Benjamin probes in his essay; and this is a rift similar to, if not identical with, the one I have been exploring with regard to Pilgrim at Tinker Creek as an exemplar of contemporary nature writing. If this rift seemed remarkable to Benjamin and to Rahn, both writing in the 1930s, it seems even more remarkable today. But because ecocriticism has been hostile to ideological criticism of the sort practiced by Rahn and Benjamin, and as beliefs a movement premised on the hope of rebirth, it has insisted that the foregrounding of personal experience in the nature writing essay is the seal of its authenticity as a literary form and the sign of its philosophical validity.

To put the point I am trying to make in less literary-critical and more sociological terms, I’d like to suggest that Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is popular because of the appeal it makes to the peculiar character of the contemporary self. But this is something that the book doesn’t do uniquely, as if it were the only one of its kind: most contemporary nature writing, it seems to me, is too selfish, by which I mean that it is too preoccupied with the self as the formative and essential element of experience, and overly concerned with the self, not as an ethically responsible entity and a citizen of the world, but as the locus of what passes for spiritual life in a secular culture. I realize that my impatience with this defining feature of today’s nature writing will seem a little strange to other ecocritics. Frank Stewart probably speaks for the majority when he notes, approvingly, that nature writing "explores how we might restructure balance in our paradoxical selves, a restoration achievable only by awakening our kinship with all the other parts and processes in nature."

But I am much less taken with the therapeutic function and character of nature writing than Stewart is, albeit for reasons other than the one put forward by Lawrence Buell, who argues that we ought to resist the temptation "to read nonfiction as lyric, as the adventures of the 'I,'" since that will prevent us from doing "full justice to environmental nonfiction." It seems to me that the just reading Buell goes on to recommend, which is a realistic one, would entail treating the narrator of "environmental nonfiction" as a mere place-marker—literally as an "I," a character of the alphabet, that is, rather than as the sort of character we wouldn’t be surprised to find entangled in a plot. In other words, such a reading would entail a formalist treatment of environmental nonfiction of precisely the sort that Buell disapproves of elsewhere: it would force us to regard the "I" as nothing more than a "textual function." But since Buell is eager to discuss environmental literature in terms of its realism, he needs to get the narrator—who is, after all, a mediating figure—out of the way, or at least cut down to size. When gotten out of the way or cut down to size, the narrator—who is almost always identical with the author—can do much less to hamper nature writing’s performance of its essential task of referring to the world. Unfortunately for Buell’s argument, which obviates the distinction between nature writing and natural history that I began this chapter by drawing, nature writers seem quite unwilling to let the "I" disappear, however anxious they may be to integrate it with its surroundings.

Buell also argues, correctly from my point of view, that the effect of the seemingly inexhaustible interest in themselves displayed by many nature writers is to call
into question whether the self is as interesting an object of study as we supposed.\textsuperscript{26} I am persuaded that it isn’t; but that doesn’t mean we can simply brush the self aside as an object of study: we have to meet it head on. I therefore am in agreement with Wendell Berry’s notion about the best way to deal with such “consecrated bovines.” Berry writes: “Any human product or activity that humans defend as a category becomes, by that fact, a sacred cow—in need, by the same fact, of an occasional goosing.” “The most exalted of all the modern sacred cows,” he adds, is “the self.”\textsuperscript{37}

Its having become too selfish—its delicate treatment of the self as a “modern sacred cow”—tends to ensure the imaginative and ethical impoverishment of contemporary American nature writing. This needs to be stressed not despite but because of the good moral characters and sound environmental ethics of many nature writers (something for which it would be difficult to provide hard proof, apart from the activist stance that many of them adopt both in their work and in their private and public lives; but I’m willing to grant it for the sake of the argument). The selfishness or self-absorption implicit in the very form of nature writing, as it seems to be construed these days, can dilute good intentions and ethical commitments, at least in terms of their effective expression, literary and otherwise. It also can keep us from treating sacred cows like so much red meat.

Nature writers and ecocritics need to abandon their assumption that the self is a transcendent entity not to be explained in the terms of biology, common sense, and everyday life. At the very least, they need to grant that the self is something that can be explained, somehow or another. They might consider thinking of the self in terms of the evolutionary concept of the extended phenotype. According to Daniel Dennett, the phenotype “not only extends beyond the ‘natural’ boundary of individuals to include external equipment such as shells (and internal equipment such as resident bacteria); it often includes other individuals of the same species.” Dennett provides a couple of examples of the extended phenotype, each of which emphasizes its social and pragmatic aspects: “Beavers cannot do it alone, but require teamwork to build a single dam. Termites have to band together by the millions to build their castles.” The concept of the extended phenotype comprehends both the natural facts and the artifacts associated with a given species. One of the artifacts associated with human beings, Dennett suggests, is the self. He characterizes the self as a “web of discourses” and as a “center of narrative gravity.” But this doesn’t mean that we make it up; the self, Dennett says, is “as much a biological product as any of the other constructions to be found in the animal world.”\textsuperscript{38} If he is right, then the nature writer’s worry about connecting the self to its surroundings is unnecessary. That hard work has been done by evolution.

The fact that a lot of nature writing has its source in a misunderstanding about the self has unhappy literary consequences: narratives driven by a concern with a pseudo-problem are bound to seem like pseudo-narratives. In other words, they are bound to seem melodramatic. Many nature writers try to create narrative interest by describing the displacement of mild agitation by timid euphoria. This displacement tends to occur in so patterned a fashioned and so punctuated (just at the end of each essay and chapter: how do they do it?) as to make it seem trite. And it is trite; considering the wild places nature writers spend their time exploring, it is a very small wonder that they are able to connect with nature. The effort required is not so great as they would have us believe.

In Walden, Thoreau notes that the “doubtfulness” or standing apart engendered by our treatment of the self as a transcendent entity can “easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.”\textsuperscript{39} I think it also can impoverish our imaginative relationship to and our depiction of the natural world, especially if we overlook John Dewey’s warning, with regard to private experience, that “the quality of belonging to some one is not an all-absorbing maw in which independent properties and relations disappear to be digested into egohood.”\textsuperscript{40} Earnest attempts to achieve this sort of digestion are frequently encountered in nature writing (and in other variants of the personal essay), so frequently that many ecocritics have assumed that the quest for greater awareness and a more intense experience must be definitive of the form.

I’m not suggesting that this assumption is baseless; Thoreau, John Burroughs, and John Muir also put themselves at the centers of their essays. But the self at the center of recent nature writing essays is not the same as the self at the center of the essays of Thoreau, Burroughs, and Muir. It is represented as incapable of sustaining the intense, life-long involvement in a particular place that gave definition to the characters of Thoreau and Burroughs—that, in effect, made them characters. And it also seems to be incapable of sustaining the buoyancy of character possessed by Muir, whose wanderlust never made him feel displaced, as it might well have done. Only a few of today’s nature writers attempt to achieve the pitch of ecstasy that was Muir’s most characteristic note, and their efforts to do so seem strained, especially in contrast to the unforced joy that Muir, by all accounts including his own, was able to achieve.

Because it has been shaped by different cultural and historical forces than those that shaped the selves of earlier nature writers, the self as it figures in recent nature writing is more a psychological than a spiritual entity. The latter kind of self is increasingly in short supply, owing to the fact that our “contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious.”\textsuperscript{41} And this means that in “the America of Linus,” as Umberto Eco has put it, “happiness must assume the form of a warm puppy or a security blanket.”\textsuperscript{42} I think this cultural context explains the tendency that nature writers have to hold forth on “spiritual” matters, and I think it also explains why they seem to have become de facto authorities on such matters for many of their readers, just as Linus Van Pelt is for Charlie Brown. Nature writers are, however, much more eclectic than Linus, whose theological perspective is circumscribed by his devotion to the Old and New Testaments. Nature writers prefer to shop around more; they range freely across cultures in search of viable language to use in describing their “spiritual” aspirations, which is very strong evidence that the
historical moment in which those feelings might have had an inherent meaning has passed.

Back, then, to Annie Dillard, whose daily routine as a resident of Tinker Creek is not so different from the daily routine of the children who inhabit the suburbia depicted in *Penny*, in that it, too, has a certain repetitiveness, which gives it a formal coherence it might otherwise lack. When Dillard describes what is for her a typical day, she offers an epitome of the classic nature essay conceived of as an "excursion": "I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost." This, of course, is not the whole story; its conclusion, "I walk back in; I write about what I saw," goes unnoted by Dillard. Though it may be truncated and elliptical, a little narrative of walking out, seeing something, and explaining over it is as much of a story as one usually gets in most nature writing, the priorities of which lie elsewhere.

As I've suggested, those priorities are for the most part selfish ones. Time after time, Dillard terminates her excursions with lyric outpourings, which have less to do with Tinker Creek and its environs than with her own state of mind. This pattern is marked in miniature in the passage I quoted only a part of in the previous paragraph: "I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I reasound like a beaten bell." Lyric outpourings of this sort make possible a rhetorical handspring over the confusion and anxiety that nature writers like Dillard say they feel in those moments when they are confronted with something that seems alien to them, or about which they know either very little or nothing at all. Such moments are always treated as if they were occasions for transcendence.

As a latter-day transcendentalist, Dillard likes to blend anecdotes about the strange lives of plants and animals with expressions of her wonder and with mystical speculations. Again and again, she deftly translates the landscapes she describes into something else, so that they seem to "blossom into immense themes," as one reader has put it (in precisely the sort of naturalizing language that conceals the entirely artificial character of the enterprise). The blossoming of "immense themes" helps turn Tinker Creek into a hothouse where the green fuses is forced through the flower by literary means. Of course Dillard is not the only nature writer to rely on the "blossoming" of themes in her attempts to achieve poetic forms of closure; but she is unusually adept at it.

A number of the anecdotes that Dillard describes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* have to do with her efforts to find out, after the fact, what the thing that she has just seen, and which has caused her to "resound like a beaten bell," actually is. Much of the book is devoted to this backfilling and filling, as Dillard revises and reinterprets her experiences in light of what she has learned at the local library. The resonance that she celebrates therefore has to do with more than her immediate emotional response to nature, which is why I feel free to call it into question. I think resonance is a learned response; you learn it by reading the right books in a dutiful way.

In her defense, one can argue that at least Dillard has done her homework and has acquired her writerly habits honestly; as both theme and device, resonance has had a very long life in American literature. Resonance is cognate with metaphors that other writers have used to express their ideas of the special relationship to nature that residents of the New World are supposed to enjoy. For example, it resembles the bittersweet "feeling knowledge" described by Anne Bradstreet in her 1658 poem "Contemplations." Bradstreet's poem is a hymn to the sense cast in terms that, to a Puritan, must have seemed theologically acceptable or at least permissible, though perhaps just barely so. I quote from a passage celebrating the sun:

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Thy swift annual and diurnal course,
Thy daily straight and yearly oblique path,
Thy pleasing fervor and thy scorching force,
All mortals here the feeling knowledge hath.
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These lines pass muster despite the fact that Bradstreet's reference to the sun's "pleasing fervor" suggests a wayward sensuality. Their "feeling knowledge" of the sun's "scorching force" is the compensation that all "mortals" receive for their mortality during their lives here on earth. In the context of the poem, "mortals" means chiefly plants and animals; but it refers to the poet, too, at least potentially, since Bradstreet's poem is about the irony of her feeling the same attractions that plants and animals feel, and thus is about her running the risk of sharing in her mortality. At the same time, "feeling knowledge" suggests— is concordant, if not synonymous with—the rapture that the Puritans experienced in salvation, the one moment in a Christian life when the sensual and the sensible (the mortal, that is) may be felt and thus known as one, without any reservations or second thoughts (except, of course, for thoughts of the sun's "scorching force," of which mortals also have a "feeling knowledge" and which helps to keep good Christians humble by reminding them of their own innate depravity). Bradstreet's poem negotiates a fine line between being rapt with "wonder" and being rapt merely with "delight," and it does so with great delicacy. As it must: the latter kind of rapture by itself would be sinful, if not heretical, in Puritan eyes.

Resonance also resembles the transparency celebrated by Emerson in the most famous passage of his 1836 essay *Nature*: "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 eyeball; I am nothing; I see all the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." Emerson's point is that when "mean egotism" vanishes while one stands on "the bare ground"—that is, when one is situated, as he was, in the relatively unimproved, un-
developed, and still largely rural American landscape—a much finer egotism immediately replaces it. This new form of egotism pays one a rich dividend spiritually (and rhetorically too, of course), while simultaneously making possible a transubstantiation of one’s body.

The “transparent eye-ball” is a super-organ. Obviously Emerson’s metaphor doesn’t hold up from an ophthalmologic point of view: a “transparent eye-ball” would be useless for the purpose of sight, since no light would be reflected by its retina (presumably, it wouldn’t need to have a retina). Yet given that vision is the keystone of the human senses, Emerson’s metaphor has its own quirky logic. What better to see the cosmos with than a hypertrophied and disembodied eyelash not subject to the limitations of ordinary vision and the vicissitudes of organic existence? Equipped this way, Emerson is ready, like Dillard, to see and be seen by “some enormous power.” Had he said, “I lap up the blithe air with my large permeable tongue,” the logic of his metaphor would have been quite different, although the erotic character of the basic idea might have been much clearer.

