

concepts, several of the succeeding chapters will employ the contrast between popular pastoral ecology, wedded to outmoded Clementsian models of harmony and balance, and the new postmodern ecology exemplified by the work of Daniel Botkin, who stresses 'that nature undisturbed is not constant in form, structure, or proportion, but changes at every scale of time and space' (1992: 62). Clearly, not all changes are desirable, but unlike Clements's climax concept, postmodern ecology looks to human values to discriminate between them, rather than appealing to the illusory objectivity of a supposedly authentic or pristine state of nature.

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## 4

### WILDERNESS

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility. The wilderness question is also central to ecocriticism's challenge to the status quo of literary and cultural studies, in that it does not share the predominantly social concerns of the traditional humanities. Unlike pastoral, the concept of wilderness only came to cultural prominence in the eighteenth century, and the 'wilderness texts' discussed by ecocritics are mainly non-fictional nature writing, almost entirely neglected by other critics. Much work in this area might easily count as intellectual history or philosophy, thus stretching the bounds of traditional literary criticism.

~~Wilderness narratives share the motif of escape and return with the typical pastoral narrative, but the construction of nature they propose and reinforce is fundamentally different. If pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated~~

landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds – particularly the United States, Canada and Australia – with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature. Yet settler cultures crossed the oceans with their preconceptions intact, so the ‘nature’ they encountered was inevitably shaped by the histories they often sought to leave behind. To understand current conceptions of wilderness, then, we must explore the Old World history of ‘wilderness’. Nor can we take for granted the politics of the wild: for many critics, after all, the ‘wildness’ we should seek is epitomised in the American West, which was assumed to be an untrammelled realm to which the Euro-American has a manifest right.

### OLD WORLD WILDERNESS

If pastoral has a dual origin in Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman cultures, the meanings with which wilderness was endowed at the beginning of the eighteenth century seem to be based almost entirely on Judaeo-Christian history and culture. The word ‘wilderness’ derives from the Anglo-Saxon ‘wilddeoren’, where ‘deoren’ or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation. So useful is the word ‘wild’ to designate the realms of the ‘deoren’ that neither its spelling nor its simple meaning have changed in a millennium and a half, although as the forests receded and the wilds were colonised the word attracted new connotations.

Wilderness is, in the history of our species, a recent notion. To designate a place apart from, and opposed to, human culture depends upon a set of distinctions that must be based upon a mainly agricultural economy: for the hunter-gatherer, concepts such as fields and crops, as opposed to weeds and wilderness, simply would not exist (see Oelschlaeger 1991: 28). If farming people define ‘home’ as opposed to the ‘wilderness’ and are inclined to view the fruits of their labour as the consequence of a struggle against nature rather than its blessings, the transition from Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer to Neolithic farmer is for many wilderness advocates a crucial turning point, marking a ‘fall’ from a primal ecological grace. Agriculture becomes both the cause and the symptom of an ancient alienation from the earth that monotheistic religion and modern science then completed. Certainly the Paleolithic ways of life of Eurasia deserve respect for sustaining human populations

under extremely difficult climatic conditions for an almost inconceivable period, during which extraordinary spiritual, technological and artistic developments occurred. Snyder speaks of ‘a 25000-year continuous artistic and cultural tradition’ (1999: 391). However, it is worth noting some inevitable difficulties in the reliance of wilderness advocates on a notion of the ‘primal mind’, which they contrast with the alienated ‘civilised mind’. In the absence of written records, Oelschlaeger’s confident reconstruction of the ‘Paleolithic mind’, for example, is based on a highly contentious interpretation of European cave art.

Whatever might be argued about the Palaeolithic mind, the very earliest documents of Western Eurasian civilisation, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, depict wilderness as a threat, and by the time the Judaic scriptures were written it is viewed with ambivalence at best. After the ejection from Eden, the wilderness is the place of exile. Yet, just as Abraham led his people into the wilderness to found a nation, Moses led the people of Israel through it to return home, finding it a more hospitable place than the civilised but enslaving Egypt. The wilderness is associated with Satan: ‘Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil’ (Matthew 4:1). But it is also identified with early monastic traditions: to escape both persecution by Roman authorities and the temptations of the world early Christian hermits went to the deserts. The Judaeo-Christian conception of wilderness, then, combines connotations of trial and danger with freedom, redemption and purity, meanings that, in varying degrees, it still has.

For many ecocritics, the next crucial point in the fall from grace of Western Europeans is the advent of the scientific revolution. For both deep ecologists and ecofeminists, the view of the universe as a great machine put forward by, among others, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), René Descartes (1596–1650) and Isaac Newton (1642–1727) represents the decisive blow to the organic universe inhabited by our ancestors. If, as Westling claims, Palaeolithic people venerated a fecund Magna Mater or Great Mother figure, these men were to complete the process of her annihilation begun by the dominance of the male Judaeo-Christian sky god. In place of the Earth as nurturing mother, natural philosophers posited a universe reducible to an assemblage of parts functioning according to regular laws that men could, in principle, know in their

entirety. Descartes, like Bacon, sought the basis for a new, practical philosophy, in which 'knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us' he and his contemporaries might become 'masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes 1986: 49). Reason became the means to achieving total mastery over nature, now conceived as an enormous, soulless mechanism that worked according to knowable natural laws.

Ecocritics attack this view as 'reductionist', claiming that it substitutes a fragmented, mechanical worldview for a holistic, organic one. Plumwood points out that once the human mind is seen as the sole source and locus of value besides God, nature ceases to have any worth or meaning beyond that assigned to it by reason and argues that 'It is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability' (Plumwood 1993: 111). Moreover, the critique of the scientific revolution has gender implications. Carolyn Merchant sees in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the feminine Magna Mater finally disenchanting and set upon by a rationalising, masculine reason, and perhaps her last followers, Europe's 'witches', being brutally rooted out (Merchant 1990: 172).

