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BEYOND GOD AND GAIA:
EXPRESSIONS OF MINIMAL NATURALIST SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKS OF
ALDO LEOPOLD, JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH, BARRY LOPEZ, AND RICK BASS

By

Paul W. Wise

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

2001

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND GOD AND GAIA: EXPRESSIONS OF MINIMAL NATURALIST SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKS OF ALDO LEOPOLD, JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH, BARRY LOPEZ, AND RICK BASS

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Paul W. Wise

In their religious outlook, Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass differ markedly from most other American nature writers. Nature writers of varying beliefs commonly acknowledge a “maximal” divinity immanent in or reflected by nature, a being or principle incomparably superior to ordinary objects of experience. The four writers who are the focus of this study see a sacred dimension in nature that is more limited, or “minimal.” To define and frame this perspective, I employ the concepts of naturalist theologians associated with or influenced by the empirical theology movement at the University of Chicago in the twentieth century. Their works figure the sacred as an effect of relations among elements of one’s natural and historical setting. It is plural, localized, contingent, and mediated by culture and reflection. In the works of the four nature writers, these have a significant but not absolute power to bring about personal renewal and increased identification with one’s environment. My study begins with a survey of nature writing’s maximal “orthodoxy,” its attendant problems, and the role of critics in reinforcing it. An overview of empirical theology reveals numerous parallels to American nature writing and poses alternatives to maximal faith consonant with contemporary intellectual life. As a critical tool, this theology illuminates Leopold’s pilgrimage from maximal organicism to a critical, minimal religious position over the course of his career and interrogates Krutch’s professions of pantheism. Religious empiricism corroborates Lopez’s beliefs

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about the role of culture—especially narrative—in meeting with the holy in nature. Rick Bass's affirmations of vitality in ravaged landscapes become, through the lens of recent empiricist thought, recognizable as religious gestures that counter eco-despair and suggest an ecological corrective to the dissolution of religious meaning proclaimed by deconstructive theology. The dissertation concludes by considering minimal religious motifs in other nature writers and intersections of limited naturalist spirituality with certain ecofeminist, phenomenological and postmodern strains in environmental thought. My work calls for recognition of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass as original and significant spiritual thinkers and for a revised understanding of the forms and possibilities of nature spirituality in American culture.

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PAUL W. WISE
2001

This dissertation is dedicated to:

My wife, Kristine—my partner in this as in all enterprises;

and

My father, Carl W. Wise—who led me through the
earliest stages of this research on long-ago trips to
bluegill lakes and grouse thickets, though
neither of us knew it then.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their openness to this project and for help offered along the way. Special mention goes to my committee director, Dr. James I. McClintock, whose advice and encouragement in many forms kept my spirits up and my thoughts focused. Without him, my graduate studies would have taken a very different and probably less rewarding course. Dr. Belden C. Lane of St. Louis University offered unexpected and much needed reassurance about the value of this work. At home, my wife Kristine kept me housed, clothed, and victualled for this long endeavor, and maintained her faith in me when my own faltered. Though I typed at the keyboard, she can honestly consider this project one of the works of her hands. Thanks to Foursight Creative Group for technical support, and to my family for not forgetting about me even when I must have seemed lost in this work.

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INTRODUCTION

One common assumption about American nature writing is that it is a literature of the spirit as well as a literature of the physical world, a record of responses to and speculations about a numinous quality experienced in the natural environment. Often joined with this assumption is a second one about the kind of spiritual belief or religious outlook expressed in nature essays. In the view of most critics (and casual readers), nature writers discern in the natural world some kind of supreme or all-encompassing reality that people must accommodate themselves to in order to achieve an authentic existence and a proper relation to the rest of nature. This reality may take the form of a unity of all matter and all living things (pantheism), a personal deity immanent in but distinct from nature (panentheism), a planetary sentience (Gaian wholism), or some sort of cosmic plan or order manifested in the realms of matters and life (transcendental idealism and the various forms of vitalism). These assumptions are by and large justified by works in the American nature writing canon, though of late they have come represent one of the genre's liabilities. In the views of some of its academic readers, the spiritual tendencies in nature writing threaten to divert attention from the real social and economic causes of environmental devastation, brush over the realities of human and ecological difference with a totalizing vision, or reify some idea of a transcendent absolute that would fix the significance of environmental components, norms of behavior toward them, and perhaps also the order of human societies.

This study examines four important twentieth-century nature writers whose work forces a reconsideration of the second of these assumptions discussed above, and of the

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criticisms of nature writing that follow from it. Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Barry Lopez, and Rick Bass articulate, in varying ways and with varying emphases, a spiritual vision that is more limited, more contingent upon ecological relations and one's perspective on them, and more involved with cultural forms of understanding than that of their predecessors like Thoreau and Muir, and those of most of their contemporaries. They reject visions of the absolute or of natural wholeness to locate the sacred in particulars of the natural world and their relational context. Interactions among creatures, places, processes, and objects reveal values which may effect renewal, transformation, or a sense of judgement. If such values are often transient, and of uncertain efficacy, they nonetheless reveal to the authors considered here critical resources for addressing personal, social, and environmental problems.

To elucidate the emergence of this spiritual viewpoint, this work draws upon the radical empiricist thought of William James and the naturalistic empirical theology that it, among other developments, inspired. This body of theology, developed mostly at the University of Chicago during the early and middle years of the twentieth century, figured the divine not as a transcendent person or totality of nature, but a "creative good" or "organic restlessness" arising from relations between particular, historically-derived elements of experience. Theologians of the "Chicago School" and their successors argue that this potential within nature and history, while not infallible or immediately discernible, is essential to the enrichment and guidance of individuals and cultures. The work of the empirical theologians helps bring distinctly religious conceptions in works of the four nature writers into focus, while the nature writers provide both concrete examples and extensions of elements in the works of the theologians.

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Applying insights of empirical theology to Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass here does not represent an attempt to trace influences or map out an existing intertextual dialogue. The nature writers give no indication that they are aware of the American empirical tradition in theology. The theologians demonstrate no knowledge of these writers, and only a passing acquaintance with any American nature writing. Little precedent exists for discussing nature writing in the context of American religious empiricism or any other formal school of theology. Yet while the encounter between these discourses here is artificially induced, the texts of both invite it. The writers in this study and the theologians employed in reading them hold similar beliefs about the importance of attending to the material world, the role of culture in experiencing that world, and the contingent, relational, and processual nature of the reality we experience.

And even considering these similarities, the foreignness (in method, tone, and circumstances of production) of this branch of theology to nature writing and especially to existing critical discussions of the genre may be what most recommends its use here. With the increasing secularization academia and society, theology in general no longer holds a central or prominent place in modern academic life. However, the decline of theology's prestige and influence may in some respects prove to be a fortunate fall. Having become something of a marginal discourse, theology is in a position to offer unexpected critiques of commonly accepted ideas and scholarly methods, to challenge entrenched theories and cast an uncanny light on familiar texts. The critic David Jasper observes that so far as a method exists in the contemporary study of literature and theology, it consists of "ranging widely between unlikely stations and drawing attention to unconventional connections" ("Study" 9). Working in the interstices of two

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disciplines, the study of literature and theology can, according to Jasper, open up creative and critical possibilities not readily grasped within the customary frame of either. The subject at hand is particularly ripe for such an approach because celebrants and skeptics of spirituality in nature writing conduct their debates for the most part within tightly constrained and largely unquestioned categories (e.g., the importance or impossibility of wholeness, unity, immediacy, transcendence, purpose, etc.)

This study's methods and concerns generally resemble those identified by Jasper. However, they also are in keeping with basic premises of the philosophy and theology employed here. James's radical empiricism held that the relations in which a thing exist impart to it its meaning and significance, and allowed insight into whatever tendencies of development it showed. By showing relations between the works of the nature writers in this study and those of American empirical theologians, this work will show a new significance for texts by these writers within the canon of nature writing, and in light of current concerns in environmental and cultural theory.

This study's aim is not to proclaim a new orthodoxy of belief or criteria for delimiting a new nature writing canon. Rather, by expanding the relational context in which we read Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass, it calls attention to these writers as innovative and compelling religious thinkers. This is not to suggest they be lumped into a school within nature writing. They do not overtly identify with one another's spiritual concerns except in passing and tangential ways. Their beliefs emerge as individual responses to various ecological, intellectual, and spiritual problems. But by no means do their beliefs have private significance only. In refusing confinement to commonplace

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forms of naturalistic religious faith, these writers set a valuable example for the future practice of ecocriticism.

