

Narrative Scholarship: Storytelling in Ecocriticism

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"Place and Narrative Scholarship in Ecocriticism"

By Michael Branch, University of Nevada, Reno

Questions regarding the usefulness and legitimacy of storytelling in ecocritical scholarship seem to me to revolve around the idea of place and our changing conceptions of the ways in which the experience of place bears upon our work as writers, teachers, and critics. As scholars of literature and the environment, the stories we integrate into our practice will likely be stories of places: places that have educated, moved, or disciplined us; places that have inspired the literary art to which we are devoted; places our culture has celebrated, sanctified, repudiated, saved, transformed, or lost. The ubiquity of the locution "sense of place" (certainly the vaguest term in our critical lexicon) suggests the centrality of this engagement with place, and may help explain why storytelling in ecocriticism is so valuable and so problematic.

The importance of "sense of place" to our work as ecocritics begs the question of how our own sense of place should influence the work we do. I think of my students' often skeptical responses to Henry Thoreau's experiment at Walden: either his pastoral retreat to the pond is viewed as escapist, or the fact that he visited Concord regularly is considered hypocritical. I fear that storytelling ecocritics walk a similarly narrow and perilous way: if we do not include stories of our own encounters with the land, we may be considered unqualified exponents of a literature that celebrates the land; conversely, the telling of too many such stories may cause us to be judged enthusiasts whose highly subjective engagement with the natural world would find better expression in a discipline less critical than literary studies.

I see several reasons why the storytelling scholar is likely to encounter skepticism. First, storytelling depends upon subjective "senses" (including the "sense of place") and must therefore remain under suspicion in a discipline that continues to accept a positivist scientific model as its standard for scholarship. Second, the combination of personal engagement and environmental concern inherent in such storytelling may be political in a sense that is perceived as being at odds with good scholarship. Third, it may be feared that the scholar's stories are offered instead or at the expense of those other "stories," the literary texts we are presumably paid to elucidate. Finally, the places we often celebrate in our stories are rarely accorded the status of cultural monuments; unlike the art historian who visits the Louvre or the Egyptologist who travels to Gizeh, the ecocritic who makes a pilgrimage to a prairie or mountain will be seen as a tourist rather than a scholar unless there is a manuscript collection or academic conference at the destination in question.

In *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), J. Nicholas Entrikin comments that "what distinguishes current work in [place studies] from more traditional studies is the greater willingness to move beyond traditional 'facts' of place to examine the more subjective experience of place" (133). It is this genuine, unmediated experience of place that we often seek to convey through story. When executed with balance and sensitivity, narrative scholarship (or "personal criticism," or "autobiographical scholarship," as versions of the same enterprise have been called before) clearly enhances the integrity, depth, and authenticity of our engagement with literature. Ecocritics are students of literary texts, but we are also cultural cartographers who attempt to map those texts onto the landscapes which inspire them. Scholars with

intimate knowledge of the places within and beneath the words have stories worth telling, and a standard of scholarship that rejects such stories does so to its own detriment.

"Narrative Scholarship"

By SueEllen Campbell, Colorado State University

I'd like to shift the terms a bit: to "personal criticism."

In my dissertation-and-then-book, I wrote fairly standard impersonal criticism--about a flamboyantly personal critic, Wyndham Lewis. I found him in his showiest moments entertaining; interesting in a purely left-brain way; intensely annoying; and, in the context of the rest of my life, deeply boring. I wanted my next work to call also on my body, my senses, my heart, what I thought mattered. I looked around me, saw my friend Phil Terrie shaping his scholarly career around a beloved landscape, and thought, Of course!

It was, appropriately, on the deck of Phil's Adirondack cabin that I started thinking about the ways my work in literary theory and my love of wild places might fit together. When I sat down to write about that thinking, an impersonal style seemed ridiculous: these ideas were mine, shaped by my life. Plus I'd already done academic writing and wanted something new. So I framed that essay in a pair of brief scenes, one on Phil's deck, and said goodbye to the pretense of impersonality. Suddenly writing looked like a lot more fun.

My own models? Lewis, I suppose, though I hate to admit it, he was such a jerk. Roland Barthes, certainly. The personal moments in other doers of sweeping theory--Levi-Strauss's autobiography; some of Walter Benjamin's essays. Early on I read Michael Cohen's Muir book and recognized a kindred impulse. His work always seems to me just far enough ahead of mine--in directions I'd like to try--to serve as both an encouragement and a challenge.

Not long ago I was dismayed to find myself assigned to teach our M.A. course in research methods: I'd never taken such a course, my library skills were obsolete, I didn't think I did real research. So I invited a dozen colleagues to come describe for us the messy reality of a recent project. What happened? Every one of them--the theorist, the biographer, the literary historian, the drama critic, the freelance journalist, the memoirist, the novelist--every one of them told us a story about a career, a story about how personal and scholarly lives evolve together, how scholarship and criticism are always informed by family, landscape, personal history, passion. How else would we gather the energy to keep doing this work?

In the context of recent literary theory, of course, these links are not surprising. The stance of objectivity retains little credibility. For years I've asked my theory students to identify the person--and the plot, imagery, characters, setting, themes--embedded in even the most abstruse and ism-y of articles. And then there's the constant annoyance of terms like "creative writing" and "creative nonfiction"--as though criticism didn't require creativity, as though thinking and creativity were mutually exclusive. All good writing is both creative and somehow personal; all of it has a place in the stories of a life; all of it tells stories. Why pretend otherwise?

For a time I wrote hybrids--personal frames around a fairly standard core. But this, too, began to seem easy, boring. Thus my latest big project, a book about being in wild places. I thought about the wilderness narratives I'd read, borrowed a structure from Roland Barthes, applied all the brain I could muster, set my memory to work, studied old photos, went hiking, got caught in lightning on a high ridge. Then I wrote a set of personal essays--ideas and scenes, the scent of sage, history and mountains, stories of my own life. It was both hard and fun, and my parents liked it.

"Narrative Scholarship"

By Michael P. Cohen, Southern Utah University

*"If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise."
--The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Ecocriticism is, like much contemporary criticism, a form of cultural critique, interdisciplinary in its tools, and its intentions.

My most recent excursion in this direction is an experiment in nordic skiing, specifically training and racing. Questions at hand begin with the following: can skiing be understood as an activity from the inside and outside at the same time?

I might depart from an essay entitled "The Nature of Reality and the Reality of Nature," by Allen Borgmann, in *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*. Borgmann speaks specifically of skiing, artificial snow, and socially constructed skiing environments. He suggests that Lito Tejada Flores' version of the downhill history of downhill skiing might apply to a wider present situation. "Skiers, Tejada Flores writes, "have gone from adventure (dealing with uncertainty in a wild mountain landscape) to sport (all-out physical involvement on known terrain) to recreation (the undemanding enjoyment of simple rhythmic movements). Lito may be talking about me.