This critique also coincides with Heidegger's attack on 'en-framing' or instrumentalism, in which beings are made to show up as mere instruments of our will. The metaphor Heidegger uses to describe a world reduced to mere resources is a forestry term: *Bestand*, or 'standing timber'. Yet the scientific revolution literally affected forestry, as Harrison shows. Where forestry had traditionally concerned itself with protection of the legal domains called 'forests' as both sites of production and as habitats, the advent of scientific principles banished their traditional value and symbolic resonance:

For this sort of enlightened humanism . . . there can be no question of the forest as a consecrated place of oracular disclosures; as a place of strange or monstrous or enchanting epiphanies; as the imaginary site of lyric nostalgias and erotic errancy; as a natural sanctuary where wild animals may dwell in security far from the havoc of humanity going about the business of looking after its 'interests.' There can be only the

claims of human mastery and possession of nature – the reduction of forests to utility.

(Harrison 1992: 121)

The ultimate extension of scientific forestry was the German *Forstgeometer*, or forest geometer, who 'enframed' the woods with mathematics, reducing them to calculable 'standing timber', eliminating the ancient, mysterious *Wald* or forest of German history and legend. Thus deep ecologists, ecofeminists and Heideggerian ecocritics identify the scientific revolution as an ecological disaster in and through which a primal authenticity was lost.

However, it is very doubtful whether the mechanistic world view has ever been as pervasive or as pernicious as these writers suggest. Keith Thomas and Simon Schama have shown that mixed, perhaps conflicting attitudes have persisted throughout modern times – even Bacon recommended including a bit of wilderness in one's garden – and we should not underestimate the attraction of the practical benefits wrought by science to people of any world view. In any case, even as the wild places were being disciplined by reason, an emergent Romantic sensibility was urging a reevaluation, and in the eighteenth century wilderness was given a new inflection with the popularisation of the idea of the sublime.

## THE SUBLIME

The ambivalence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition towards wilderness had been resolved in early modern philosophy and literature into something approaching outright hostility. Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) explained mountain ranges as being the physical outcome of God's displeasure with mankind, scars inflicted upon a previously unwrinkled globe by the 'Great Flood' that Noah and his family survived. The crust of the world had burst open, he argued, releasing a terrible deluge from within the planet that left the Edenic Earth battered and broken. However, Burnet's readers found the apocalyptic terror of this ruined world strangely appealing, including a young man later known for his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke (1729–97). His *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* represents, Schama demonstrates, a counter-

current in the philosophy of the 'Enlightenment', with Burke setting himself up as 'the priest of obscurity'. For Schama, Burke's sublime was found in 'shadow and darkness and dread and trembling, in cave and chasms, at the edge of the precipice, in the shroud of cloud, in the fissures of the earth' (Schama 1995: 450). Whereas the merely beautiful arouses feelings of pleasure, Burke claims that 'the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of Horror' (Burke 1990: 53). The beautiful is loved for its smallness, softness, delicacy; the sublime admired for its vastness and overwhelming power. Feminist critics have shown that the qualities associated with the sublime and the beautiful are gendered, and concluded, perhaps with less justice, that 'the sublime moment is peculiarly male' (Day 1996: 188). Just as the feminine and beautiful is denigrated by comparison with the masculine sublime in Burke's definitions, it is argued, so women were excluded from encounters with the wild.

Burke's *Enquiry* was published in 1757, but it was in Romantic poetry that sublime wilderness found its literary apotheosis. The most familiar of Romantic landscapes such as the Scottish Highlands and the Lake District derive their fame from their resemblance to the archetypal locus of the European sublime, the Alps. William Wordsworth, for example, takes the climbing of English mountains as an apprenticeship in awe, although it is specifically a female who is addressed in 'To — on her first Ascent to the Summit of Helvellyn':

Lo! the dwindled woods and meadows;  
What a vast abyss is there!  
Lo! the clouds, the solemn shadows,  
And the glistenings, heavenly fair!

And a record of commotion  
Which a thousand ridges yield;  
Ridge, and gulf, and distant ocean  
Gleaming like a silver shield!  
Maiden! now take flight; — inherit  
Alps or Andes — they are thine!  
(Wordsworth 1987: 173)

Nor had this awe left behind its religious dimensions, although Wordsworth's piety was not, in his early work at least, conventionally Christian. 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' finds the poet moved by a 'presence':

. . . a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought.  
(1987: 164)

His sister, Dorothy, contributed sublime descriptions to William's *Guide to the Lakes*, and both the Wordsworths learned their appreciation in part from *A Short Residence in Sweden* (1796) by the feminist radical Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97). She seems as moved by the 'wild beauties' of Sweden as her male contemporaries:

The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself, why I was chained to life and its misery? Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable . . .  
(Wollstonecraft and Godwin 1987: 153)

The categories may be gendered, but the experience is circumscribed neither by gender nor by place. In Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', the Alpine original inflames the imagination. For ecocritic Karl Kroeber, 'Shelley's poem intensifies the Wordsworthian literalized interactivity of mind and landscape' (Kroeber 1994: 127). It exploits the oxymoron of the mountain's 'silent voice', reflecting on its contrast with both the poet's mind 'which passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings' and the larger political world whose pettiness and deceits it exposes: 'Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe'.