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CHAPTER ONE

SUPER NATURALISMS: THE HERITAGE OF MAXIMAL BELIEF IN AMERICAN NATURE WRITING

Nature writing has long served as a kind of secular scripture in American culture, and most of it has upheld a certain orthodoxy of belief. Important nature writers approach this orthodoxy by many paths—transcendental idealism, pantheism, Christian panentheism, and animism, to name a few. But with few exceptions, their visions of the divine have a key element in common with one another, and with the teachings of most established religious traditions: they conceive of the sacred as something unsurpassable in power, extent, or worth, as overwhelming, all-inclusive, or ultimate. In the particulars of the material world, they have found signs of the unity of them all, or of a presence or power that surpasses or controls them all. Where nature writers identify a spiritual value in the natural world, they tend to view that world either as a medium registering the acts and utterances of God (or the working of some *logos* principle) or as the face of Gaia, an all-inclusive, all-sustaining, and perhaps sentient unity of life and matter. In short, they express what we might call a “maximal” religious outlook.

Scholarship on spirituality in nature writing has largely upheld this orthodoxy. Commentators tracing the religious outlook of canonical nature writers tend to focus on how writers achieved a vision of nature’s unity and interconnectedness, or on how nature and the processes or appearances of order in it came to represent a substitute for the maximally perfect and powerful God of traditional Western theism. Given how pervasive such wholistic or maximal views are in nature writing, and in the world’s spiritual traditions generally, this emphasis should not be surprising. But in an intellectual climate where transcendent ideals, claims of wholeness or totality, and

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appeals to order or value in nature are widely suspect, it puts much nature writing and spiritually oriented ecocriticism at risk of being marginalized and viewed as irresponsible or irrelevant in the face of current environmental challenges. Considering the power of evocative and deeply spiritual expressions of nature writing to motivate concern and action on behalf of the natural environment, this would be regrettable.

There is no reason, however, to believe that such a development is either inevitable or necessary. Orthodox maximalists dominate the congregation of American nature writers, but among them stand dissenters whose visions of the sacred in nature look beyond the received conceptions of God and Gaia. Four writers offer especially substantive and fertile alternatives to traditional maximal models of the divine in nature: Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Barry Lopez, and Rick Bass. Each sees potent spiritual value in nature, but either struggles with or rejects outright conventional understandings of divinity in nature. Their works suggest a new importance to spiritual appreciation of the natural environment, and also open up new approaches to reading and interpreting environmental literature that has a spiritual dimension. Ironically, these authors develop their religious perspective primarily within the genre most closely linked to maximal forms of nature spirituality and the Judeo-Christian tradition that often underlies them: the first-person nature retreat essay. At the same time, their religious vision also hearkens (albeit not deliberately) to a rich yet generally overlooked tradition in American religious thought, one that is also a product of the dominant Western religious traditions. The four writers who are the focus of this study may be understood as the most concrete, accessible, and ecologically informed representatives of the empirical naturalist religious tradition in America. Their essays and other prose works

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develop religious perspective that corresponds generally to the *minimal* strain of this tradition.

The contemporary naturalist theologian Jerome Stone classifies as minimal those systems of belief which recognize some presence or activity in the world which transcends human understanding yet is not radically superior in essence, value, or power to the phenomena we encounter in ordinary experience (*The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* 11). Neither a supreme personal God nor an ultimate purpose or principle in the universe figure in such systems of belief (*Minimalist* 12). Divinity or transcendence is instead associated with realities and ideals, encountered or conceived in ordinary experience yet unanticipated and uncontrolled by us, which act as “sources of healing or criticism” (*Minimalist* 12-13). Stone claims that, in an age deeply skeptical about metaphysical absolutes, this model of faith has an advantage over more customary, maximal models of religion in that it avoids extravagant speculative claims about the nature of divinity or ultimate reality. Its focus lies instead on experiences of values within particular, situated phenomena, even while recognizing the unavoidably ambiguous quality of such experience (*Minimalist* 10-11). While this model of faith retains a measure of the skepticism it attempts to counter, Stone still commends it as an approach to a sturdier and more defensible belief. “The less we assert,” he writes, “the more supportable our affirmations become” (*Minimalist* 11).

Stone’s definition of minimal faith is an invaluable guide to understanding the spiritual confessions and conflicts of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass. They encounter the sacred, the power which lies beyond human comprehension or control, yet on which the quality as well as the mere facts of both physical and spiritual existence are felt to depend radically. They locate the divine in the particulars of experience rather than in

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any sense of an ultimate unity of being, or in a supreme principle, entity, or power revealed through physical nature. Spiritual awareness and growth derive mainly from experience of contingent and limited things, not of anything that is total, ultimate, unsurpassable—in short, anything that is maximal. Accordingly, they stand apart (in spite of their claims to the contrary in some cases) from the idealistic, vitalistic, and pantheistic spiritual tendencies that dominated American nature writing through the early twentieth century, and which still condition a considerable amount of environmental philosophy and literature.

Unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson, these four writers do not look on natural facts as symbols of spiritual facts, nor do they see in natural events, as John Muir did, “pulses of Nature’s big heart” (*My First Summer in the Sierra* 73). Joseph Wood Krutch offers what may be the best short summary of this faith in *The Desert Year*, writing that “what I am after is less to meet God face to face than really to take in a beetle, frog, or mountain when I see one” (38). And really taking in a natural object in this case means far more than familiarizing oneself with the kind of facts about it that natural history books record. It is something more akin to the experience Aldo Leopold had of looking into eyes of a dying wolf and sensing, as their “fierce green fire” sputtered out, a truth known fully only to wolf and the mountain she inhabited (*Sand County Almanac* 130). For Leopold, Krutch, and the other writers under discussion here, local, concrete elements in the natural world are manifestations of the sacred because they present, in varied and sometimes conflicting ways, values, criticism, healing, and possibilities for fulfillment. These qualities neither have their source in nor refer to any reality beyond the thing experienced, save the history and relations (including that of observer to observed) that

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A historian of philosophy might characterize this position, correctly, as a species of what William James called “radical empiricism.” The writers in this study concur with James’s view that “appreciative attributes” of things—their value, use, beauty, etc. — are objective realities which, while perceived only on a dim level of consciousness, still work upon the perceiver more than they are simply projected by him or her.¹ However, closer and more revealing parallels to the religious model elaborated by these four writers may be found in the work of American theologians identified with or influenced by the “Chicago School” of naturalistic (or, to some, empirical) theology. Strongly influenced by Whiteheadian process thought as well as Jamesian empiricism, the Chicago naturalist theologians identified the divine with the capacity of worldly phenomena to promote our transformation, particularly toward increased empathy, understanding, and love. This capacity is not absolute, but its effects are partly dependent on our past experiences and by the attitude with which we engage the world. Similarly, moments of spiritual significance in the works of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass are not isolated, fleeting events, but experiences which cumulatively contribute (for better or for worse) to one’s sense of self and one’s relations to others. One’s response to each partly determines the importance of those that come after, as well as the possible responses one might make to them. The work of these theologians will be the primary theoretical resource employed here in reading the four nature writers. From their work come the primary concepts and terms used to discuss the spiritual perspectives of these writers. This perspective will most often be described as “empirical naturalism” or “limited naturalism,” both of which reinforce its emphasis on particulars of experience, its rejection ideals, absolutes, and

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supernatural qualities. It will also be called pluralistic or as non-reductive naturalism, terms which convey the belief that the sacred is many rather than one, and that while it is understood here in naturalistic terms, it is not reducible to what can readily be defined, observed and measured (hence, it is not naturalistic in the usual scientifically-accepted sense of the word). The term “empirical” as employed here (and in the works of most empirical theologians) comprehends all of these concepts, but other terms will be used to emphasize certain dimensions of a writer’s faith that are particularly relevant at a given point. However one might label the spiritual visions under discussion here, they deserve attention from environmental thinkers at the present moment, when calls for a renewed spiritual appreciation of nature fill the pages of popular books and journals, yet maximal assertions, religious or otherwise, have come under sharp criticism.

It is not surprising that students of nature writing have not generally recognized the interactions of these four writers with particular elements of their environment as religiously significant. American nature writers have defined naturalistic spirituality in almost exclusively maximal terms by consistently presenting maximal conceptions of divinity in nature. The divine often takes the form of a blind, overwhelming, undifferentiated force of creation and destruction, roughly corresponding to the more severe manifestations of what Rudolph Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*. Otto found at the root of all religious consciousness an awareness of some undefinable, overpowering might, supreme above all creatures and unsusceptible to full expression through language, which he called the numen (10-11). To describe it better through an analysis of its effects on human emotion, he conceived of it alternatively as the “*mysterium tremendum*” (12). He identified three components within the *mysterium*: awfulness, or a quality causing fear “such as not even the most menacing and

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overpowering created thing can instill” (14); majesty, or a capacity to convey to humans a sense of “impotence and general nothingness against overpowering might,” of being “dust and ashes” by comparison with the numinous object (21); and finally, energy or urgency, a power sometimes rendered as vitality, passion, will or excitement, but ultimately knowable only as “a force that knows not stint or stay, which is urgent, compellingly alive,” and whose truest depiction, according to Otto, is in biblical portraits of Yahweh’s consuming wrath (23-24).

