

The
AMERICAN NATURE WRITING NEWSLETTER
A Biannual Devoted to the Study of Writing on Nature
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Getting Real with Nature Writing

Glen A. Love

The writer who would criticize sceptical theory today finds himself in a rhetorically odd position. He is conservative and that word alone carries an automatic charge of disapproval. The fact that what he wants to conserve is meaning and reason. . . is not noticed (38).

Our literary culture is at present much more alive, much more active than it was twenty years ago. But there is in this activity something febrile. The very energy, as it accelerates, exhibits more and more the character of a malaise. The ordinary appetite for truth is replaced by a competitive cynicism, which stimulates but does not feed the mind. If we wish to produce by education people who are intellectually just, truth-loving, responsive to evidence and curious, now is the time to pause and take stock (192).

(A.D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis* (London:Methuen. 1983)

Intellectually just. Truth-loving. Responsive to evidence and curious. Perhaps in these qualities we can discern something of why nature writing flourishes today. Clearly, nature writing questions the ascendant critical taboo against reality. But reality, in the form of the natural world, stubbornly remains.

Whether it is the celebration of nature by the poet (as in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "nature is never spent;/There lives the dearest freshness deep down things") or the warning of the ecologist (as in Paul

Ehrlich's caution that "Nature bats last"), nature writing insists that there is an indubitably real world out there. It is not merely something invented by each of us in our private skulls. "Reality," as novelist Philip K. Dick says, "is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." (*I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon* [London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1986], p. 4)

Dim-sighted as we are, we may each have fastened our epistemological hands upon a different part of the elephant, but there *is* an elephant, more various and wonderful than we might suppose. And should *one* blind groper's perception of the elephant achieve ascendancy and become a social or cultural given, that perception is no less limited, nor is the elephant's total reality diminished by it.

Nor did the elephant--or the real world of which it is a part--spring into existence only when the first language named it. The evolution of a "text" did not evolve the elephant. There may be a hundred different and wholly arbitrary terms for elephant in a hundred different languages. But no reasonable person would conclude from this that elephants do not exist.

Nature writing reminds us of these homely truths, contradicting as it does so, the antimimetic assumptions of much current theory. A consequence of our discipline's ignoring of an ecological perspective is seen in the current eclipse of realism as a fashionable literary genre. The inevitable revaluing of nature, forced upon us by the steady deterioration of our environment, will be accompanied by a revaluing of literary realism. Realism shares with nature writing a concern for systems that work. Both realism and nature writing recognize that the world will not at last yield to our fantasies of control, either linguistic or technological. Non-representationalism eschews such concerns. The contemporary critical assumption that writing words on a page or reading them from a page constitutes the only reality cannot sustain itself in the face of the relentless actuality of a shared, and threatened, natural world.

But nature writing also flourishes because it reaches beyond "ordinary" reality, in uniting the bedrock of the real with the grace of individual perception and expression. (*continued p. 2*)

From the Editors

In response to a growing concern that the literary community is not doing its share to preserve the planet's delicate ecological balance, this issue of *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* focuses on Ecocriticism, environmentally conscious approaches to literature. Glen Love's "Getting Real with Nature Writing" argues that nature writing reminds us of the nontextual bedrock real world that sustains us. Sean O'Grady urges educators in the humanities to learn about environmental issues and to become politically active. Cheryl Burgess' bibliography listing critical works that bear on literature and the environment will appear in the Spring Newsletter. Two courses which focus on concepts of nature in literature are described in the "Classroom Notes" section.

This issue introduces a new regular column on Ecofeminism written by Natalie Dandekar of the University of Rhode Island.

As usual we invite readers' comments and suggestions. If you would like to share your classroom work, please submit a manuscript including the course title, description, goals, texts used, and student response to:

L. Thomas Stuckert
English Department
University of Findlay
Findlay, Ohio 45840

Correspondence about book reviews should be addressed to Edward Zlotkowski at the address below.

If you would like your publications, work in progress, dissertation, to be included in our bibliography in the next issue, please fill out the enclosed form and return it to Alicia Nitecki by April 15, 1991.

We would like to thank Sarah Freas for generously creating the new lay-out.

Alicia Nitecki

The *American Nature Writing Newsletter* is published twice a year and contains brief essays, books reviews, classroom notes, and information about activities relating to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Items of interest, including news about conferences, forthcoming publications, and work in progress are welcome. Copies are free to individuals.

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(continued from p. 1)

If nature writing affirms the *otherness* of nature--that which, in disregarding us, enriches us--it affirms the human gifts of consciousness and language, marrying the real to the aesthetic and the ethical, and, ultimately, the political.

Nature writing flourishes because it reasserts the infinite richness of reality. It reminds us that, contrary to current received opinion, reality is not naive. It is complex and fascinating and alluring. And true. Ω

University of Oregon

As Is

Sean O'Grady

A seasoned copy of Willis L. Jepson's *A Manual of the Flowering Plants of California* sits on my bookshelf. Its tattered, watermarked, and yellowing pages attest to sixty-five years (not all of them mine) of enthusiastic use, much of it in the field, where it belongs, imparting its rich acquaintance with California's plant-people to any human who would take the time to learn its language: the scientific lingo of botany. A whorl of words--circumscissile, cinerous, secund, serotinous--whose incantatory strangeness is infused with the unbridled hope of evoking the essential, mysterious presence of the plants themselves.