However, if the sublime required a degree of terror to induce the requisite spiritual or even political bewilderment, it would always be vulnerable to technological and cultural change. European civilisation largely mastered its mountains with trains, roads and ski-lifts, whilst the exploration of the American West brought news of the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains, making the wildernesses of the Old World look decidedly tame.

### NEW WORLD WILDERNESS

Thoreau's *Walden* can be regarded as the terminus of Old World pastoral in American literature, as it collides with both the technology and autonomous cultural confidence of the young republic. His *Maine Woods* (1864) can, with a similar degree of oversimplification, be highlighted as an early example of the wilderness tradition that borrows the ancient rhetoric of retreat and applies it to the endless miles of sublime landscape in America. After climbing Mount Ktaadn, Thoreau writes:

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman . . . Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night.

(1983: 71)

His insight is achieved while standing on a peak of just 5,300 feet. Yet it leaves him in awe of his own body, as well as the wilderness about him:

this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, – that my body might, – but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?

The sublime provocation of the mountain scenery, and the near-hysteria at the moment of 'contact' it enables, tends to belie the permanently threatening proximity of that other wilderness, the human body. The anxieties attending the boundary of human intelligence and animal matter will be discussed in Chapter 8.

One of Thoreau's most enthusiastic disciples, the Scottish immigrant John Muir (1838–1914) contributed more than any other single writer to the establishment of wilderness as a touchstone of American cultural identity, and a basis for conservation activities. He is best known for hymning the virtues of California's Sierra Nevada mountains and for his political campaigns on behalf of wilderness. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir's journal entry for 15 July 1869 recounts a view of 'sublime domes and canyons, dark upsweeping forests, and glorious array of white peaks deep in the sky, every feature glowing, radiating beauty that pours into our flesh and bones like heat rays from fire' (Muir 1992: 232). Paul Brooks, in *Speaking for Nature*, positions Muir alongside John Burroughs as one of the two fathers of American conservation. Explaining how Muir chafed at his domestic responsibilities, he exclaims: 'How different his voice sounds when he is back in his beloved mountains' (Brooks 1980: 21–2). Muir's extravagant prose is the mark of one of nature's spokesmen for Brooks, whose critical approach verges on worship. Yosemite Valley had already been the first place in America protected by an Act of Congress in 1864. Muir's writings and personal activism would lead to the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1890 and the formation of a wilderness protection organisation in 1892, the Sierra Club, which Brooks calls 'the most powerful conservation organization in the western hemisphere' (Brooks 1980: 23).

Daniel Payne claims that 'it is hard to overstate the importance of John Muir's contribution to the wilderness preservation movement' (1996: 85), citing his tireless lobbying, participation in Congressional debates and commissions, his prolific writing and even the camping trip he took with President Theodore Roosevelt. For Max Oelschlaeger, Muir also has a contemporary role assisting us in the development of a new 'Palaeolithic consciousness' that will supersede the mechanistic world view: 'his wilderness theology – a profoundly insightful evolutionary pantheism – is a complementary development that revivifies an archaic sense of the sacrality of all being' (p. 173). This would seem to be contradicted

by the apparently conventional piety of Muir's experience of the sublime on North Dome, where he offers himself 'humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power' (p. 238). Elsewhere, though, Muir asserts that 'when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers' (p. 248). He is an incisive and sardonic critic of anthropocentrism, as in a diary entry ridiculing the 'numerous class of men' who 'are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves' (p. 160). Muir argues that alligators, lions, poisons and diseases are all ample proof that Creation is not prefabricated for human use and comfort, and that every living thing down to the 'smallest transmicroscopic creature' has intrinsic value. He even avers that 'if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears' (p. 155). Such ecocentric piety nevertheless coexisted with a thorough scientific knowledge of botany and geology.

#### 'THE TROUBLE WITH WILDERNESS'

Although Oelschlaeger draws attention to the ways in which Muir attacks the arrogance of 'Lord Man' and espouses a more inclusive spirituality, it might be argued that he does not succeed in showing the usefulness of such a pantheistic theology. He criticises playful, sceptical, fragmented 'postmodernism', as it is usually understood, as an indulgent extension of ecocidal, mechanistic modernism and offers as the only alternative to a solipsistic obsession with human sign systems his notion of a genuinely postmodern ecocentrism that would resanctify nature, unifying 'holistic' science and wilderness religion. In common with many deep ecological critics, he assumes that ecological problems stem from a single moral or spiritual source, and that the adoption of pantheism would therefore solve them. But if God is identical with the universe, arguably that eliminates the distinction, basic to traditional theology, between how things are and how divine providence would have them be: a pantheistic theology would have to worship not only the pure streams of Yosemite Valley but also toxic waste dumps, which would be quite at odds with Muir's rhetoric of

the purity of wilderness and its essential opposition to the filthy realms of 'Lord Man'. For the literary critic, a further objection is that Muir's prose alternates between tedious enumeration of species and repetitive sublime hyperbole in which every other phrase is an exclamation. There are moments of intriguing philosophical insight and visionary intensity, but in the mass his writing is stultifying.

In terms of the representation of the wilderness of the Sierras, Muir wrote the book but Ansel Adams (1902–84) took the pictures. He returned to Yosemite at least once a year from his childhood on, learning to take and process photographs at the Sierra Club lodge there, and publishing them in the Club's *Bulletin*. After his death, the State of California designated over 100,000 acres of the Sierra the 'Ansel Adams Wilderness Area'. Although Adams took around 40,000 photographs, of still-life and documentary subjects as well as caves and canyons, his best known images are his black and white shots of mountains and valleys, in which wilderness attains an iconic status. His images epitomise the purity of the wild in their reduction of landscape to starkly defined regions of sky, rock, water and forest, while their epic scale and eerie stillness conjoin to suggest stoic self-reliance. Adams was a technical perfectionist and developed a sustained mature style that emphasised depth of field and a wide tonal range. He typically took photographs in winter or early spring in only the clearest weather conditions, and used red or green filters for enhanced contrast of rock and snow, sky and cloud. The overall effect is to give the mountains a stark, monumental quality, allowing them to retain the sublime, immeasurable otherness Muir had praised in the Sierra Range: 'In general views no mark of man is visible upon it; nor anything to suggest the wonderful depth and grandeur of its sculpture' (Muir 1992: 614).