It has been common, of course, to view powerful natural phenomena such as storms or floods in these terms, effectively transferring classical attributes of God to the operations of nature. Otto sees this habit as a crude, degraded form of numinous experience (64), but it has produced some memorable passages in American environmental literature. Chief among these, perhaps, is Thoreau’s reaction to the desolate peak of Mt. Katahdin, a place where nature was something “savage and awful, though beautiful,” not “lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland,” but “Matter, vast, terrific,” the home of “a force not bound to be kind to man” (*The Maine Woods* 70). Thoreau voiced awe and fascination with this kind of force (if not with a direct expression of it) again near the close of *Walden* in writing:

We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain that lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. (225)

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If we account for his general incapacity to express fear of anything in nature, we can see John Muir praising this kind of power, especially when embodied in ice, water or wind, as true divine wrath, upheaving and leveling in pursuit of ends beyond our understanding yet unarguably good at last. Writing of the windstorms that batter forests in the Sierra Nevada, he urges readers not to look with horror on the destruction they cause, for if they consider what the forests have met with over the centuries, such as “hail, to break the tender seedlings, lightning, to scorch and shatter; snow, winds and avalanches, to crush and overwhelm—while the manifest result of all this wild storm-culture is the glorious perfection we behold; then faith in Nature’s forestry is established . . .” (*Mountains of California* 172). To Muir, these winds act as a refining fire, consuming yet perfecting, destroying and making whole. His works affirm Otto’s assertion that the numinous, while bewildering, is also very appealing, and capable of captivating and imparting a “strange ravishment” to those encountering it (31).

The more terrifying aspects of absolute might at work in the world that Muir overlooks surfaced for twentieth century readers in the work of a fellow Californian, Robinson Jeffers. Throughout his poems runs a recurring vision of an inexorable, overwhelming force that builds up creatures, mountains, and societies only to destroy them in time and purge the corruption created by the living. William Everson has discussed at length parallels between Jeffers’s sense of an ultimate power in the world and Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*. The resemblance is stark indeed in passages like that from *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* where the prophet Cassandra predicts the destruction of humanity in retribution for its technological arrogance:

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hunters,/The mouths of the hungry with snow/were filled, and their
claws/Took hold upon ice in the pasture, a morsel of ice was their catch in
the/rivers,/That pure quiet whiteness/Waits on the heads of the mountains,
not sleep but death, will the fire/Of burnt cities and ships in that year
warm you my enemies . . . ? O clean, clean/White and most clean,
colorless quietness,/Without trace, without trail, without stain (56)

As Emerson has written, for Jeffers “God is wrath, nothing but wrath. The only solace is the solace of expiation; the only peace the peace of purgation” (52). Against this energy, humanity truly is “impotence and general nothingness.” Remaining the sole presence in the universe after dispensing with all created things, it is absolute—necessary and eternal—in being as well as in power.

Other maximal religious conceptions in nineteenth and twentieth century nature writing associate divinity in nature with either an ideal, sometimes monistic order embodied in the physical world or a cosmic plan or will directing the development of life and matter. From Emerson’s *Nature* onward, these notions of transcendent *logos* and Gaian unity remained staples of American environmental writing for more than a hundred years, and still surface in various forms at present.

Showing his debt to continental idealist thinkers, Emerson in *Nature* voiced his belief in an ideal and absolute order with the claim that “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (*Selections* 32). All these facts comprised the supreme being he called the Oversoul, a presence which infused nature, yet existed in its entirety in every

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human soul.² As Emerson would have it, a sensitive and uninhibited mind could discern “that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present, one and not compound . . .” (*Selections* 50). Evidence of the unitary character of the world presented itself to Emerson in the existence of common shapes and patterns throughout nature. Writes Emerson,

The river, as it flows, resembles the air that flows over it; the air resembles the light which traverses it with more subtile currents; the light resembles the heat which rides with it through Space. Each creature is only a modification of the other A rule of one law, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. . . (*Selections* 40)

Like Emerson, Henry David Thoreau believed in a spiritual realm revealed through a proper appreciation of the natural. Proof for him of the existence of this realm came through instincts, which he believed were innate in all people, toward a higher, more spiritual life (*Walden* 154). These *a priori* instincts, if properly cultivated, disciplined (mainly by restraining the body’s “coarser” instincts), and brought to bear on the world of experience, could, he believed, acquaint one with the fundamental moral laws of the universe. He wrote in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden* that

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes . . . it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows resolute and more faithful, his road lies. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles. (158)

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Walden's "Spring" chapter provides perhaps the most famous elaboration of Emerson's idea of a single law embodied in all nature. Appropriately, Thoreau develops this notion through a single unifying image. Describing the shapes created by snowmelt trickling down a sandy railway berm, he writes "[T]his one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf" (218). The flowing water "takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines . . . or you are reminded of coral or leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowells, and excrements" (216). The sand reveals "an anticipation of the vegetable leaf." Its atoms, Thoreau asserts, "have already learned this law, and are pregnant with it" (217).

Loren Eiseley, writing nearly one hundred years later, could not share the transcendentalists' optimism about connecting with an ideal order manifest in the natural world, but he remained convinced that one existed. Skeptical about attempts to explain the origin of life solely through the workings of matter and energy, Eiseley insisted in *The Immense Journey* that life could be explained only by considering in addition to these the "mysterious principle known as 'organization'." Itself the product neither of life nor of natural selection, organization was, according to Eiseley, "there before the living in the deeps of water" (26). Eiseley's description of organization as the power which "cups out the eyes" and "spaces the notes of the meadowlark" (26) recalls the transcendentalists in implying that apparent order in the world is evidence of an order beyond it. Yet he was even more evasive about the nature and meaning of this order than they. To human eyes, Eiseley believed, the natural world would remain "an apparition from that mysterious shadow world beyond nature, that final world which contains—if anything contains—the explanation of men and catfish and green leaves" (27).

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Affirmations of a fundamental unity in nature have appeared more recently in the works of writers who identify with Zen Buddhist traditions. A basic tenet of Zen mysticism is that personal enlightenment and right relationship to all beings grow from the ability to see beyond illusory divisions of being and time and recognize as the only true reality the Void which contains and is all things. As Peter Matthiessen writes in *The Snow Leopard*, for Zen, religion is “no more and no less than the apprehension of the infinite in every moment” (35). One experience of this kind of unity comes to Matthiessen in *The Snow Leopard* during a day of trekking in Nepal when, following ruminations on the recent death of his wife, anxieties about his own mortality, and the hopes for renewal that he had pinned upon this trip to Asia, he picks up a “yellow and gray-blue feather of an unknown bird.” Immediately comes

[a] piercing intuition, by no means understood, that in this feather on the silver path, this rhythm of wood and leather, sounds, breath, sun and wind, and rush of river, in a landscape without past or future time—in this instant, in all instants, transience and eternity, death and life are one.

(131-32)

Patrick Murphy notes that Gary Snyder has pursued a project of reconciling the industrialized world to wild nature by articulating and promoting a recognition of the unity of nature that derives from his Zen practice. Snyder has said of the world that “It’s already all a Buddha if you can just see it It’s the eternal moment” (qtd. in Murphy, “Penance or Perception” 245). According to Murphy, Snyder believes such enlightenment “will break down the artificial barriers that humans imagine exist between themselves and nature, and that recognition will provide the basis for an accurate concept of place” (246). Snyder’s mythic images of an integrated world—Turtle Island, Gaia,

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“Earth House Hold”—are vehicles to convey this kind of enlightenment (Murphy, “Penance or Perception” 238). For Snyder and Matthiessen, then, a sacred understanding of nature means awareness of a unity of being that underlies all phenomena, another absolute or maximal principle.

Writers who postulated some ideal order in nature often imputed to it not only unity and omnipresence, but activity and, in some cases, consciousness as well. In *Nature*, Emerson described human creativity as the action of an “Original Cause working through instruments he has already made” (*Selections* 34). He discerned intent behind every feature of the earth when he pronounced that “the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active” (*Selections* 103). Thoreau characterized the earth as an entity maximal in relation to all others, declaring that the earth is “not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic” (*Walden* 219). William J. Wolf, arguing against a pantheistic interpretation of Thoreau, contends that this “central life” is not a divine personality so much as an inchoate animating force comparable to Bergson’s *élan vital* (148). Even granting this, it still vastly surpasses every being on the earth in both might and stature.