In 1925, this book sold for \$5. In 1986, I paid \$20.00 for it in a used bookstore. The prices are still pencilled on the flyleaf, along with the bookseller's disclaimer--"as is"--presumably a reference to the book's poor physical condition. Nevertheless, I welcomed the volume, field hardened as it was, and it remains one of my favorites, and most useful. It weighs several pounds, actually seeming to increase its mass the longer I need to carry it, but, despite this, I relish its companionship when I go botanizing. It simply has more character than the lighter, more recent floras.

Another one of my favorite books, also by Jepson, is *The Trees of California*. My copy came off the press in 1923. It too shows the wrinkles of having accompanied countless students into the field, many of whom, by now, have themselves returned to field and forest, "gone underground" so to speak, and come back as Calochortus lily, Calypso orchid, or second growth redwood. I don't, however, bring this book with me into the field--I worry that the beautiful cover illustration, of Kern Canyon Jeffrey pines, might be ruined by the weather. So I suffer the anxiety appropriate to consigning a field guide to the shelf, recall the young Gary Snyder's

motto: "Never own anything you can't leave out in the rain." So I won't bring this book when you and I meet in the field. But please, allow me here to share the opening paragraph of its preface:

Dr. James Bryce once addressed informally a body of students at the University of California on the conduct of life. After speaking of those things necessary to real success in life he urged his hearers each to cultivate some interest beyond their life work or profession, like the study of some branch of botany, zoology or geology, which would serve as an intellectual recreation a resource from excessive cares of the day's or week's work.

You won't find words like these in the "standard" floras today. That's why I'm quoting them. Jepson's dendrology is eloquently written. The wedge between the sciences and the humanities had only suffered a few blows at the time he was writing and compiling. The log has long since been split, and split again. We today live among the splinters.

There are signs, though, that things may be taking a more synthetic, and sympathetic, turn. In the humanities, *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* bears witness to this. Among literature departments, which for the last decade have been infatuated with weaving and tangling themselves in a web of critical theories, there is a renewed interest in what some have been calling the "literature of fact," which includes nature writing. Indeed, many teachers of literature, increasingly concerned with the biological unravelling of the world as is, have even been asking: "What role can I play in the environmental movement?" I have quoted Jepson's words for their benefit.

Rather than for "intellectual recreation" (there's been more than enough of that), the pursuit of scientific knowledge has become, for those who wish to teach literature from an "ecological" perspective, an intellectual necessity. Do your homework first. Learn the flora and fauna, the rocks, the weather. The assignment also includes politics: familiarize yourself with the environmental issues, pick one, become an "expert" in it, and then get out there and fight. Chances are your students know more than you. Learn from them.

Some of you may challenge this agenda, asking: "What does this have to do with the profession?" My response is: the "profession" is part of the problem. We perish under what has been published. What does it all say? Who's reading it anyway? Our real job is to teach, which means to learn. The profession has generated a wide array of powerful, potentially useful theories; unfortunately, it has contented itself with confining praxis to interpreting literary "texts." We now can read *Moby Dick* from a

Greenpeace perspective, but the world goes to hell. Is it any surprise that the dominant mode in nature writing is the elegy?

Funny as it may sound, the theories of Marx, Freud, Foucault, Derrida--you pick your theorist--properly transposed and employed, are eminently useful on the environmental battlefronts. The "opposition" is caught unprepared. They see and speak the world in one way. We can overwhelm them with visions, knock down their industrial Tower of Babel. After all, environmentalism is all about changing the way we perceive the world. As educators in the humanities, we're in a powerful position to participate in--and alter--environmental politics. We need to change the world, instead of idly interpreting it, if we harbor any hope sustaining its wild integrity.

Grab the field guide off the shelf. Take it out into the rain and sun and snow. Learn the world as is, unmanipulated, self-sustaining. See if this doesn't transform the way you see the world and its literature. Tell your students about it. Encourage them. But don't write an article about it for PMLA. And finally, if you're really gung-ho, familiarize yourself with environmental laws and policies. Lobby to improve them. Read Environmental Impact Statements, challenge the county supervisors, run for county supervisor, be a thorn in the side of the powers that be, *become* the powers that be--and then abolish your position. Ω

University of California, Davis

Steinbeck and the Environment: An Interdisciplinary Conference. Abstracts, inquiries, and papers are requested for an interdisciplinary conference on Steinbeck and the environment. The conference will be sponsored by the Steinbeck Research Center of San Jose State University, and hosted by the University of Massachusetts Field Station on Nantucket Island. Steinbeck specialists, generalist scholars of American literature, marine biologists, ecologists, and all interested humanists and scientists are invited to participate. Queries, abstracts, papers to: Steinbeck Conference, 180 Polpis Road, University of Massachusetts Field Station, Nantucket, MA 02554. Tel. 508/228-5268.