Yet William Cronon has identified this 'otherness' as part of 'the trouble with wilderness'. Promoting a more sceptical, less pious ecocritical perspective, Cronon argues that wilderness 'quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject' (1996: 80). This construction of alienated urbanites, who buy the works of Muir and his followers but seldom attempt to emulate him, sets up a sacred ideal:

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover

our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity.

(Cronon 1996: 80)

This vision has pernicious consequences for our conceptions of nature and ourselves since it suggests that nature is only authentic if we are entirely absent from it. Such 'purity' is often achieved at the cost of an elimination of human history every bit as thorough as that undertaken by pastoral literature. In the case of Yosemite, this myth of an 'uninhabited wilderness' meant that both the Ahwahneechee Indians and the white miners who had lived and worked there were expelled.

Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1990) exemplifies Cronon's myth of wilderness purity. In the past, he argues, pollution and devastation were localised phenomena and even widespread contamination by DDT or fallout from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests would eventually disappear. But the advent of anthropogenic climate change, or 'global warming', has changed the situation, fundamentally contaminating the whole planet:

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.

(McKibben 1990: 54)

From now on, there will be nothing truly wild and 'a child born now will never know a natural summer, a natural autumn, winter, or spring' (1990: 55). McKibben's horror is justified by the scientific evidence thus far, but it is shaped by an inflection of 'nature' that is by no means universal or inevitable. It might be pointed out, for example, that the methane emitted by termite mounds is substantial enough to make a calculable contribution to global concentrations of greenhouse gases, but these insects have not 'ended nature'. However, McKibben's construction of nature reinforces an idea of wilderness, in which any modification of the environment is a form of contamination.

A further problem is apparent: the ideal wilderness space is wholly pure

by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there. This model not only misrepresents the wild, but also exonerates us from taking a responsible approach to our everyday lives: our working and domestic lives are effectively irredeemable alongside this ideal, so the activities we carry out there escape scrutiny (see Cronon 1996: 81). Wilderness, then, is ideological in the sense that it erases the social and political history that gives rise to it, extending into reactionary politics as well as Thoreau's occasional misanthropy. At best, the wilderness experience and its deep ecological philosophy risks identification with privileged leisure pursuits that sell authenticity while mystifying the industrialised consumerism that makes them possible. If we correlate the wilderness consciousness with the social forms of life, or social classes, in which it has taken hold, we have the grounds for some of Timothy Luke's cynicism:

It makes sense for deep ecologists to condemn human overpopulation or resacralize the bioregion they wish to enjoy. Unfortunately, nomadic grub eaters cannot produce high-tech composite surfboards, eighteen-speed bicycles, or sophisticated hang gliders. Who will make such goods or produce food while others seek self-realization and biocentric equality? The antimodern, future primitive condemnation of industrial human civilization by many deep ecologists is not really total, but its contradictory partialities are mystified in the social forms of life that generate this consciousness.

(Luke 1997: 21)

To the extent that it extols the idea of wilderness and the writers who explore it, ecocriticism risks complicity with this ideology. Deep ecology, it might be argued, has conspired with some American ecocriticism to promote a poetics of *authenticity* for which wilderness is the touchstone. To critique this is not to argue for the abandonment of wilderness to the tender mercies of ranchers and developers, but to promote instead the poetics of *responsibility* that takes ecological science rather than pantheism as its guide. The choice between monolithic, ecocidal Modernism and reverential awe is a false dichotomy that ecocriticism can circumvent with a pragmatic and political orientation. The fundamental problem of

responsibility is not what we humans *are*, nor how we can 'be' better, more natural, primal or authentic, but what we *do*. Ecocriticism would not then be seeking a more truthful or enlightening discourse of nature, but a more effective rhetoric of transformation and assuagement.

### AUSTIN, LEOPOLD AND ABBEY: TWENTIETH-CENTURY NATURE WRITING

The modern canon of American wilderness writing is quite extensive, but the key figures are Thoreau and Muir in the nineteenth century, Mary Austin (1868–1934), Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) and Edward Abbey (1927–89) mainly or wholly in the twentieth. Of these, Leopold is perhaps the least vulnerable to Cronon's argument because he is wary of religious language and imagery, preferring to communicate his natural history observations and philosophical arguments in a relatively self-effacing, low-key idiom. His major achievement for philosophers and historians is his formulation of a biocentric 'land ethic' at the end of *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), where having examined recreational, economic, scientific and other human-centred reasons for preserving wilderness, he concludes that, important as these are, an ethical defence is needed that is not hampered by human chauvinism: '[A] land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such' (Leopold 1968: 204). His formulation of the land ethic is elegant and apparently simple, bringing together normative criteria that are both aesthetic and scientific: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (pp. 224–5). It is not the individual organism that attracts moral consideration, but the 'community' as a whole, a community in which human beings are neither more nor less than 'citizens'.