For John Muir, the appearance of organization in both the animate and inanimate world clearly indicated the working (perhaps through overwhelming natural forces like the wind) of an orderly, and perhaps consciously directed, plan. “Harmony” is one of Muir’s favorite words to denote the appearance of order in nature, and his use of it has a distinctively eighteenth-century, Linnaean coloring to it that denotes not a kind of homeostasis or balance among components of a landscape, but the unfolding of a methodical and rational process in nature. He assures readers of *The Mountains of*

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California that the region's peaks and canyons, whose origins seem inexplicable at first, will gradually become recognizable as "necessary effects of causes that follow one another in a harmonious sequence" (48). Discussing the natural history of the sequoia tree and the widespread ignorance thereof, he remarks that after careful study of factors such as soil quality, glacial activity, and elevation, the "lawless mysteries" surrounding the tree vanish, and "broad harmonies take their place" (*Mountains of California* 139). Michael P. Cohen has noted that Muir's writings are ambivalent regarding whether the organization of the world was imposed by a personal intelligence or by some immanent vital principle (92). As with Thoreau, though, the precise form of Muir's belief is less important to note here than its presupposing an absolute, maximal reality shaping the world. Muir underscored this quality of his thought in an interview late in his life, during which he declared that "There are no accidents in nature" (Strother 11355). Scoffing at attempts to explain the development of life through the evolutionary process alone, he said that "somewhere before evolution was an intelligence that layed out the plan, and evolution is the process, not the origin, of the [plan]. You may call the intelligence what you please; I cannot see any reason why so many people object to call it God" (Strother 11356).

"Cosmic Mind" was the term John Burroughs applied to his own principle of intelligence guiding the development of the universe. He speculated that an essence of mind suffused all matter, and worked in conjunction with a blind force pushing things toward improvement and complexity which he called "creative energy." After reading Bergson, he identified this principle explicitly with the animating force the French thinker called the *élan vital* (Westbrook 110). Burroughs believed that in inorganic things and in the simplest life forms, this Cosmic Mind operated merely to maintain form and

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functioning, while in complex animals, it enabled sophisticated reflexes and consciousness. In his last writings, he would argue that the Cosmic Mind bound all parts of nature into a whole as the cells and organs of a body are bound together to sustain a single life.³

In one form or another, these conceptions maximal divinity still dominate popular and scholarly conceptions of the sacred in the natural world. Critics of American nature writing have partially contributed to their almost unchallenged prevalence. The writers whose spirituality has received the most critical attention have been those who evince some explicitly maximal vision: Eiseley, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder. Commentary on other writers usually obscures the possibility that they present some alternate mode of belief by either stressing continuity with the convictions of earlier authors or the teachings of established spiritual traditions, or operating with a kind of vague, subjectivist understanding of religion that focuses on the reaction of an individual to numinous experience without closely examining the source of that experience.

In "The Land in American Religious Experience," Lynn Ross-Bryant follows the traditionalist route in arguing that Gretel Ehrlich, Barry Lopez, and Annie Dillard work toward an understanding of the "wholeness of the sacred and the ordinary," an ideal that was "inherent in the Puritans' vision . . . as well as in the Transcendentalists'" (351). Where they differ from their forerunners, she insists, is a de-emphasis on individualized awareness or appropriation of the land (351)—not in their conceptions of the sacred. Ross-Bryant identifies another point of continuity with tradition by noting that these three writers, like the colonial Puritans, see the landscape as a place of both bright promise (which she equates with the sacred) and menacing darkness. They stand apart from the Puritans by allowing the light and darkness of the land to exist in tension rather than

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trying to subdue nature's darker aspects (348). She does not consider whether this is possible because the holy light and the chilling darkness represent different things to the writers of different eras; neither does she ask whether dark, dangerous elements in nature might in fact represent an aspect of divinity for the recent writers. In tracing these connections between early and contemporary interpreters of the American landscape, Ross-Bryant assumes (but never defines) an unchanging and highly conventional idea of "the sacred." James McClintock, in a book on Leopold, Krutch, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Gary Snyder, finds at the root of these writers' reverence for the natural world a "Romantic organicism and wholism" deriving from Thoreau (10). The observation is indisputable and intriguingly developed over the course of McClintock's book, but the emphasis on wholism and unity obscures certain religiously significant experiences of disunity or of awe at unique, discrete parts of nature that occur in these writers. If we accept without qualification this account of striving toward a unified vision, what do we make, for instance, of Krutch's inability to accommodate dandelions, ants, and certain other creatures within his "pantheistic" conception of nature, or of his sense that the redemptive capacity of the world was realized more in desert landscapes than in any others? An overemphasis on unity and continuity also limits the usefulness of Catherine Albanese's notion of American "nature religion." Albanese sees in American thought since colonial times an ongoing concern, expressed in various ways, with deriving from the order of nature a model and a justification for a harmonious social order (8-9). She identifies the apparent ambiguity of the natural world as one of the chief obstacles that nature writers and others have struggled with in their attempts to establish harmony. But even with this qualification, her scheme falters if we try to apply it to postmodern nature writers, such as Rick Bass, who recognize that the difficulty in finding

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a regenerative order in nature does not lie simply in educating one from conflicting observations. Bass, among others, contends that any redemptive order in the world we might wish to adapt or absorb must also be nourished and partly created by the human community.

Subjectivist studies of spirituality in contemporary nature writing do not simply reassert earlier conceptions of divinity in the world; they largely brush aside any consideration of the nature of divinity that writers encounter in the world. In what may be the best subjectivist discussion of spirituality in contemporary nature writing Douglas Burton-Christie illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Adopting a definition of spirituality as the complete range of one's responses to what one considers ultimate ("Mapping" 37), he identifies a common pattern of spiritual response to the world by writers such as Lopez, Krutch, Dillard and Wendell Berry that involves an expansive sense of relationship, an awareness of irreducible mystery in nature, and a recognition of moral responsibility for the nonhuman world (24, 38). While his case is convincing, it leaves completely open the question of just what these writers find ultimate; he is exclusively concerned with the character of their response, this in spite of his admission that one's religious experience, one's encounter with the ultimate, is prior to and is the source of spiritual awareness (37-38). One might ask of Burton-Christie whether differences in how each writer figures "the ultimate" (and such differences clearly exist among the authors he discusses) account for the writers emphasizing different responses within the triadic scheme he proposes. Ross-Bryant has written an article on Barry Lopez arguing that for him and various other ecological writers, awareness of and a will to protect "mysterious otherness" encountered in the land form the basis of a contemporary spirituality ("Nature and Texts" 40). Her contention amounts

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to an ecological extension of the apophatic (negative) tradition in western theology, which stresses the ultimate otherness, unknowability and un-representability of God. What we can know of the divine in the world, that “mysterious process in which the land and . . . all living things are engaged,” she asserts with Lopez, we can know best through metaphor and other forms of imaginative outreach toward the world (41, 46). These are indeed key motifs in Lopez’s writing. Yet she passes quickly over another, complementary idea of his which would enrich her study. What most moves and engages Lopez when he is out on the land is not a vague, mysterious awe, but an appreciation for the small nuances and intricate organization of wild places and creatures, as well as the intimations of their historical distinctiveness that arise in contact with them. He has a pronounced sense of value in the world he encounters. Ross-Bryant is principally concerned with Lopez’s contention that the conscious cultivation of a sense of mystery allows this value to come to consciousness (46). She only briefly mentions his belief that human language and understanding arise through interaction with the land, are results of “energies and forces acting upon us” (47). If one is investigating spirituality in Lopez, does it not make sense to examine closely why he believes such energies have such a profound impact on us? Is it worthwhile to consider whether Lopez’s references to the relationships among parts of a landscape as “the pattern we call God” (Aton 16) are anything other than gestures of submission to a final mystery? Perhaps even more to the point, one might be led by Ross-Bryant’s commentary to ask whether the apparent compatibility of metaphor and narrative with natural features has to do with anything besides the nature of these literary devices?

A still narrower subjectivist emphasis underlies much of Max Oelschlager’s *The Idea of Wilderness*. Oelschlager’s main interest is the past existence and possible

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recovery of what he calls the “Paleolithic mind.” This is a state of awareness marked by “recognition of nature as a spontaneous and naturally organized system in which all parts are harmoniously related,” and awareness that “wild nature and culture are organically related” (8). In the later chapters of his book, Oelschlager portrays the movement of various writers, including Aldo Leopold, toward the attainment of this outlook. He identifies the climax of Leopold’s career as an ecologist and writer as the moment he abandoned a “resourceist” mentality to commence becoming “a person of Indigen wisdom” (232). Interestingly, Oelschlager goes on to describe Leopold’s relationships with different landscapes in ways very similar to how empirical theologians describe spiritually significant interaction with the physical world.⁴ However, he does not ascribe religious significance to these relationships, and at any rate, what the land imparts to Leopold is secondary in his account to Leopold’s achievement of an outlook that grants intrinsic value to the land. Given that Leopold tied his hopes for harmony between humans and their natural environment to widespread changes in public attitudes toward the environment (as well as the stress in religious empiricism on the outlook one brings to experience in the world), this emphasis is not entirely misplaced. But it is a broad and cursory estimation of Leopold’s spiritual development, and whether it suffices to convey the nuances and complexity of Leopold’s spiritual outlook is a question Oelschlager never considers.