Resounding, if not like “a beaten bell” then at least like an activated buzzer, is also something that might have happened to Whitman’s “body electric.” The poet describes his body as if it were hard-wired to respond to stimulation in much the same intense way that Dillard values. In a well-known passage from the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” Whitman both celebrates and protests against the power of his own reaction to touch. Of course, Whitman being Whitman, his reaction to touch is no less powerful when he is doing the touchings himself, as for example when he is in the grip (pun very much intended) of autoerotic passion:

You villain touch! what are you doing? … my breath is tight in its throat;
Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me.
Blind loving wrestling touch! Sheathed hooded sharp-toothed touch!
Did it make you ache so leaving me?

The violence of the language Whitman uses in this passage suggests that he isn’t having an especially good time, and that he really is indulging in self-abuse. But his suffering, because it is part of the creative process, turns out to be justified in the end. Though he spills his seed on the ground in the lines following the ones I’ve quoted, there is “recompense richer afterward” and a blossoming, you might say, of immense themes: “Sprouts take and accumulate … stand by the curb prolific and vital, / Landscapes projected masculine full-sized and golden.” But Whitman’s projections of the landscape frustrify by his seed, by his poetry, are at the same time introductions of that landscape. On the next page of “Song of Myself,” he finds that he “incorporates” all of the animal, vegetable, and mineral elements of earthly existence. Thus the landscape in Whitman’s poetry always turns out to be an inscape.

It turns out, that is, to be not a part and a parcel of the earth, but a part and a parcel of the soul. In a peroration Whitman added to later versions of “I Sing the Body Electric,” the poet addresses his body and “the likes” of his body and body parts: “O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you, / I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul).” What the poet calls “the likes of the parts” of his body includes the many phallic and testicular natural objects described elsewhere in his poetry, such as the “root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snake, nest of guarded duplicate eggs” and the elongated “libre of mudy wheal” for which he expresses tender feelings in “Song of Myself.” These are the natural counterparts of the “man-balls” and “man-root” that he appraises as frankly as he can in the gross anatomy to which he devotes the bulk of section nine in “I Sing the Body Electric.” As Whitman tells us in the concluding lines of this poem, after he has finished explaining how the knee bone connects to the thigh bone and so on until he has worked his way outward to freckles and inward to marrow, all these things are not only “the parts and poems of the body” and also, by some stroke of good fortune, coincidence, or convergent evolution, parts “of the soul.” That would mean they continue to have a double character, and the point is to get them together in the same place both as equals and as one. So Whitman concludes much more forcefully by asserting, “these are the soul!”

When he makes this assertion, Whitman seems to be attempting to solve the mind-body problem with an exclamation point, and by relocating the penis as an integral organ: it is no longer a mere appendage. Thus Whitman translates the penis into the “phallic” so highly valued by psychoanalysis, and rejects its use value for the exchange value common to all symbolic objects. His treatment of the rest of nature, of the earth’s body, follows suit. That his assertion of the unity of body and soul is, at least in part, the product of Whitman’s intense self-involvement, and that this self-involvement is often figured in his poetry as masturbatory, should give us pause. Not that there’s anything wrong with masturbation; but I doubt whether it affords the best available model for our relationship with the natural world, which is both productive and reproductive (in roughly the sense in which these terms are used by advocates of sustainable agriculture like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson). Masturbation is, in short, too selfish.

The reader may be wondering why I haven’t included Thoreau in this brief literary history of resonance, since few ecocritics would dare to leave him out. The reason is simple: I don’t think he belongs here. In Walden Thoreau describes what could be called a version of resonance, but he discounts the possibility of immortality that Bradstreet, Emerson, Whitman, and Dillard are all eager to maintain. Thoreau’s version of resonance also seems distinctly less rapturous than theirs. He writes: “If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glisten on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and narrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality.” If this is a transcendental sentiment, it is an extremely odd and bloody-minded one. There is something violent
about Thoreau’s imagination, and he may have been a true Puritan without being a Christian. This means that his Puritanism was not the merely residual form of belief or habit of mind that it was for most New Englanders of his day. Thoreau discovered something resembling the innate depravity of existence for himself, and he came to terms with it—after some struggle, and never to his entire satisfaction—through his study of natural history, and by refusing to compromise in his dealings with his society. Needless to say, this makes him a problematic father figure for later writers about nature, who have been inclined to take a much less complicated, less paradoxical, and less politicized view of things.

Otherwise the circle remains unbroken: “feeling knowledge,” the “transparent eyeball,” and the “body electric” are metaphors for a state of theological, epistemological, and/or sexual clarity and intensity during which the self, the writer’s inner nature, and everything outside it, the natural world or, in Emerson’s dismissive phrase, nature “in the common sense,” are experienced as one thing.42 Then they resonate. Resonance happens when you discover a connection between yourself and nature in moments of ecstasy. In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Dillard’s ecstatic relationship to nature seems to be religious, transcendental, and sensual all at once. I think it was also a self-induced ecstasy, though not, I hasten to add, in the same way that Whitman’s was.

Dillard characterizes her own ecstatic experience as follows: “Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow, you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall.” The odd thing is that although “grace” entails a heightening of consciousness for Dillard, it does not lead her to a better understanding of natural processes or the lives of organisms. Just the opposite, in fact: “I feel in confusion,” Dillard writes; “I don’t understand what I see.”43 So much, then, for natural history: it is a ladder that a nature writer like Dillard feels compelled to kick away after ascending to a higher plane of consciousness. Consciousness of this sort seems to have very little to do with understanding the earth; how, then, can it be said to have something to do with imagining the earth in a way fully in accord with the best theories of ecological science, as we have been told by ecocritics that it does?

Ecocritics have tended to take the ability to experience the present “purely” for granted as a marker of the nature writer’s heightened awareness of the “earth.” In his book on nature writing, Scott Silovic defines “awareness” as an “exalted mental condition,” and identifies this condition as the primary subject matter of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. He describes Dillard’s work as “psychological,” and suggests that its psychological dimension is what makes it valuable as literature.44 In a similar vein, Don Schese suggests that nature writing is descended from natural history, travel writing, and “spiritual autobiography,” and maintains that its spiritual quality, far from being a potential source of tension and contradiction, is nature writing’s most praiseworthy aspect.45

On this score, editors of nature writing anthologies also seem to have reached a consensus. In his preface to This Incomparable Land, Thomas Lyon argues that the “crucial point” for nature writers is “the awakening of perception to an ecological way of seeing,” an awakening that gets cashed out psychologically and spiritually, since it is accompanied by “a transcendence, to some degree, of the isolated consciousness of self.”46 John Elder and Robert Finch, in their introduction to The Norton Book of Nature Writing, note that nature writers like to begin their essays “with a closely observed phenomenon” and then to “reflect upon its personal meaning for them.” And this means that “the personal element—that is, the filtering of experience through an individual sensibility—is central” to what Elder and Finch view as “the nature writing tradition.”47 Yet another anthologist, Stephen Trimble, confirms the importance of individual experience in nature writing’s scheme of values: “Being a naturalist is a feeling,” he writes, “a conscious sense of connection to the land, to the other animals and plants.” And he adds: “Each experience begins as a new sensation. But as soon as writers attend to it, sensation becomes perception.”48

Each of these commentators celebrates precisely those features of the nature writing tradition that seem most problematic. And each of them affirms a set of interrelated truisms that ought to be called into question: that nature writers are more “aware” than other observers of nature, and more “spiritual,” too; that they transcend “the isolated consciousness of self”; that the most essential thing they do is to filter “experience through an individual sensibility”; and that they are concerned with “a feeling” created when “sensation becomes perception.” However, these truisms should be called into question not because they are false but because they are such inaccurate descriptions of the status quo: it seems regrettable that they are as true as they currently are. “Awareness,” the “psychological” and the “spiritual,” “transcendence,” “sensibility,” “feeling,” “sensation,” and “perception” are problematic notions precisely because ecocritics and nature writers, too, have put so very little pressure on them. Like resonance, they have become received ideas, and we are meant to gasp with admiration when we encounter them: How beautiful nature writing is!

To counter the complacency with which these ideas continue to be received, I would like to suggest that there is a fundamental tension between psychology or spirituality and natural history, a tension that ecocritics have ignored. If so, then nature writing must have little or no bearing on ecological and environmental issues, which are biologically, socially, and politically as well as, if not rather than, psychologically and spiritually determined. How aware one is of the environment, in the nature-writing sense of “aware” (which, after all, does seem to set the bar for awareness awfully low), is in the greater scheme of things simply not very important.

That Dillard describes the “exalted mental condition” of “experiencing the present purely” in terms of feeling “emptied and hollow” is instructive. It is hard for me to see what we are likely to gain from having such an experience, tonic as it might seem. Yet nature writers and ecocritics continue to insist that “experiencing the present purely” connects us in some special way to nature, which we know to be abundant, beautiful, and overflowing, or anything but empty and hollow. By
these commonplaces actually mark contradictions badly in need of a much more forthright treatment than ecocritics have given them. In short, these commonplaces are symptomatic rather than diagnostic. Consider, for example, the arguments made by the nature writer Diane Ackerman, arguments which echo Steward's point about the pursuit of the seaseable and the unseable but take that point to extremes. If Ackerman's book The Moon by Whose Light, Ackerman suggests that nature writers share not only "a pastoral ethic," in which they would expect to them to do, but also devotion to the keenly observed detail and "a sense of sacredness" as well. "This is a way of beholding nature," Ackerman suggests, "that is itself a form of prayer.69 Nature writing, in other words, tends to veer off into writing about the supernatural.

Like Annie Dillard, Ackerman is at some pains to lay claim to a religious tradition, and would like to do so on her own idiosyncratic, "mysterious" terms. She is aware, of course, that "beholding nature" has rich biblical precedents: we are instructed to behold the earth for the first time in Genesis 1, verses 29–31. In fact, it is no less than the second command God gives us, the first being the problematic directive to "Be fruitful and multiply."

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have eaten the fruit of the tree, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Obviously this is just one version of the creation among many, and just as obviously "beholding nature" as a religious practice is not limited to the Judeo-Christian world. It has a long and varied heritage, and the terms in which it is described in other religious traditions often suggest something much more contemplative than is urged upon us in Genesis 1. This more inward-looking notion of "beholding" is one to which many nature writers, dedicated multiculturalists that they are, also see themselves as, well, beholde

To any one who assures that the distinction between the material and the spiritual is not arbitrary but gets made to some purpose and for good reason, attempting to apprehend the material world spiritually—say, by "beholding" it prayerfully—seems to be a category mistake of the most basic kind. This doesn't mean that there is no room whatsoever in nature writing for the expression of feelings, but it does limit the ways in which the feelings of nature writers can be expressed and, more importantly, interpreted. As Kroeker notes, "ecological conceptions of natural reality," conceptions of the sort that many nature writers would claim to have, "need not exclude ideas or attitudes sometimes associated with reli
giosity,” even if those conceptions “allow no place for any transcendent deity,” much less for the dim-witted mysticisms that Kroeber finds annoying.51

Many of today’s nature writers, and certainly the best of them, must be aware of the risks they run intellectually when they frame their work in religious terms. Perhaps this is why they seem to hesitate when they describe their spiritual life in nature; they don’t want to project their own values onto the natural world willy-nilly. In fact, on this score I would say that nature writers tend to be overly cautious. Many of them assume that alienation from nature is so much a part of their character as westerners that it is presumptuous of them to pose as observers and students of the natural world. In essay after essay and book after book, they convey a sense of being caught in a cosmic dilemma: a sense of being trapped between inner and outer, self and other, word and thing, literature and science, culture and nature.52 If for no other reason than to escape the unpleasant business of having to shuttle back and forth between opposite poles, they try to reconcile these dichotomies. Their attempts at reconciliation provide the narrative impetus, such as it is, for much of their writing.

That so many nature writers continue to be attracted to prayerful ways of “beholding nature” also suggests that they feel uneasy with the nature bequeathed to us by the sciences, not excluding ecology. This is a nature entirely lacking in any transcendental meaning—a nature in which the “unsayable” is understood to be nothing more than the microscopic, the subatomic, the ultraviolet, and so on, which however hard they may be to see cannot be called ineffable. Literary tradition encourages nature writers to assume that to lack transcendental meaning—to be, as it were, entirely effable—is tantamount to having no meaning at all, and for many of them, nature is either sublime or it is ridiculous. Despite their supposed affection for all things pastoral, they scorn the middle ground.