First, what is the present situation, including the relationship between our present culture and what it perceives as a "natural" environment? Second, how is skiing an interesting field in which to explore this ecology of human and natural? Third, how can we verify or discredit the history Tejada-Flores provides? The answer, I believe, is a double narrative, wherein the writer is both spectator and spectacle, part of and marginal to the activity, complicitous and disaffected; in other words a double perceiver.

"Embedded Stories: Ecocriticism and/as Autobiographical Scholarship"

By Diane P. Freedman, University of New Hampshire

At the ASLE session last year, Scott Slovic described the general field of ecocriticism as "the study of nature writing by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text." He also suggested (I'm paraphrasing here) ecocritics seek out and/or produce writing that partakes of the earth, of the senses, that speaks directly

(thus saving paper and readers' energy!) through narrative. Ecocriticism might be above all a mode of writer-reader, writer-text, and writer-nature connection.

I have been working on and in a genre I've termed autobiographical criticism or cross-genre, alchemical writing that merges and recycles memory and interpretation, writer and scholar. A braided river of reader-response and feminist literary criticism, autobiographical stories, and creative writing, autobiographical scholarship may also be considered a branch of ecocriticism (or narrative ecocriticism a branch of it) for its focus on the situatedness of the critic or scholar.

One chapter in my first book (*An Alchemy of Genres*, 1992) is even entitled "The Ecology of Alchemy: Recycling, Reclamation, Transformation" [in texts by Marge Piercy, Tess Gallagher, Alice Walker, Susan Griffin, and Carol Ascher et al.]. I wrote then that my point was "not to catalog an exhaustive list of a poet's influences, but to show that Piercy [for example] not only transplants and coalesces many texts and voices in her work but suggests that fact in the imagery of growing things." I noted ecological practice as well as subject of these writings and extolled the virtues of readers responding "in kind." Later, I claimed that for "the other feminist poet-critics discussed ... the homespun, the homestead, and nature similarly conspire to form fertile ground for their communal feminist poetics and politics, their cross-genre work." I cited Diane Wakoski: "Perhaps one of the greatest contributions twentieth-century American women make to poetry is to refuse to let aestheticians and poets forget the body. The earth body, the goddess body, the seasons and cycles, the agrarian root which we must still have even in urban or post-urban culture" ("Bodily Fluent"). I accepted Adrienne Rich's injunction, "Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction" (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry*).

Surely these quotations suggest the ecocritical dimensions of a range of autobiographical writers and of my work on them. Elsewhere, I've written and spoken about such diverse texts as Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* and the film *Free Willy* in the context of my own life as a bi-coastal resident, mother of a toddler, and writer-teacher ("A Whale of a Different Color: Melville and the Movies"). The essay double dips, mixing not only story with criticism but autobiographical scholarship with ecocriticism, and the braided form is contagious; I've co-edited two collections in which scholars "read" their lives through their research and read their subject matter through their lives (*The Intimate Critique*; "Nexus"). Returning to New Hampshire from a summer visit to Seattle, thinking about this panel in Vancouver, I wrote:

I see the NW through the screen of the east, eye focusing on the blue heron at Edy's landing on Whidbey Island after seeing my own blue herons on the back-of-the-Mill-Pond swamp on which I live in NH; I notice the quality of water, the coldness of our northern seas east and west, the salt bite. My son dances in the foam, gets as dewy-eyed as I about leaving land or sea to which we've grown accustomed and instantly devoted. He likes to integrate the places he's been or we've been into the places he goes (I think of his tantrum this evening, when he forgot the Bonaire fish he intended to bring up to his climber on the hill in front of our house, by a triple pine tree: he loves things to remember persons and places by, will sleep with my hairband for remembrance--not rue, but baubles and wound rubber band).

Is "narrative scholarship" a sufficient term for an enterprise that, for me, began with poetic attention to the poetry of multi-"ethnic" feminist poet-critics? Although "narrative criticism" is an important way of characterizing the ecocritical/autobiographical-critical enterprise, a newcomer might be encouraged by a list of related terms and writers besides those already mentioned; hence, writings on location (Freedman and Frey, "Nexus"), personal criticism (Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury*), public criticism (Hesse, "Cultural Studies and the New Belletrism"), experimental critical writing or integrative

writing, (Torgovnick, "Experimental Critical Writing"; *Minnesota Review* interview), personal essay (Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*), or, simply, the [belletristic] essay (see, especially, Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar*). As with ecocriticism, in any case, the ratio of personal narrative to more traditional analysis in any given piece of autobiographical scholarship varies with each experiment.

Why do many of us increasingly teach and write "stories of reading" (Steig, *Stories of Reading*) or of other academic enterprises? For a range of reasons: aesthetic (it's more pleasurable to read, more literary), political (it's more accessible, usable), epistemic (how we know is dependent upon who we are and with what narratives--our own and others--we come to others), self-expressive (if our histories and allegiances are multiple why not our compositions?), and psychological or pedagogic (students learn much by examining how and why they ask and conclude what they do, including learning to write more "naturally" and for a wider audience). Such a pedagogy is socially responsible in its mode of attention and in its future application: engaged, situated, accessible writing has more use-value in the world, especially one with a dismal academic job market.) Of course this list is incomplete and its categories blur . . .

"Narrative Scholarship"

By Mark Hoyer, University of California, Davis

My scholarly focus over the past several years has been on the portrayal of Native American peoples and their cultures by both Native and Euro-American writers, and on the blending or borrowing of "literary" practices and forms that results from cultural contact. Storytelling in Native cultures combines theory and practice and often serves the function of criticism. The storyteller is at once artist and "literary" (or cultural) critic. Although I am not Native American, I often incorporate storytelling as part of my critical practice, as a way of honoring a Native way of "doing criticism" and of breaking the bonds imposed by the subject/object, expert/audience and critic/artist dualisms inherent in the traditional mode(s) of Western literary practice. Because personal experience directs not only what but also how I read, and ultimately how I interpret the stories that others have told, I use personal narrative not necessarily to put forward my story as "evidence" for any "case," but rather to establish the very basis from which arises the possibility that I could have conceived of such a "case."