In both overt and subtle ways, these prevailing tendencies in scholarship on religious attitudes in nature writing reinforce traditional, maximal ideas of divinity in the natural world. These ideas are default assumptions in thinking about sacred dimensions of nature, supported by the history of nature writing and the (uniformly maximal) religious context of Western culture. They continue to appear well beyond the bounds of

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literature. The school of environmental thought known as deep ecology urges people to reject assumed boundaries between self and surroundings to recognize our inclusion in a global ecosystem. Proponents of the cosmological anthropic principle argue for the existence of a grand design in nature which made the appearance of humanity inevitable.⁵ To provide spiritual and political guidance in the contemporary world, Charlene Spretnak has elaborated what she calls an “ecological postmodernism,” a conception of unity in nature extending to the molecular level (20).

Yet despite the continuing importance of such ideas, current skepticism about totalizing or unitary schemes in general casts them as problematic aspects of nature writing and environmental thought. Recent critics have attacked maximal naturalistic spiritual concepts that have surfaced in the discourse of the deep ecology movement and which have counterparts in environmental literature. Peter van Wyk, among others, has criticized the tendency of deep ecologists to construe the earth as a unified and living subject and links this habit to their veneration of canonical American nature writers such as Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold (93). Rather than promoting connection with the earth, he argues, this view of the planet implies remoteness from it. A speaker invoking this image effectively assumes a position allowing himself or herself to objectify the world, to render it a static, confined, passive body—a patient—whose complete condition and needs can be ascertained (24). Van Wyck also charges that viewing the planet as an entity obscures and dismisses the real social and historical causes of the environmental crisis. This “view from the outside,” according to van Wyck, “is a promise of an omniscient vision, and a promise to deliver us from history” (25). The social ecologist Murray Bookchin decries the erasure of difference, particularly between human and nonhuman beings, promoted by the unitary visions of some spiritual ecologists. “If community is to

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be broadly defined as a universal ‘whole.’” he writes, “then a unique function which natural evolution has conferred on human society dissolves into a cosmic night which lacks differentiation, variety . . .” (9). Timothy Luke critiques deep ecology’s visions of the earth as a unified, conscious subject that, approached with intuitive openness, can convey a kind of redemptive wisdom. These conceptions, he says, do not open one to a forgotten wisdom alien to industrial society, but reflect the ideals of those who promote them (11, 15). In this “myth of Nature’s subjectivity,” earth becomes simply a projection of idealized humanity, “the correct mediation of [humanity’s] acting that can generate a new, more just, totality” (15).

If spiritual perspectives are to play a significant role in addressing environmental problems (and a great many persons wish them to), then writing that advocates or critiques them must be able to acknowledge and interrogate the maximal religious assumptions of American nature spirituality, and propose distinct and appealing alternatives. One might reasonably begin this work by turning to a discourse that develops well-defined religious concepts and practices methodical inquiry into spiritual matters—theology. However, critics of all sorts of writing have largely—and deliberately—avoided this resource. In 1979, Giles Gunn wrote that studies in literature and religion had largely turned away from concerns with the role of distinct religious tenets and traditions in literary works in favor of a wider-ranging, less parochial approach, operating “on the plane of the hermeneutical rather than the apologetic, the anthropological rather than the theological, the broadly humanistic rather than the narrowly doctrinal” (5).⁶ David Jasper observed that American critics in particular, working within a religiously pluralistic culture and suspicious about attempts to “impose doctrine upon poetry,” tend to cast aside theological concepts and categories to examine

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religion as a significant albeit softly-focused sociological, anthropological, and psychological phenomenon (*The Study of Literature and Religion* 1-2).

There are good reasons for this development. Christian theology has had a long and close association with literary criticism in the West, and this association has tended to reinforce orthodox (and maximal) religious views, particularly as the social and scientific developments of modernity brought these views under scrutiny. Nineteenth-century commentators such as John Henry Newman and Matthew Arnold looked to literature as a means of renewing the vitality of classic Christian doctrines. In the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot asserted that literary criticism could be substantive only so far as there is “common agreement on ethical and theological matters.” Though Eliot admitted that such agreement had been lost by modern culture, whatever agreement had existed about these things centered upon principles of an absolute, maximal divinity. In the absence of agreement on these matters, Eliot argued, it was incumbent upon individual Christians to “scrutinize their reading . . . with explicit ethical and theological standards” (388). He paints the believing critic (and for that matter, the authentic critic) as an upholder of earlier religious principles.⁷ In light of this history, then, no one should be surprised by Jasper’s observation that theologically-informed Anglo-American criticism has had a noticeably defensive and apologetic cast to it (“The Study of Literature and Theology” 4). Theology has effectively worked to align literature with the sort of cultural authority that many contemporary literary critics have made a career of resisting, hence its loss of critical respectability.

Arguably, though, the retreat from the study of theology and literature does as much to uphold tradition as the historic practice of it did. Focusing on the cultural or psychological impact of generally “religious” impulses or acts forestalls scrutiny of the

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religious principles informing a literary work—or a critical method—and the consequences that may follow from them. Perhaps the mere association of theology with literary criticism is less a problem than the kind of theology modern critics have brought to the task. Jasper finds that Anglo-American critics interested in theology have largely hewed to German Protestant traditions that have little tolerance for relativism or indeterminacy (“Study” 4). He looks to various kinds of deconstructive religious thought to revive studies in literature and theology. But in regard to American nature writing, the work of American empirical theologians holds special promise. It develops conceptions of a pluralistic, limited, and relational divinity, and its insights can bring the departures of certain nature writers from maximal spiritual beliefs into focus. Empirical theologians also share with the nature writers in this study certain convictions about the natural world and the relations human beings have with it, making their respective works uniquely compatible. This particular branch of theology is an unorthodox critical tool, rarely applied in literary studies. Yet it may prove effective at helping readers and critics look beyond an increasingly dubious yet thoroughly entrenched spiritual orthodoxy in American nature writing, and at bringing experiences of grace in nature out from under the old signs of God and Gaia.

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CHAPTER TWO

“AN ATTACHMENT TO LIFE”: AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EMPIRICISM

In 1933, Bernard Meland, a young theologian recently graduated from the University of Chicago Divinity School, published an essay in the *Sewanee Review* titled “Kinsmen of the Wild: Religious Moods in Modern American Poetry.” There, Meland observed that while American poets of his day such as Frost, Sandburg, and Millay lacked a religious orientation in the traditional theistic sense, their work embodied elements of a new, earth-centered religion which rejected belief in absolutes and instead enjoined an openness to the joys, perils, and mysteries of the environing world (443, 448). He characterized their religious path as a “return to actuality,”⁸ a heightened concern with earthly realities and human involvement in them that opposed the “strangeness to the world” instilled by religions that identified human beings as mere sojourners on the earth. This outlook could dispel such estrangement in modern Americans, he felt, by cultivating among them an “emotional orientation in the universe,” meaning an “acknowledgement of man’s intimate relations with the life of nature, recognition that he is a child of earth, born of its processes, nourished at its sources, sustained and eventually dissolved by its own movements” (443-44).

To readers of American nature writing, these are familiar ideas conveyed through what is likely an unfamiliar voice. Nonetheless, this voice is worth their attention. It lies within a theological discourse that holds great potential for the study of spirituality in contemporary nature writing. Meland was a leading figure in the movement in twentieth century American religious thought known as empirical theology. Centered at the Chicago Divinity School and active mainly from the early 1900’s through the 1970’s,

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empirical theologians drew on the radical empiricism of William James and John Dewey and (especially in the later phases of the school) the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead to articulate a unique strain of naturalistic religious thought. The empiricists identified the divine with processes and relations within concrete reality that give rise to experiences of transforming or enriching value. They shared with many contemporary nature writers a view of the physical world as a richly interrelated and constantly evolving field never fully separable from whatever meaning or worth one might sense in existence. Developing these positions often led empirical theologians to confront and explore issues and problems that have consistently preoccupied nature writers, thus making their discipline in some respects a parallel intellectual enterprise to nature writing.

Nature writers have long voiced a sense of relation to or community with the nonhuman world and urged their readers to cultivate one as well. This has also been a fundamental project of empirical theologians. Meland takes it up in his “Kinsmen” essay where he refers to the strong “fellow-feeling between man and . . . other creatures of the earth” exhibited by the poets of which he wrote as a significant religious mood. Pursuing this point, Meland anticipates Aldo Leopold’s call for the extension of ethics to the nonhuman world by remarking that “The circle of fellowmen has widened. It has grown from tribal, national, to international scope. Is it conceivable that, to some extent, it might become more intercreatural?”⁹ (453). In his major work, *The Size of God*, Bernard Loomer, a longtime Dean at Chicago, denounced the denial of relationship among humans or between humans and other beings as an unhealthy symptom of the desire to control. On the other hand, Loomer wrote, “When, in our openness and by our efforts, we establish webs of relationships, we are not uniting fundamental factors that previously

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were radically disjoined; we are rather exemplifying the interrelatedness that is a given condition of our lives and all life” (35). Sounding much like Meland, he described the form of religious practice he aspired to as “an attachment to life,” meaning “a spirit-testing commitment to the specific processes of life” (29). Jerome Stone writes that to secure the greatest possible infusion of value into human life, people must widen their loyalties to include “the whole human community and beyond to include the universal community of all life and worthy inanimate things, in short, to the universal community” (*Minimalist* 87).