So pronounced is this scorn for the middle ground in the work of American nature writers that I’m tempted to say that with friends like these, nature doesn’t really need any enemies. Of course, some nature writers are much more subtle on this score than others. For example, in her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, Ackerman rejects the distinction between the sensible (the meaningful) and the sensual (usually thought of as inherently meaningless), and her rejection of this distinction makes her version of “beholding” seem rather more complicated than Dillard’s is. “The senses don’t just provide sense of life in bold or subtle acts of clarity,” Ackerman argues, “they tear reality apart into vibrant morsels and reasonable them into a meaningful pattern.” For her, the meaningfulness of our sensual experience is part of the natural order of things; but this, she suggests, is something we tend to forget, and so we have become confused about our place in nature. “We need to return,” Ackerman writes, “to feeling the textures of life,” which she proposes we do by allowing ourselves a greater degree of sensory indulgence, of really feeling.53 But I doubt that we will be any more successful in apprehending the order of things if we shift our attention, as Ackerman suggests we should, to the odor of things. She recognizes, as Barthès did, that sight is a genteel sense, and wants us to give more priority to scent, taste, and touch than we do.

But there is a limit to how far we can go toward sensing things more intensely than we do now. This limit is fixed by our evolutionary heritage, which determines the amount of bandwidth we can pick up using any one of our five senses. As a matter of complete coincidence—this is, quite simply, just the way things worked out—our evolutionary heritage has cut us off from a more intense experience of some sensations, especially tastes and smells, both of which tax our powers of chemoreception. The ecologist E. O. Wilson writes:

*The jungle teems, but in a manner mostly beyond the reach of the human senses. Ninety-nine percent of the animals find their way by chemical trails laid over the surface, puffs of odor released into the air or water, and scents diffused out of little hidden glands and into the air downwind. Animals are masters of this chemical channel, where we are idiots.*54

Our chemical idiocy is part of the duty we pay on our heightened powers of visual and mental acuity—on our hypertrophied optic lobe and enlarged cerebral. Only so much information can be crammed into our brains; and it seems to me that nature writers ought to be among the first to accept our cognitive limitations, and to move on to fresher subjects.

Instead of doing that, writers like Ackerman have tried to verify Dillard’s assumptions about mystery by applying them to experience conceived of in more sensual and less overtly “spiritual” terms. Ackerman does deserve credit for interpreting our sensuality in the light of the natural history of the human sense organs, and for avoiding the abstruse theological arguments that Dillard finds attractive. But beyond a certain point, Ackerman’s engagement with natural history also becomes almost entirely metaphorical, and she begins to echo some of the more self-indulgent sentiments expressed in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In *A Natural History of the Senses*, for example, Ackerman writes, “There is no need for divine election. Perception itself is a form of grace.”55 It follows from this statement that the less percipient person, the scientifically trained observer, for example, whose mind is more apt to mediate perceptions, to sort them out and shape them into piles of data, than to relish them, is likely to be the less graceful person as well. Ackerman dramatizes this implication whenever she reports, as she does in a number of the essays collected in *The Moon by Whale Light*, on her adventures with field biologists. These are often charmingly boyish men with the know-how to take her to places where she can put herself in vibrant sensual contact with the animals they study, while they go about the less sensual and therefore less “real” business of number crunching.

Ackerman’s celebration of the therapeutic benefits of sensuality, and of what might be called the “poetry” of perception, has affinities with the arguments made on behalf of “gross contact” by Jack Turner in his book *The Abstract Wild*. Turner,
who at one point in his life was a professor of philosophy but who has now worked for many years as a mountain guide, describes his book as a rant. As befits a rant, many of the book’s assertions about the impact culture has had on nature are just as apocalyptic as Horkheimer and Adorno’s were fifty years ago. Maps and guides, the curmudgeonly Turner declares, “destroy the wildness of a place just as surely as photography and mass tourism destroy the aura of art and nature.” This declaration doesn’t leave much in the way of wiggle room in which we can work out our destinies and make those shuffling evolutions and compromises that are necessary even in the wild, where fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly, and humans can’t help loving the things they do. It is going to be very difficult for anyone to have “gross contact” with the wild, if any sign of human impact on and presence in the wild is taken as evidence of the impossibility of having “gross contact.” On Turner’s account, “gross contact” will be a one-off affair available only to the lucky few.

But despite the vigor of Turner’s arguments, his unwillingness to compromise, and his insistence on gross physicality, he is really after an ethical contact. And he holds out for that in the end precisely because he sees the human self as both root cause of our maladjustment to nature and the probable source of a cure for this maladjustment, if we take our wildness in the right doses. Turner writes: “Ecological crisis, is not, at the roots, caused by industrialization, capitalism, and technology, but by a particular form of the human self.” As so many nature writers and not a few ecocritics also do, Turner thinks of ecological crisis as something organic, as something with “roots,” and not as something interwoven with other human problems in historically complex ways. Uproot the bad form of the human self, become other than you are (less abstract, for starters), and you have begun to resolve the ecological crisis. Turner’s arguments bring him closer to the point of view of writers like Dillard and Ackerman than one might think he is at first blush.

Like Dillard and Ackerman, Turner also assumes that nature and our knowledge of it are among the many ancient things threatened by modernity. This assumption greatly underestimates nature’s resilience, and its mutability, not all of which is owing to our interference. Nature takes strange guises sometimes, and it seems to have its own ideas about gross contact. From New Jersey southwards through Virginia, Canada geese forget how to migrate and become all but immovable objects as they squat on the lawns of office parks and hiss at passersby, when they aren’t busy polluting the water of small ponds with their prodigious droppings. In the low country of South Carolina, alligators take up residence in the fish-filled water hazards of golf courses, and make them truly hazardous, while sharks snack on the arms and legs of swimmers who venture just a little bit too far from shore and the neon glow of Florida’s beachfront resorts. From Maine to Pennsylvania through to Wyoming and Montana and on to Alaska, black bears parade nonchalantly through subdivisions, as if ranch houses and condominiums were natural features of the landscape, noshing on garbage as they go. In the desert southwest, urban coyotes lure poodles and golden retrievers to their deaths, and cougars prey on straying toddlers, frightened joggers, and frail senior citizens. The upshot of all this is that venturing into the wild may be much less of a venture than we have assumed.

Before we complain about our inability to really feel it and our lack of gross contact with it, we should give more thought than we do to the fact that nature is more than willing to poke us in the eye, elbow us in the ribs, and kick us in the shins. In her impassioned screed “Against Nature,” Joyce Carol Oates, feeling bitter after a nasty episode of tachycardia she suffered while jogging on a beautiful summer day, defines “Nature-in-itself” in Melvillian terms. It is, she says, “a blackness ten times black.” This definition of nature is opposed to the Emersonian and the Thoreauvian definitions, and by adopting it as her own Oates means to tweak the tender sensibilities of nature writers, whose “painfully limited set of responses” to nature she sums up as follows: “REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYSTICAL ONENESS.” Oates is right, I think, about the limitation of those responses; but she fails to recognize that many nature writers are every bit as squeamish about nature as she is. This squeamishness has gone unnoticed by ecocritics, too. Reverence, awe, piety, and mystical oneness are antiseptic responses to nature; one might even say that they are unnatural responses, in that they are incompatible with what we know about the earthy flavor, by which I mean to suggest not only the randiness, but the rawness and rankness as well, of most biological processes. If you want to set up shop as a nature lover, you’re going to need extra reserves of cold blood, a stout heart, a strong stomach, a tolerant mind, and several changes of clothing, and no matter how prepared for the worst you may be, you shouldn’t expect to view natural phenomena without wilting with disgust from time to time. Reverence, awe, piety, and mystical oneness may appeal to the romantic in you, but they are far from being impartial responses to nature. In other words, they reveal a bias, which is just the sort of thing that, to hear nature writers tell it, they are supposed to help us overcome.

The natural history writer David Quammen makes the bias of romantic responses to nature abundantly clear when he describes a long day spent watching lemurs in Madagascar:

When the rain begins drumming more steadily, I raise the hood of my parka. The ground is soggy against my ass. I hunker. The golden bamboo lemur hunkers. I gape at them and, every so often, they glance pitifully down at me. As hour creeps by. The rain doesn’t stop and the lemurs don’t perform any memorable behavioral hijinks. A few leeches come inchworming up my legs, thirsty for blood. I flick them away without malice. I savor another day of romantic adventure in the rainforest.

Obviously Quammen, who knows the subject well, would agree that there is nothing natural about reverence, awe, piety, and mystical oneness. Before such lofty emotions can be felt and communicated, much groundbreaking work must be done: a plot of bare earth must be staked out, cultivated, and made fertile in the
imagination. In other words, someone has to have written the right books, and someone else has to have bought them and read them, so that a daily chain of expression, reception, influence, response, and imitation—all those things we mean when we speak of a tradition, or of a market, for that matter—can be created.

Having reached a crucial juncture in my argument, I would like to put one of the points toward which I have been working in this chapter as plainly as I can. Too much of what is called nature writing proves, on closer inspection, not to be writing about nature at all; it is, instead, writing about a response to nature. And this response may not be as resonant as it is said to be, since this writing leans more toward the private, inner world of the self, a place where tremulous sentiment rules, than toward the public, outer world of nature and culture. My point isn’t that all forms of inwardsness are suspect, but that other forms of inwardsness—such as, for example, intimate familiarity with and a keen pleasure in the natural world, and an unapologetic savoring of its many delights, or a frank appraisal of its many dangers and the hurts they can cause—aren’t seen as viable options and are given short shrift by most nature writers. As is another and still more challenging alternative, intellectual curiosity about natural history; should that curiosity mature into scientific or philosophical inquisitiveness, it might make the distinction between inner and outer on which so much nature writing is premised seem embarrassingly flimsy.

Really Seeing

*We bring to the simplest observation a complex apparatus of habits, of accepted meanings and techniques. Otherwise observation is the blanket of staring, and the natural object is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.*

John Dewey, Experience and Nature

Like Whitman's poetry, nature writing may be "stuffed with the stuff that is coarse," with gross content and natural detail. But as with Whitman's poetry, this stuffing is often there only to round out a phrase or two and to chart the dilutions of the writer's self-awareness, its expansions and contractions. Particularly the latter, considered strictly as narrative, nature writing is steeped in ennu. Many readers, especially those who have some resistance to so-called fine writing, who suspect that it is only sentiment propped up by sturdy syntax and vivid adjectives, find nature writing boring. It smacks too much of the seminar room and the creative writing workshop (which may be the nature writer's true home away from home), and it shares too many assumptions about the healing powers of nature with the shallowest of currently fashionable therapies.

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the experience valued by many nature writers is not the kind patiently acquired over time (not *Erkennen*), but the kind that can be had in an instant and captured in a phrase (it is *Erlebnis*). A rather pat confidence in the power of the descriptive seems to be widespread in our culture—thus our belief, for example, in the effectiveness of advertising, which has more in common with nature writing than one might think. Like copywriters, nature writers are skilled at description, which enables them to provide their readers with a visceral "experience" of being "in the great outdoors" (an idiomatic but nevertheless a paradoxical expression). Needless to say, the great majority of their readers are going to enjoy this vicarious experience while seated comfortably on their headstands indoors. Thus they can avoid the gruesome accidents, and the mild discomforts of sweat, sunburn, insect bites, stinging nettles, sprained ankles, and sand in the swimsuit, to which the outdoors leaves one constantly exposed. They can play it safe, risking only boredom and a little petty cash.

For nature writing is surely a commodity; after all, nature writers exploit natural resources, if only for the sake of imagery, so that they can send a tasteful and well-packaged product to market. They appeal to the tastes of the above-average Joe and Jane, who are educated, have some disposable income, and may even own a weekend place at the lake or in the mountains where they, too, can take exhilarating little walks, just like nature writers do. Despite my impatience with the Frankfurt School, I think they got some things right, and their observation that under capitalism experience is easily reified and turned into commodity is one of those things.

Writing about nature is another way of having it on tap for cultural purposes, and the aesthetic enterprise has a great deal more in common than one might think with other enterprises that much more obviously treat nature as a resource. Not that nature writing is the moral equivalent of strip-mining (as the Frankfurt School, in its most overheated moments of argumentative vigor, would have it), but the two activities do occupy the same moral universe. This is something that a lot of nature writers and ecocritics would like to deny.

Those nature writers and ecocritics who favor a phenomenological approach to resolving epistemological issues, even if as a rule they don’t make phenomenology an explicit theme of their essays, would be especially eager, I think, to deny that experience can be commodified and that writing about an experience, no matter how raw or unique an experience it might be, is one way to help the process of commodity. Consider the case of the nature writer David Abram, who like Jack Turner has a background in philosophy, and who does make his devotion to phenomenology explicit, very much so. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram writes: "The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gateways where our body receives the nourishment of otherness." Abram’s approach to sensation obviously has affinities with Ackerman’s approach to the same subject, as it also does with Turner’s, albeit to a lesser extent. But to Ackerman’s credit, she doesn’t embroil herself in the hoary old philosophical debates that Abram, who unlike Turner has very little experience of wilderness, still finds compelling. And Abram continues to find these debates compelling, despite his claims to have resolved them to his own
satisfaction by reading writers like Merleau-Ponty and applying their ideas in his admittedly and deliberately naïve attempts to come into vibrant contact with the natural world.