By utilizing personal stories as part of my critical practice, I seek to follow the lead of not only contemporary Native American storytellers and critic/writers (e.g. Momaday, Silko, Vizenor, Sarris), but also Euro-American scholars of Native American literatures (e.g. Jahner, and Krupat, who suggests that a Native "critical practice" be seen "as internal to an evolving literary practice" [*Ethnocriticism* 195]). My personal stories are not meant primarily to justify, glorify, preach, or otherwise establish normative guidelines in either individual lives or scholarly practice. They are, instead, an attempt to place myself critically (though criticism always seems to possess one or more of those secondary characteristics enumerated above). As Stephen Greenblatt has written (in *Learning to Curse*) about his tendency to use anecdote and personal narrative,

. . . [S]elf-expression is always and inescapably the expression of something else, something different. A recognition and an understanding of the difference does not negate self-expression . . . but it does help one see more clearly where in the world one's identity comes from and what kinds of negotiation and conflict it entails. . . [T]he narrative impulse in my writing is yoked to the service of literary and cultural criticism; it pulls out and away from itself. (8)

The justification that Greenblatt offers here might help critics--and particularly those critics dealing with Native cultures and materials--avoid what Greg Sarris (in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*) has pointed out as a problem in the practice of Native American literary criticism, a problem he attempts to avoid in his own critical practice by returning to his Native storytelling roots. Though Sarris is here referring to critics dealing with Native American authors, I believe the same concerns are justified in dealing with non-Indian authors (e.g. Mary Austin, John G. Neihardt) who rely heavily on and incorporate Native cultural material in their writing:

Some critics do consider the ways certain Indian writers mediate, or make use of, their respective cultural backgrounds or specific themes considered to be generally "Indian." But those critics do not seriously consider or reflect upon how they are making sense of and putting together the writers' cultural backgrounds and the writers' texts. They attempt to account for the interaction represented in the texts, but not for their own interactions. They might, for example, attempt in their various approaches to locate and account for an "Indian" presence or "Indian" themes in a text, but they do not consider how they discovered or created what they define as Indian. (123)

Personal stories can be part of an attempt, then, to account, at least in part, for how the critic discovers and creates what s/he defines as "Indian."

Narrative Scholarship: Storytelling in Ecocriticism

By Gretchen Legler, University of Alaska, Anchorage

Although narrative scholarship is useful to ecocritics and popular among them it is by no means relevant only to ecocritics. In fact, let's not forget where it started--with feminist literary scholars who were frustrated with the objective, disembodied voice in literary criticism and who began to do "narrative scholarship" or "autobiographical criticism" partly as a mode of resistance--a challenge to the institution of academia. Some of the "poet-critics" (a term used by Olivia Frye in *An Alchemy of Genres*) whose examples we may use for guidance include Jane Tompkins, Olivia Frye and Frances Murphy Zauhar, Nancy Miller, Jane Gallop, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Mairs, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Susan Griffin. These practitioners of narrative scholarship have taken a lot of professional "heat" for writing about themselves in their theoretical work.

From the beginning there have been lines drawn between those who practice narrative scholarship and those who do the "real" thing. But, obviously, questions about the value and uses of narrative scholarship are ultimately questions about the value and uses of different knowledge claims. In ecocriticism we don't get any closer to the "real" truth about human relationships with nature by writing narrative scholarship or autobiographical criticism. What we do when we adopt these critical modes is we make evident another element--the complication of the writer's/scholar's subjective experience, which is normally camouflaged in "non narrative" scholarship. This is the most valuable thing about narrative scholarship--revealing the agent or author of the criticism--like drawing back the curtain on the Wizard of OZ. Revealing the agent of criticism makes it possible to add a whole new layer to the criticism itself--a discussion of the notion of experience as it relates to the idea of nature (nature as the source of material truth). In this way, every piece of narrative scholarship is a radical challenge to the critical establishment. Every piece of narrative scholarship is a challenge to Euro-American notions of objectivity, the self, knowledge and language.

Narrative scholarship implies the combination of personal narrative with literary criticism--the presence of the "I" as critic. Narrative scholarship, then, has something in common with creative nonfiction. Canadian writer Myrna Kostash has remarked that the most important aspect of creative nonfiction and what sets it apart from other forms of literature is that the "I" is present and accounted for and also accountable as a material political agent in the piece of writing and in the world. Creative nonfiction draws upon/demands a material or erotic intelligence in addition to an abstract intelligence. The same might be said for narrative scholarship.

Another important strength of narrative scholarship is that it develops a different relationship with "the text" than traditional literary scholarship. It assumes the political power of the text--both creative and critical. It assumes that stories about human relationships with the natural world make a difference in the way we act. Ecocritics who take narrative scholarship as their mode involve themselves in the moral realm.

Narrative scholarship is key in ecocriticism, if one of the things we are doing is calling into question the whole relationship of knowledge, of language and the self to nature and what is natural. Narrative scholarship, especially if it involves personal narrative, is about border crossing--crossing the line between writer and scholar, while also calling into question the entire net of relationships between the material and the abstract. The underlying premise of autobiographical criticism is that a scholar's critical eye is rooted in her political, social, erotic materiality. In narrative scholarship we make our influences visible and we use them as pivots around which we perform our criticism.

Errant Thoughts on Narrative Scholarship: Storytelling in Ecocriticism *By Glen Love, University of Oregon*

After some thirty-five years in college teaching and the attendant publishing of criticism, I included, last year, in an introduction to a novel by Vancouver Island writer Roderick Haig-Brown, my first piece of what I now understand to be "narrative scholarship." It was an autobiographical incident about going to Campbell River as a teen-ager to meet Haig-Brown, my model outdoorsman, and then getting cold feet, fearing to knock at the great man's door, and returning home, defeated, to Seattle. Perhaps similarly inhibited, perhaps even now a captive of my early training in the New Criticism, schooled to accept the sanctity of authors' texts, I still consider the inclusion of that anecdote in an introduction to Haig-Brown's book, something of a D-double-daring act. (And here I am at it again!)

Despite my timidity, I can, on reflection, justify, with a necessary qualification, the integration of stories and scholarship, especially when the subject is nature writing:

Justification #1: Heraclitus wrote, "The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own." Nature writing, it seems to me, invites us, as does realism, to address the common world. (Is it only coincidental that the massive assaults to the environment have occurred during the last few decades, when realism has been in literary disfavor?) Though storytelling could easily lead us toward romance and fantasy--the dreamer's private world--the emphasis in nature writing, as in realism, is necessarily upon the common world, shared experience, the system that works, wherein the stories of the critic may complement and enhance those of the author. For me, in the best nature writing eco outweighs ego, though both are present. For me, nature writing and ecocriticism are never far from the common world, the real world. (And, yes, there is a real world.)

Justification #2: Since natural history (in the form of systematic or scientific observation) and personal response (in the form of autobiographical record) form the alternating rhythm of most nature writing, and since the discourse of both of these activities is essentially narrative, it is not surprising that narrative might make its way into much of the related ecocriticism. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Why would we spend our time on the works of Thoreau, Dillard, Haig-Brown, except that we love them, and wish others, through our praiseful attention to them, to do the same?

Qualification: But why do we love them? Because their stories are better than most, almost certainly better than ours. Their stories have won their way in the world; ours have not. However emboldened we may be by the reader-response theorists, a respectful attentiveness as to who is who, and who has done what, would seem to me to be a prerequisite to the practice of narrative scholarship. Most of us would prefer to be artists, rather than critics. (Was it Mencken who defined a historian as a failed novelist?) Some few make the transition from critic to artist. In our field, I think of Joseph Wood Krutch and Norman Maclean, both of whom began as professional readers--critics--of literature, and who went on to become artists whose works we now study. But they made their way on their own hook, on the strength of their own stories. Others of us may do the same, but the odds are long.