Beguiling as it may seem, Leopold's dictum raises substantial philosophical and ecological problems. The metaphor of 'citizenship' is appealing, but human societies attach reciprocal rights and duties to citizenship and our duties are exclusively *to* the wilderness; we do not derive any in return. Also, the formula only asserts the moral value of, rather than arguing for, say, a stable biotic community. While it may

seem obvious that we should prefer a healthy environment, the non-chauvinistic grounds for wanting one are not supplied. Perhaps more problematic still, the very idea of a 'biotic community' as an identifiable, stable locus of value is extremely problematic from the perspective of modern theoretical ecology. The language of Leopold's ecology is nowadays treated with some caution since it suggests a degree of predictability that is seldom found in natural systems. The idea of a 'community' suggests the ecological whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but, as Brennan argues, 'The possibility remains that when we encounter an apparently stable ecosystem manifesting diversity of species and apparent self-regulation, we . . . may be confronted with an item that just happens to be the way it is' (1995: 211). Many species transgress ecosystem boundaries, and some species benefit from change while others are harmed or eliminated: an entire ecosystem does not stand or fall together. Not only is it very difficult to establish the boundaries of ecosystems, the word itself misleadingly suggests 'the physical concept of the stability of a mechanical system' (Botkin 1992: 42). If the community cannot be properly delineated, and if the ideal stable condition for it cannot be established, then neither 'integrity' nor 'stability' are the objective criteria we need for moral action. It would seem that only beauty remains, which is scarcely easier to define, but which Leopold seeks to exemplify in a series of analogies between the arts of humans and nature.

In Parts I and II of the *Almanac*, Leopold, a professional ecologist and professor of game management, exploits his scientific knowledge to construct a wonderful series of narratives of natural artistry: how the river paints its own landscape; how the tree encapsulates its own history; how the hunting dog reads 'the olfactory poems that who-knows-what silent creatures have written in the summer night' (Leopold 1968: 43). The swampy epic of the whooping crane, the tragedy of the passenger pigeon and even the odyssey of atom X through complex, wilderness biota and simplified, agricultural ones are narrated. In some respects Leopold's idea of wilderness as a retreat or proving-ground for male hunters remains close to the dualistic vision that Cronon criticises. But at the same time, Leopold is the only professional scientist amongst the canonical writers, and he writes for a sceptical audience who work in and with the wilds. His radical land ethic admits the benefits of modernity and the inevitability of human intervention:



By and large, our present problem is one of attitudes and implements. We are remodeling the Alhambra [desert] with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use.

(1968: 225-6)

Despite sharing with Leopold an ecocentric perspective, and the admiration of many ecocritics and activists, the writings of Edward Abbey perfectly exemplify the trouble with wilderness. His sojourn as a Park Ranger in the Arches National Monument in Utah is justified in *Desert Solitaire* (1968) as follows:

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. . . . To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.

(Abbey 1992: 6)

Thoreau's ascent of Ktaadn embodied a similar paradox. The desire for 'contact', for 'reality', conflicts with the cultural enframing of Thoreau's 'Titan' and Abbey's 'God or Medusa'. Both writers maintain a rigorous individualism at both a political and stylistic level, although Abbey veers at times into vicious paranoia. Nevertheless, Abbey's work is littered with learned literary and philosophical allusions, and, as Daniel Payne comments: 'Although Abbey presented himself as a blunt, straightforward speaker, much of his writing is in fact a complex mixture of personal narrative, journalism, philosophy, natural history, political commentary, and story-telling . . . full of paradox, irony, and humor' (Payne 1996: 153).

Don Scheese, who credits *Desert Solitaire* with changing his life, states approvingly that Abbey is the 'most radical, iconoclastic figure' in the wilderness canon, enjoining us to 'Afford the time to allow for prolonged engagement with and meditation on nature. Enter the wilderness and

experience freedom. Be alive to the redemptive possibilities of the wild' (1996: 315). Abbey induces us to delight in the apparently unpromising landscapes of the sandstone deserts he inhabits, and brings justified rage to his polemics against 'Industrial Tourism' and the damming of Glen Canyon on the Colorado River. His later novel *The Monkey-Wrench Gang* (1982) inspired the formation of Earth First! and other direct-action groups. At the same time, his enthusiasm for guns, paranoia about federal government and 'big business', and support for violent resistance to authority risks appearing to ally environmentalists with survivalist militias. SueEllen Campbell alerts us to some disturbing absences from Abbey's wilderness; the local Indians, for example, are only briefly and disparagingly noticed. More strikingly, Abbey does not mention the atmospheric nuclear tests going on in Nevada at this time, although Arches was affected by fallout. Campbell's questions reflect Cronon's concerns: 'What notion of the elemental ignores nuclear fallout? Why think it's necessary to leave society to find reality? What's *lost* by opposing wilderness and culture?' (Campbell 1998: 24).

Abbey not only opposes wilderness and culture, he plainly genders the distinction and eroticises the landscape, wanting to 'embrace the scene intimately, deeply, totally, as a man desires a beautiful woman' (1992: 5). But actual women are almost entirely absent from this wilderness, except as the other end of the 'bloody cord' of civilisation that wilderness helps a man to cut: '(My *God!* I'm thinking, what incredible *shit* we put up with most of our lives – the domestic routine (same old wife *every* night), the stupid and useless and degrading *jobs*, the *insufferable* arrogance of elected officials, [etc.])' (1992: 155). This despite the fact Abbey married five times. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that the idea of wilderness intrinsically excludes women, any more than the sublime was reserved for male Romantic poets: Mary Austin, in particular, provides a useful counterpoint to Abbey, and even the prospect for a reconfiguration of 'wilderness'.

