

# The American Nature Writing Newsletter

Spring 1990, Vol. 2, No. 1

## FROM THE EDITORS

We are again pleased to report that the list of subscribers to the Newsletter continues to grow, and that the first volume is now "sold out."

With this issue, we are beginning a new regular column on Environmental Ethics. Correspondence about this feature should be sent to:

Joan Whitman Hoff  
Department of Philosophy  
Bentley College  
Waltham, Ma 02154-4705

The "Classroom Notes" section in this issue includes descriptions of four courses which deal with the theme of nature from literary, philosophic, sociological, and cultural perspectives. If you would like to share your classroom work in this area, please submit a manuscript including the course title, description, goals, texts used, and student responses to:

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

We apologise for the omission of the bibliography. We ran into some difficulties with this section but it will appear in Spring 1991.

We would like to thank those who wrote in to encourage us in this venture, and to remind readers that we welcome suggestions for regular features and special issues.

Alicia Nitecki

## REVIEWS

*In Defense of the Land, Essays in Environmental Philosophy* by J. Baird Callicott. SUNY Press: Albany, NY, 1989.

J. Baird Callicott's *In Defense of the Land Ethic* is a well-written and interesting collection of essays which combine cohesively to form a convincing argument for what might be called environmental rights. In fact, Callicott's book is a compilation of essays written over the span of a decade and hence contains several arguments for moral consideration of the environment.

In the Introduction, Callicott explains that his approach to environmental ethics differs from "normal moral philosophy. It grows, rather, out of modern biological thought about the environing natural world and about human nature." (11) So, he turns to sociobiology as a resource and claims that his aim is to help reorient contemporary philosophical thought. Drawing on science, philosophy and history Callicott successfully brings together a wide variety of disciplines and issues in a single volume.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I, "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics," discusses Aldo Leopold's paradigm land ethics as an alternative to the anthropocentric and extensionist views as well as discussing the place animals have and should have in environmental ethics. It includes three papers, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," a "Review of Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*" and "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again." Callicott's position is that animal rights and environmental ethics must be considered as a common concern but that at times they may conflict with each other.

Based upon this Callicott develops a holistic environmental ethic in Part II. In three essays, "Elements of an Environmental Ethic: Moral Considerability and the Biotic Community," "The Conceptual Foundation of the Land Ethic" and "The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology" Callicott focuses on the land ethic's shift from an individual

The *American Nature Writing Newsletter* is published twice a year and contains brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes, and disseminates 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.

Editor: Alicia Nitecki, Bentley College  
Assistant Editor: Cheryll Burgess, Cornell University  
Classroom Notes Editor: L. Thomas Stuckert, Findlay University

Environmental Ethics Editor: Joan Whitman Hoff, Bentley College  
Journal Notes Editor: Scott Slovic, Brown University

Address correspondence and queries to Alicia Nitecki, Department of English, Bentley College, Waltham, MA 02154-4705

focus to a community focus. Callicott's main claims are that anthropocentrism is no longer sufficient or efficient for the global community, and that the global community must be considered.

Part III brings a discussion of the shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Herein, Callicott discusses the revolutionary combination of holism and ecocentrism as defying western ethical heritage. He includes in his discussion such thinkers as David Hume, Adam Smith and Darwin. In three essays, "Hume's IS/UGHT Dichotomy and the Relation of Ecology to Leopold's Land Ethic", "On the Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Species", and "Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics" Callicott takes the historical approaches to value theory and extends them to the biotic community.

In Part IV, Callicott focuses on American Indians as environmental ethicists. In two essays, "Traditional American Indian and Western European Attitudes Toward Nature: An Overview" and "American Indian Land Wisdom? Sorting Out The Issues" he discusses the controversial issues of the American Indian's contribution to the land ethic and notes the importance of the interrelatedness of all species and life forms.

Part V is based upon Callicott's research in the midwest. "Aldo Leopold on Education, as Educator, and His Land Ethics in the Context of Contemporary Environmental Education", "Leopold's Land Aesthetic" and "Moral Considerability and Extraterrestrial Life" are three essays which, in some ways, tie together the topics in the earlier essays and also offer some new issues for reflection. Callicott focuses on the limits of the land ethic and the possibility of life on other planets and whether or not it is important to consider that possibility in an environmental ethic.

The titles of the essays themselves reveal the broad range of ethical considerations and research present in Callicott's book. Beginning with the traditional western anthropocentric view, Callicott explains why that view is no longer plausible or adequate for our contemporary world. Problems including land, animals, agriculture, aesthetics and the possibility of extraterrestrial life are discussed in detail providing a synoptic view of various considerations concerning them. This diversity is one of the aspects of the book which gives it its strength. The current interest in the environment supports the notion that anthropocentrism can no longer sustain us. What is needed is a reevaluation of the theories that do exist and some intellectual speculation about what will be needed in the future. Callicott does just that.