Why Ecocritics Tell Stories

By Ian Marshall, The Pennsylvania State University, Altoona

We tell stories because we have learned from our teaching to show as well as tell, to illustrate points with anecdotes, examples, experience, so that even the guys in the back of the class wearing backwards baseball caps will pay attention.

We tell stories because we believe in an ecology of reading, where literature, life, and theory are interpenetrating, inter-dependent, inter-connected, a web, each strand informing and helping us understand the others, everything hitched to everything else.

We tell stories because we sense that literature is "equipment for living" (in Kenneth Burke's phrase) and also that our lives are equipment for understanding literature, and theory.

We tell stories because we enjoy our friends' bemused disbelief when we submit grant proposals for ecocritical "research" that involves a backpacking trip to Ktaadn in Thoreau's footsteps. We enjoy telling those friends that our next project will be a comparative study of beer in world literature.

We tell stories because we have to admit that there's a grain of truth, maybe a whole sheaf, in what an anonymous reviewer wrote in rejecting a grant proposal, wondering if we are seeking simply to get our vacation paid for. For we are idealists, and we believe that both our work and our play can take place in the same realm.

We tell stories even though our grant proposals are turned down because we tell stories.

We tell stories because we admire creativity and good writing, and not just from afar.

We tell stories because we are tired of the adversarial stance that permeates not just human relations with nature but the critic's relations with other critics and with readers, as if readers need to be conquered by superior logic, or contained in the critic's particular ideological box.

We tell stories because we like to roam, and ramble, and that's what essays are supposed to do (see Montaigne, follow his path, go over Montaigne and see what you can see), and we know that writing too is a kind of journey, an exploration, every story line a trail, and we welcome the companionship of readers.

We tell stories because we put into practice the post-structuralist, neohistoricist theory that all readings are situated and subjective. So we may as well reveal just where we are situated.

We tell stories because we see sense in the feminist argument that the personal is political. And the personal is more interesting.

We tell stories because they bring thoughts and theories back to earth.

We tell stories because, as Gary Paul Nabhan says, that's how environmental education traditionally has taken place, back when "Story had not yet been sequestered in books, nor had pertinent knowledge about the natural world been reduced to 'facts' ritually presented by members of a scientific priesthood."

At the same time, we tell stories because we are comfortable with science. admiring as we do writers who are conversant with it, who neither fear nor loathe it, and so we are not desperate for the "scientific" validity supposedly attached to the deadeningly impersonal tone and the thesis/support model of writing that mimics the format of a lab report.

We tell stories because we believe that writers are influenced by places as well as texts, and that they too should be explored.

We tell stories because we check original sources--the forests where bookstuff comes from before being penned up in libraries.

We tell stories because neither our minds nor our bodies nor our souls can be contained by the concrete walls--or are they abstract walls?--of a library.

But we also tell stories because our time spent in libraries tells us that's what language is for, for a library is if nothing else a repository of stories.

We tell stories for so many reasons that I have to use this ridiculously small font to fit them all on one page, and we've barely begun.

We tell stories because we are breaking down the barriers between subject (writer) and object (of study).

No, that's not it, we tell stories not to break barriers but to make connections between subject and object, we are verbs, we do, we tell.

We tell stories.

It's what we do.

At least, that's how it seems to me.

Incurring the Wraith

By John P. O'Grady, Boise State University

We all have our ghosts, I suppose. And because none of us "is an Island" unto ourselves, we often share our ghosts. This whole question "What is narrative scholarship?" is the latest form of a revenant that has been haunting literary criticism in Western culture since at least the time of Aristotle. What is a ghost? I like to think of it as any bit of unfinished communication, a connection that failed to establish. In the web of our conscious relations--both human and non-human--the ghost is a missing strand. To put this in terms of depth psychology, one could say that ghosts are the unconscious and usually invisible weavings of missing strands (of which there are many) in the web of consciousness that forms a world. And a world is always whole, whether perceived or not.

What is the nature of this ghost, which rises up as a question: "What is narrative scholarship?" What tattered dispatch lies behind this query? Actually it's a ghost "in disguise"--perhaps for safety's sake--the same one who haunts all literary critics, who is more familiar perhaps in the form of another question: "What is literary criticism?" All the other questions we might raise on the subject of "narrative scholarship" are subordinate to this. Use casuistry or good manners to deny it and we will be left chewing on that old scholastic chestnut: "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" (Those who call themselves "ecocritics" are already familiar with this ghost, in the form of the debate over whether nature is "essential" or "socially constructed.")

What then is literary criticism? Louise Rosenblatt offers a fine description: "In the basic paradigm for literary criticism, the movement is from an intensely realized aesthetic transaction with a text to reflection on semantic or technical or other details in order to return to, and correlate them with, that particularly apprehended aesthetic reading." Rosenblatt redirects attention back to the experience of reading; literary criticism, according to this model, is itself a dynamic literature of reading experiences. There are as many kinds of reading experiences as there are readings. Notice how I say "readings" and not "readers," for one is not the same reader of *Moby Dick* in 1995 that one was in 1975. You can't step into the same text twice. In an ideal realm, one could say that a literary critic is a highly self-aware reader. The goal: to know oneself, or at least be working on it. Do you see where all this is leading? "What is literary criticism?"--that question too is a ghost in disguise. "I know you!" we must now say to the ghost, which suddenly reveals itself as another question: "Who am I?" Press harder: Who is the "I" that asks "Who am I?" There are many ghosts, but they are all one ghost.

And what about narrative scholarship? It's just another method in our meaning-making activities. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, just like any other experiment in the extended investigations that constitute a life. The risk we always run is that we might get lost in the haze of our own imaginings. Which is to say the ghosts will hold us in thrall. Narrative scholarship, if that indeed is what I am sometimes perceived as doing, is a way of working with the ghosts.

Narrative Scholarship

By Rebecca Raglon, University of British Columbia

Narrative scholarship offers up the rather frightening prospect of thousands of professors suddenly beginning to offer up their "stories" to an unprepared public. Imagine every book beginning with a "story" about the inner feelings of the author as he or she approaches such fundamentals as library research. Imagine every learned conference filled with story tellers skirting around the central topic: why discuss Thoreau when we can "share" our "feelings" about Thoreau? or listen to yet another melancholy re-visit to Walden Pond? The point is, why assume that professors' stories are going to be intrinsically interesting, worthy, uplifting, funny, or any good at all? For good stories shouldn't we turn to good writers: poets, novelists, storytellers and playwrights? Why do we need a narrative about a mountain ascent to contextualize an academic's critical approach to John Muir? Surely more relevant contextual information can be found in even a casual perusal of the contributor's notes found in any scholarly journal: "Dr. Doe is a professor of English at Blarney College." We instantly know that Dr. Doe a) has read a lot of books, b) has a steady salary, c) has ample leisure to pursue outdoor activities and d) is probably not a world-renowned storyteller. What more contextualization is needed? Finally, we might wish to ponder the wisdom of encouraging our students to become adept in "narrative scholarship." After sifting through the revelations of their "peak" wilderness experiences, their intimate thoughts of life, death, nature, birth, wonder, sex and whatever else they might chose to write about, who is going to be comfortable affixing a dreaded "C+" to such heartfelt efforts? Until the academy itself thoroughly changes, then, "narrative scholarship" is bound to be nothing more than a self-indulgent exercise.