That in fact Abram has not resolved any of the philosophical debates he comments on is suggested by his continued reliance on a vocabulary that phenomenology ought to have cured him of using, as when he characterizes the sense organs as "gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness." He might have dwelt on the following proposition more than he seems to have done while writing *The Spell of the Sensuous*: that our organs mediate our sensual awareness of things for us demonstrates that the world should not be regarded as if it were "other" than we are. Unless, of course, our sense organs are also "other" than we are, which really puts us in a pickle philosophically, psychologically, and existentially. I suspect Abram is concerned about "otherness" only because he tends to think of sensory experience *unnaturally*, or like a philosopher, and because he approaches it with a ready-made thesis already in hand. This is why he characterizes the sense organs as if they functioned like gates, which very clearly they don't (nor, for that matter, do they deliver "nourishment" to our bodies). Abram's metaphors are revealing, but not in the way he intends them to be.

Like each of the other writers I've discussed, Abram seems to be attracted to the idea of our alienation from nature, and not just because it gives him something to write about. But many of his anecdotes suggest that what he characterizes as alienation from nature is much better described as ignorance of nature. Curiously, such ignorance is often represented by American nature writers as an advantage, if not as something of a virtue; working in a vacuum of knowledge seems to inspire them with a sort of missionary zeal, and they soon become their own prophets. Consider, for example, Abram's newfound enthusiasm for the insect life of Indonesia. He writes: "Fireflies! It was in Indonesia, you see, that I was first introduced to the world of insects, and there that I first learned of the great influence that insects—such diminutive entities—could have upon the human senses." I feel compelled to point out that this an unlikely story: how could Abram not have noticed "the world of insects" prior to his Asian travels? Excluding the poles, on this planet insects are ubiquitous and their numbers are legion. But as Abram explains, some pages later, he "had rarely before paid much attention to the natural world." So when he finally got around to paying some attention, he reacted to the natural world with all the enthusiasm of the convert. His head-over-heels reaction to the insect life of Indonesia is therefore justified, at least rhetorically. Like Dillard, Abram is resonating; he, too, is a pilgrim. Fireflies!

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachlard writes: "A philosopher often describes his 'entry into the world,' his 'being in the world,' using a familiar object as a symbol. He will describe his ink bottle phenomenologically and a palpable thing becomes the janitor of the wide world." Bachlard approves of this imaginative telescoping of the object, and seems to assume that any philosopher of worth will be a fellow phenomenologist (and not a blinkered British empiricist or a cynical American pragmatist). But to judge from what Abram makes of phenomenology, I think it much more likely that the worthy philosopher will be dedicated to optical parsimony and possessed of a gimlet eye. Such a philosopher will construe the object's gatekeeping function more narrowly, rigorously, and reductively than Bachlard allows, especially if the object in question is an unprepossessing thing as an inkbottle.

And yet if the worthy philosopher does happen to be a phenomenologist, perhaps even an unusually tough-minded and skeptical one, then Bachlard is probably right: the world will be his oyster, and should one happen to appear on his desk, the oyster will be his world. Such a philosopher will be a happy sort of fetishist, as Abram seems to be when he spends a couple of pages of *The Spell of the Sensuous* teasing out the phenomenology of his awareness of a ceramic bowl. His contemplation of this bowl, which sits before him on a wooden table lit by a single lamp, leads him to speak earnestly of the way in which his senses gradually become "more attuned to its substance," as they also will become increasingly more attuned to other objects in the room in which he sits, when given the opportunity. A wooden dresser, an old sink, the table where Abram writes, and his pens and pencils too are all capable of soliciting his undivided attention. Abram writes: "My sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence—to the way of this stone, or tree, or table—as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity." Thus he is able to engage in "a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below" his "verbal awareness," as if he were the Doctor Doolittle not only of the inarticulate but of the inanimate as well.

I think it isn't merely coincidental that when Abram focuses his attention in the way recommended by Bachlard, Merleau-Ponty, and other phenomenologists, the object of his attention should be an empty bowl. The empty bowl is an objet d'art, and hence the product of a certain artifice, both of craft and, more importantly, of thought. Abram contemplates an object that has been relieved of much of its raw materiality by the potter who shaped and fired it, and which has been de-materialized and formalized further still by Abram's decision to use it in his illustration of phenomenological methods and of his own "style and sensitivity." By virtue of the intensity with which Abram studies the ceramic bowl, it becomes the centerpiece of a ritual occasion. But this is just the sort of ritual occasion that occurs whenever a philosopher decides to come to terms with the supposed otherness of the world, as Abram makes it clear he is doing think, for example, of Descartes and his famous ball of wax. And imagine the difference it would have made if Abram's ceramic bowl had not been empty—if it had been full of loose change, say, or of granola, fresh blueberries, and whole milk. That would have put his relationship to the bowl on an entirely different footing, and would have made it a lot more difficult for him to appraise the bowl in terms of its supposed "otherness." He would have been too busy putting it to good use, filling his pockets with coins or his belly with breakfast.
fully available for our inspection. This is a point very forcefully made by Peirce’s fellow pragmatist John Dewey, who writes:

Awarenesses do not come to us labelled “I am caused by an event initiated on the surface of the body by other bodies” and “I on the contrary originate in an intra-organic event only indirectly connected with surface changes.” The distinction is one made by analytic and classifying thought. This fact is enough to place in doubt the notion that some modes of consciousness are originally and intrinsically “sense-perception.”

“It is pure fiction that a ‘sensation,’” Dewey adds, “travels undisturbed in solitary state in its own coach-and-four to enter the brain or consciousness in its purity.” Something like this “pure fiction,” the so-called phenomenological reduction, is the initial move in the philosophical method of phenomenology; it can be thought of as one of the more elaborately rationalized forms of navel gazing. Dewey fulminates against “hypostatizing” philosophical maneuvers of this sort. Those who make them, he writes, “suppose that there are inherently marked off different forms of awareness corresponding to the distinction arrived at by technical analysis.” He detects in such maneuvers the continued influence of “the traditional theory that knowledge is an immediate grasp of Being.” All that such maneuvers accomplish, he says, is to dress up the traditional theory “in the terminology of recent physiology.” For Dewey, “bare consciousness or brain and nerves” are much less important to “valid knowing” than things like pendulums, lenses, prisms, yardsticks, pound weights, and multiplication and logarithmic tables. The list is his own; obviously, we could update it by adding things like computer networks, weather radar, global positioning systems, and all the other prosthetic devices that, not being omniscient, we need to get around in the world.

Because he isn’t content with the things that prosthetic devices can do for us, and because he is hostile to science, in The Spell of the Sensuous, Abram attempts to revive the phenomenological tradition and to adapt it for the purposes of nature writing. I think he violates the maxim about trying to teach an old dog a new trick. But Abram is determined to interpret his experiences of nature in terms of the light they shed on problems that philosophers like Peirce, Dewey, and their pragmatic descendants regard as insoluble because the terms in which they are couched seem to be nonsensical.

Abram appears to think that one can unravel philosophical tangles and clear up intellectual muddles simply by appealing to intuition. “Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity,” he writes, adding that this is something that “goes largely unnoticed or unacknowledged in scientific culture.” The effect, if not the intent, of this statement, is to undermine both objectivity and scientific culture, by making them seem desiccated and overly rationalistic.

In light of Abram’s account of what a phenomenological approach to the world, or rather to the contents and furnishings of his kitchen, is like, phenomenology seems to be an essentially aesthetic way of viewing the world, or at least of writing about it. It also seems to be a somewhat autistic way of viewing the world, though its autism is a methodological imperative rather than a clinical condition. Phenomenology Abram-style tries to forget that the world is something we use, and treats the world as if we were wholly symbolic and hence all but inexplicable. As an aesthetic exercise, phenomenology involves, first of all, the deliberate commission of the pathetic fallacy, so that one can describe bowls and tables and the like as “presences” preternaturally alert to one’s own moods. It also involves the cultivation of a certain “style and sensitivity,” which gets cashed out verbally in the lush lyricism of phenomenological prose. Where would phenomenology be without adjectives, and lots of them? And finally, phenomenology involves a stunning indifference to contradictions; otherwise it’s very hard to understand how one could speak seriously about carrying on “a continual dialogue” with things located outside the realm of one’s “verbal awareness.”

For these reasons, and more, I think it’s obvious that as a nature writer Abram does not and cannot do just what he says he does and can do. For all his solicitude toward what he calls “the other,” he pays less attention to the bowl on the table than he does to his paying attention to the bowl on the table. Bowl, table, and world serve him as props for a scene played out in his own self-consciousness, despite his emphasis on bodily awareness. As Abram describes it, the body seems erudite and even polymathic, as it would have to be to carry on the many dialogues in which it is supposed to be engaged.

Whenever observation and argument fail Abram, italicized terms and thick descriptions come quickly to the fore in his writing. If he cannot see something clearly, he assures us he nonetheless can feel it and is attuned to its easy. He likes to make emphatic declarations about matters that, in truth, are more metaphysical than phenomenological. He writes: “Prior to all verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists.” Because it forces its practitioners to continually appeal to the a priori—to experience it as transcends “prior to all verbal reflections”—phenomenology is a stopgap measure at best. Unwittingly, it propitiates the void and courts the metaphysics it only pretends to have nothing to do with. And as Charles Sanders Peirce argued, in an essay with the bracing title “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” metaphysics is “a subject much more curious than useful, the knowledge of which, like that of a sunken reef, serves chiefly to enable us to keep clear of it.” For this reason, writers about nature would be better off leaving it to philosophers of the phenomenological variety to chart the shoal waters of consciousness, if that is what they want to insist on doing.

And even those philosophers are going to have a hard time of it. After all, it isn’t as if the contents and operations of consciousness were readily apparent to us and
Objective science, Abram complains, has reduced "the living person" to an "anatomized corpse." His argument is a variant of the old romantic complaint that we murder to dissect first voiced by Wordsworth. The sleight-of-hand performed here (Abram is a magician as well as a philosopher and a nature writer, so I use the metaphor of trickery deliberately) is typical of *The Spell of the Sensuous* as a whole. The case it makes for phenomenology as the curative discourse that will lead us out of the blinkered and dysfunctional "Western philosophical tradition," and into the promised land of "indigenous, vernacular cultures," where we will see things clearly and walk at our ease upon the welcoming earth, is pitched primarily at our emotions and prejudices.21

Abram’s brief against science also seems mistaken from a historical point of view. In a discussion of the limited role played by the senses in science after the seventeenth century, Foucault notes that taste and smell are excluded “because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable.” As for the sense of touch, it is “very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as between smooth and round).” Foucault says that this "leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof." He therefore concludes that “the blind man in the eighteenth century can perfectly well be a geometer; but, he cannot be a naturalist.” To be a scientific observer, he says, “is to be content with seeing—with seeing a few things systematically.”

Phenomenology, as Abram tells its story, is averse to “seeing a few things systematically.” It advocates instead that we return to “the taken-for-granted realm of subjective experience, not to explain it but simply to pay attention to its rhythms and textures, not to capture or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse modes of appearance—and ultimately to give voice to its enigmatic and ever-shifting patterns.” If phenomenology can help us do all that (and the reader should recall the reasons Dewey offers as to why it cannot), Abram thinks it also will help us to “articulate the ground of the other sciences,” which would mean that phenomenology beats other philosophies at their own game by refusing to play that game according to the rules.22 But if the sciences aren’t in need of grounding (as I argued in chapter three), then phenomenology’s efforts on their behalf would seem to be idle, and Abram’s argument doesn’t have the vital context he thinks it does.

Abram consistently misconstrues and misrepresents the philosophical and scientific positions he argues against. When, in a discussion of the heliocentric view of the solar system proposed by Copernicus, Abram declares, “This conception simply did not agree with our spontaneous sensory perception, which remained the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth,” the mistake he makes is to assume that concepts need to “agree with our spontaneous sensory perception” in the first place.23 They often don’t, which is precisely why we call them concepts; rather than, say, casual observations or chance impressions. We have to conceive them: they are human artifacts. Why be shame-faced about this, as Abram seems to be suggesting we should be? Moreover, it isn’t as if concepts and percepts have the habit of occurring to us in anything other than highly complex combinations. As they do, for example, in “the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth.” This experience is shot through with theories about the physics of light, about astronomy, and about tectonics, to list only the most obvious ones. Abram seems unable to decide whether “perception” means sense perception strictly speaking or something much more metaphorical, an unconscious perceptiveness and sensitivity to the nature of things.