Callicott's book is an excellent compilation of essays which in themselves are plausible and worthy of serious attention and together contribute significantly to the current debates taking place concerning the environment. He gives attention to nonwestern and nontraditional perspectives, which is something that is not always found in a single book. It is certainly a book which should be read because it is interesting and it can be used as a text in any course which might deal with any aspect of the environment because of its strengths in discussing alternative historical and scientific and philosophical views. It certainly deserves a close look.

Joan Whitman Hoff, Bentley College

*The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature.* By W. Ross Winterowd. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.

New Studies of nature writing are springing up everywhere these days. At the 2nd North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference which took place February 8-10 in Ogden, UT, more than twenty papers on nature writing were presented; some examined ecopoetry or environmental fiction, but many derived implicitly from a devotion to nonfictional prose as a trenchant mode of literary expression. More of the same happened at the College English Association's gathering last month in Buffalo, NY, where three separate sessions focused on nature writing of various types. Meanwhile, important publications—such as Peter A. Fritzell's *Nature Writing and America: Essays upon a Cultural Type* (see review in the Fall 1990 issue of the newsletter)—have been appearing, though most have thus far eluded the attention of scholars working in this fast-expanding field.

I trust that many readers and teachers of nature writing have, at least in part, appreciated this neglected body of literature out of an intrinsic attraction to the pristine, the unexplored—to the very wildness of it. And so it has to be with some ambivalence that we witness—and participate in—this explosion of popularity, the perusal of John Muir's once-esoteric writings becoming in our time as commonplace as an excursion to his once-remote Yosemite. Lately I have been stumbling across discussions of nature writing in surprising places. I recently opened W. Ross Winterowd's *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature* which a friend had passed along to me because of its analysis of literary journalism, only to find that the distinguished rhetorician and theorist of composition (author of *Composition/Rhetoric: A Synthesis* in 1986) had drawn upon the terminology of his discipline (chiefly, the wavering opposition between "discursive" and "presentational" literature) to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of how "the nature meditation" and other popular forms of nonfiction function as *literature*. Understanding Winterowd's lively and learned argument is a way of understanding our own ardent, but frequently unexamined, defense of the literary value of nature writing. Echoing and elaborating upon Terry Eagleton's inclusive, fluctuating definition of literature, Winterowd asserts that "Literariness, fictionality, and poeticality are not functions of the text itself, but result from the way in which the reader takes the text [...]" His book grapples with the biases many readers, especially literary scholars, have towards "The literature of fact."

As Winterowd races through his survey of rhetorical theory and definitional debates, his own argument occasionally disintegrates into loosely linked digressions (a problem inherent in the division of this 139-page text into six chapters and twenty-two subchapters) and the competing terminology of supporting theorists (Susanne Langer, Endel Tulving, and Kenneth Burke, in particular) sometimes becomes more distracting than illuminating. But Winterowd returns frequently enough to Langer's fundamental distinction between "discursive symbolism" and "presentational symbolism" to explain, and ultimately debunk, the bias which has led many scholars to devalue texts which bear "the taint of discursiveness." "In the twentieth century," he observes.

"successive purges have 'purified' literature, the dross of 'fact' being smelted off to leave the pure gold of imagination: poetry, prose fiction, and drama." It is clearly Winterowd's goal to reverse the effects of these purges, and in doing so he brings nonfiction (including nature writing) into the current controversy about the canon. Noting that only fifteen of the approximately 900 sessions at the 1988 MLA meeting were explicitly designated as forums for discussing "Nonfiction Prose," he writes: "The virtually monomaniacal commitment to the 'imaginative' and avoidance of the 'non-imaginative' is a large factor in the alienation of the literary establishment from the educated reading public. Annie Dillard, Peter Matthiessen, Richard Selzer, even Joan Didion as essayist--these authors of the common-place, read and admired by those for whom Litspeak is a foreign language, are barely in the contemporary canon."