In *Great American Nature Writing*, Joseph Wood Krutch identified this kind of intercreatural feeling a key element of the nature essay tradition as practiced by Thoreau and his successors (6). He cited precise observation of the natural world, informed to some degree by science, as another (64). Empirical theologians also accepted science as an important, though not infallible, means of understanding the world. As Nancy Frankenberry observes, the worldview of empirical theology derives from the premises of evolutionary naturalism. It acknowledges nothing existing beyond material reality, which is understood as a network of continually developing energy-events (“Major Themes” 37). Like the classical empiricism that underlies the modern scientific method, empirical theology recognizes experience as the only valid source of human knowledge, even though it denies that experience can be reduced to the perception of value-free data. Karl Peters notes that empirical theologians share with scientists a commitment to formulating reliable and consistent methodologies for understanding (and confirming our understanding of) reality (59). Approaching more nearly the sensibilities of nature essayists, the theologians Henry N. Wieman and Jerome Stone have both discussed science as a means of expanding one’s sense of qualities in the world which are

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“transcendent,” which can promote healing, awareness, or connection in mysterious yet compelling ways.¹⁰ The findings of science, according to Wieman, “magnify” the awareness of value, beauty, and pleasure in the world that we acquire in our ordinary interaction with it (*Source of Human Good* 205). For Stone, the fact that scientific research continually reveals new questions along with answers indicates some dim but compelling value in nature which continually draws us on to new awareness. He writes that commitment to the scientific method, to “system, coherence, universality, precision, and verification, is the pursuit of a continually transcendent but ever relevant goal” (*Minimalist* 38).

In his account of the development of the American nature essay, Peter Fritzell places the origins of the genre not only in strong feelings of connection with the nonhuman world and a commitment to disciplined observation, but in crises of identity and epistemology faced by early European colonists in North America. He writes that like many an early American settler, “America’s nature writers have been caught between their needs to locate themselves . . . and their desires to quit the business of having to locate things, their dreams of immersing themselves in a prehistoric, unconscious, and Edenic NATURE.” (7-8). The questions and situations addressed by nature essayists, according to Fritzell, “perpetuate in some detail” the common early American experience of attempting to understand and find meaning in “nonhuman nature alone, without further significant institutional, social, or family support” (8). Concluding that such efforts fail in a sense by inevitably falling back on inherited categories and systems of meaning, Fritzell still assigns them a crucial role in the development of American literature and culture. William Dean, who has emerged as one of the foremost historians of the empirical tradition in theology, finds that tradition rooted in the same quest that Fritzell

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describes. “Consciously or unconsciously,” Dean writes, “empirical theologians spoke for peoples who had faced perilous tests of physical survival. Most seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century Americans stood in natural and social history almost naked—unable to clothe themselves sufficiently in the European traditions from which they had physically removed themselves.” They, along with Americans of later generations and other cultural backgrounds, asked “whether within this new and brutish American history, they could find God . . . or a version of God that made particular sense to them” (“Empiricism and God” 108-09). Empirical theologians affirmed that God was indeed located within history, history that was largely natural. “Like Emerson,” Dean finds, “the empirical theologians found themselves in the thick of natural process . . . rather than contemplating from a distance the natural scene. . . . Contrary to European convention, nature and science were integral to American theology. The God of the Americans lived at the center rather than the edges of nature” (“Empiricism and God” 109). Even so, at least a part of European theological convention survived in the works of empirical theologians: belief in “a quality, even a perfection” shining through history “that could be (or better, had to be) trusted” (“Empiricism and God” 112). Often this “quality” takes the form of an omnipresent creative tendency, but empiricists often employ orthodox western theological conceptions to describe it. Most of them define the sacred dimension of reality as wholly good. Some maintain the aseity (independence) of the divine, asserting that while humans may establish relations with God (however figured), the benefits of these relations flow wholly from God and are not created by human effort (Dean “Empiricism and God” 115). Jerome Stone traces his model of this-worldly transcendence to Otto’s ideas of the *mysterium tremendum* (*Minimalist* 23). And all describe what is effectively a state of sin that is an always threatening human possibility

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Among the conventional ideas that survive in empirical theology is the symbol of God as inherited from western monotheistic traditions. For the empiricists, it does not define the object of devotion so much as it establishes the importance they attach to relations with the sacred as encountered in nature and history. As Bernard Loomer writes, "In our traditions, the term 'God' is the symbol of ultimate values and meanings in all of their dimensions. It connotes an absolute claim on our loyalty. It bespeaks a primacy of trust It symbolizes a transcendent and inexhaustible meaning that forever eludes our grasp" (*Size of God* 42). So like Thoreau or Annie Dillard, who comb the world's scriptures for figures to interpret their experiences in nature, or Barry Lopez, who draws upon history, art, optic science, and theology to explicate the numinous qualities he sees in landscapes, empirical theologians turn to the realm of culture to render communicable their intuition of a mysterious value received through experience.

The notion of some numinous quality or divine presence immanent in the natural world is, of course, a further affinity between empirical theology and the tradition of the American nature essay. Yet this is also one respect in which empirical theologians differ sharply from most practitioners of the nature essay. The religious perspectives of most nature writers have been maximal in some respect, identifying the divine with some totality of nature, with overwhelming natural force, or a universal order or principle. For empirical theologians, though, the sacred appears in numerous and always contingent forms, always in connection with ordinary beings and things and the relationships that exist between them. Jerome Stone, for instance, contends that the divine exists as a

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collection of resources within the world that are capable of effecting a transcendent experience, yet which do not themselves form a unity. Bernard Meland defines God as a goodness we encounter within relationships, an effect strictly of the character of the relation and the parties that form it. Though Bernard Loomer approaches pantheism in referring to God as “the organic restlessness of the whole body of creation,” he stresses that this activity is different in every element of creation, and that only through relationships with particular others does one encounter transforming or redeeming influences (*Size of God* 25, 41). In keeping with the notions of the process thought that had deeply influenced him, Loomer further asserted that there is “no ground of being that is the source of all becoming while being itself not becoming” (*Size of God* 29).

Statements like these outline the rudiments of a spiritual vision at odds with Emerson’s assertion of “one law” evident throughout nature or Burroughs’s “Cosmic Mind”; one that contrasts with the sense of a diffuse yet distinct and unitary ground of being that Annie Dillard articulated in her conjecture that with the expansion of human knowledge about the universe, God has “not absconded but spread . . . to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand, so subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 9). The emphasis on relationships in empirical theology points to a divinity characterized by (even dependent on) pluralism and difference and not, as in Matthiesen’s thinking, existing as a fundamental unity beyond any difference.

Expressions of a similarly pluralistic and contingent divinity appear in the works of the four writers who are the subjects of this study. For instance, while Aldo Leopold occasionally uses wholistic, integrative metaphors (organism, mechanism) in *A Sand County Almanac* to describe ecological communities, these figures are not for him the

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sources of awe or the invitations to mystery that the calls of cranes or the beneficial role of decaying trees in the lives of animals are. Although professing himself a pantheist, Joseph Wood Krutch finds more satisfaction in intimate awareness of and interaction with the plants and animals living around him, in the belief that all living things “are in this together,” than in any thought of a planetary unity. Barry Lopez locates a “pattern called God” in landscapes, but is more interested in the nuances of local and temporary patterns than how all landscapes may join in a universal one. The grizzly bears of the American West represent to Rick Bass (as they did to many aboriginal peoples) a powerful vivifying force, yet one undergoing transition and demanding continually to be understood anew.

Reading the works of empirical theologians alongside those of the four nature writers in this study holds promise but poses certain complications. Approached with the religious model of empirical theology in mind, Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass stand out in the nature writing canon as original and challenging spiritual thinkers. Joining the insights of these two groups of thinkers also brings to light important new perspectives on environmental and critical problems. It is imperative, however, not to lose sight of important differences between empirical theologians and these nature writers. Each group works within a different discursive mode and draws on different textual and intellectual histories. Each addresses a different audience, and there is little indication that either is acquainted with the others’ work. Even so, the shared perspective and commitments of the two groups make it reasonable to compare them closely, and to interpret each with the aid of the other. To suggest the possibilities that empirical theology holds for the discussion of nature writing and environmental philosophy, a survey of its origins, major statements, problems, and possibilities is in order.

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Empiricist thought in any form is grounded in the belief that knowledge comes from experience. However, the conception of “experience” has never been a simple or stable one among empiricist thinkers, and efforts to expand it have played a large role in the emergence of American religious empiricism. Philosophical discussions of “empiricism” usually trace its origins to the sensationalist thought of British thinkers such as Locke and Hume, and while this school may be regarded as a remote ancestor of the religious empiricism at issue here, it in fact did a great deal to undermine the credibility of naturalistic religion in all forms. British empirical thinkers saw experience as the source of our knowledge, but restricted the knowledge that could be gained directly from experience to simple, value-free impressions (heat, solidity, motion, etc.) received through the five senses. Secondary qualities, such as worth, purpose, and relation, could be known through operations of the mind succeeding sense experience, but not immediately. Locke, at least, maintained that some knowledge of God was still possible, but through reason only and not by sense experience.