What to Make of a Diminished Thing: Writing About Nature in the 1990s. A symposium to be held at Lehman College, April 20, 1991. Contact Jack Kligerman, Department of English, Lehman College, Bronx, NY, 10468.

REVIEWS

Earth Rising, Ecological Belief in an Age of Science by David Oates. Oregon State University Press: Corvallis, Oregon, 1989.

The environmental movement has entered a new phase. It has gained the capacity to reflect on itself, to consider its origins, purposes, and mission. This has occurred for a multitude of reasons, including the pervasive and insidious experience of environmental pollution, which has led to extensive media coverage of environmentalism. The vehicle for this reflection has been the recent flood of books, documentaries, magazines, conferences, and public forums.

This retrospection is long overdue. Environmentalism is more than a political movement; it represents a comprehensive worldview, which applies ecological theory to contemporary issues, incorporating vivid and rich metaphorical visions that inform spirituality, ethics, and everyday action. Indeed, this is the basic thesis of *Earth Rising* by David Oates which investigates the meaning and importance of the ecological world view.

Oates carefully explains that this world view, what he terms ecologism, is not a science, rather it is a belief system that is derived from ecological theory. Several fundamental concepts are at the core of this world view. These are holism, balance, cooperation, and cybernetic system. He explores these concepts in depth, analyzing their metaphorical meaning, reviewing their basis in ecological theory, and assessing their policy implications. For example, in his intriguing essay on balance, he explains how the ubiquitous recycling symbol expresses the idea of dynamic equilibrium and how that idea contributes to a recycling ethic. Thus we see how theory and metaphor lead to action. Oates covers a great deal of ground in this process, commenting on various wings of contemporary environmentalism (ecofeminism, deep ecology, Gaia hypothesis), and speculating on the ethical implications inherent in the metaphors. Indeed, these are the strengths of this book. Oates brilliantly describes how theoretical ecology informs a world view. His ability to illustrate the elusive boundaries of science and religion, his understanding of the scientific, spiritual, literary, and aesthetic aspects of the metaphors allows the reader to freely speculate, to muse, to appreciate and enjoy these interesting questions. Oates has a deliberate and friendly style. He makes difficult concepts accessible. He encourages the reader to explore his/her values and ideas about nature. Most importantly, the reader is challenged to explore the ethical implications of these ideas.

Nevertheless, I was disturbed by a particular theme in *Earth Rising*. Oates consistently refers to the pervasiveness of ecologism, describing the "massive social and political

support given to environmental legislation in the late 1960's and early 1970's", and citing the outdoor boom and the renewed interest in health. He describes the enormous membership increase in environmental organizations and reviews public opinion polls which ostensibly reflect strong support for environmentalism. He asserts that

"some degree of ecological consciousness has become a permanent part of the American value system. This wide support, while not philosophically deep, has shown itself to be perhaps emotionally deep: tough, resilient, indeed almost ineradicable."

Certainly one can make a strong argument for the increased importance of an environmental perspective. But on numerous occasions, Oates naively stretches his point. For example, in his chapter on cooperation, Oates claims that in contrast to the classical Malthusian perspective,

"it is no longer regarded as necessary to let the economically unsuccessful simply starve. Social utility has been given a different and broader definition; a person is generally regarded as more than a money or goods producing unit. In effect the rationale for the entire system has changed from progress and productivity (with the side effect of prosperity for the fit) to the general well being of all."

Political and economic reality bring some very different facts to bear on this question. Oates is working in a fantasy realm here.

I don't think Oates adequately illustrates the specific, everyday life manifestations of ecological metaphors. When he does do this, by elaborating on the recycling symbol or by discussing the whole earth icon his book is particularly effective. But often his illustrations remain solely in a rarefied intellectual realm. Hence his thesis that ecologism is widespread and pervasive is questionable. He doesn't show often enough, with the everyday life examples from popular culture, or with tangible and systematic political examples, how ordinary individuals embody this worldview.

But Oates amply demonstrates the cohesiveness of ecological belief. His book is effective because he involves the reader. We participate in his exploration. We are invited to help articulate and enact an ecological worldview. *Earth Rising* is an excellent text for both undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary courses on environmentalism. Oates has made a significant contribution to the literature because he comprehensively and gently enables, indeed empowers, us to reflect on the deep meaning of environmentalism. ♪

Mitchell Thomashow, Antioch/New England Graduate School

This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing, edited by Thomas J. Lyon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

Overall, Thomas J. Lyon's *This Incomperable Lande* tells a bittersweet, ironic tale of nature writing in America. It reveals that as attitudes towards nature have progressed towards an ecological, unitary view of the place of *homo sapiens* in the natural world, this world itself has steadily withdrawn--as wilderness or wildness--to smaller and smaller enclaves. We lament the loss of land yet praise the growth of consciousness. And we are led to wonder if the vision illuminating the pages of this excellent anthology and history will continue in the future to find much of a "diminished thing" to make something of.