Much of *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature* amounts to a lesson in reading certain nonfictional texts as "esthetic objects" rather than as "sources of information." Actually, it is hard to imagine anyone reading Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* or Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* for anything other than their "qualitative" (Burke) or "lyrical" (Winterowd) aspects--and thus this study sometimes verges on the truisitic. Nonetheless, Winterowd's book gives new fuel and new language to the approaches many of us have long maintained in our work on nature writing. Particularly useful is his decision to associate literary journalism's emphasis on dramatic presentation with the combinations of discursive and presentational prose in the essays of John McPhee, Stephen Jay Gould, Joan Didion, Lewis Thomas, Loren Eiseley, and Richard Selzer. But it will probably be the final chapter, entitled "Reading: Nature to Advantage Dress'd," which will be of greatest interest to students of nature writing. In his amiable and admiring remarks on Dillard, Abbey, Matthiessen, and Barry Lopez, Winterowd, the self-proclaimed "relativist," arranges these four writers on the spectrum from psychology of information to psychology of form" (more of Burke's terms), finding *Desert Solitaire* and Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* relatively informative (discursive) and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* primarily lyrical (aesthetic, presentational). Drawing upon Louise Rosenblatt's distinction between "efferent" and "esthetic" modes of reading (the former denoting the retention of information after the act of reading, the latter emphasizing the reader's absorption in "what happens during the actual reading event"), Winterowd underscores one of the central points of his book: to illustrate that "any text can be read either efferently or esthetically, though some texts have more potentiality for esthetic reading." "Esthetic" reading comes about through *immersion*, he writes, "and we immerse ourselves in *unified* texts, whether 'factual' or fictive"; various kinds of *disunity* tend to inhibit aesthetic responses to *Desert Solitaire*, *Arctic Dreams*, and even *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

While extremely provocative, Winterowd's assessments of his four concluding examples were not, for me, wholly persuasive. After rather hurried treatment of the other three, he begins the final subchapter of the book with the following glowing statement: "*The Snow Leopard* is a magnificent achievement, having all the power of a great novel with a first-person narrator as well as the inherent appeal of informativeness. One reads the book as 'fact,' not fiction,

but becomes totally immersed esthetically." I do not dispute this evaluation of Matthiessen's fine book, but I am suspicious of Winterowd's dismissal of the aesthetic impact of the other three books because of their relative disunity (*Arctic Dreams*, he writes, "lacks the intensity that the lyric ratio [...] creates. It is too disunified to sustain itself"). Such an emphasis on the unity of discursive and presentational aspects in a given work as essential to the aesthetic impact--the literariness--of the work leads the critic to overlook the abundant patterns of dissonance and disorientation throughout *Desert Solitaire* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*--if Abbey and Dillard have produced disunified works, this is entirely consistent with their strategies "compel us into a reawakened awareness of the wonderful," as Abbey puts it. As for the disjunction between the narrative and discursive layers of *Arctic Dreams*, this seems profoundly in keeping with Lopez's effort to enable his reader to experience the diverse, even incongruous, ways of knowing a natural place, "mathematical knowledge" remaining separate from particularized understanding, yet each supplementing the other in an essential way.

Scott Slovic, Brown University

## CLASSROOM NOTES

"American Landscapes" and "Landscape, Myth, and Literature" at the University of Oregon

Louise Westling

During the past two academic years, in response to student interest in the environment and as an extension of my own research work on landscape imagery, I have taught two courses at the junior/senior level focused on the historical development of symbolic landscapes: "American Landscapes" (Fall 1988) and "Landscape, Myth, and Symbol" (Fall 1989). These courses actually developed from earlier experiments in the middle and late 1970's which were stimulated by John Conron's anthology of readings, *The American Landscape*. In the 1970's I had concentrated on Conron's book with the addition of close readings of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, but in my two most recent courses the scope was broader.

"American Landscapes," a course that enrolled both English majors and graduate students, was based on the assumption that the landscape has been a central preoccupation of American culture since the first European explorers began describing the "New World" according to their own ideological needs and cultural traditions. Conron's *The American Landscape* provided a historical range of examples from the earliest European explorations down to the present day, which allowed us to follow the evolving symbolic treatment of the land. My own thinking has been influenced by Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* and Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land*, so that I stress the gender dimensions of such traditions as the Judeo/Christian motif of the Garden of Eden, archaic Greek notions of the Golden Age, and pastoralism. Leslie Fiedler's hypothesis in *Love and Death in the American Novel* about male bonding and

the escape from civilization (coded, of course, as female) adds another level of complexity, since the landscape is also gendered female in most texts. At the end of the course contemporary models suggested by James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis and the New Biology are placed in contrast to the traditional Euro/American habits of objectifying and exploiting the physical environment.

Texts for "American Landscapes" included a packet of xeroxed background materials: examples of Sumerian garden imagery from the Hymns to Inanna (c. 2,000 B.C.), the first three chapters of Genesis, the first and last chapters of *The Machine in the Garden*, Emerson's "Nature," and several chapters of Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Way of Looking at Life on Earth*. Books were John Conron's *The American Landscape*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, William Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*, and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.

Students seem eager for courses like this; "American Landscapes" was filled to capacity at 35 and had a waiting list. At a number of points along the way, students suggested other readings, brought me books, and commented on how much more of this sort of approach they wanted. Assignments besides readings of 150-200 pages per week were a short analytical paper each week and a final essay of 8-10 pages. The major criticisms on student evaluations were that the course did not have a very clear theoretical basis and that some of the readings from Conron were repetitious. I myself felt that the Glasgow novel was overly long and not very well-written.