Austin's landscape is Southwestern, arid and thinly populated like Abbey's, and she shares his facility for vivid, descriptive prose. In her best-known work, *Land of Little Rain* (1903), she seems highly attuned to the presence of birds:

About the time the burrowers and all that feed upon them are

addressing themselves to sleep, great flocks pour down the trails with that peculiar melting motion of moving quail, twittering, shoving, and shouldering. They splatter into the shallows, drink daintily, shake out small showers over their perfect coats, and melt away again into the scrub, preening and pranking, with soft contented noises.

(Austin 1996: 13)

According to Buell, 'her protagonist is the land, more particularly the geography of its watercourses and the patterns of life created by water scarcity' (Buell 1995: 80). The extraordinary challenges of the environment lead its inhabitants into strange exigencies: 'There was a fence in that country shutting in a cattle range, and along its fifteen miles of posts one could be sure of finding a bird or two in every strip of shadow; sometimes the sparrow and the hawk, with wings trailed and beaks parted, drooping in the white truce of noon' (Austin 1996: 7).

Yet this is a wilderness for inhabiting, not, like Thoreau, Muir and Abbey, for sojourning, and 'The manner of the country makes the usage of life there, and the land will not be lived except in its own fashion' (Austin 1996: 26). For ecofeminist critic Vera Norwood, this shows that 'Nature and culture are interactive processes: human culture is affected by the landscape as well as effecting change on it' (Norwood 1996: 334). She argues that women write wilderness differently, experiencing immersion rather than confrontation, 'recognition' rather than 'challenge'. Part of the justification for this lies in Austin's self-effacing idiom and narrative structure, which, as Buell observes, 'allows the book to be taken over by other people's stories and her speaker to imagine the desert as it might look through the eyes of birds and animals' (Buell 1995: 176). Whilst Austin's style might be a function of an androcentric prejudice that simply expected reticence of women writers, it might also be seen as a device that decentres the human subject not, as in Muir, by mere assertion, but by subtle insinuation at the level of narrative.

One of the most intriguing, though flawed, works in recent ecocriticism claims that Austin deconstructs the concept of wilderness itself. Combining autobiographical sketches, literary criticism, philosophical reflection and a discussion of desert land management, Barney Nelson's *The Wild and the Domestic* (2000) shows how Austin challenges the myth that wilderness is 'no place for a woman', rewriting the gendered

dichotomy of masculine wilderness and feminine domesticity. For example, she notes that the vaunted 'self-reliance' of the heroic Western male consists mainly in the ability to undertake 'feminine' domestic tasks such as cooking and mending clothes themselves, that Western states granted women suffrage long before the East, and that Austin found freedom and self-confidence at home in the rural Southwest.

The centrepiece of Nelson's argument is a contrastive study of Austin and Muir in which she argues that his construction of Yosemite as a pristine wilderness paradise was not only a falsification of history, but also led to the exclusion of working people, white, Hispanic and Indian, from upland pastures that had been in use for as long as 400 years. Whereas Muir betrays contempt for both shepherds and sheep, Austin respects the practical knowledge and philosophy of the people, and the intelligence and hardiness of their animals. Since Muir lost large numbers of sheep during his brief tenure as shepherd in the Sierras (200 ewes and 100 lambs on one occasion) he may have been making a virtue of adversity in constructing Yosemite as a sublime landscape of 'leisure and study, not work', while Austin 'believed land should be valued as home' and fought to protect residents' rights against urban demands for land, water and leisure space (Nelson 1996: 75). Nelson argues that Muir promulgated a 'myth' that ranched sheep and cows were environmentally damaging, calling them 'hoofed locusts' and adversely affecting federal and state policies until the present day.

Nelson's case is far from watertight, since Austin too wonders 'how much the devastating sheep have had to do with driving the tender plants to the shelter of the prickly-bushes' (p. 40). Nevertheless, connecting Austin's literary creations to the specific environmental question of arid land ranching, rather than to very general ecophilosophical issues, makes for refreshing reading, and it emphasises the need for ecocriticism to question even the tropes deployed by environmental organisations. When the Sierra Club argues for more 'wilderness', they are in practice representing the interests of wealthy suburbanites rather than rural working people, and leisure industries rather than extractive or agricultural ones. This attention to the politics of wilderness is especially important in American ecocriticism, which has until recently tended to stress the spiritual and moral, while neglecting the ways in which wilderness is a site of class and gender struggle.

## BEYOND WILDERNESS?

An updated wilderness canon would include the work of Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen and Gary Snyder, which has been the subject of much American ecocriticism, particularly in the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. It would also address other New World literatures that arguably inflect wilderness in culturally and geographically specific ways: Australia's 'outback' as an interior wilderness space, for example, and Canada's 'North' as both a powerful signifier of an irreducibly 'wild' geography and climate, and a site of contested high-technology industrial and military activities.

In the early 1970s, Canadian cultural nationalism deployed wilderness as a mark of difference as well as an article of ecological faith. Bruce Littlejohn and Jon Pearce claimed in the Introduction to an anthology that 'If there is one distinguishing element that sets Canadian literature apart from most other national literatures, it is the influence of the wild' (1973: 11). Margaret Atwood's early work both reflected this preoccupation with wilderness and, thanks to her talent and success, strongly reinforced it. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* (1979) returns to the landscape of her childhood in Northern Quebec, ostensibly to find out what has happened to her father. The threats to this wilderness from logging, hydroelectric projects and commercial tourism are coded as 'American', driving the protagonist into an increasingly alienated and paranoid state. She sees this 'border country' (p. 20) later as 'occupied territory' (p. 115): 'In the bay the felled trees and numbered posts showed where the surveyors had been, power company. My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale, *solde*' (p. 126).