The amusing thing about arguments like Abram’s is that while the rhetoric they rely on is rife with expressions of impatience with abstraction, the solutions that they offer are always just as abstract as and much more perplexing than the problems to which they are addressed. Consider Abram’s description of the epiphany he experienced when he encountered a bison in a forest in Java: “It was as if my body in its actions was suddenly being motivated by a wisdom older than my thinking mind, as though it was held and moved by a logos, deeper than words, spoken by the other’s body, the trees, and the stony ground on which we stood.”24 The alert reader will notice several things: first, that Abram puts a lot of stock in livestock. And second, that he describes his epiphany in the subjunctive mood (without registering that mood grammatically). This signals that his words are speculative, a matter of “as if,” and not simple notions of fact. His description is actually an interpretation, then, if not a fantasy of sorts, since even though Abram “really saw” the bison, he may not have seen it quite in the hallucinatory manner he describes. The third thing the alert reader will notice is that Abram’s terms are precisely those that, as Dewey argues, will allow him to recoup the old idea that “knowledge is an immediate grasp of Being,” of “a logos, deeper than words, spoken by the other’s body.”

From a pragmatic point of view like Dewey’s, the case that Abram makes in his book is utterly predictable: he attempts to reconstruct for his reader “sensuous” experiences of the sort he thinks must ratify a phenomenological approach to the natural world. Again and again, his reasoning seems circular: the experiences he describes seem to validate phenomenology, only because he first describes them in accord with phenomenological theory, which he insists isn’t culturally circumscribed, as other philosophical theories are. Uniquely, phenomenology provides Abram with the tools he thinks he needs to overcome our “strange inability to clearly perceive other animals,” our “real inability to clearly see, or focus upon, anything outside the realm of human technology, or to hear as meaningful anything other than human speech.”

*The Spell of the Sensuous* is yet another illustration by an American nature writer of the insightfulness of Philip Rahv’s claim that “experience,” no matter how dressed up it may be in theory, tends to be an anti-intellectual idea. In literature in which “experience” is represented as the most essential thing, “the real appears,” according to Rahv, “as a vast phenomenology swept by waves of sensation and feeling. In this welter there is little room for the intellect, which in the unconscious belief of
many imaginative Americans is naturally inopportunous, if not wholly inimical, to reality." Abram's appeal to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty doesn't make Rahr's point any less applicable: it's a point that nature writers and ecocritics alike need to heed. If they do, they no longer will feel compelled to make complaints like the one made in a recent volume of ecocriticism: "Rather than being continuously felt, much of the natural world that pervades our daily lives goes unnoticed and is not even experienced as proximate, much less integral and synergistic to our every breathing moment." What would it mean to "continuously" feel the pervading character of the natural world, and to experience it as "integral and synergistic to our every breathing moment," which sounds like an exhausting thing to do? I suspect that it would mean being another kind of creature altogether, a nonhuman and very likely a single-celled, extremely short-lived creature, destined to burn out before it has a chance to fade away over several decades of a glorious old age.

In The Moon By Whate Light, Ackerman writes, "Once you have seen a bat echolocate, or watched an alligator touch distant pond mates with its water dance, your idea of seeing and touching changes." But Ackerman is wrong: once you've seen a bat echolocate, or watched an alligator boom and make the water around it dance, it isn't "your idea of seeing and touching" that changes, not if you are paying careful attention to what you see—both "really seeing" it, that is, and really thinking about it once you've seen it. What should change is your idea of hearing, but only insofar as the auditory experiences of bats and alligators are concerned; their range of hearing extends into frequencies where our ears are of no use to us, something it has taken us a long time to discover. Bats are nimble creatures and alligators are toothy brutes, so we've had to approach them carefully in order to get to know them as well as we do. And that we know them at all is due to the efforts we've made to formulate a few theories about them. As John Burroughs once insisted, "The eye is informed and sharpened by the thought."

Nature writers and ecocritics are distrustful of our thoughts, largely because they are ours and don't seem to belong to the world as fully as they would do if they were present in it in the same way that bats and alligators are. But as Richard Rorty argues, the complaint that "we are for ever trapped behind the veil of subjectivity is merely the pointlessness, because tautological, claim that something we define as being beyond our knowledge is, alas, beyond our knowledge." Rorty also says that the "distinction between inside and outside" that gives rise to this tautological claim is invalid because it is at odds with "a biologicist view"—a view that nature writers and ecocritics ought to take into account—and because it "amounts to making knowledge into something supernatural, a kind of miracle." From Rorty's perspective, it seems evident that nature writers cannot have what they want, and that the complaints they make about culturally fundamental matters like verbalization are signs of their bad faith.

The bad faith of American nature writing is most evident in its treatment of its own subject matter, the natural world, which it represents as alien, and therefore as something impossible to address, much less capture, in words—even when the words it uses to describe the natural world are in fact wonderfully eloquent and evocative. Consider just one example of eloquent and evocative words of the kind I have in mind, Henry Beston's attempt to describe the sound of snow falling against the windows of his farmhouse in Maine: "Every now and then I could hear, even through the wind, the sound which snow makes against glass—that curious, fleecy pat and delicate whisper of touch which language cannot convey or scarce suggest." This self-admonishing passage is from Beston's classic Northern Farm, first published fifty years ago. It shows just how ingrained the contrary tendencies of nature writing are.

These contrary tendencies persist both because they are "traditional" and because of the credence that nature writers continue to grant to epistemology as a philosophical subject worthy of their interest. Following the lead of the nature writers they study and emulate into a philosophical cul-de-sac, many ecocritics have thought that they, too, must redress the epistemological shortcomings of Western culture if ecocriticism is to flourish. That they need not bother to do so, that, in fact, no one, philosophers not excepted, need bother to do so, has been my assumption throughout this book, and I want now to explain, once more but from a new angle, why I think epistemology should not be a subject of our concern.

One of the epistemologies that nature writers and ecocritics seem to find most attractive is a very old one; it can be traced back to the work of the first natural historian, Aristotle. "The hylomorphic epistemology," as Rorty explains in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, "thought of grasping universals as instancing in one's intellect what the frog instanced in its flesh." To understand the frog was to grasp its elemental froghood, its batrachian quintessence or, as we might think of it, achronistically and from our own historical perspective, its froggy DNA.

But the hylomorphic model of human understanding was displaced long ago, according to Rorty, "by a law-evidence framework which explained froghood as possibly a merely nominal essence." Froghood became just another entry in the book of nature until Locke synthesized the hylomorphic and the nominalist views by conceiving of the mind as supersensory, thus linking language to the world directly through the mind as the organ of sense and sense making. As Rorty points out, this is a purely metaphorical solution, in which the mind is thought of as being, like the eye, the "mirror of nature."

The nature writer's desire to have an unmediated relationship with nature is a desire to become a more perfectly reflective surface for the representation of nature. This desire is frustrated by the constraints imposed upon us, ironically enough, by our relation to nature and by our own natures as one sort of animal among myriad others. In other words, these constraints involve both the many varieties of cultural blindness—which are easily overstated; we can always change our minds about things—and the ineradicable of human beings when it comes to things like catching the scent of another animal on the wind. That's something we just have to live with.
The argument that we don’t fully experience nature because we are incapable of really seeing and really feeling denies our own nature, but the constraints placed on our relationship to nature aren’t limited to epistemological or, rather, physiological ones; those constraints are also ethical. This is one of the most important points made by neo-pragmatists like Rorty, who remarks that the “attempt to slough off responsibility”—or bad faith—“is what Sartre describes as the attempt to turn oneself into a thing.” Turning themselves into things, into bell-like instruments and empty vessels of pure responsiveness, is what American nature writers often have sought to do. They have imagined that this change of state will grant them an enlightened passivity, and therefore ethical peace of mind where nature is concerned; but to be ethical is to be embroiled in activity and to never enjoy peace of mind. In fact, I would argue that one cannot slough off responsibility, to use Rorty’s phrase, or to put the point another way, cannot slough off one’s culture, and remain a moral agent at the same time. Michael Pollan asks an apposite rhetorical question with regard to the American obsession with wilderness: “Wasn’t the attraction of wilderness precisely the fact that it relieved us of having to make choices—wasn’t nature going to decide, letting us off the hook of history and anthropocentrism?” Nature writers and ecocritics cannot be let off that hook; what they want is as unavailable philosophically as it is culturally and experientially, in the wilderness the same as elsewhere.

This appears to be the case no matter how fervidly the language nature writers use to try to deny or get around it. When, for example, Terry Tempest Williams asserts her belief “in the longing for unity,” explains that longing as a “yearning to heal the fragmentation and divisions that separate us from nature, that separate us from ourselves, that separate us from God or the mysteries,” and then tells us that the wilderness is the place where “we all can make peace with our contradictory natures,” we have to notice both how typical and how very peculiar a statement she is making. It’s the kind of statement that gets made only when the mind is conceived of as being something like an internal wilderness area, a sort of blank space on the cognitive map. While some minds may be like that, charity requires us to believe that most of them are not.

But there are limits to how far we can go in our charitable appreciation of other minds. In his discussion of Thomas Nagel’s classic essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Rorty points out that philosophers like Nagel who assert the validity of intuition, of what it feels like to be a bat, or of what it feels like to be a human being for that matter, rest their arguments on “sheer phenomenological qualitative opacity.” They make an appeal to the experience of being one thing rather than another, an appeal to the “opacity” or “in-ness” of that thing. Thus they argue in an inappropriate and fallacious ipso facto fashion, since it is the very nature of the thing that is at issue and has yet to be established as a fact. This raises, Rorty argues, “a bedrock metaphilosophical issue: can one ever appeal to non-linguistic knowledge in philosophical argument?” That is, how can we hold ourselves accountable to something of which we all admit we can give no account? Rorty argues, “This is the question of whether a dialectical impasse is the mark of philosophical depth or of a bad language, one which needs to be replaced with one which will not lead to such impasses.” And he adds, “The intuition that there is something ineffable which it is like to be—something which one cannot learn about by believing true propositions but only by being like that—is not something on which anything could throw further light. The claim is either deep or empty.” Rorty suspects that it is empty, and so do I.

Rorty argues that philosophy as we have had it handed down to us is “the impossible attempt to step outside our skins—the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute.” Like philosophy, nature writing also begins with an attempt to step outside and into what is supposedly another, more absolute reality. “I walk out,” Dillard writes, “I see something.” But attempts to “see something,” if they are attempts to really see it, are never conclusive and inevitably lead to an impasse. Stuck in this impasse of their own creation, nature writers wait in vain for what Ackerman describes, in her essay “In Praise of Bats,” as “an electric, pulse-reviving vision when the universe suddenly declares itself. A ravishing tug on the sleeve of our mortality.” Mortality may very well tug on our sleeve, but this doesn’t mean that the universe “declares itself.” We have to find it out: such is the lesson that natural history teaches us. Unless they begin to be more conscious and more critical of the ideas that have structured their work, nature writers and ecocritics, too, may find themselves, in Rorty’s words, “drawing a line around a vacant space in the middle of the web of words and then claiming that there is something there rather than nothing.” This vacant space may be reminiscent of Walden Pond, but we will be unable to sound its depth. It won’t have any.

**Culture**

for the word tree I have been shown a tree
and for the word rock I have been shown a rock,
for stream, for cloud, for star
this place has provided firm implication and answering
but where here is the image for longing

A. R. Ammons, “For Harold Bloom”

Religion and philosophy are two provinces of thought separated by an ambiguous frontier, a hoodoo terrain that Emerson explored again and again in his essays. This terrain continues to attract American nature writers, though it is clear that it isn’t altogether of this earth. But our nature writers seem to be most comfortable with a
view of the landscape taken from on high, even if this view is often blocked by intellectual fogs and a blue haze of religiosity—such is the meteorology of the intense inner.

In his poem "For Harold Bloom," A. R. Ammons strips the scenario informing Emersonian transcendentalism to its bare essentials. This scenario is Prometheus-like in that he refers to Prometheus, the archetypal Ammon's poem has ventured into the high places in search of "firm implication and answering" with regard to the mysteries of being. But he has met with only partial success, having been granted the rudiments of culture—a functional language, useful for the denotation of trees and rocks—and culture's painful excesses of meaning, which dictate that the only "image for longing" the narrator of the poem can acquire is one that he fashioned for himself: a stopgap measure at best. Thus the fate meted out to Prometheus, bite after bite for all eternity, and thus the gnawing at the vitals that Romantic assumptions about nature and culture visit upon those who accept them as valid. Ammons, I believe, recognizes the mistake made by the narrator of his poem (which must be read as an ironic tribute to Harold Bloom, among the last of the red-hot Romantics). It would be a good thing if contemporary American nature writers could share Ammons's insight and skepticism.