"Landscape, Myth, and Symbol" was an experimental course for non-English majors funded by the Oregon Humanities Center, and drawing students from the middle to the latter stages of their undergraduate careers. It was an attempt to survey symbolic treatments of landscapes in various contrasting cultures from the Neolithic to the present, and it was deliberately inter-disciplinary, crossing the boundaries from archaeology and literary study to biology. Clearly such a course could not hope for thoroughness or conventional academic rigor; however, it was designed on the premise that close textual analysis of image and symbol would at the very least result in an increased awareness of various cultural codes. The questioning of traditional assumptions of Euro/American culture was seen as a valuable first step towards understanding how human identity is linked to the landscape for both positive and negative consequences, particularly at a time when global problems require us to find radical new approaches to life on the planet.

Readings for this course also began with a packet of xeroxed background materials: selections from the Sumerian Inanna hymns, the first twelve chapters of Genesis, Hesiod's *Theogony* a selection of American Indian creation stories, Irish Celtic stories about the so-called "fairymounds" or *síds* which are now called "passage graves" by archaeologists, and selected writings by European explorers of North America excerpted from Conron. After two weeks spent on these materials, we moved to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where Celtic traditions of symbolic landscapes function centrally in an ostensibly Christian context. Next we read the Penguin edition of Matsuo Basho's travel writings, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* for perspectives from 17th century Japan; and then

returned to more familiar terrain with Thoreau's *Walden*. Cather's *My Antonia* followed, then Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* for an American Indian treatment of the end of wilderness which would contrast with Faulkner's. The course ended with the reading of essays by Annie Dillard, Gary Snyder, and James Lovelock, as well as Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*. During the last three weeks of the quarter, colleagues from Landscape Architecture, Asian Art History and Archaeology, and Biology came to give guest lectures on the garden, Mongolian and Siberian nomadic burial mounds, and biological perspectives on the Gaia Hypothesis.

Assignments for this course followed the same scheme as for the "American Landscapes" course, with a series of short papers and a longer final essay. Again there was a full complement of 35 students who were enthusiastic about the opportunity to formally consider traditions of evaluating the human relation to the natural world, and again there was some frustration with the exploratory and non-conclusive format of the course. In more specific terms, students complained that the reading was too heavy, urged the inclusion of African materials and more Asian readings, and suggested that a religious studies expert be invited to give a guest lecture.

University of Oregon.

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### *Ecofeminist Dialogics and Environmental Literature*

Patrick D. Murphy

This advanced doctoral seminar will spend the first few weeks developing an understanding of the major theoretical and methodological components comprising an Ecofeminist Dialogics and then will utilize that knowledge in analyzing a series of twentieth-century American environmental literature texts, both prose and poetry. For the theoretical side, we will study Mikhail Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, V.N. Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, and a few of my essays to cover dialogics. I will also present material from other books by the Bakhtin circle. No single work exists adumbrating ecofeminism but several are in production, so we will probably rely on a packet of reproduced essays--mostly taken from *Environmental Ethics*, a special feminism and ecology issue of *Studies in the Humanities* 15.2 (1988), and some of my work--[if anyone would like the packet table of contents, please write me; the *Studies* issue costs \$2.50--pdm].

For the environmental literature side, we will read Robinson Jeffers's *Selected Poems* and *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* and *Myths & Texts*, Strieber and Kunetka's *Nature's End*, Mary Oliver's *American Primitive*, Linda Hogan's *Savings*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* and *Always Coming Home*. These works are listed in the order in which we will discuss them.

Students will make informal presentations on various readings, including--I hope--introductions to other environmental literature, and will write a journal-length paper utilizing an explicit critical method on the assigned readings or

other texts, either analyzing them as environmental literature and the implications of such a designation or critiquing them from the perspective of ecofeminist dialogics or some aspect of that method, such as ecology, feministics, or dialogics.

Mid-semester remarks: At the moment of writing we are preparing to discuss Snyder's *Turtle Island*. We began with dialogics and students tended to approach it as another method for interpreting texts--not the world. But when we took up ecofeminism, the focus suddenly shifted to interpreting and changing the world in relation to perceptions of women and nature, and whether or not texts--creative or critical--could help accomplish such change. Literature was nearly forgotten during those meetings. In the two weeks we spent on Jeffers we did not return to the world of the text so much as we debated the relation of texts and world. While students found the theoretical works difficult and often abstract, they considered them "useful," one criteria for this being that they addressed real issues. While I expected a generally good response to Jeffers, I was surprised when nearly everyone reacted positively to his poetry, calling it "refreshing" and praising his use of poetic narratives. I hope to report on the rest of the class in a later issue of the newsletter.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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*Field Study in American Wilderness  
Literature and Philosophy*

Mikel Vause

It has always been my secret and possibly unrealistic desire, as Robert Frost said, "To unite my vocation and avocation." In the Spring of 1985 just such a union occurred when the Weber State College Honors Program accepted a proposed 2-credit course entitled "Honors Colloquium 490: A field study in American Wilderness Literature and Philosophy." This course was initially my "brain child" and sprang from a desire to introduce students to the wilderness not only through reading the literature of wilderness writers, but also by actually experiencing wilderness first hand. To make it happen, I teamed up with Dr. Jock Glidden from the Philosophy Department at Weber State.