One hopes so. But the history of the American land as observed in selections ranging from William Wood's *New England Prospect* (1634) through John Hay's *The Immortal Wilderness* (1987) suggests that precious little time remains for an ecological consciousness to enter the mainstream of American political thought and really make a difference in saving a land that increasingly has been laid waste by the cultivation of "progress." As Professor Lyon argues, the dominant culture reflects dualistic habits of mind that have separated "mind from matter, self from surroundings, and man from nature" (17), and have created a climate for the exploitation of earth. He traces this dualism to the "Christian concept of man as a special creation and the Aristotelian concept of reason as the best and distinguishing part of man . . ." (18). The tradition, as he acknowledges, stretches farther back in time than two millennia, centering always around the "usefulness" of land. But is progress in terms of utility--one side of the "old growth" vs. "spotted owl" controversy in today's Northwest--the only measure of land?

Happily, as this anthology illustrates, American nature writing proves that there has been another kind of surveying going on, one that has steadily charted new ground of consciousness or spirit, which may yet save us from ourselves. If we could only listen to the voices in these pages, we might in fact enter the New World at last.

The text is divided into two parts: I, A History; II, An Anthology; and it includes a seventy-six page annotated bibliography. The brief first section of the History presents "A Taxonomy of Nature Writing." Warning that the types he lists "tend to intergrate" and that the categories are not "immutable," Professor Lyon outlines three main "dimensions" of the literature of nature: "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (3). The spectrum runs from "Field Guides and Professional Papers," "Natural History Essays," and "Rambles," to "Essays on Experiences in Nature." This last group includes "Solitude and Back-Country Living," "Travel and Adventure," "Farm Life," and "Man's Role in Nature" (4). The main burden of the Natural History Essay, in the most

inclusive sense of the term, "is to convey pointed instruction in the facts of nature" (5). From this point one moves towards essays which more and more emphasize "the writer's experience" (5), and end with "analytic and comprehensive works on man and nature," where "philosophy is all" (7). The divisions of this taxonomic scheme function not just to inform the reader and describe the genre, but give as well the rationale for selecting the essays.

Section two of the History offers a useful and instructive "American Chronology." It begins with Columbus' landfall in 1492 and ends in 1987, when "the last wild California condor is captured and taken to the San Diego Zoo" (15), albeit with good intentions. In eight brief but packed pages, God's plenitude diminishes; scientific nature study begins; a non-anthropocentric view of our relation to nature develops.

Then follows the History proper. It is in four chapters: "The American Setting," "Beginnings," "The Age of Thoreau, Muir, and Burroughs," and "Modern Developments." In a patient, interesting, highly-informative, yet--given the wide field of study--fairly concise manner, Professor Lyon traces the development of not just writing about nature in general but the nature essay as a form as well. His main theme is that within the dominant "frontier" mentality, naturalists and nature writers make up a distinctly nonconforming, even heretical minority. The principal cultural heresy expressed in American nature writing is the refocusing of vision outward from the self, individually, and from the corporate self, our species. A radical proposal follows on the widened vision; that the environment, nature, is the ground of a positive and sufficient human joy" (19). Romanticism and nature thus fuse as "the experience and detailed study of nature . . . lead toward an ecological understanding of the world" (21). The History ends with remarks on Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986); which is seen as "a contemporary statement, almost a precis, of what may be the major ethical motif in American nature literature, the choice between domination and democratic membership. The alternatives frame the great question of how we should live" (90).

In Part II, the Anthology, we are given twenty-two selections which cover the variety of forms presented in the taxonomy. Some deservedly favorite choices are here, e.g. Thoreau's "Walking" and Muir's "The Water-Ouzel"; others tap more philosophical sources, such as John Burroughs' "The Natural Providence" and Joseph Wood Krutch's "The Meaning of Awareness"; essays by other writers, especially Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey, stretch our thoughts in unaccustomed ways. But the selections make us wish for even more. They remind us that what we are reading is a well-informed introduction to an extremely plentiful yield.

(continued p. 6)

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Finally--and what I believe makes *This Incomperable Lande* such a valuable text--there is the annotated bibliography of primary materials and secondary studies. These readings indicate how central to the American experience and its intellectual history writing about nature has proven to be. After skimming over the bibliography, one wonders how Professor Lyon could have limited his selections at all. He must have felt like a visitor from the third world on entering an American supermarket: only here the offerings on the shelves are real and meaningful, not frivolous and wasteful reduplications of the same thing.