An earlier generation of nature writers got into trouble for "nature faking": for making up more or less outlandish tall tales of nature lore. It was claimed, for example, that some mother birds are able to mend the broken legs of their fledglings, should the need arise, by setting the broken legs in casts made of mud. The present generation of nature writers, by way of contrast, might be accused of "culture faking," of making up or exaggerating cultural handicaps so that they can reflect themselves as more impaired than they actually are. Dissatisfied with what William James calls "ambulatory" knowledge, "knowing as it exists concretely," nature writers long for a "salutatory" knowledge, a form of "abstractly taken" knowing that is the stuff of fantasy, according to James. Salutary knowledge has little to do with the entanglement and embrangement of the "rich thicket of reality." So much, then, for the "nature essay" as a perambulatory "excursion."

Frustrated in their pursuit of salutary knowledge, American nature writers often indulge in bouts of hand wringing, as we have seen, and seek solace in religiosity, poetizing, sensuality, or philosophical gibberish. But there is yet another way for them to cope with the frustrations they feel, one that involves trying to discover an ethnological solution to the problem of our alleged alienation from the natural world. In theory, such a solution involves shifting one's allegiance and defecting to another culture, where the scales might drop from one's eyes. Then one would be able to "really see" the natural world for the first time, or so we are told by nature writers who are enamored of the ethnological approach. As one ecocritic has observed, these writers "seek to recoup a 'wholeness' with the human world" of the sort thought to be typical of "the mind-set of primitive cultures." They assume that really seeing nature would mean seeing it as something other than the concrete nation of forces and assemblage of mechanisms that Western science has studied so relentlessly and with such devastating effects.

In his 1968 book The Island Within, Richard Nelson reveals his fear that he may be alienated from nature simply because he is an American of Western European extraction who grew up in the Midwest during the 1950s and 1960s. Nelson, who has lived in Alaska for many years, says that he envies his Native American friends because they are more attuned to nature than he will ever be, no matter how much time he spends hunting, fishing, and camping on the wild coast where he makes his home. But Nelson is obviously a more competent natural historian and outdoorsman; otherwise he couldn't live where he lives and couldn't do the things he does. Nelson seems to suffer from a peculiarly American form of wishfulness: he longs to achieve "a separate kind of conscience" and to escape from the "snare of thought" into "the purer freedom" of the senses. Frankly, I find this desire for a more perfect union with nature puzzling. Nelson lives just a short journey by boat away from an uninhabited island where brown bears feed on the carcasses of dead whales along a shoreline carved out by the unfettered surf of the Pacific. What more does he want?

Nelson answers this question, though he does so indirectly, in a passage of The Island Within in which he describes his inability to connect with a flock of seabirds diving for scraps of fish near his boat. He writes: "I become distracted by the urge to identify which species these birds are, straining to see minute differences in the color of their wing linings, bills, and feet. I pull out the book, then realize that in my compulsion to possess or categorize them with names, I've stopped seeing them." Nelson's quandary is both semiotic and epistemological. He italicizes the word "seeing," but doing that gives the word no more meaning than it would have otherwise, nor does it improve the word's grip on reality. If squinting our eyes at reality is of no avail, then squinting our words at reality also is of no avail. Seeing a bird—and hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting it, too—are acts (partially) embedded in culture. Why do we wish that it could be otherwise? Why can't we just relax, enjoy the view, and identify the birds, too?

But Nelson's semiotic and epistemological quandary is, of course, a familiar one: like other nature writers, he's bothered by his inability to see the birds only to the extent that he assumes birds are hard to see because they belong to a nonhuman order of things—to "nature," that is. I wouldn't want to deny that there are things about nature that are difficult for humans to know, since we are—as I've already noted—much less proficient than other creatures when it comes to exploring certain aspects of reality, especially the more "sensual" ones. Nor would I want to deny that some humans are more proficient than others when it comes to exploring certain other aspects of reality, which may or may not be "sensual." But what? I think nature writers should consider Dewey's observation that "the counterpart of the idea of the invidiously real reality is the spectator notion of knowledge." If you assume that reality is inordinately difficult to know, you will relegate yourself to the status of a
chance bystander of the sort who is never a reliable witness of events in the world. You will start to believe that getting the barest glimpse of things is just the best that you can do. But this double bind hasn't to avoid, from a Deweyan point of view, since reality, even if it should happen to take the form of seabirds dressed in unfamiliar plumage, need not be regarded as "invidiously real," nor must being a spectator seem dismal. Surely Horkheimer and Adorno were overstating the case when they wrote, "Paranoia is the dark side of cognition." 101

Compare George Levine's take on what happens when man meets bird to Nelson's. Levine writes: "I have been forced to recognize the degree to which even their otherness is part of a distinctly human conception, bred from books and texts and language as much as from the confrontations or evasions of the field." 102 In other words, birds can be different from humans without their difference posing an insurmountable obstacle to our knowledge of them. The difference between nature and culture doesn't have to be granted the grave philosophical significance that nature writers have granted it. In fact, this difference is one source of the pleasure we take in encountering birds and other wildlife, which suggests that things can be different from us without being other than we are—without being, as different things are sometimes said to be, the Other. Culture is our means of negotiating our differences from nature and from each other, and not an outright impediment to our negotiations, about which we can do nothing at all—the disdain view of culture that holds sway in most of our theories about it.

It seems to me to like Richard Nelson, Barry Lopez takes an unduly dismal view of culture—or at least, of his own culture—in his many books and essays. Also like Nelson, Lopez is very fond of the native peoples of the far north, and seems to be seeking an ethnological solution to the problem, as he sees it, of Western culture's contempt for nature. But Lopez's vision is a darker one than Nelson's, and his tone is more plaintive. The ecocritic William Rueckert is sensitive to the lighting and timbre of Lopez's work, and interprets it in terms of a "powerful nostalgia for the primitive," the "primitive" meaning a relationship based on an extensive firsthand knowledge of nature and a reverential, nonadversarial attitude toward it. Rueckert argues that Lopez's mission as a writer is to "reestablish" a positive relationship "with the prehuman and nonhuman ground of all life; with the preverbal, nonverbal, and pretechnological." 103 But to offer an account of the preverbal, nonverbal, and pretechnological, or all those things presumed to lie somewhere just off the shores of culture in the vast sea of the "prehuman and nonhuman," while relying precisely on the verbal and the technological resources that culture provides, is a tall order and one impossible to fill. Anyone who dared venture to fill in this role as a primitivist, and then some.

Of necessity, the preverbal, nonverbal, and pretechnological that Rueckert argues Lopez would like to "reestablish" a positive relationship with would have to be ungraspable using any of the means at the disposal of the writer, since these means are exclusively verbal and technological. Nevertheless, Rueckert is correct to sug-

gest that Lopez sees forging an unbreakable link between inside and outside, text and world, and self and other as an ethical and artistic imperative. As Rueckert observes, "Lopez is never frivolous" and his work is "deeply moral." 104 But what Rueckert finds "deeply moral" about Lopez's work may very well strike other readers as unnecessarily moralistic.

The primitivism that American nature writers and ecocritics find congenial is a somewhat Pollyannish primitivism, which turns a blind eye on the barbarism that inevitably infects all cultures to some degree, whether they actually are so-called primitive cultures or not. This version of primitivism assumes that "extensive practical knowledge" and "a reverential, nonadversarial attitude" are compatible ways of being "in touch with" nature. But combining the two is likely to give rise to inperable contradictions, since one is the fruit of a way of doing and the other is the fruit of a way of being, and since to each, as we all know, is human. This isn't just a cliché. In his poem "The Glass of Water," Wallace Stevens writes: "In a village of the indigenes,/ One would have to discover. Among the dogs and dung, One would continue to contend with one's ideas." 105 Primitivist nature writers would prefer to avoid having to make discoveries and having to contend with ideas. But if Stevens is right about what must happen even in "a village of the indigenes," no refuge from the hardships of discovery and the contentiousness of ideas will be available to them there.

Attempts to evade the hardships of discovery and the contentiousness of ideas are bound to fail, and this failure will make itself evident symptomatically. For instance, Lopez's 1997 book Arctic Dreams has been regarded as a magisterial text, but the book expresses an ambiguity of conviction and is haunted by a looming despair at odds with the beauty and beauty of the landscapes its author traverses. The more deeply one reads into Arctic Dreams, the more brooding and introspective its tone becomes. Not that Lopez, or any other nature writer, should be an outright optimist where the fate of the natural world is concerned; but despair can be, and often is, yet another form of bad faith.

Lopez is a very sophisticated writer in some respects, but he often makes an extremely simplistic distinction between nature and culture. He is apt, for example, to interpret evidence of human presence and activity in nature as a contradiction. He does this in Arctic Dreams in a passage in which he mulls over the difference between the archeological remains of early inhabitants of the arctic and the abandoned campsites of more recent southerners in that land:

You raise your eyes from these remains, from whatever century, to look away. The land as far as you can see is rung with a harmonious authority, the enduring force of its natural history, of which these camps are so much a part. But the most recent evidence is vaguely disturbing. It does not derive in any clear way from the land. Its claim to being part of the natural history of the region seems, somehow, false. 106
Lopez is dismayed to discover that twentieth-century high-arctic campfires are littered with tobacco tins, oil cans, and empty rifle cartridges, the refuse of a commercial culture with little sense of what subsistence means. And no doubt this litter is a depressing sight; yet it seems unfair to human beings, and especially to the Western variety of human beings for whom Lopez has very little patience, to judge them in the light of an unfamiliar landscape “rung with a harmonious authority.” This sort of authority, couched in what seems to be the mixed metaphor of a ringing harmony that one can see (but cannot really see), is unlikely to be the least bit visible to anyone else, no matter how sympathetic to Lopez’s position everyone else may be. This sort of authority resides entirely in the eye—and in the prose—of the beholder.

Questions of vision, of perception, and of some form of faith are the central issues in Arctic Dreams, as is indicated by the book’s “psychological” title and adumbrated by its subtitle, Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape. Lopez mystifies the experiences of arctic travelers, especially those travelers who happen to be natives of the region. And he does this both implicitly, when he describes his own experiences in moving, lyrical ways and in language rich with religious overtones, and explicitly, when he editorializes about what kind of experience one ought to have in and of northern landscapes:

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.

The sentiment expressed in this passage, which concludes a meditation on the shortcomings of the scientific point of view, conveys a message other than the one Lopez intends, and an unhappy one. In the later chapters of Arctic Dreams, the detailed natural history that has been presented in the opening pages of the book is revealed as window-dressing. If the quality of our intention and of our attention is what matters most, then should we not dispense with natural history and cultivate an altogether “uncalculating mind” right from the start of our arctic adventures? It seems to me that on Lopez’s account, doing just that would be the quickest way for us to achieve a heightened awareness of the land’s “expression.”

In an essay first published in 1981, Lopez reveals his impatience with the plodding, prosaic character of natural history when he complains that the majority of field biologists work “under the press of orthodoxy in Western science” and “overlook mystery.” “They dismiss, for fear of the complexity they introduce, many factors that set an individual animal apart from the standard description of the species.” Lopez is entirely correct to complain about the unreliability of “the standard description” of species by field biologists: as many of them have admitted, the logistic view of species is a highly faulty one, conferring a spurious appearance of precision on fairly miscellaneous data. However, the standard descriptions of species offered by taxonomists are another matter; and few, if any, field biologists would agree that “mystery” is an acceptable alternative to the logistic equation. They would use terms like “randomness,” “patchiness,” or “the stochastic” instead, about which there is very little mystery, however much imprecision there may be in coping with the chaotic phenomena that these terms denote mathematically. “Mystery” is a term that nature writers like to use to paper over the gap between what is and what they assume ought to be, even if there may be some disagreement between writers like Dillard and writers like Lopez about just where this gap is located.

Paperying over gaps of this sort, no matter where they’re located, is regarded by many ecocritics as the essence of the nature writer’s art; they argue that an approach to nature like Lopez’s, in which “mystery” is treated as “a kind of wisdom to be experienced,” expresses a moral as well as an aesthetic point of view. But it seems to do that only if one grants that moral points of view are matters solely of the inner state (the imagination and the desire) of individual persons at particular moments. To be moral in this way, even intensely so, in the solitude of the arctic is not test, I would argue, of one’s integrity as a moral agent. In moral matters, context is all, especially in moral matters that touch upon issues of environmental ethics. It may be true, as Lopez would have it, that the most appropriate form of awareness in the arctic, at least for someone who is neither a hunter nor a scientist, is “aesthetic contemplation.” After all, one is likely to think of the arctic as a new world’s paradise. Not only is it cold, it is a desert, notwithstanding all that snow and ice and abundant bird and mammal life. Just as there are said to be no atheists in foxholes, there are probably no hedonists in the higher latitudes.

But let me put a different spin on the argument I’ve just made. The moral stance recommended by Lopez is not only “also” an aesthetic stance, it is an aesthetic stance through and through; hence its religiosity. When Lopez mystifies the experience of the arctic, and recommends mystification as the one true way to approach the northern landscape, he does so because he understands both this landscape and the experience of the person moving in and through it on the analogy of an aesthetic form. He writes: “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.” What can one say about obliteration attempted on a scale this grand? I think it is axiomatic that Lopez’s view of poetry is not one that a literary critic can countenance (and as for his assertion that “the land is like poetry,” I’ve said enough about that in earlier chapters).