Being a longtime outdoorsman and active mountaineer, as well as a member of the English faculty at Weber, I believe there can be no finer union than that of the humanities and vigorous outdoor activities. This concept is not new but was advocated by such eminent philosophers of nature as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. The idea is also one easily traced to classical Greece--the concept of a sound mind in a sound body. The combination of the mind and body is also compatible with the lofty idea of Wordsworth and Coleridge in Britain and Emerson and Burroughs in America--that contact with wild nature expands the imagination.

That is the goal of "Field Study in American Wilderness Literature and Philosophy": to help students expand their imaginations. It is our purpose to provide the students with our personal perspectives regarding wilderness as a means by which they can start to develop their own perspectives. For both Jock and me it is more joy than burden. This kind of interdisciplinary course, as Dr. Robert Arway, former

director of the Honors Program, said, is full of the creativity he had hoped would come from honors faculty. Dr. Ron Holt, the current Director of Honors has continued to support us by making this class a regular Honors offering.

The course is an intense four-day, three-night seminar taught in the wilds of the Raft River Mountains of Northwestern Utah or the southern end of Idaho's Sawtooth National Forest. During the four days the student will experience orienteering, mountain running, hiking, and rock climbing, as well as solo time spent reading excerpts of the writings of great American thinkers, explorers, and artists, such as William Byrd, George Catlin, John James Audubon, Henry David Thoreau, Francis Parkman, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Wallace Stegner and David Roberts. As a result the student can come to grips with some of the more pointed ideas regarding wilderness and in turn embark on the development of personal ideas regarding wilderness values and uses.

The students who have registered for the course provide an almost ideal cross section of America--everyone from middle-aged housewives to a teenage fashion model; people as diverse as some "New Wavers" to a black football player from Detroit. Some have been in wild country before; for others it is the first time in their lives they have been out of sight of a machine. Over the past five years the class has maintained its diversity of enrollment.

The course works. During our time together as a class Jock and I have seen these people grow as a community helping each other over individual hardships, things as simple as walking slower on a day hike or cheering on a struggling classmate who was stuck at the personal crux move in the middle of a rock face, or soft words of encouragement to help "screw up" the courage to rappell down a vertical rock for the first time.

Probably the activity that has had the most profound effect on the greatest number of students comes after the campfire discussion of "vision in the Crazy Mountains" by Plenty Coups, a great tribal chief of the Mountain Crow who bivouaced naked and fasting in search of the spiritual strength needed to lead his people. The result of this bivouac was a dream and as Emerson said, "A dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments." The vision received by Plenty Coups showed the harmony found in wilderness but also predicted the destruction of wild lands by man's misuse. Upon conclusion of the discussion, at about 10:00 p.m., on our last night out and under a full moon, Jock and I divide the class into two groups labeled by two of the main symbols in Plenty Coups' vision, "Birds" and "Beasts."

The "Birds" follow Jock, the "Beasts" follow me as we lead them through the darkness to the mountain ridges opposite each other separated by the valley that held our camp. Each student is deposited alone with no equipment and with the instruction to remain in that spot all night and not to return to camp until one hour after sun-up.

The next morning is filled with stories of transcendent experiences, cold, fear, but mostly of personal triumph with overcoming fear or discomfort--or being able to do something that four days before was not only impossible but inconceivable. Jock and I both participate in the bivouac--it puts us in close touch with the students' feelings. The students, in every case, grew, but I think the teachers, which is

usually the case if one is a serious teacher, grow more. Not only do we reacquaint ourselves with wilderness, but also with the infectious desire for knowledge and experience found in youth.

The course requires the students to keep a commonplace book and to carry it with them always at all times and to make daily entries from which they are to write a wilderness essay, short story, or some poetry as the written work for the class. The text is Frank Bergon's excellent anthology entitled *The Wilderness Reader*. Assigned sections are to be read for group discussion; other sections are assigned sections. Grades are based on the written assignment and class participation, both in discussion of the text and also in climbing, hiking, orienteering, etc.

At the conclusion of the class the students are asked to evaluate the course. Here are some of their comments:

I would recommend this course to anyone who would like to take a better look at themselves instead of just looking at the reflection of self.