This Incomperable Lande, then, is more than an incomparable book. It is an essential one. I wish, though, that "human beings" or another suitable synonym would substitute for the all too pervasive "man." Women, after all, have shared the destruction of land, the fruits of conquest, the feathers of egrets, and the enlightening of our consciousness. They should not be overlooked in the language. They might also have composed a larger group of writers in the Anthology, being represented here only by Rachel Carson and Annie Dillard. Furthermore, it is regrettable that Houghton Mifflin Company has published the book only in a \$29.95 hardcover edition and currently has no plans for a cheaper reprint. Nevertheless, Professor Lyon has given us an intellectually sound book, one that satisfies emotionally in spite of its mournful *basso continuo* of destruction. It is a significant resource for all readers, lovers of literature and nature alike. Ω

Jack Kligerman, Lehman College, CUNY

Norton Book of Nature Writing. Edited by Robert Finch and John Elder. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.

The dust jacket of the newly published *Norton Book of Nature Writing*, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder, bears a reproduction of "Early Morning at Cold Spring," a painting by Asher B. Durand of the Hudson River School. This pleasing work depicts a tiny waistcoated and top-hatted man, dwarfed by overreaching beeches and oaks, poised contemplatively on the bank of a placid bay. In the distance across the bay, a church spire rises from the billowing treetops, and a few figures on a pathway by the water seem to be making their way toward--or perhaps away from--the church. The placid water mirrors the distant shoreline tableau.

This painting perfectly captures that peculiarly nineteenth century, peculiarly American sense of, as Emerson put it, "an occult relation between man and the vegetable"--a relation best enjoyed in onanistic privacy, away from the irritations of human community, and founded on the firm conviction that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in

nature corresponds to some state of the mind . . ." (Emerson again). Even the distant church spire in the painting seems to proclaim its own modesty in relation to the grander and more luminous *plein air* cathedral in which the ruminative little man (whose back, by the way, is to the viewer) worships.

The *Norton Book of Nature Writing* presents a case in which one *can* judge a book by its cover. For this anthology bears roughly the same relationship to writings on the subject of nature (or writings that in some way include nature) that the Hudson River School bears to landscape painting (or paintings that in some way incorporate natural elements). This is to say that, for all its virtues of drama and grace, for its apt capture of light in all its guises and its technically adept, minutely observed renditions of flora and fauna, rock and water--even for its radical diminution of the human figure within the natural world--the Hudson River School is parochial, limited in viewpoint, technique, and aesthetics. And, to a large degree, so is the new Norton anthology.

This assessment will startle even the casual skimmer of the *Norton Book's* table of contents, which begins with excerpts from Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (an eighteenth century work that both Darwin and Thoreau kept within arm's reach), and which concludes with a work by the contemporary, relatively unknown young Mormon writer Terry Tempest Williams (born 1955). In between lie 123 pieces by 92 other writers from all walks of life: explorers (William Bartram, Charles Waterton), artists and art critics (George Catlin, Rockwell Kent, John Ruskin), poets (Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walt Whitman), novelists (Virginia Woolf, John Steinbeck), mystics and monks (Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Merton), ornithologists (Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon), geologists (Clarence King, John Wesley Powell), an animal trainer (Vicki Hearne), and naturalists of every other stripe, amateur and professional, from Jean Henri Fabre and Charles Darwin down through Annie Dillard and Gretel Ehrlich.

Despite this luxurious sprawl of writers, the collection represents nature writing in the narrow sense: as the record of an individual's response to some particularized landscape, event or, occasionally, animal. The editors themselves define the genre in this way: "The personal element--that is, the filtering of experience through an individual sensibility--is central to what we view as the nature writing tradition." Other criteria governing the selection were that works be non-fiction prose (an excerpt from *Moby Dick* is the exception); and that the works "represent, as fully as possible, the range of nature writing in English over the past two centuries. . ." (Exceptions were made for a Frenchman, a Dane and a South African--Jean Henri Fabre, Isak Dinesen, and Laurens Van Der Post).

The combined effect of these limitations of sensibility, time and place is that the overriding perspective

and feeling of the collection is relentlessly Romantic, or at least nearly so in all its pre-, post- and neo- manifestations. Most of the works in this collection--and many of them are excellent works in themselves--strike that brief, if lyrical, range of notes between the ruminative and the rhapsodic. The reader discovers everywhere the anthropomorphizing tendency as well as the deep-seated drive to project on nature our imaginative, spiritual, aesthetic or ethical agenda. The need resounds in Coleridge's lamentation that "The Chestnut is a fine shady tree, and its wood excellent, were it not that it dies away at the *heart* first. Alas! Poor me!"; in Fabre's moral revulsion at the cannibalistic copulations of the female praying mantis; in Gustav Eckstein's excesses of fellow feeling, thoroughly charming and appalling at the same time, toward his two desk-drawer dwelling rats (of the male he writes, "Father this morning is lying on his side, his two hands folded just under his nose, as if he had fallen asleep in prayer.")

The reader is deafened once again by the voice-in-the-wilderness howl and bombast of Melville's "Whiteness of the Whale" chapter; and is amused and exasperated to find Henry James seemingly incapable of viewing a landscape as anything *but* a work of art: "Cape Cod," he writes, "on this showing was exactly a pendent, pictured Japanese screen or banner; a delightful little triumph of 'impressionism'." And more than one reader will roll her eyes at John Updike's piece from a "Talk of the Town" column for the *New Yorker*, in which he exults about the rain, "Throw her on the street, mix her with candy wrappers, splash her with taxi wheels, she remains a virgin and a lady."