It is this reasoning, and the fact-value split it presumes, that has defined scientific and logical truth throughout modern times. Yet it has met with continuous resistance from numerous literary figures (Blake, Wordsworth, most nature essayists), as well as from a significant group of American religious and philosophical thinkers. One of the earliest American statements of this resistance appears in the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Although heavily influenced by Locke’s sensationalist epistemology, Edwards postulated a “sense of the heart” in addition to the five natural senses that could directly perceive the holiness of God and the truth of scripture in all aspects of experience. In his sermon “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Edwards asserted that true knowledge of God derives not from intellectual understanding, but from “a real sense and apprehension of

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the things revealed in the word of God” or “a sight of their divine excellency and glory” which is possible when God’s spirit has reclaimed a person from sin (*Writings* 72). Redeemed persons believe the doctrines of God’s word, he writes, “because they see divinity in them” (*Writings* 75). As his unpublished *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* made clear, Edwards believed that such perceptions were available not only through reading scripture or other narrowly defined religious contexts, but through all elements of creation.

Various Protestant divines, most notably Horace Bushnell and John Williamson Nevin, kept an empirical theology of sorts alive in American Christianity during the nineteenth century. Both Nevin and Bushnell strove to revive a Protestant faith whose appeal had faltered against challenges from revivalism, Catholicism, New England Transcendentalism, sectarian feuds, and (especially in Bushnell’s case) the rising authority of science. By drawing on Coleridge’s notion (derived from Kant) that, through reason, the human mind could grasp a noumenal dimension of reality, they formulated versions of wholistic mysticism in response to these challenges (Ahlstrom 610; DiPuccio 51). Bushnell described a creative force operating through nature yet not bound by its laws which he called the “supernatural”: the supreme manifestation of it was the incarnation of Christ, and salvation—which included the improvement of human society as well as personal redemption—was achieved through cooperation with it wherever manifested (Ahlstrom 612; R. Edwards 205-206). Nevin saw an ideal dimension within the actual, but contended that experience of it followed only after an individual’s salvation by participation in the life of the Church (DiPuccio 54). Whereas Edwards looked to the natural world for affirmations of religious doctrine, these theologians held

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The movement toward modern, minimal religious empiricism began not in efforts to reinvigorate orthodoxy, but in reactions against maximal idealistic and organismic schemes generally. Such schemes abounded in nineteenth century philosophy, partly as a result of the influence of Hegel. Thinkers like Royce and Bradley attracted attention late in the century with extensions of Hegel's systematic idealism. Ernst Hackel (coiner of the term *ecology*) propounded an influential version of secularized organic wholism during this period. Variations on Darwinian theory (most notably Herbert Spencer's) attempted to outline a definite tendency in the progress of evolution. To William James, among others, such schemes appeared presumptuous and insupportable. If there was an absolute unity of existence, James asked, how could individuals with limited perceptual powers have direct knowledge of it? In describing reality as ideal, how could one avoid merely projecting one's received or speculative ideals? How could one ensure that any tendency seen in history or matter was not simply a reflection of one's own desires and expectations? Mechanistic materialism, a strict form of naturalism deriving from classical empiricism, avoided these problems by asserting that reality was at base material, law-guided and (at least in theory) measurable, but its denial of a qualitative dimension of reality was unacceptable to James. James's dissatisfaction with the thought of his time led him to the position he called "radical empiricism," which he elaborated between the 1901-02 Gifford lectures that produced *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and his death in 1910. This notion laid one of the essential foundations for a significant renewal and transformation of natural theology.

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Throughout his career, James had concurred with the classical British empiricists in affirming experience as our only meaningful source of information about the world, but he rejected their insistence we can experience only discrete, value-free physical sensations. He finally supported his belief that human experience consisted of more than the reception of clear and precise data by situating all human perceptions within a relational context that could not be escaped, yet might be at least temporarily obscured by the kind of abstractive thought that produces discrete objects of scientific inquiry. In our immediate awareness, he argued, we experience no fact or thing in strict isolation; rather, we experience the relation of things to one another in space and time, as well as their similarity to or difference from others and, of course, the impression they make on us; our awareness of activities includes a sense of direction, change, resistance, causes and effects. “Any kind of relation,” he wrote, “must be accounted as real as anything else” Moreover, because “the relations that connect experiences must be experienced relations,” we are conscious of our experiences themselves “continuing each other,” taking shape in relation to all previous ones (*Essays on Radical Empiricism* 42-45). From this perspective, no datum comes to a perceiver barren of some meaning or value.

James’ argument for the objective reality of experienced relations and valuations was, naturally, a pragmatist one, proceeding not from supposed essential qualities of experience, but from its observable consequences. The “appreciative attributes” of things, the sense we have of their “dangerousness, beauty, rarity, utility, etc.” may be considered objectively real, he claimed, because they have “immediate bodily effects upon us, alterations of tone and tension, of heartbeat and breathing, of vascular and visceral action” (*Essays* 150). Hence, our valuations of sensed facts have a reality about them that cannot simply be called “subjective” in the sense of being something inferred or

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projected by the mind. Because our impressions and conscious thoughts have such distinct effects, James went so far as to say that “thoughts in concrete are made of the same stuff as things are” (*Essays* 37).¹¹ Accordingly, Nancy Frankenberry comments, it may be said that radical empiricism recognizes “no interesting metaphysical difference between facts and values” (*Religion and Radical Empiricism* 89).

Even so, James does not claim that the qualities and relations that come to us in experience can be readily grasped and articulated consciously. He held that we perceive relations and values on the “fringe” of our awareness, a vague area of experience whose data cannot easily be sorted and named. What the “fringe” presents us with, according to James, are dim feelings of tendency, affinity, and transition, a pronounced but indistinct “overabundance of relations.” Rational thought can isolate and clarify the relations and patterns we encounter in the fringe of awareness, but not with any certainty or authority, since by doing so it abstracts these from the full context in which they exist. As James would have it, indifference to the fringe of relations in search of precision leads to a debased understanding of our intellect. Among the chief aims of his work, he wrote, was “the reinstatement of the vague to its proper place in our intellectual life” (*Principles of Psychology* 254).

If perceptions within the fringe were uncertain, James still saw them as critical dimensions of religious sensibility. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James stipulated that the event of deliverance in any religion consisted of awareness of some wrongness within the self, accompanied by a sense of some better, more authentic self which an individual believes “is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of this same which is operative in the universe outside him, and which he can get in working touch with . . . and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck”¹²

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(498-99). As Frankenberry shows, James's attempts to define the More are somewhat vague and inconclusive.¹³ However, his references to contact with it as consciousness of "a wider self through which saving experiences come" (*Varieties* 505) or of "actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and prayer-state" (*Varieties* 509) are worth noting. Both argue for the existence of redemptive qualities or energies existing outside our selves whose exact nature may be uncertain, but whose reality and efficacy are undeniable.

These ideas support the premises of maximal as well as minimal forms of naturalistic spirituality, as well as to those of theism. James for his part believed that religious experience as he had studied it offered no basis to declare with certainty that the More was either the God of classical theism or pan-deity advocated by monist idealists of his day such as Bradley and Häckel (*Varieties* 514-15). Such things were merely speculative, rationalist constructs. All that experience of the More supported for him is an awareness of something larger than the ordinary self, and considering that the effects through which we know the More are varied in typed and intensity, James believed it might make sense to construe the universe as "a collection of . . . selves of different degrees of inclusiveness," an idea which, as he noted, amounted to a kind of polytheism (*Varieties* 515).