Liked: Being away from the routine of town; the last half of the rappel; hot cocoa with backpacks; partymates; tentmate; small group interaction and cooperation; the subject matter; the two-credit hours; realness of the instructors; the snowball I ate; being given the opportunity to find a limit of my courage.

I enjoyed the trip more than any other college experience I've had to this point, and I think I learned more about the objectives of the course and about myself than in any other course. In other words, it was the best way possible to apply and comprehend what the ideas were. I felt the material for the class was well thought out, progressive and presented in such a way that each idea was built upon.

I have been very pleased with the course and am glad that I had the opportunity to participate. I appreciate the first-hand or hands-on experience. It is very different from sitting in a classroom and reading the articles and listening to a lecture. I enjoyed the group discussion and the ideas that were presented and the insight that I gained.

Weber State College

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#### *Nature Writing in the Curriculum*

William Greenway

When we were asked by our chair to come up with new kinds of composition courses, I decided I wanted a course that was grounded in traditional modes of discourse but flexible enough in subject to be timely, and creative. Our present first quarter course stresses personal essays, and our second quarter course emphasizes argumentation and requires a longer, investigative, essay--a research paper. I was sick of summer vacation and granny papers in the former, and drugs and abortion in the latter. I wanted something a little broader, that could incorporate some literature, and a course wherein they could call upon specific experience and

memory, which would show them that their past could have some relevance to topical issues, and would require some direct observation and description, thereby avoiding the sweeping generalizations that frosh argumentation papers are heir to.

I forget how I came to conceive of nature writing as that course, except that I looked up from my desk and saw Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* on my book shelf. Since our first quarter of comp. is devoted to the personal essay, Dillard would be perfect--a personal voice writing about subject matter accessible to everyone, even to urban students like ours. Dillard herself comes from Pittsburgh, and much of her nature love comes from those vacant lots and city parks, or her own backyard. Yet, though Dillard's subjects are far from exotic (indeed they are intensely domestic), she is essentially a philosophical, even theological, writer. Combining attention to detail with an attendant attention to description, she is able to extrapolate from that direct experience of the world in the manner of the Romantic poets. How easy it is to shift from the Dillard text and her description of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance that, in her words, "are our home," to Wordsworth's view of the haunted mountains of Cumbria. My students bring both texts to class, ready to shift from one to the other as the discussion takes us. We learn quickly how the closest art form to the poem is not the short story, but the personal essay, how poetry is further from fiction than it is from science, and how close the microcosm of the personal is to the macrocosm of the world around us, and that where the world goes, so goes the individual. This gives the personal aspect of the course political and social, as well as personal--spiritual and philosophical--relevance. "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" becomes more than time-wasting if we view that vacation spot in spiritual or ecological terms.

Also, students feel comfortable imitating. sometimes feel that their perplexity in the writing class is not an inability to do something--rather it is perplexity over what exactly it is we want. But if we give them a strong model, they can follow it. No writer got good without imitation, and it's unrealistic of us to think our students can develop a writing voice without imitation. And a writer like Dillard not only provides an easily imitated approach to her material, she provides a good model of contemporary style, informal but exact. And there are lots of other good nature writers out there, such as John McPhee or Farley Mowat, who can provide a contrast in tone. In having this "creative" component in the course, I would hope we can move students closer to a new model of essay: those writers like McPhee and Dillard who can be intellectually rigorous and still catch in their writing some of the excitement of poetry, or at least literature, a component in short supply in nature essays since Thoreau.

As Stephen J. Gould, Isaac Asimov, Jacob Bronowski, and Stephen Hawking have shown, scientific writing need not be dull writing. Thus the second quarter of our composition sequence, the research paper quarter, becomes a way to show students how their papers can become more than mere exercises in bibliographic form, a sort of torture we put them through for their own good. The course is especially pertinent if I let the students begin their research by choosing a book from the reading list on a subject they're interested in, preferably a subject that they've had some experience

with. One of my students had seen a gray whale, another had had her childhood home invaded by bats, another wrote about the let-burn policy in Yellowstone simply because she'd had a vacation there. This personal stake in the material makes a difference, and incorporating their own experiences into such an essay personalizes it for them, and gives them an opportunity to express their own feelings about the subject. We spend hours talking about how McPhee's personality pervades his work even though he often pretends to be invisible.

That one could be "poetic" and "factual" in the same essay was a revelation to my students, especially when they saw that a more literary style would not only not detract from the "scientific" integrity of an essay, but could even enhance it. They learn that the best way to tell readers how fast a grizzly runs is not to give the m.p.h, but tell them, as McPhee does, that the grizzly is "one and a half times as fast as the fastest race horse" (Not much use trying to outrun one, is there?). Or they can see that metaphor, far from being effete, is a way to explain reality, as when Dillard tells us "The animals and plants in a drop of pond water pass light like pale stained glass." These writers are able to make us see their subjects, which can never hurt in a quest for scientific, or any other, truth. In fact, their method of uniting poetic observations such as metaphor with factual material reveals how, to these new writers, the traditional split between literature and science, fact and fiction, may be artificial, that the search for truth must be both empirical and intuitive. As Einstein, who came to believe toward the end of his life that the universe was the mind of God, and others have shown us, it is no longer possible to maintain a discrete view of life, neatly dividing the "real" world of the scientist from the fanciful world of the poet. Far from being circumlocution, poetry is the best and the fastest way to say something, to make the obscure clear.