There are a few poor choices, such as the David Quammen piece which takes issue with the animal rights stances of Tom Regan and Peter Singer, to the probable mystification of readers unfamiliar with these two authors (whose work is not represented here). Some pieces--Emerson's "Nature" is one--seem unnecessarily truncated. The introductions to individual authors are often no more than brief, laudatory remarks. But these are cavils. It is the anthologizer's bane to be taken to task for both his choices and omissions. On the whole, the works included are a pleasure to read.

The *Norton Book*, however, invites a more serious quarrel. It is not surprising that anthology of works on nature should appear at a time when the cultural and political climate is charged with environmental furor (both real and feigned). What is surprising is that the editors present a too-narrow context for these works which for some readers will amount to no context at all. Perhaps it is unfair to criticize an anthology for what it does not aspire to do; still, it seems that at a time when reconsideration of the human being's place within the natural world affects all disciplines, a harder look and a larger view than the one circumscribed within this anthology would be crucial. Such a view would place the notion of "individual sensibility," as a prerequisite for

"nature writing," within a larger cultural and historical context and would address its limitations and defaults. It is, after all, at least partly the romanticizing of nature, and the privatization of "nature experiences" that account for the current disastrous relations between humans and the rest of the physical world.

All the really conspicuous absences in this collection may be attributed to the editors' adherence to the "individual sensibility" angle. "[F]ine scientific essayists from Thomas Huxley to Stephen Jay Gould" are missing because of a perceived deficiency in this respect (one wonders whose sensibility the editors think Gould writes from anyway); traditional Native American works are absent for the same lack, as well as because such works exist only in translation); presumably the works of Gary Snyder, Susan Griffin, and eco-feminists as a class are absent, too, because they do not exploit "personal sensibilities" but rather those linguistic and cultural arteries which lie at the very heart of the paradigm shifts necessary for the human world to regain its balance on the planet.

There are stirrings in this volume toward a necessary "communal sensibility" that would lead to change. One detects them in Ursula Le Guin's playful myth-making exercise on the subject of the eruption of Mount St. Helens; in Barry Lopez's emphatic re-imagining of Eskimo culture; in Leslie Marmon Silko's description of ritual and myth in the Pueblo imagination. These writers do not so much continue the tradition of nature writing in England and America as depart from it, turn it back upon itself. They invert the usual view. It is important to recognize that. Ω

Georgyi Voros, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

New Alchemy Quarterly promotes the goals of the New Alchemy Institute: to develop sustainable technologies for providing food, energy, shelter, and landscape design. The journal's recent themes include: environmental education, managing growth, sustainable agriculture research, environmental art, and ecofeminism. The Fall 1990 topic is landscaping with nature. Bill O'Neill, *New Alchemy Quarterly*, New Alchemy Institute, 237 Hatch Road, East Falmouth, MA 02536. Membership \$35; quarterly subscription only \$8.

The CEA Critic : announces a special issue on Reading/Writing/Teaching the Literature of Nature. Queries: Betsy Hilbert, Independent Studies Department, Miami-Dade Community College, 11011 S.W. 104 Street, Miami, FL 33176.

CLASSROOM NOTES

"Nature in American Literature" at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

George Savage

Last fall (1989) I taught a special topics English course called "Nature in American Literature." The course was for majors and non-majors and included graduate and undergraduate students.

I only regret that it was a one-time-only course. Without doubt it was the most successful course I have taught in my six-year tenure at Whitewater. In it I was able to teach several of my favorite writers who often fall between the cracks of English and biology curricula. Thoreau is unique in having escaped (through academic Providence?) this fate, but there have been latterday "Thoreaus"--John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard--who have not fared so well. As I planned the course, which was filled with writers who have made these interdisciplinary cracks their fertile domains, I would daydream from time to time about "team teaching" the course with a biology teacher. Half the dream came true. One of my best students had a degree in biology. He generously added a scientific perspective on most of the literature and proved a worthy field guide on a day trip our class took to Aldo Leopold's shack near Baraboo, Wisconsin.

The course began with an examination of differences between European and Native American ways of perceiving nature, differences brought into stark relief by juxtaposing Biblical and Eskimo creation myths. These differences were also raised in the film *Koyaanisqatsi* and Keith Basso's very fine essay "Stalking with Stories: Names, Places, and Moral Narratives among the Western Apaches" (anthologized in *On Nature*, ed. Daniel Halpern). We traced some of the ecological and cultural consequences of these conflicting world views to the first European migrations to America.

Because there was so much to cover in a one semester course, we then skipped to American Romanticism, with selections from Cooper and a slide presentation on the Hudson River school of art. Our most formidable reading assignment, Emerson's *Nature*, served as a prelude to American Transcendentalism. We read selections from Whitman and Dickinson and, taking Thoreau's advice, read sections of *Walden* and his essay "Walking," "deliberately."