Narrative Voices: Past to Present

By Ann Ronald, University of Nevada, Reno

For many nineteenth-century writers, literary criticism and cultural commentary were synonymous. Such major figures as Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold sought intellectual connections between the two, engaging their readers in the historical milieu of the past and the sociological complexities of the present as well as the essays, novels, and poems of Europe, England, and America. Along with rigorous analysis, they filled their prose with stories, vignettes, pointed allusions to their friends and foes. Their successors, early twentieth-century humanists like Lionel Trilling for example, did the same. Only with the advent of the so-called "new" criticism did the critic lose his narrative voice.

When I was in graduate school (she said, switching to her own voice), my Northwestern professors indoctrinated me into a theoretical environment hostile to the impersonal textually-analytic Chicago School. The battle lines were clearly drawn. On the south side, a text reigned supreme; in the suburbs to the north, cultural contexts were just as important as words on the page. 'They' were to grow into third-generation I.A. Richardses and R.S. Cranes; 'we' were to be latter-day Matthew Arnolds (or Matthew-inas, as the case may be). 'They' were to be the critic as luminary; 'we,' the critic as conversationalist.

For more than half a century—I believe until feminist voices sounded a different 1970s tone—the Chicago approach prevailed. Certainly I felt out of sync as I tried to build an assistant professor publication record and found editors excising my first person pronouns and stifling my narrative impulses. Now, however, times have changed. A host of late twentieth-century voices—feminist, Marxist, new historicist—has swung the pendulum back. Constructionists, deconstructionists, and

postdeconstructionists are swinging on the pendulum too, but I personally think the most effective 1990s critics are those with intellectual connections back to Arnold and Carlyle--men and women whose readings of literary texts weave anecdotes and personal experiences together with observations on culture and society, thinkers who write with voices of their own.

We are the logical next step. Backpackers, climbers, hikers, bikers, birders, environmentalists, ecologists, lovers of what is wild, readers, writers, thinkers, dreamers and do-ers—we are walking Matthew Arnold out of England, packing his *Kelty* with Thoreau, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Gary Snyder, filling his senses with grizzlies, granite, sagebrush, spotted owls, prairie dogs, open-pit mines, cheat grass, tamarisk, slickrock, snowmelt, and wolves, while guiding him along the High Divide. Along the way, we're talking to him, telling him stories, too.

What is Narrative Scholarship and Why Is It Relevant to Ecocriticism?

By Suzanne Ross, St. Cloud State University

As I prepare to write this statement about narrative scholarship and its role in ecological criticism, I am aware of two things simultaneously—a memory and a sound. I am recalling the quick, downhill walk away from an impending thunderstorm that I took with a friend last spring during which we talked about this thing called narrative scholarship. The seed ideas for this statement were planted in my mind on that walk. I can still see my friend ahead of me on the trail, hear my friend's words. Walking and talking, walking and talking, they were the means by which the ideas were coming. At the moment and in the midst of my recollection, I listen with one ear to the rhythmic purr-breathing of a cat in the chair behind me. Dependably, he is my companion when I sit down to write. My memory of a past walking conversation and the present sound of a companionable cat are mutually relevant because they signal interests and commitments in my scholarship. These links in potential narratives work to join my actual life in the material world here and now with my study of literary representations of human understanding and action within what Neil Evernden calls that "great amorphous mass of otherness that encloaks the planet."

My efforts at scholarship of any sort, whether this statement or an essay I recently wrote about Sally Carrighar's representations of the "self-worlds" of other animals, inevitably take place in lived contexts. They are informed, even motivated by my past and my present, my experiences, my desires, and my commitments. I want the parts of my life to cohere. And most relevantly to this discussion, a means of making my professional work, ecocritical scholarship, authentically congruent with the whole of my life experience.

The literature we cherish speaks of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life and seeks to reveal the embeddedness of human life in the life of the world. Narrative scholarship seeks to embed scholarship in life. By tracing the disparate connectivities between texts and life experiences, literature and the world, it is clearly ecological. The stories we tell reveal the ways in which we ourselves are woven into the world and how our work as scholars is but one form of human action within the world. Our stories provide the central terms by which scholarship is anchored to life as well as the terms on which the value of that scholarship can be judged.

I believe that scholarship of any kind, but ecocritical scholarship crucially so, must be grounded, bound to the earth. Narrative scholarship seeks to do this by situating ecocritical theory in life practice; theory and practice are thus tested against and informed by one another.

Narrative scholarship is about engagement with the world. It is about giving—time, energy, and effort, whether emotional, physical or intellectual. It is about field work and volunteer work. It is about publicly and complexly linking one's sense of oneself with a scholarly project. It is a way of saying, "I stand here."

Narrative scholarship is about intimacy within the world. Knowledge is born of intimacy. As is compassion. Narrative scholarship is a way of saying, "I stand with." Perhaps it's a way of wearing our hearts on our sleeves. For that reason, it is about both advocacy and risk.

Just as Barry Lopez has described the traditional role of story in human life—that it functions to bring the interior landscape into accord with the exterior landscape, narrative scholarship seeks to anchor the scholarly act in the world. Its goal is to embed scholarship authentically in life. In so doing, it reveals the particular experiences, desires, commitments that motivate and shape each scholarly act. Really, what I'm trying to say is that narrative scholarship is about love.

Narrative Scholarship

By Kent Ryden, University of Southern Maine

In high school composition classes—when I was doing time in high school, at any rate—students are taught never to use the word "I" in a piece of academic writing. Ideas create themselves, it seems, and are to be presented on the page in the disembodied voice of absolute, abstract Truth. The less evidence of actual human involvement with the words on the page and with the thoughts behind those words, the better. Who cares about you, anyway? Just give me the facts.

You would think that literary scholars would have gotten away from this kind of thinking with the demise of the New Criticism—you know, the belief that a literary work is a self-contained artifact, that all meaning lies within the text itself, and that any biographical, historical, or other contextual factors are irrelevant to interpretation. These days, we critics have learned to view texts within as many relevant contexts as possible—all texts, that is, except our own critical writings. How critics came to their interest in a subject, how they continue to interact with and think about that subject—in other words, how personal experience and engagement have shaped and continue to shape a scholar's thought and practice—is still seen as decidedly secondary if not irrelevant to the august work of critical exegesis. (These readers are out there. I know. While many reviewers have appreciated the way I incorporated personal reflections into my *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, others have taken me to task for what they have seen as excessive self-indulgence if not rampaging egotism. For some readers, a little Ryden goes a very long way.)