Jonathan Raban, the expatriate English writer who now makes his home, just as Nelson and Lopez do, in the Pacific Northwest, complains in his recent book Par-
sage to James about the limitations placed on American nature writers by their allegiance to a point of view indebted to "Emerson at his most vatic." Because they subscribe to this point of view, Nelson and Lopez try to maintain a "prayerful relationship" to nature, which gives rise to a "dominant tone" in their work that is "solemn, lyrical, minutely observant" — a false tone, or so Raban implies. The vatic, the solemn, and the lyrical all necessitate a belief in a "transcendental order" that is "improbably tidy and benign," Raban argues, adding that one is unlikely to discover much evidence of this kind of order in the chaotic old-growth forests and swirling coastal waters of the far northwest. Instead, it must be willed into being as a part of the nature writer's vocation. This explains the peculiar earnestness of American writing about nature, an earnestness that after reading Lopez Raban didn't feel he could emulate. "Lopez," he writes, "was too good for me."

What I find most striking in Lopez's work is the way in which the one hand, that of the natural historian keenly interested in wildlife and wild places, doesn't wash the other hand, that of the religious seeker and artist dissatisfied with his own cultural heritage. What happens instead is that Lopez's will-to-mystery reacts negatively on his mastery of nature fact and detail, chiding it for being insufficiently poetic and esoteric. As a result, his writing seems to spiral around a center composed of equal parts of knowledge and know-nothingness. This unstable compound never resolves itself into a firm confidence in the worth and value of what is known and felt, or a happy-go-lucky but bitter-sweet skepticism about both.

It also seems to me that over the course of Lopez's career as a writer, the note of complaint has strengthened: the caustic, and not the cajolistic, has become the basis in the struggle between his doubt and his desire. And he has made it clear that his upbringing is to blame for his dissatisfaction. Because Western culture is supposed to be alienated from nature, it inspires in Lopez an aversion that borders on loathing. This aversion is complemented and exacerbated by a view of aboriginal cultures that is more or less utopian. In a recent memoir, Lopez explains that he was attracted to the study of anthropology while enrolled in the masters of fine arts program in writing at the University of Oregon, and soon discovered that the alternatives he sought were available in a number of indigenous cultures. Of these cultures, he writes: "They did not separate humanity and nature. They recognized the immanence of the divine in both. And they regarded landscape as a component as integral to the development of personality and social order as we take the Oedipus complex and codified law to be." Lopez commends what he thinks of as the anthropological falsity— that is, he treats cultures as more rigidly structured and codified, and as more distinct from one another, than they are and could possibly be. He writes as if the incest taboos and the institutions of law were uniquely Western phenomena, and as if there were no traces of animism and of the sense of place to be found outside the confines of indigenous cultures.

Nature writers often bewail the susceptibility of indigenous cultures to Western influences; they depict indigenous cultures as if they were endangered species highly vulnerable to changes in the moral climate and the invasion of exotic ways of thought. That is, they depict them as if they were islands surrounded by rough seas brimming with moral and intellectual dangers. At the same time, they describe their own culture as if it were immune to nonwestern influences and incapable of wrapping its mind around nonwestern ideas. Yet Lopez's career, and Nelson's, too, can be cited as evidence of Western culture's fascination with and susceptibility to many if not all things indigenous and nonwestern.

Because of his qualms about his own culturally determined disabilities and predispositions, Lopez likes to adopt a painstaking, perception-by-perception focus on his reactions to the topographic features of unfamiliar landscapes and their resident flora and fauna. Like David Abram, he is fond of the phenomenological approach to things and relies on this approach as a means of reconstructing his reactions to nature in as undiluted a fashion as possible for his reader. But he also relies on it in order to place himself in a sort of cultural self-quarantine. While Lopez may be our representative in the exotic landscapes he visits, he often comports himself in his writing as if he were the man from nowhere, a virtual blank slate of a person. This phenomenological strategy sometimes leads him to indulge in description merely for description's sake.

In Lopez's essay "The Stone Horse," for example, he recounts—almost step by step, and I mean that literally—his visit to the site of an intaglio horse, a sculpture created several hundred years ago by Native Americans living in the Southern California desert, somewhere near the Mexican border. Lopez writes:

I still had not moved. I took my eyes off the horse for a moment to look south over the desert plain into Mexico, to look east past its head at the brightening sunrise, to situate myself. Then, finally, I brought my trailing foot slowly forward and stood erect. Sunlight was running like a thin sheet of water over the stony ground and it threw the horse into relief. It looked as though no hand had ever disturbed the stones that gave it its form.

In this passage, as in the passages which precede and follow it, Lopez pays careful attention to himself paying careful attention to ... well, himself paying careful attention to the stone horse.

At some point in their essays, most nature writers shift their focus from the natural world to the inner world, a rhetorical strategy that is likely to produce prose lacking in dramatic appeal. The action in the paragraph I have quoted from "The Stone Horse" consists entirely of Lopez shifting his eyes and moving his foot, as the morning sun begins to wash over the sculpture he is examining. More accurately, the action consists entirely of Lopez taking careful note of those events, and I hope the reader understands that I am using the words "action" and "event" in their weakest denotive sense. As a matter of fact, it is by using words in just this way that phenomenology wills itself into being, as if it were a rabbit pulling itself out of
a hat by its own ears. Like Abram, Lopez wants to bear witness to his bearing witness, and to record for his reader a flickering moment of encounter, not because of the knowledge that such moments impart but just because they are moments of encounter, hence precious from both the phenomenological and the anthropological point of view. That the intangible horse is hard to see even when you are standing right next to it, that desert travelers often pass by it without noticing it at all, is only part of Lopez's point, and the least important part.

Lopez is yet another rusticated, exurban flâneur with time on his hands. "The man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the flâneur," Benjamin argues, "only if such he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city." That Lopez, a writer devoted throughout his career to evocations of place, should so consistently strike the posture of the displaced person described by Benjamin is instructive. Benjamin notes that in the nineteenth century some flâneurs experimented with walking turtles on leashes through the Paris arcades. They did this in order to set an extravagantly leisurely pace; to separate themselves from the surrounding environment, above all from the crowds of bourgeois shoppers whose sensibilities they were eager to offend; to rest, as it were, the cultural clock; and to create moods in which they might be more receptive to fresh impressions. Lopez's motives are similar, even if he doesn't go quite to the same length as the Paris flâneurs: he dispenses with the turtle on a leash.

Ecocritics who have written favorably about nature writing seem to find slow-motion psychological stripteases of the sort that Lopez performs in "The Stone Horse" stimulating. Yet it's very hard to say what the point, ultimately and perhaps even proximately, of such an exercise may be. I assume that the point has something to do with coming to grips with "the preverbal, nonverbal, and pretechnological," but in practice all that proves not to be within Lopez's reach. Instead, it is something he is forced to evoke by calling attention to his strenuous efforts to grasp it. I think this is the case because "the preverbal, nonverbal, and pretechnological" is something sublime, and hence something incipiently metaphysical, if not entirely so. And as I suggested earlier, the phenomenological is also something incipiently metaphysical, and is kept from becoming completely metaphysical only by the painstaking, ritualized attention given to the modalities of consciousness by the phenomenologist.

American nature writing has a fundamentally contradictory character: at critical junctures, it swerves inward, easing the world it has been at such pains to describe, and abandoning the physical for the metaphysical. And it does this so that the writer, as Lopez puts it, can "situate" himself or herself in a nonhuman limbo. Unfortunately, the nature writer's representations of this nonhuman limbo have been taken for granted even by readers who should be committed to taking nothing for granted. Some ecocritics see nothing peculiar or problematic about this state of affairs: William Rueckert, writing about Lopez's book, River Notes, actually argues that the book's readers, both casual and critical, should try to suspend their powers of judgment.
tion for ecocrtics than it has been. I realize, of course, that where traditions are concerned, one critic will see a ragtag army of imitators, and will point scornfully to all those dust jacket blurbs announcing the debut of yet another chip off the old block, while another critic will see a genuine cultural movement, unbroken in its continuity, and will point to those same dust jacket blurbs with pride. The first critic will speak of a decline and the second of a possible ascent to new heights. To have to choose between their two points of view is a disheartening prospect. However, since my sympathies do incline more toward the first point of view, I want to articulate the limitations of the second point of view as I see them.

Those who profess a great admiration for American nature writing enjoy pointing out just how consistent its tradition has been over the past century and a half, or since Thoreau’s natural history essays were first published. For example, Thomas Lyon observes that nature writing “appears to have been so firmly rooted in its basic methods and alliances that currents of intellectual fashion and even deep philosophical change, in the culture at large, seem hardly to have disturbed it.” Lyon suggests that nature writing’s imperturbability is a very good thing, and that its rootedness “in its basic methods and allegiances” is one of its chief virtues. And if we were right about that, the interested critic would be relieved of the burden of taking contemporary nature writing’s immediate cultural, intellectual, and philosophical context seriously into consideration, whereas its historical provenance would be something that the interested critic could safely assume, without giving it much thought. Of course, if it is true that nature writers have not bothered to keep up with “intellectual fashions,” and if still more remarkably they have disregarded the “deep philosophical change” that has occurred “in the culture at large,” then surely they have been running the risk of irrelevancy, or at least of marginality, and their work must be difficult to consider in context simply because they have failed to contextualize it from the start. It therefore seems to me that a certain amount of force must be applied to nature writing if it is going to make sense as something other than a historical curiosity; we have to jimmie it open using the tools we have at hand, to recall a point I made in the preface to this book, and that is just what I have tried to do in this chapter.

I doubt whether we can offset nature writing’s apparent failure to keep pace with the times (which I, for one, don’t fully acknowledge in any case) by stipulating that it is a quintessentially American form and practice, hence as central to the American literary canon as Hawthorne’s tales or Dickinson’s poetry. Adding a grandfather clause of this sort to our arguments, while adding nature writing to our reading lists, will not be and, indeed, has not been enough to convince skeptics that they should read something as quaint as the typical nature writing essay, by definition, must be. Nor do I think this problem can be overcome by stipulating that nature writing is “ecological.” Surely ecology must be counted as one of those new “intellectual fashions” and products of “deep philosophical change” from which the nature writing tradition is supposed to have kept its distance; and as I’ve shown, nature writing is in point of fact highly suspicious of biology and ecology, just as it is of all science.

But the point I am trying to make in raising these objections to the idea of the American nature writing “tradition” isn’t that Lyon and other ecocrtics are entirely mistaken to think that this so-called tradition has bucked the tide not only of current trends but of history, too. Viewed in the context of those trends, and in light of history, both literary and otherwise, contemporary nature writing does indeed seem quaint. And it seems that way in large part because its gaze is steadfastly retrospective, but without being properly historical. Nature writing almost always looks back to a time when Americans lived in a once-and-never land of uncut forests and of great grasslands, which were unbroken except by the hooves of buffalo and the burrows of prairie dogs—it is, in a word, almost always nostalgic. But its nostalgia is complicated and distorted by cultural feedback, as nostalgia inevitably is.

In his book Second Nature, Michael Pollan writes: “Americans have a deeply ingrained habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed; we automatically assume that whenever one gains, the other must lose. Forced to choose, we usually opt for nature (at least in our books).” Pollan’s closing parenthesis is telling: the irreconcilability of nature and culture is a matter of literary tradition. It can be thought of, then, as a sort of fiction, and therefore as a special case of falsehood. Because Second Nature Pollan is most concerned with the practical relationships that a gardener has with the natural world, he argues that the choice between nature and culture “is a false one.” The garden is his figure for the coextensiveness of nature and culture, but it is also the place where this coextensiveness is actively explored by gardeners. The garden, it seems to me, is yet another extended phenotype: it is the human equivalent of beaver dams and termite mounds.

Of course gardens aren’t the favorite terrain of most nature writers; wilderness is. But wilderness has always been more a state of mind than a reality; it has always been a figuration of consciousness, rather than something to be discovered waiting for us outside the bounds of our assumptions. Wilderness is that imaginary landscape where we leave behind only our footprints and take away only our memories, as the prissy old motto has it. But leaving behind only our footprints is more or less impossible for us to do; just consider what goes on in most officially designated wildernesses today. They are overrun with hikers, bikers, whitewater rafters, and rock climbers. This is scarcely surprising, since in the United States wilderness areas are intended to serve as venues for recreation. The majority of Americans think of the woods, the rivers, the oceans, the mountains, and the deserts as places to have fun, not as places where we might discover a more productive way to live with the land.