Her unresolved grief over an enforced abortion 'surfaces', colliding with her discovery of her father's drowned body in a lake. She eventually leaves the cabin and her friends, denying that she has a name and 'through pretending' to 'be civilized' (p. 162). Ultimately, however, the protagonist feels the need to return, hoping that 'the Americans' can be 'watched and predicted and stopped without being copied' (p. 183).

In the 1970s the paintings of the Group of Seven and Thom Thomson, made in many cases in the first half of the century, had gained

fresh appreciation, not only for their striking painterly techniques, but as powerful appeals to emergent Anglophone Canadian nationalism. For example, Thomson's 'Pine Island' (1914) represented the forests and lakes of Ontario as beautifully pure and defiantly hardy, clinging to the rock of the Canadian Shield. In 'Death by Landscape', a short story from *Wilderness Tips* (1991), Atwood layers memories of a childhood wilderness camp with adult meditations upon Group of Seven paintings: 'They are pictures of convoluted tree trunks on an island of pink, wave-smoothed stone, with more islands behind; of a lake with rough, bright, sparsely wooded cliffs; of a vivid river shore with a tangle of bush and two beached canoes, one red, one grey' (p. 110). The attraction the adult protagonist Lois feels for these paintings derives from her uncanny sense that 'there is something, or someone, looking back out'. It emerges that her friend Lucy inexplicably vanished in her company at Camp Manitou, and that she was blamed. The adult Lois has refused to return to the North, but regards her paintings with a fond obsession:

these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense. . . . Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly . . .

(pp. 128-9)

The twist is that 'Every one of them is a picture of Lucy'; she lives in them, glimpsed only at the edge of vision. Equivocating between the artistic and environmental meanings of 'landscape', and exploring a morbid fascination with the way both paintings and forests recede endlessly, Atwood shows an ironic awareness of the construction of wilderness that was absent from the earlier novel.

Atwood's fiction demonstrates that wilderness can be productively explored in relation to genres other than nature writing. Recently ecocritics have sought to expand the field, as in Adam Sweeting and Thomas Cochun's analogical study of 'realist' theatrical and wilderness spaces. For example, they observe that the traditional theatre space is sharply demarcated from the audience space by the proscenium arch, just

as 'wilderness zones . . . are bureaucratically distinguished from the land from which they have been carved' (p. 326). Both realist theatre and wilderness experience disingenuously 'efface the cultural assumptions and structures that shape our performances, encouraging audiences or wilderness visitors to observe events as though they simply unfold on their own'. This shared 'representational aesthetic' reduces theatre and wilderness to emotive spectacle, preventing recognition of their wider social and ecological context. The authors argue that modern drama theory, which challenges the notion of a fixed, pre-given theatrical space, might help address some of the problems with wilderness spaces that likewise deny their own history and deflect the active agency of their 'audience'. Critics including Andrew Light, David Teague and Michael Bennett have contributed equally innovative essays on the construction of urban 'wilderness' in film and urban planning to the anthology *The Nature of Cities* (1999).

Within nature writing, considerable controversy has been stirred by the work of Rick Bass, especially his discomfiting book *Fiber* (1998). The narrator leads us through the four stages of his life, which suggestively parallel Bass's own: oil geologist, literary artist, environmental activist, then an eccentric kind of logger. He inhabits the Yaak Valley in Northern Montana, where Bass lives, and which he has fought vigorously and publicly to preserve from clear-cutting forestry. Yet the narrator also opens up spaces between his persona and Bass, claiming to have an arrest warrant out for one of his earlier incarnations. Gradually the fourth persona emerges, the familiar sojourner 'sinking deeper and deeper into the old rot of the forest' until, he predicts, he becomes one with it. At the same time, unlike most wilderness sojourners, the narrator works in the forest, selectively logging, selling some timber to mills and spooking other local loggers by leaving occasional logs by their trucks. This 'log fairy' persona reflects on the wearying work of the activist, and its corrosive effect on the artist. Then suddenly, in Part IV, this elaborate artifice abruptly disintegrates: 'There is, of course, no story: no broken law back in Louisiana, no warrant, no fairy logs. I am no fugitive, other than from myself. Here, the story falls away' (p. 45). The rest of the narrative seems an enraged rant against the federal government, the Sierra Club and the logging companies, but it still keeps changing tack: 'If you think I'm going to say *please* after what they've already done to this landscape, you

can think again' (p. 49). Then, 'I am going to ask for help, after all' (p. 50). Then: 'The valley cannot ask for anything – can only give – and so like a shell or husk of the valley I am doing the asking, and I am saying please, at the same time that I am saying, in my human way, fuck you' (p. 50). The story concludes: 'Somebody please help', with an appendix giving addresses for readers to write letters requesting the protection of the Yaak as a wilderness area.

Scott Slovic has argued that nature writing texts may be characterised as either 'rhapsodic' celebration of natural beauty and wildness, or 'jeremiad' – the 'warning or critique' that challenges the reader to political action and self-reform (1996: 85). Carson's *Silent Spring*, for example, is primarily jeremiadic, while *Land of Little Rain* is mainly rhapsodic. Michael Branch's contribution on Bass to an important ecocritical anthology applies this typology to what he calls Bass's 'Yaak-tivist' writing, showing that it causes 'readers to consider just how much environmental invective they will accept' (2001: 224). The high-powered jeremiad of *Fiber* deliberately unsettles readers who are culturally unused to expressions of open anger, being 'more concerned about good behaviour than about justice' (p. 231). Some readers consider that the literary quality of the work is thereby compromised, but Bass's evocations of rage and grief are artistically sophisticated and sanctioned by a long literary tradition of corrective rhetoric. Branch calls this fusion of fury and almost inconsolable loss 'elegaid'.