But it is the diversity of the course that makes it work so well. Its combination of scientific and philosophical thought unites, instead of divides, the world that affects us, and therefore appeals to all majors because it includes all disciplines. And by being able to switch from the essay to poetry so easily, we also are able to solve an old dilemma--the question of whether there should be a literature component to the freshman comp. sequence. Many schools feel that literature in a writing course is a sop to the teacher, and an extra burden to the student, but if the literature component is used in the service of transforming the student's own experiences into essays, then we show how literature is a part of, and not just an uninvolved comment on, our lives and world. This may be the only literature they get, and as the curriculum seems to be swinging back toward a more balanced view of a liberal arts education, a literary component becomes timely and relevant. Though I haven't done anything with fiction yet, I don't see why it couldn't be used. I can see Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," for instance, or Rawlings' *The Yearling* fitting into the course very nicely.

I feel that nature writing is a possible solution to the composition problem. We tell writers, "Write about what you know," or "Look in your own backyard." This is a good way to make the point effective.

Youngstown State University

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Note: An extensive list of readings and paper topics used by Dr. Greenway in the courses described above may be obtained by contacting Tom Stuckert.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

### THE EXXON OIL SPILL

Joan Whitman Hoff

A little over one year ago, on March 24, 1990, the Exxon Valdez was steered onto a wrong course and soon thereafter went into shallow water and shipwrecked on Prince William Sound, Alaska. It was just recently that Joseph Hazelwood, the skipper of the ship, was tried and acquitted of all but one minor charge concerning the spill--neglect. While there remains talk that Exxon is to be charged and tried, a very damaged environment, including plants and wildlife, is struggling to survive.

The horrifying deaths of the wildlife, the black residue which remains on the shore, the allegations that Exxon had failed to abide by its own standards, and the alcoholism of Joseph Hazelwood are the focal points of the controversy. Moreover, this single incident represents the cavalier attitudes toward the environment which have developed in this century. Of course, environmental pollution existed before this century; but the nature of pollution and the extent to which the environment can be polluted in a short period of time has changed. Perhaps of greater significance, the expectations of people--of themselves and others--has seemingly lessened. Corporations are legal persons who have gained a reputation for having the money and power to use and abuse the environment. In our society, capital has often taken precedence over such things as trees and wildlife and the ecosystem as a whole.

But there is growing discussion concerning such activities and whether or not people and corporations should act more responsibly toward the environment. Anthropocentrism, the western view that the environment exists for us, has been countered by more holistic ones which, at the very least, claim that the environment deserves some kind of respect. Environmental Ethics and Business Ethics have become areas of serious study over the past decade and with this has come a new kind of expectation, a new awareness.

In terms of ascribing moral responsibility for the Alaskan oil spill, one must look to both Exxon and Joseph Hazelwood for the answers to who is responsible and why. Exxon, a legal person, is also a moral person, according to Peter French. The Corporate Internal Decision Structure of the corporation gives it its moral conscience, and hence, is that aspect of the corporation which can decide to act morally or immorally. In violating their own principles and standards Exxon acted immorally toward itself and the environment. Even



though there was probably not a specific intention to harm the environment or itself Exxon has at least indicated a willingness to allow harm through its neglect. In appointing Joseph Hazelwood, a known alcoholic, to skipper the ship Exxon acted in its own interest and not in the interest of others and/or the environment. Likewise, Hazelwood acted irresponsibly in directing the ship onto a course other than the one on which he reported he intended to go and also in having drunk before the ship set course. Simply failing to consider the possible consequences of one's actions and acting neglectfully so that those consequences occur indicate a lack of moral responsibility. Likewise, the failure to respond quickly to the spill and to clean it up thoroughly brought the lack of ethical fortitude and the illegality of the spill to the forefront. In two days the spill had covered 100 square miles. By May of 1989 it had covered more than 2500 square miles. The emergency contingency clean-up plan developed by the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company and required by the state of Alaska should have had the spill contained within 50 miles in 12 hours. But this did not happen. It is believed that if it did the spill could have been contained. Left to spread that first 12 hours, the spill was further complicated by subsequent weather conditions, factors which in turn complicated the damage to the environment.