Though not a native Wisconsinite, I acquired abundant chauvinistic state pride while showing the transcendental legacy in several Wisconsin writers, John Muir and Aldo Leopold. I have since learned that these writers are virtually unknown to most Wisconsin college students. We also traced transcendental themes in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* as well as discussed feminist theories of nature

with the guidance of the work of Annette Kolodny.

The final three books we read were by contemporary writers: Wendell Berry (*The Unsettling of America*), N. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn*), and Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*). Momaday and Dillard proved to be the most popular writers of the course; in fact, several months after the course concluded, some former students initiated a trip to a nearby campus to hear Momaday read from his recent novel *Ancient Child*.

This post-semester enthusiasm was also revealed in occasional course-related articles I later received. I relate this enthusiasm not to brag about a particular class (I've also had my share of flops), but to suggest that nature courses in the humanities are intrinsically relevant and interesting in our age of ecological crisis. Rather than be offered as a rare "plum" course for teachers and students, I wish this kind of course, particularly with a more integrated cross-disciplinary approach, were available to the majority of students on a semester to semester basis. Ω

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

The "High Points" of Wilderness Literature at Weber State College

Mikel Vause

In today's graduate programs the search for originality is the concern not only of graduate students but professors as well. In my program at Bowling Green State University, my committee probably worried as much about helping me find a dissertation topic as I did. We discussed all sorts of topics, everything from some modern critical examination of Emerson's "Nature," to some kind of textual analysis of the original manuscripts of Dante's *Inferno*. But when it got down to the real decision I was asked "what really interests you?"

Living in the flat lands of Ohio, I was more than a little homesick for high mountains, my home being at the foot of Wasatch arm of the Rocky Mountains. So to seek relief I suggested a study of the literature that deals with mountains and, in particular, that written by climbers. In searching the canon we found no other literary-critical study that dealt with the works of climber-writers.

The result of my doctoral work was a dissertation that examines the writings of ten international climbers and their contributions to the literary world. Such climber-writers as Sir Leslie Stephen and Geoffrey Winthrop Young, Maurice Herzog and Walter Bonatti, Woodrow Wilson Sayre, David Roberts and Arlene Blum were some that made up the collection. Their writings were examined

and analyzed for literary quality, philosophical depth and artistic craft. The result was both interesting and certainly unique as dissertations go. But more importantly the several years of pouring over volume after volume of everything from guide books to novels, I was able to collect a great deal of useful information.

Upon returning to Weber State College, in Ogden, Utah, I was approached by my department chair Candadai Seshachari to teach a class based on my graduate work, thus English 275 "Literature of the Mountains" came to be. For this class there was not an already existing text, so I made my own by going back to my files and pulling together a unique collection of both rare and common climbing essays and stories from all over the world. This text has proven to be more useful than I had originally planned as it not only provided many great climbing stories, but it also gave my students some insight into different writing techniques, and other cultures as well.

An example of this kind of diversity can be found by comparing Bonatti's attack of an "over-industrialized society" found in the chapter titled "Mountaineering" in his book *The Great Days* with Doug Scott's observations of Yosemite's "Camp IV" found in his essay "on The Profundity Trail." Bonatti sees the mountaineer as the modern equivalent of the Knight, one chasing noble causes in the high mountains only to have his conquests devalued by a world peopled with the sedentary and spiritually dead. In his essay, Scott came down from five days on the North American Wall of Yosemite's El Capitan with a renewed vigor to return to modern society, his eye clearly set on making a contribution to his fellows. By using such comparisons in the classroom the teacher can lead a historiographical discussion focusing on time and place. A class may take a look at national philosophies by examining each author's national background and how nationalism is mirrored in content. A technical literary critical perspective can come by examining writing styles and content.

Another important approach, one that is of great importance today, is to look at how climber-writers from various eras and countries and regions deal with the environment in their writings. When one looks at the writings of Jeff Lowe and compares them with those of John Hunt two extremely different views of man's place in the environment emerge. In Lowe's essay "One Man's Frostbite" we read about "Alpine Style" climbing (climbing bit mountains with a small team of two or three in an attempt to have little impact on the environment) as compared to the grand expedition (Hunt's 1953 Everest expedition, for example, as chronicled in *The Conquest of Everest*, that put Hillary and Tenzing on top of the world). Hunt's trip was a success, but it relied on not just a few climbers, but a cast of hundreds. There the impact on the environment was clearly evident and has continued to be wherever large expeditions have been involved. Such

comparisons can then be carried over into discussions of both local and global environmental concerns.

We have offered this class several times with an average enrollment of fifteen and the comments we have received have been very favorable. Not only does this type of class provide the students with a new and different alternative to the standard "Introduction to Literature" class, it provides the teacher a unique opportunity to teach a subject that is very near and dear, and a chance to be creative; it gets the dissertation off the shelf and puts to use a great deal of information that many times in the past has done nothing but gather dust on the shelves of the library. Ω

Weber State College

Women's Studies Quarterly : An Educational Project of The Feminist Press at the City University of New York. Editor: Nancy Porter. Guest Editor: Margery Conwell. The focus of this issue is on the relationship of women and nature in all disciplines: humanities, social science, science and technology. Margery Conwell, Department of English (A-324), College of Staten Island, 715 Ocean Terrace, Staten Island, N.Y.10301.