Unlike traditional nature writers who assume righteous moral or political positions, Bass is highly self-conscious about his authority as writer. As Karla Armbruster explains, even the title provokes the reader to consider the materiality of the book, and its dependence upon the industry Bass attacks. Bass rigorously interrogates his own rhetorical position, acknowledging his complicity with the activities he castigates and avoiding 'a simplistic, black-and-white version of the situation that would rule out compromise and inevitably end in a stalemate between holier-than-thou environmentalists and the loggers they would see as enemies' (Armbruster 2001: 208).

The 'poet laureate of deep ecology', Gary Snyder, has worked for a long time among such tensions. He achieved fame in the 1950s as one of the Beat Generation, alongside Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, then took the arduous path of initiation into Zen Buddhism in Japan before

moving to Northern California, where he writes, teaches and lectures. Oelschlaeger expresses almost unlimited admiration for his work, arguing that his 'shamanic vision' brings the Great Mother back to life in the postmodern world. Snyder's work is interpreted specifically as a series of injunctions:

Listen! the poet tells us. This is the Eastern axis of Snyder's spiritual ecology: by listening one quiets the mind, calms the senses, and reestablishes contact with the earth. . . . Go into the wilderness; stand on the rock of granitic truth. Hear the Ur syllables, the seed syllables, of mother earth: *the wind! the moving water! the sighing boughs!* We are her children, she is our mother, we are it, the flowing land . . .

(Oelschlaeger 1991: 274)

In a similar vein, David Robinson applauds Snyder's promotion of a 'new cultural ethic of the wild' made up of four normative claims:

1) the necessity of a commitment to the potentialities and limitations of place; 2) the belief in the wild and its processes as the best teacher for humanity; 3) the identification of the wild with the sacred; and 4) the use of the wild as a guide for a diverse, inclusive, participatory democracy.

(1999: 21)

The reader should not, however, be entirely put off by such praise. Much of Snyder's poetry is marred by earnest ecopieties and hectoring propaganda ('For the Children', 'Mother Earth: Her Whales', 'Front Lines', 'Control Burn'), but his adapted translations of Oriental poems are vivid, spare and brilliant, and his own poetry, at best, is rescued by playful eroticism, sharp humour, beautiful language and a degree of self-deprecation. Snyder's youthful experiences of working as a logger, and contact with socialists as well as Buddhists and Native Americans, give his writings a breadth of reference and sensitivity to people's social and material needs that is unusual amongst wilderness writers. His critique of poet Robinson Jeffers in 'Word Basket Woman' might well be extended to many others discussed in this chapter:

Robinson Jeffers, his tall cold view  
quite true in a way, but why did he say it  
as though he alone  
stood above our delusions, he also  
feared death, insignificance,  
and was not quite up to the inhuman beauty  
of parsnips or diapers, the deathless  
nobility at the core of all ordinary things

Snyder explicitly and repeatedly rejects the inflection of wilderness as solely a landscape of recreation, recognising the risk and likelihood of commodification, where 'wild and free' as easily evoke 'an ad for a Harley Davidson' as they do 'a long-maned stallion racing across grasslands'. For Snyder, 'Both words, profoundly political and sensitive as they are, have become consumer baubles' (1999: 168). One way of guarding against this risk is to subvert the dualistic construction of wilderness and civilisation that Cronon criticises, and Snyder's most effective technique for accomplishing this is to bring the 'wild' closer to home. For example, he asserts that our bodies are wild, highlighting 'universal responses of this mammal body', such as 'the heart-in-the-throat in a moment of danger, the catch of the breath' (p. 176). In 'Song of the Taste', he restores to us a sense of the wild in our everyday diet:

Eating the living germs of grasses  
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed  
around the sperm of swaying trees

Even human language, the supposedly unassailable marker of culture, is wild in the sense that it 'rises unbidden' and 'eludes our rational intellectual capacities'. It may be domesticated for educational or other purposes, but fundamentally language 'came from someplace else' (p. 177).

Snyder effectively argues that civilisation is the locus of chaos and disorder, while wilderness epitomises the free self-organisation of nature. Rather than being simply opposed, the wild ramifies through the civilised

and sustains it. The 'etiquette of freedom' this realisation ought to encourage is probably the best we can hope for from wilderness ethics: part deep ecology, part Beat Generation hedonism, and all gentle, humane injunction:

We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them. . . . The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get home.

(p. 182)

## 5

### APOCALYPSE

For at least 3,000 years, a fluctuating proportion of the world's population has believed that the end of the world is imminent. Scholars dispute its origins, but it seems likely that the distinctive construction of apocalyptic narratives that inflects much environmentalism today began around 1200 BCE, in the thought of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, or Zāraṭhustra. Notions of the world's gradual decline were widespread in ancient civilisations, but Zoroaster bequeathed to Jewish, Christian and later secular models of history a sense of urgency about the demise of the world. From the Zealots of Roman Judaea to the Branch Davidians who perished in Waco, Texas in 1993, Judaeo-Christian believers have fought and died in fear and hope of impending apocalypse, whilst Nazis, communists, Native American Ghost Dance cults, Muslim Mahdists and the Japanese adherents of the Aum Shinrikyo sect have adopted and adapted apocalyptic rhetoric, again with catastrophic results as prophecies of crisis and conflict inexorably fulfil themselves. Yet arguably very similar rhetorical strategies have provided the green movement with some of its most striking successes. With this in mind, it is crucial that we consider the past and future role of the apocalyptic narrative in environmental and radical ecological discourse.