One problem which emanates from the Exxon case is that people do not often see the need to care for the environment. The lack of forethought and concern for its treatment results in adverse consequences for us and for the environment and all of its inhabitants. Peter French discounts such caring as sentimentalism (1) and, while arguing in support of greater corporate responsibility, fails to see any specific moral responsibility to the environment other than that which might affect human beings. Nel Noddings, however, gives us another account. In her book, *Caring* (2), Noddings argues that caring is an essential part of moral responsibility. It is the lack of care which Hazelwood and Exxon demonstrated, for example, which prompted the Valdez disaster and it is one for which society and the environment will pay dearly for a long time to come.

Caring does not necessarily involve the sentimentalism to which French refers. To feel something toward other beings, other species and the environment may simply represent a recognition that the individual feels a part of the whole or perhaps an interconnectedness with it. And if it does involve emotion it does not mean that there is a lack of reflection. Without both awareness and sensitivity to the environment and its problems--both real and potential--people are doing themselves and future generations a disservice, let alone promoting harm to the biotic community as a whole. Contemporary arguments support the "right" of the environment to be treated with some respect. Without respect it seems that everyone loses.

If people continue to abuse the environment, if they allow corporations to abuse it, then there will be no environment in which to live or in which to do business. Perhaps that is why so much attention has been given to the Exxon Valdez crisis and other similar dilemmas which have occurred in recent history throughout the world. Society, the biotic community as a whole, needs a long-term vision in order to secure that there might be something left behind other than

a disaster. And one needn't look too far into the future to see the long lasting effects of one's actions.

As Noddings puts it, "The problems we struggle with . . . shed further light on the questions we have already considered, and we may find deeper support for our contention that the ethical impulse or attitude is grounded in the caring relationship." (3)

Bentley College

## ENDNOTES

1. See French's "Terre Gaste", in *Proceedings of the Eighth National Conference on Business Ethics, Business, Ethics, and the Environment*, forthcoming The Greenwood Press, 1990 and my response to his arguments, "The Exxon Valdez Crisis" in the same book.

2. Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: Univ. of CA Press, 1984).

3. Ibid. p.148.

## JOURNAL NOTES

"Feminism and the Environment" will be the topic of the Spring 1991 issue of the *Feminism and Philosophy Newsletter*. The editors, Nancy Tuana and Karen J. Warren, will consider brief articles (10pp. or less), relevant book reviews or bibliographies, and related course syllabi until the September 1, 1990, deadline. Send manuscripts (in duplicate, with author's name on title page only) to Nancy Tuana, Arts and Humanities, JO 3.1, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX 75083-0688.

Enthusiasts of environmental literature will want to take a look at *Wilderness*, the quarterly publication of The Wilderness Society. In addition to journalistic reports on the American wilderness, the journal prints literary nonfiction in its "Amplifications" section and poetry in the section called "Wildsong." Contributors to the Winter 1989 issue include David Rains Wallace and Wendell Berry. T.H. Watkins, Editor *Wilderness*, 1400 Eye Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005. Poetry submissions to John Daniel, Poetry Editor, 2006 NE 24th Avenue, Portland, OR 97212.

The *North Dakota Quarterly* will publish a special issue on nature writing in 1991, edited by Sherman Paul and Don Scheese. Twenty-eight scholarly articles (mostly about individual authors) have already been solicited; there will also be a "green section" of original nature essays. Submissions for the "green section" are due by June 1, 1990 (20-30 pp., double-spaced, MLA style). Bob Lewis, General Editor, *North Dakota Quarterly*, Box 8237, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202.

*Buzzworm The Environmental Journal* will publish its inaugural issues in 1990. One-year subscriptions (six issues) cost \$18. Write to *Buzzworm*, P.O. Box 6853, Syracuse, NY 13217-7930. Also, together with Patagonia Inc., *Buzzworm*



announces the Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction (1990 deadline was March 15); an excerpt of the winning novel-length entry will appear in the July/August issue of the journal.

*Pantheist Vision*, the quarterly publication of the Universal Pantheist Society, includes two brief articles on Edward Abbey in its September 1989 issue. For information on this publication or on the annotated "Fiction for Pantheists Bibliography," write to Harold Wood, Editor, *Pantheist Vision* P.O. Box 265, Big Pine, CA 93513.

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## SOCIETIES

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The *Forest History Society* announces an opening for an Assistant/Associate Director of Research and Publications. Closing date for applications: 1 July 1990. Contact: Harold K. Steen, Executive Director, Forest History Society, Inc., 701 Vickers Avenue, Durham, North Carolina, 27701. Tel. (919) 682-0319.

Seventh Annual Sitka Summer Writers Symposium. This year's theme, "Groundwork: Renewing the Covenants that Sustain Us." June 10-16, 1990, Sitka. Address: Sitka Summer Writers Symposium. P.O. Box 2420. Sitka. Alaska 99835. (907) 747-3794.