As it happens, the book I wrote is about how people discover and assign meaning in their geographical surroundings and how they communicate that meaning to others. This scholarly interest grew out of a lifetime of experiencing landscapes and places (as I like to say, scholarship is a great way to legitimize your hobbies), and as I was shaping my thoughts for the book—a process which necessarily and frequently took me out of doors—I found that certain of my experiences corroborated some important themes that I wanted to develop. In short, my life was seamlessly connected to my scholarship, and it seemed artificial and unnecessary to break them apart for the sake of a book. Furthermore, my experience seemed to me to help demonstrate the truth of what I was writing about. Am I any less of a "folk," or any less legitimate a writer, than the people I was studying? Was my testimony any less valid than theirs? I felt that my experiences might help readers to recognize similar episodes in their own

lives, or might at least get them to reflect on their own relationships to the places that surround them. My personal narratives, I hoped, would help make my book more persuasive, more grounded in the way people actually inhabit the earth, not weaken its impact or be a distraction.

I think it's a little disingenuous to pretend that a scholar's—any scholar's—work doesn't grow somehow out of deeply personal factors, and isn't maintained and furthered by those same factors. We poor bastards who end up as college professors don't choose our fields and specialties just for the hell of it, or because that's where the jobs are, or because we think it's a great way to make money and meet girls. We do what we do because we like it, because it fits in with what has interested us most about the world around us and about being human, because some life experience or bundle of experiences lit a fire that somehow managed not to get extinguished in graduate school. A scholar who takes the time to narrate some of that past or present experience shows us where the book or article came from, deepening its resonance and vitality, showing us how it derives from the passions and patterns of one life and inviting us to fit it somehow into our own lives. We see that the work is not just an empty academic exercise and pay close and sympathetic attention.

This is perhaps another way of saying that narrative scholarship, as we're calling it, raises and addresses issues of credibility and authenticity. Narrative scholars, we think, actually care and aren't just grinding the stuff out; they have been personally engaged with the subject at hand; they must then feel a special obligation to think and write about their topic carefully and respectfully; they are believable. Addressing these issues is perhaps more important in ecocriticism than in, say, the sciences, where it's hard to publish without actually observing something, be it a star or a cell or a rock formation. You can, on the other hand, still write intelligibly about literature and the environment simply through reading the literature. As far as I'm concerned, though, a piece of ecocritical writing is qualitatively better and richer if the writer shows evidence of actually having gone outside and become physically and emotionally engaged with the environment at some point, if he or she demonstrates some awareness that the literary work under discussion grew out of an experience of nature and can best be appreciated and understood in that same spirit. None of the above is to say that personal anecdote should replace rigorous, informed analytical thought, of course; rather, it is a suggestion that we be willing to reconnect scholarship to its experiential wellsprings, that in writing out of our lives we can write more effectively into the lives of others.

Narrative Scholarship

By Stephanie Sarver, University of California, Davis

How do I define narrative scholarship? As I see it, traditional academic writing, as opposed to narrative scholarship, lays claim to "objectivity" through its invocation of "fact." This factuality is reflected in citations, which document the research that informs the writing. As scholars, we acquire our credentials through evidence of our research; this evidence earns our readers' trust by providing them with enough information to confirm that we are not "making up stories." But as post-modern scholars, we all know that all academic writing is, to some extent, a story, i.e., a thoughtful selection of information arranged in a way that will lead readers to certain conclusions. In traditional academic writing, the storytelling is extracted from the text and submerged in a parallel narrative of footnotes and citations—the scholars "tale" of research. The story behind the text is implied, rather than overtly acknowledged.

Narrative scholarship may lift the parallel narrative of research into the text, where we participate in the authors' process of discovery and analysis. As its name suggests, narrative scholarship may serve a didactic function, informing by way of a story. When the story deals in facts not easily corroborated by the reader, it provides evidence that nonetheless allows us to trust in the writer's authority. The reliable narrative scholar includes enough information to reflect a careful consideration of the topic discussed, which can be corroborated by the research and experience of others. Effective narrative scholarship is grounded in a rigorous scholarly method, that is, the writer knows her subject, either through research or experience, and this knowledge is reflected in the text, into which the "scholarship" has been artfully woven. Narrative scholarship may blur the arbitrary line between objectivity and subjectivity, between the scholarly and the creative. Given this, the range of works that might be defined as narrative scholarship is broad: I count Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life* in this category, as well as John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid*, and Gary Paul Nabhan's *The Desert Smells Like Rain*. And then there are such works as Gary Snyder's *Practice of the Wild* and Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which hang on the cusp between narrative scholarship and creative narrative.

So what's the problem with narrative scholarship? It may require work of its readers. If the work forgoes footnotes and citations of sources, and if we are reading as scholars, we must be diligent in our analysis. We may have to search for arguments and evidence. In identifying potential problems I find myself with several questions: How do we know that a writer of narrative scholarship is reliable? If narrative scholarship challenges the categories of objective and subjective, how do we distinguish scholarship from art? (For example, how do we make sense of such works as Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan tales?)

Narrative scholarship defies conventional notions of what academic writing should look like. When it looks like a story, we may be inclined to dismiss it as entertainment; when it situates the writer smack-dab in the middle of the text, it may challenge the notion of scholarly objectivity. These questions point not only to the problems, but also to the strengths of narrative scholarship: it overtly acknowledges the difficulty of writing from an objective point of view. Its very structure acknowledges the story-telling dimension of writing; when the writer makes her presence evident in the text, she clarifies her point of view, giving the reader useful information by which the text can be understood and interpreted. Most important, by situating information and insights within the structure of a narrative, a writer can transform the abstract into the concrete through example and illustration without necessarily losing the important elements of observation, analysis, and criticism. The biggest risk of narrative scholarship, as I see it, is that it can stray too far into the personal, becoming confessional, self-conscious, and even trivial; or it can slide too far into the narrative, or story, and thereby lose its scholarly dimension. Nonetheless, artfully executed, narrative scholarship seems to be a great way to move away from the often dry, lifeless prose of traditional scholarly writing. In speaking to our imaginations, it can carry us along a path that educates as it entertains.

Narrative Scholarship

Don Scheese, Gustavus Adolphus College

"Man—let me offer you a definition—is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he's about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life."

This passage, from Graham Swift's *Waterland*, serves as the epigraph to William Cronon's wonderful essay "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative" (*Journal of American History* 78.4 [March 1992]:1347-76). To the topic of "Narrative Scholarship" a New Historicist might well respond: "What? Isn't all scholarship narrative? Isn't every explanation of how the world works or human artifacts function a story, one among many possible versions or ways of interpreting things? Isn't everything a text, isn't everyone an interpreter?" Other species may have their own stories to tell, but certainly Graham Swift reveals a fundamental truth about humans: we are a (if not the) storytelling species.