Nature writers like Turner, Nelson, and Lopez, who spend much of their time in wilderness areas, are especially eager to rediscover both the natural landscape that Americans once possessed, however fleetingly, and the imaginary homeland of an earlier era of literary history as well. In this earlier era, the myth of the American
Sublime appealed to a people who, first by means of conquest and secondly through their own industry, were creating the latest in a long line of terrestrial empires out of what they perceived, without noting the potential contradiction, as both a "howling wilderness" and a "virgin land." These people needed to repent of their trespasses imaginatively; when they paused in their labors to take a considerate look at nature, they wanted to be awestruck. They had yet to develop Wallace Stevans's sense of the American Sublime as a "vacant space" where an "empty spirit," having grown "used to the weather," "the landscape," and all "that" would find bread and wine hard to come by. It therefore seems to me that the most awestruck of today's nature writers are trying to live and write in a cultural time warp; they are trying to be not only premodernist but premodern as well, in repentance of the sins of their forefathers. This means that today's nature writers are forced to overlook the actuality of the landscape we have made for ourselves, so that they can fix their sights on more ideal terrain, which they hope to conquer and settle in spirit. They badly need to catch up with Stevens, so that they then can begin to come to terms with the present moment, in relationship to which even Stevens has begun to seem a little quaint.

But the admirers of American nature writing, as well as those who produce it, have not viewed its quaintness in this light, which is the light cast by reflection on the broader currents of literary and cultural history. They have instead yielded to nostalgia, and have chosen to view nature writing as if it really did constitute a hermetic tradition immune to outside influences and hence uncorrupted, incorruptible, and heroic in its resistance to change. Consider the judgment made by Elder and Finch in their introduction to the Norton Book of Nature Writing, where they write that "nature writing flourishes in America as never before." They suggest that this means "nonfiction" may be "the most vital form of current American literature," in an atmosphere in which "the natural context of fiction has been attenuated and when much literary theory discovers nothing to read but constructs of self-reflexive language."123 Elder and Finch seem to be saying that nature writing flourishes, paradoxically enough, precisely because it doesn't breathe very much of the atmosphere of the present day.

Of course, the manner in which Elder and Finch have characterized the atmosphere of the present day is highly tendentious. They've overlooked the fact that most students of the subject regard "constructs of self-reflexive language" as definitive of "the natural context of fiction," and not as a strange aberration, which has cropped up only recently and, with the encouragement of literary theory, has spoiled things for the partisans of old-fashioned realism. Elder and Finch seem to have forgotten that the self-reflexive and the fictional go hand in hand and always have done, which is perhaps the chief reason the fictional can be untrue without its being a lie. And as it happens, nature writing is self-consciously self-reflexive, too; it is yet another instance of the supposedly unnatural habit many contemporary authors have of "writing about writing." Witness the worries about the dangers of verbalization to which writers like Annie Dillard and David Abram are prone.

Elder and Finch also overlook the fact that "the natural context of fiction" is and can only be a cultural context. However, they are using the word "natural" in an intuitive rather than in a theoretical way. Like Thomas Lyon, and like many others in the ecocritical community, they think nature writing affords an alternative to the excesses of culture to "intellectual fashion," to "deep philosophical change," to "literary theory," and to those irreconcilable, self-reflexive novels that aren't like the ones in which our great-grandparents immersed themselves, once all the corn was shucked and the livestock bedded down for the night. If only nature writing were given its due, they seem to be saying, then we could overcome the obstacles posed by intellectual, philosophical, and literary history, and the "natural context" of literature, whatever that is, could once again flourish.

If it seems that ecocritics are trying to have it both ways when they talk about nature writing, that is because they are, in fact, trying to have it both ways. One of the most eye-opening of the assertions they have made about nature writing, given that they all seem to agree on its devotion to tradition and thus would seem to be saying that it is an essentially conservative form, is the assertion that it is revolutionary. "For all the nature essay's perhaps plaid-seeming consistency over time," Lyon has observed, "there is genuine revolution in it. Even at its most genteel," he continues, "it is subtly, inherently subversive. Seeing, simply seeing, destroys divisions; for however brief a time, it restores health." Lyon argues that the nature essay can realize the paradoxical feat of subversion by conservative means despite its habit of speaking in a small, small voice and its "radical reversal of our usual bluster." However, the revolution that the nature essay has "in it" isn't in the first instance political; it isn't radical that way. By addressing us without bluster, the nature essay's immediate effect on us is, according to Lyon, "an entire psychic reorganization." It is only after this dramatic psychological change has been secured that we will be prepared for what Lyon calls "our redemption, both ecological and political."124 That "revolution," "reorganization," and "redemption" are incommensurate terms, and that a religious vocabulary, a therapeutic vocabulary, and a political vocabulary are being run together here, without a negotiation of their differences, would seem to be serious shortcomings in Lyon's argument.

But ecocritics aren't the only ones to have argued that nature writing is potentially revolutionary; sweeping claims about its cultural and political muscle also have been made by nature writers, who haven't been shy about flattering themselves. For instance, Barry Lopez has said that he believes nature writing "will not only one day produce a major and lasting body of American literature, but that it might also provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought."125 It seems to me that the assumption that ecocritics like Lyon and nature writers like Lopez have been making is this one: in an ideal world, a world reorganized along earth-friendly and "ecocentric" lines, nature would inform culture punctually of the character it ought best to take, and culture would be grateful for this information, which would prove to be more or less immediately redemptive.
Culture would be "forever on the alert" for the sort of clarion call Thoreau described in Walden.\footnote{216}

However, I suspect that in the event a clarion call of this sort might not be at all soothing; it might awaken us to nature and to greater awareness of our social and political discontent, too, just as it seems to have done for Thoreau. And it also might open up the tradition of nature writing, and rock that "losing body of American literature" back on its heels, so that it is forced to reconsider its own foundations. Many of today's nature writers and their admirers are still trying to think and write (though not necessarily in that order, which is half the problem) largely within the framework of assumptions about nature current in this country a century and a half ago, if I may beg the question of how truly current those assumptions were at that time.\footnote{217} These writers and their admirers share the hope for a renaissance of American culture and a revolution in American politics of the same kind that inspired writers like Emerson, more than anyone else, the spokesman of this hope; Thoreau, albeit in delimited and paradoxical ways; Whitman, the self-proclaimed popular champion of political revolution, social reorganization, personal redemption, and cultural renaissance; and many others.

Evidence that nature writers are taking a leap back in time to mid-nineteenth century America is not hard to find: I noted early on in this chapter that Dillard shares thematic interests with both Emerson and Whitman, and relies on tropes similar to theirs, while lifting much of the architecture of her book directly from the pages of Walden. And I think it is very likely that Lopez is deliberately echoing Emerson, Thoreau, and especially Whitman when, in an essay entitled "The American Geographies," he calls for a national literature of nature, just as they once did. In a passage reminiscent of Whitman's catalog, Lopez writes: "I know that in a truly national literature there should be odes to the Triassic reds of the Colorado Plateau, to the sharp and ghostly light of the Florida Keys, to the aridian soils of southern Minnesota and the Palouse in Washington, though the modern mind abjures the literary potential of such subjects." Lopez doesn't want to consider the possibility that "the modern mind" has a valid point, since for him as for many other nature writers its being "modern" is one of the things preventing that mind from having any views of nature, and of writing about nature, worth taking into consideration. Lopez also sees the creation of a national literature of nature as a moral imperative of just the sort that "the modern mind" is likely to resist. He writes: "There should be eloquent evocations of the cobble beaches of Maine, the plutonic walls of the Sierra Nevada, the orange canyons of the Kaibab Plateau."\footnote{218} To which "the modern mind" may very well respond, "Say who?"

I think there is yet another reason "the modern mind abjures the literary potential" of the subjects Lopez ticks off his list, one which has nothing to do with its supposed lack of interest in those subjects and its distaste for moralizing, and everything to do with the shaping influences of literary history. "Odes" and "eloquent evocations" no longer have the power to move us that they once had (thanks, in no small part, to the efforts of intellectually sophisticated poets like Stevens). The Triassic Red of the Colorado Plateau, the Aridian soils of the upper Midwest and Far West, and America's cobble beaches, plutonic mountain ranges, and orange canyons do have "literary potential"; of this there can be no doubt. But the question is how best to express this potential in terms of actual literary production. Many nature writers are overly reliant on "eloquent evocations," on word painting; they regularly turn out what are purported to be essays, but are really the prose equivalents of odes. This suggests that these writers are being held hostage by cultural assumptions about nature and by ideas about form that are long overdue for a rethinking.

Eccentrics and nature writers need to recognize that there is nothing original, and thus nothing revolutionary, about the hope for a national literature redeemed by its fidelity to nature. They have been trying to peg the worth of nature writing on its continuation of projects dear to the heart of American literature, classically and canonically conceived. In this conception, the thought that political, cultural, and social life might be amenable to redemption, if only its fidelity to nature can be assured, is central. In classic American literature of the mid-nineteenth century, the genteel and the subversive, with redemption of culture and politics as its stakes, attempted to run a sort of three-legged race together, when they might have turned in better performances in opposition to one another. As it was then, so it is now: a genteel subversion, of the sort described by Thomas Lyon, will almost certainly be a purely imaginary one, conducted entirely within the precincts of literature or, more broadly, of art (though in this scheme of things art is thought to run errands of mercy in daily life, it is believed to have its true home in a higher and separate realm of transcendental value). A genteel subversion is also much more likely to be reactionary than revolutionary, if only by default.

In any case, and for reasons having to do with broader issues of rhetoric and argument, I think it is far from clear that when "polar forces collide and nature writers attempt to reconcile them in epiphanic prose," as Don Schese has put it, their attempts at reconciliation are ever going to be more than very modestly successful.\footnote{219} Genuinely polar forces aren't so easily reconciled, careful readers aren't so easily persuaded, and meaningful arguments aren't so easily won. But nature writers and eccentrics have been assuming that a little epiphany goes a long way. Some such notion about the power of epiphany lies at the core of Emerson's essays, in which a redemptive vision of American nature, culture, and literature is sketched in the air for the benefit of the reader. And as I noted earlier, some such notion also seems to motivate much of Dillard's performance in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

Against the backdrop of outsized claims, vague hopes, and distortions of literary history that eccentrics have expressed with regard to nature writing and that I have described in the preceding pages, I would like to suggest that nature writers cannot possibly do all the things they have been credited with doing. That is, they cannot
and do not dwell in an eternal present, as they have been said and, in some cases, have claimed to do. They cannot have what they want; no one can. The talents of any one writer, even when those talents are considerable, aren’t enough to maintain the vitality of the conventions of traditional nature writing as described by ecocritics and nature writers alike.

At the same time, however, I want to argue that American nature writing must have evolved, if not in a gradual, progressive way, then more or less with the theory of punctuated equilibrium and haphazardly. According to this theory, periods of relative stagnation are followed by periods of innovation and rapid new growth, both of which are accompanied by mass extinctions. Each generation competes with the next as best it can because its differences from the next generation are just as marked as its similarities, and eventually prove fatal—in the long run, if it is a very fortunate generation, and much sooner, if it isn’t fortunate at all. Insofar as nature writing is concerned, that its equilibrium is punctuated means that Thoreau, Burroughs, and Muir didn’t pass the lighted torch on to Donald Culross Peattie and Edwin Way Teale, who safeguarded it for a generation before handing it over to Annie Dillard, who may be ready to pass it on to Diane Ackerman, David Abram, Jack Turner, Richard Nelson, and Barry Lopez in their turn.

Either the American nature writing tradition has been ruptured because it has changed internally with the evolution of new species, or it has been ruptured because its world has changed around it, and like the coelacanth and the horseshoe crab, it finds itself surrounded by strange new entities that it knew nothing of in its youth and may find it difficult to cope with. In either case, be it explosion or implosion, rupture isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Quite the reverse: where traditions are concerned, rupture can be a happy accident. Rupture keeps traditions out of museums and classrooms, and in the streets—or in this case, in the back roads, the fields, the forests, and the mountains, and along the shorelines—where traditions belong, and where they can be reinvented from time to time. Provided, of course, that rupture occurs in the right place: it must be a lucky break. Otherwise all rupture means is that a tradition has been broken and needs mending, or is over and done with, and should be abandoned lest the dead weight of the past overtax the present. This much advantage, at least, the coelacanth and the horseshoe crab have over the nature writing tradition: better arguments have been put forward for their preservation.

This, however, is something that keepers of tradition, especially self-appointed ones, often fail to recognize. Umberto Eco writes: “It is typical of reactionary thought to establish a double equation, between Thought and Origin and between Origin and Language. The Thought of Tradition serves only to confirm a mystical belief that arrests any further reasoning.” Precisely the reason, as Eco argues in another context, that “the real problem of a critique of our own cultural models is to ask, when we see a unicorn, if by any chance it is not a rhinoceros.” I think that the American nature writing tradition, which though it may be venerable has yet to survive as long as the coelacanth and the horseshoe crab have survived, may be a rhinoceros, which has been disporting itself as a unicorn and which is, of course, also an endangered species that really can’t afford to fool around. Provided, that is, that it doesn’t turn out to be another creature of myth entirely, namely an albatross.