The April 1990 ("Earth Day") issue of *Harper's* included a controversial Forum, entitled "Only Man's Presence Can Save Nature," in which such writers as Frederick Turner and Dave Foreman debated the role of humanity in environmental preservation. Subsequent issues of the magazine (see July 1990) have presented a flood of interesting letters (from the likes of Kirkpatrick Sale, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Cy Jamison, and Michael Fischer) in response. *Harper's Magazine*, P.O. Box 1937, Marion, OH 43305; (800)347-6969.

The Winter 1989 issue of *Witness* (Volume III, Number 4) was guest-edited by Thomas J. Lyon and devoted to "New Nature Writing." Contributors include John Hay, William Kittredge, Rick Bass, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Gary Snyder, and seven other important nature writers. Peter Stine, Editor, *Witness*, 31000 Northwestern Highway, Suite 200, Farmington Hills, MI 48018. Single copies \$6.

ECOFEMINISM

What is Ecofeminism Anyway?

Natalie Dandekar

To those of you already acquainted with, or actively working as ecofeminists, I apologize if this first column seems to you overly elementary. To many people, ecofeminism is a neologism, and one with which they are barely acquainted. So, in this column, and because I am trained as a philosopher, I begin with the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism.

As the sound of the name suggests, ecofeminism combines the insights of the feminist critique of human relationships with an ecologically oriented analysis of the way in which patriarchal presumptions distort all relationships, human and non-human alike. Where "development" oriented models speak of quantitative remedies, more food, more wages, more gap, ecofeminism seeks transformations promoting a qualitatively more human social order. (See *A New Movement*, ed. Judith Plant, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989.)

Rooted in the feminist critique, ecofeminism realizes that we don't know what a human social order will be since patriarchal presumptions function in all of us to distort the meaning of being human. We grow up gendered, conditioned to perpetuate the system of domination and oppression in ways we cannot always uproot. Feminist critique offers us hope that we may shed the distortions of hierarchy so that all humans may interrelate as subjects worthy of working out our own lives in mutually respectful circumstances. Ecofeminism builds upon that potential for transformation and connects it firmly with the ecological understanding that we are all part of one organic flow of life. Acknowledging the importance of the ecologist's orientation toward developing ways of life that will allow human beings to fulfill our material needs living in harmony with nonhuman nature, ecofeminists make explicit the connection between the exploitation of women as resource and the exploitation of nature as resource.

Ecofeminists understand that both feminists and ecologists provide alternatives to what is so often and fallaciously assumed about the relationship of mind/body; nature/culture. Of course it is possible, in thought, to distinguish nature from culture. But thinking the separation does not make of nature and culture two independent realms of being. However cultured, human beings remain bound to the necessities of nature; however unlimited human inventiveness may be, nature is not by that means transformed into a resource for unlimited exploitation.

Ecofeminists consciously recognize that it is the same mistaken presumption of alienation, of treating the other

(whether it be woman or nature) as resource, and means to be used and even used up in the pursuit of some (privileged, male) end, which underlies the wrongs which distort our human life chances and ultimately threaten to destroy us all, and at no great distance in time.

As Ynestra King writes in "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," Plant 18-28) ecofeminist principles are based on four beliefs, issuing in four interconnect forms of practice:

1. The building of Western industrial civilization in opposition to nature interacts dialectically with and reinforces the subjugation of women.

2. Life on earth is an interconnected web, or, in the words of Corinne Kumar D'Souza, a field of interconnecting events arranged in patterns of multiple meaning. We could not live without the rest of nature. Ecofeminist practice is necessarily anti-hierarchical.

3. A healthy, balanced ecosystem needs diversity. Ecologically, environmental simplification is as significant a problem as environmental pollution. Diversity in nature is necessary and enriching. In human society, commodity capitalism intentionally simplifies human culture so that the same commodities can be marketed anywhere. Ecofeminism resists social/environmental simplification, valuing and supporting unity in diversity.

4. The survival of the species necessitates a renewed understanding of our relationship to nature, our own bodily nature and of non-human nature . . . although the nature-culture dualism is a product of culture, we can nonetheless consciously choose . . . to transform the nature-culture distinction and . . . create a free ecological society.

Ecofeminism approaches political issues on an intimate and moral level, holding that a personalized, decentralized life-affirming culture and politics of direct action are crucially needed to transform the world's priorities. Disarmament, and a reconceptualization of wealth in a peace paradigm connect with ecology as politics, and feminism as promoting a vision of an alternative political order. So, ecology, feminism and liberation are joined in the theory and practice of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists consciously and transformatively act so that we can participate in a sustainable wholeness, finding membership in a unity which cherishes diversity. Ω

University of Rhode Island