Whether we call what we do "Narrative Scholarship," "Autobiographical Criticism" (see *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 6 May 1992:A8-A9, "New Brand of Scholarship Mixes Experience, Expertise"), or something else, an important distinction has to do with the degree to which the "I" is foregrounded in the scholarship. Personally, I have always been drawn to scholars who reveal how they came at a particular subject, the genesis of their interest in a topic. Some, but certainly not all, of these projects can be labeled "ecocriticism": Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (Oxford, 1985) and *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford, 1992); Michael Cohen's *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Wisconsin, 1984); Belden Lane's *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Paulist, 1988); and, most recently, Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (Knopf, 1995), in which he tells of the influence of one of his teachers who "always insisted on directly experiencing 'a sense of place,' of using 'the archive of the feet.'"

In my own book, *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* (Twayne, forthcoming 1996) I incorporate "foot notes"—stories about pilgrimages to Walden Pond, Mt. Katahdin, the Sierra, the Mojave Desert, the sand counties of Wisconsin, Arches and Canyonlands National Parks—in analyzing important works of nature writing. Of the many benefits of ecocriticism based on fieldwork (intellectual, spiritual, physical) I will mention just one: the reminder we receive while out in the predominantly nonhuman world that what we call wilderness contains a civilization other than our own.

There you have it. This is one more story, a story about telling stories based on others' (fellow nature writers' and critics') stories. Whether we return from the woods or finish a book (another kind of journey), we want to tell stories. I have just told another.

Ecocriticism with or without Narrative: The Language of Conscious Experience versus the Language of Freefall

By Scott Slovic, University of Nevada, Reno

Seldom does the fallen climber tell his or her own tale. Overburdened by a backpack full of books and distracted by my role as literary critic, I recently forgot my place in the physical world, stepped off a mountain wall, and nearly lost everything. Ecocritics who ignore the worldly context of their reading, of their thinking, do so also at the peril of their lives and language. Language without context, without grounding in experience, means next to nothing. A life without context is impossible.

At the end of July, I traveled with the nature writer Rick Bass to the Shirakami Mountains in northwestern Honshu, a United Nations World Heritage Site, to do a story on wilderness protection in Japan for *Audubon* magazine. There were eight people in our party—all writers, editors, journalists. Our guides were the author and environmental activist Makoto Nebuka and a mountain man known as

"Narita-san." For three days in the virgin beech forests of Shirakami, we sloshed through rivers in special hiking shoes called "chica tabi" with spongy rubber soles and metal spikes, ascended cascading streams, and crawled up mountainsides using scraggly trees and bamboo-like sasa, interwoven with poison ivy, as handholds. The forests were trailless, except for thicketed deer paths. I found myself preoccupied with the other writers' perceptions and with the efforts of Mike Yamashita, the *Audubon* photographer, to document the place and people with his cameras despite Nebuka-san's steady pace. Our expedition was a hall of mirrors, everyone photographing, interviewing, keeping a notebook. I marveled at Rick's ability to take notes on a pocket-sized pad even while wobbling across rivers or pausing on a steep slope. Occasionally, he would say something aloud like, "So many images of light. Sunlight, bright-colored frogs, light on water, light through leaves" or "The strands of the story break apart and reweave themselves--first bears, then the place, and now Nebuka-san himself is emerging as the center." My notebook reflects my impressions of Rick's experience more than my own.

At the end of our second day in the mountains, after ten hours of walking, our guides became disoriented just as it began to get dark. We clambered downhill through a dense thicket of sasa grass, following an apparent animal trail, until we found ourselves looking over the dribbling lip of a narrow waterfall—two hundred feet down. We paused there for another half-hour—Rick took notes and I took notes about his notetaking—as our guides deliberated. The guides figured we could inch our way across the top of the waterfall and along the sheer slope to one side, then climb down to a possible camp site. Back and forth they crawled, scouting out the route. I watched Rick and ate candy. Then it was my turn to go. I was the second person to follow the guides, holding slender sasa stalks and using my spiked shoes to grip the grassy lip on the side of the waterfall. Mike was right behind me. Just as I stepped out from the ledge where we had been resting, Shigeyuki Okajima, the Everest climber and environmental journalist, shouted. "Watch out, Scott! It's slippy, very slippy." Smiling at his Japanese English, I stepped out, felt the earth give way beneath my feet, and realized I was clinging to a tiny, bending tree trunk, dangling over the edge. Without a pack, I might have been able to pull myself up to safety, but I had sixty pounds strapped to my back. My hands slid towards the end of the tree. I had no clear sense of how big the drop-off was. Shige, panicked, was now shouting. "No, no, no!" I glanced silently at him. Then suddenly I was skidding down the grassy upper portion of the cliff, arms outstretched and hands digging into the dirt, clutching for handholds. I slid faster and faster, not knowing when I would sail out from the wall for the final, fatal drop through empty space. Suddenly, the noise changed and I felt my boots and legs scraping rock, my shirt sleeves ripping--and then silence and dizziness. A moment later, Mike came tumbling sideways down the same, eighty-foot section of cliff, pulled down by his camera equipment, grunting and moaning as he splashed into two feet of water, just inches away from me. Soon the water turned red, absorbing the blood from a cut somewhere beneath my jeans. We had landed on a ten-foot ledge in the middle of the narrow waterfall, barely avoiding the jagged wall below.

For ten days after the accident, I watched Rick, Mike, and Nebuka-san photograph clearcuts and roadbuilding just outside the World Heritage Site. I listened to Rick interview a bear biologist at the Historical Museum of Hokkaido, and I accompanied him and a cluster of Japanese ecocritics to the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima and to the orange shrine in the inland sea at Miyajima. And I became demoralized about my role as "literary scholar tagging along with actual nature writer." The phrase that kept coming to mind was "third wheel." I was the third wheel during our travels, and perhaps ecocritics were the third wheels of the environmental writing community. Rick had the Audubon assignment, Bruce Allen played a crucial role as translator, and I stood back and watched Rick watch the world. Nobody seemed to mind my presence, but nobody quite understood it, either. I remembered a discussion I had a year ago with Terry Tempest Williams. "So what exactly do you do as an ecocritic?" she asked. "What do you do?" It doesn't seem quite right to tell nature writers, keen to communicate as they are, "Well, I help people understand your work." Writers like Rick Bass and

Terry Tempest Williams can communicate quite well on their own, without the help of literary scholars. So what is our role, then? Again and again. I come back to the ideas of contextualization and synthesis. Ecocritics, to do something genuinely meaningful, something beyond propping up our own careers by producing unnecessary commentaries on lucid, eloquent literary texts, must offer readers a broader, deeper, and more explicit explanation of how and what environmental literature communicates than the writers themselves, immersed in their particularized narratives, can offer. Crucial to the ecocritical process of pulling things (ideas, texts, authors) together and putting them in perspective is our awareness of who and where we are. Our awareness, literally, of where we stand in the world and why we're writing. Storytelling, combined with clear exposition, produces the most engaging and trenchant scholarly discourse. Nature writers themselves—Lopez, Pyle, Zwinger, etc.—realize this. Ecocritics should take a hint.

Ecocriticism without narrative is like stepping off the face of a mountain—it's the disoriented silence of freefall, the numb, blind rasp of friction descent. To the extent that our scholarship begins with our experiences in and concern for the physical world of nature, we must seek an appropriately grounded, conscious language. The language of stories, charged with emotion and sensation, may be our best bet.

Narrative Scholarship

By Frank Stewart, University of Hawai'i

The model for the kind of writing I'm interested in, as for many nature writers, is drawn from Henry David Thoreau. His genius, as you know, was a literary way of seeing and talking about the world that synthesized phenomena and feeling, fact and imagination, matter and transcendence—and, we must remember, the rhetorical conventions of fiction, poetry, autobiography, science, and so forth. But at the same time his literary project was an experiment. He felt deeply that his experiment might founder, and this awareness of its provisional successes colored his work; *Walden's* complex tone combines and synthesizes optimism, with despair, new dawns with old darkneses. And Thoreau never failed to covet his experimental narrative strategies as much as he coveted his amateur status as a naturalist.

Many of us working within the lines drawn by Thoreau, or writing critical commentaries about others involved in this line of business, hope to retain the freedom bestowed by Thoreau's experimentation (some of us even want to retain an amateur status). And indeed it was important for me, in my discussion of Thoreau in *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (along with my discussions of others who worked in the same experimental ways), not to betray the spirit in which Thoreau wrote. We can hardly profess to admire Thoreau (or to understand him) and then commit the kinds of literary and perceptual sins that appalled him. Or, to put it positively, it is difficult to demonstrate an understanding of his spirit without attempting to incorporate the elements that he transformed into literary art—such as the presence of a first-hand narrator with first-hand experience of nature and the out-of-doors. And most importantly it is helpful, as he showed, to understand and make use of parable. I hope a discussion will follow in the conference about the nature of parable, but most importantly about the ways in which parabolic stories can free us from worn-out and reductive modes of criticism, and move us closer to the direct forms of knowledge that Thoreau pursued.

Narrative Ecocriticism

By John Tallmadge, The Union Institute

I appreciate the opportunity to offer a few thoughts about narrative ecocriticism. I believe it is very pertinent to the study of nature writing especially, and to ecocritical studies generally. It also has wider applicability to the study of any literary works that depend heavily on their referential dimension.

I would define narrative criticism as bringing one's own experience of persons or places to bear upon the interpretation of works where these persons or places figure. For example, to understand Thoreau's "Ktaadn," one would go to the mountain and perhaps follow Thoreau's ascent route at the same time of year and under similar conditions. The narrative of that experience would provide a subjective lens through which to view Thoreau's text. It would not replace other modes of interpretation, but combine with them to give a stereoscopic view. I have proposed a model of narrative criticism that I call "a natural history of reading" (CEA paper, 1992) because it applies the method of the natural historian to encounters with literary works, and with nature writing specifically. Essentially, the method proposes combining two "disciplines," a discipline of erudition that exposes the text's intertextual relations, and a discipline of engagement that exposes the texts grounding in actual nature through the subjective lens of the critic's own experience of the world. A given work of criticism might lean toward discipline or the other. Erudition reflects what we think of as normal or conventional literary study. Engagement reflects the practice of nature writers themselves. It's rare to find the two in perfect balance.

Theoretical and conceptual arguments for such a mode of criticism can be drawn from Barry Lopez's essay "Landscape and Narrative," which posits the truth inherent in the order of the landscape as a reference for the truth of the story. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* argues for a recuperation of the referential dimensions of literary texts: if we are to judge literature from an ecocentric perspective, we must take the referential dimension more seriously than would modern and postmodern literary theory. Sherman Paul's *Hewing to Experience* draws a suggestive analogy between the critic and the explorer reporting from an undiscovered coast. Recent experiments in this mode of criticism include Sean O'Grady's *Pilgrims to the Wild*, John Elder's *Imagining the Earth*, and parts of Sherman Paul's *For Love of the World* as well as my own *Meeting the Tree of Life: A Teacher's Path*.

Teaching and Narrative Scholarship

By David Taylor, Converse College

"I was thinking this morning of Thoreau's way of writing, and what a mistake I have made in not heeding it. I am afraid I try to say things in too pretty a way—aim to have the page too smooth, to have it read well. I am too afraid to give the mind a jolt, which is a mistake. Thoreau doesn't care how many jolts he gives—the more, the better—they add zest to a page." (John Burroughs, *Journals*)

"My mother is a fish." (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*)

"The quest for an authentic language is pursued within a framework in which language, consciousness, and landscape are interrelated." (J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*)

When I think of the teachers who inspire me (no matter the field of study), the common thread among them is not their command of dates, theorems, or the Holman Handbook, but a genuine personal investment in the material being taught. By "personal investment" I mean that these teachers give me a chance to listen to their background with the material and to see how their learning processes take place. As we know, learning is made up far more of miscues, errant interests, dawdling in unfrequented stacks in the library, chance articles in the newspaper, and long walks than of crystalline visions or profound theses. In other words, learning is a story and a heck of a lot more like Kafka than Thackeray. Often, though, the classroom environment is a place where we "aim to have the page too smooth, to have it read well." It's comforting this way, an order and arrangement that keeps students busy taking notes and maximizes the amount of data on which to test them. Students know this environment, sense it quickly having had to adapt to it off and on for over a decade, and act appropriately by pulling out their spiral notebook and burying their heads in note taking. Like Vardaman, the information we're given may be construed in narrow contexts. On the other hand, those of you who have incorporated field work into your classroom know what a "jolt" it can be. Some students are exuberant, some are scared, and some want to know if this will be on the test. Those of you who have opened a discussion of a text with a personal story about an early reading (what you might think of now as a misreading) know that many students gain confidence and trust from this and are far more willing to discuss their own views.

Narrative scholarship and teaching is about opening up possibilities and other stories; it is about a diversity of views and readings (sounds like reader response). As good storytelling encourages the listener to consider other ways of seeing the landscape, so, too, narrative teaching encourages other ways of understanding information by contextualizing the class environment (contextualizing the class itself is not typical reader response). What's ecocritical about narrative scholarship and teaching? Coetzee's "quest for an authentic language" is "pursued" in an interrelation between "language, consciousness, and landscape." The more care and thought we put into the prospects of word, personal story, environment (suburb, inner city, classroom, library, or trail), and their interrelation, the better we are pursuing authentic communication.

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