James once described radical empiricism as "a mosaic philosophy" in which pieces of experience were joined only at the edges, not held up by any single, all-inclusive base (*Essays* 86). Being externally related to one another, things "are with one another in many ways" he wrote, "but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything" (*A Pluralistic Universe* 321). It is a position which allows for multiplicity without chaos or utter disjunction. But more importantly here, it offers a conception of a

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In the decades after James wrote, John Dewey would articulate another influential empirical interpretation of religion. For Dewey, the “religious” was not a quality of any object or force, but “an adjustment to life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace” (*A Common Faith* 13). And though Dewey denied that this adjustment was the effect of any specifically religious or spiritual dimension of reality, he did argue that it was promoted by the conditions of the experienced world, in conjunction with human imaginative effort. The “religious” adjustment grows from the idea of the whole self (an entity known only as an imaginative projection) harmonized with the Universe (“a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected” (*A Common Faith*) (19). However, such an adjustment, such an imagined harmony, cannot simply be willed, but is dependent upon “an influx from sources beyond conscious deliberation or purpose” (*A Common Faith* 19). Dewey identified these sources not with the supernatural, as traditional religions did, but with “the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience” (*A Common Faith* 48). According to him, experience presents us with ideals that promote our better adaptation to the world, possibilities for a fuller and more richly related existence. Far from being simply imaginary, though, the ideal “has its roots in natural conditions.” There are “values, goods, realized upon a natural basis—the goods of human association, of art and knowledge. The idealizing imagination seizes upon the most precious things found in the climacteric moments of experience and projects them” (*A Common Faith* 48). Putting this another way, Dewey wrote that prior to any advance in human society or technology, the requirements for it

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“were there in physical material and energies and in human capacity. The idealizing imagination seized hold upon the idea of a rearrangement of existing things that would evolve new objects” (*A Common Faith* 49). Dewey proposed that the name “God” be applied to “this *active*”¹⁴ relation between the ideal and the actual” (*A Common Faith* 51), the encounter and choice of transforming goods and the spread of their influence upon human communities. The divine thus becomes associated with a process of dynamic advance. Human existence has, in Dewey’s thought, an open-ended *telos* which unfolds through the interaction of consciousness with the possibilities inherent in the world, and proceeds toward ever-greater states of relatedness to the order of the world, or an increase in the condition Dewey referred to as “qualitative meaning” (*Art as Experience* 27). His version of religious empiricism recognizes the role that specific, minimal, values in the world have in religious experience, but, as Frankenberry has noted, at the same time does more than James’s to account for the feelings of unity or the whole that often figure in such experiences (*Religion* 109). Also, Dewey’s conception of God as an active relation adds a distinctly minimal dimension to the divine, making it something contingent upon human consciousness and the dynamic possibilities of the physical and social worlds.

Perhaps no response to the conflict between mechanism and idealism proved more intellectually fertile than the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, and the influence of this system on empirical theology was particularly strong. Whitehead rejected one of the cornerstones of classic empiricism, the notion that all things except sentient animals lacked consciousness and emotion. He argued that all entities, from human beings to atomic particles,¹⁵ were capable of having feelings and being aware of the feelings of others. The primitive element in the universe, according to Whitehead, “is sympathy, feeling the feeling in another and feeling conformally with another (*Process*

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and Reality 162). Although awareness of these feelings typically lies within the penumbral, prelinguistic field of our awareness,¹⁶ our attitude toward other entities, qualitatively marked as we receive them by their own feelings and experiences, determines the course of our own development. Whitehead argued that a given entity is actually constituted by all other entities in the universe “by means of its determinate attitude toward [them]” (an attitude usually formed unconsciously) (*Process and Reality* 40, 125). The past entities of the universe (possessing, of course, widely varying degrees relevance) are prehended by an actual entity as “elements for new creation,” which the actual entity synthesizes into a novel perspective (*Process and Reality* 210-211). Each entity possesses an aspiration (supplied by God, according to Whitehead) toward an ever-more complex, contrastive synthesis of the feelings and possibilities we prehend from other entities (*Process and Reality* 85). Whitehead’s system falls short of a thoroughgoing empiricism in that it constructs an intricate and all-encompassing rational scheme to explain the universe from a few basic propositions.¹⁷ Insisting on an ultimate unity of all experience in God as well as a universal and regular process of becoming, it also retains a strong maximal dimension. However, Whitehead’s panpsychist views do describe a universe of plural and ubiquitous values, all with a role to play in the continuing creation of individuals and the whole of the universe.

Not primarily religious thinkers themselves, these three expositors of an enriched or “radical” empiricism formulated four concepts which would become basic elements in the naturalistic empirical theology developed at Chicago and elsewhere from the early 1900’s onward. First is the notion that material realities convey spiritual or emotional values which promote the growth or healing of individuals. Secondly, these values are accessible through a pre-rational, pre-linguistic awareness. This presumes they do have

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an existence outside language, but a third contention stresses the importance of language and other symbolic practices in realizing and transmitting the power of these values: this is the idea, best articulated by Dewey, that some conscious, constructive response to the values and possibilities sensed in experience is necessary if they are to have a significant effect. Finally, sacred, transforming qualities in experience are results of the specific phenomena that manifest them and their relations to other phenomena, not (at least primarily) of the relevance of any thing to any ultimate design or intelligence. These ideas enable a retreat from the maximal religious conceptions, both theistic and naturalistic, that underlie both conventional religious practices and the tradition of the American nature essay. At the very least, they point the way to a view of the world as meaning-ful, and relevant to human emotional life. The theologians of the Chicago school would offer an expanded understanding of how these might also be understood as a manifestation of what people have understood as the divine.

What religious historians refer to as the Chicago School of empirical theology took its initial form in the first decade of the twentieth century among a group of scholars engaged in the study of Christian traditions as sociohistorical phenomena. Drawing on the emergent fields of sociology and social psychology, as well as the pragmatist, radical empiricist, and Darwinian thought, scholars such as Shirley Jackson Case and Shailer Matthews discussed Christian history as a series of efforts among social groups to adapt received religious traditions to promote their survival in new historical and environmental circumstances.¹⁸ This movement was empiricist in comprehending experience of the environment (particularly that transpiring in the course of one's attempts to adapt to one's environment) as the only valid means of evaluating religious truth (Inbody 21). Naturally, it did not conceive of the environment as an inert material backdrop for the

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human drama. Throughout its history, empirical theology has argued in various ways for the presence of potencies within the natural world which transform experiencing subjects. In general, its practitioners have moved from identifying these as discrete elements in the world to associating them with qualities of beings and things.

In an early statement of this argument, Shailer Matthews defined God as the “sum of personality-producing forces in the universe.” There were in nature, according to Matthews, forces that were neither intelligences nor entities advancing the development of human personhood, of rational, conscious, social and purposeful being. Religion, in his system, was the process by which societies established harmonious relations with these forces, and the task of theology was to support these (Inbody 21; Meland, “Empirical Tradition” 21-24). Although many nature writers and ecologically-inclined readers would likely reject Matthews’s emphasis on “personality” as the objective of cosmic processes as too anthropocentric, his position does recall the longstanding belief of American nature writers that contact with wild landscapes restores and enhances human character, freedom, and individuality, especially in the face of the dehumanizing tendencies of industrial society. Emerson, of course, proclaimed that “In the woods, we return to reason, and faith” (*Selections* 24). But twentieth century writers such as John C. Van Dyke, Edward Abbey, and Joseph Wood Krutch found humanizing qualities and tendencies in the nonhuman world without invoking any transcendent source of authentic being, as Emerson did.

Among the first theologians to employ the organismic thought advanced by Whitehead and others in a thorough reinterpretation of Christian traditions, Henry Nelson Wieman, who joined Chicago faculty in 1927, approached more nearly a pluralistic naturalism. He identified the creation of novel good as an essential attribute of the sacred

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in nature. Wieman equated God with what he called the “creative event,” a process working through nature and history to advance the security, welfare, and solidarity of human beings (*Source* 17). The creative event, according to Wieman, works most fully in free, non-instrumentalizing interactions with other persons, creatures, or cultural products. This kind of “creative interchange,” Wieman argues, promotes the good by enhancing “qualitative meaning,” a sensed connection between present events that allows one “to feel not only the quality intrinsic to the event now occurring, but the qualities of many events that are related to them” (*Source* 18). Such an experience suggests to the individual mind and to human groups “a new structure of relatedness, where events are discriminated and related in a manner not before possible,” thus arousing “a hunger for a better world, a good that might be, but is not” (*Source* 62, 65).¹⁹ Wieman warned that this expansion of appreciative consciousness could not be attained through deliberate mental striving or imagining, but is the work of the creative event itself, and requires a complete giving of oneself over to creative processes in the world (*Source* 20, 76). Even so, the creative event does not work in complete independence of human will and effort: people could work to empower the creative event by eliminating barriers to its effectiveness such as outmoded traditions, reductive modes of knowledge, and oppressive social arrangements (*Source* 82). Reflecting some of Whitehead’s tendencies toward rationalism and systematization, Wieman held that the processes through which the creative event worked had distinct, consistent structures that could be discerned through observation and hypothesis (thus approaching the stringent empiricism of scientific study). Theoretically, God could be understood as thoroughly as any other object in the world. Wieman was at least modest enough to concede at the close of his

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first book that “the exact nature of God is still problematical, and may be for some years to come” (*Religious Experience and the Scientific Method* 381).

By the 1940's, a new generation of Chicago theologians had begun to move away from ideas of the divine as a distinct creative element within nature, identifying it instead with effects of one's relations and experiences with particular things and beings. The theologies they developed would be less anthropocentric, wary of older maximal claims, and cognizant of creatural difference as a critical agent in the development of humans and groups. They would also devote more attention to the epistemological problems involved in knowing sacred aspects of nature, and to the role of language and culture in shaping perceptions of them. In these ways, the second generation of Chicago theologians would move closer than their predecessors had to the concerns of contemporary nature writers and ecotheorists.

Bernard Meland, a member of the Chicago faculty after 1945, took initial and influential steps toward this understanding. Though deeply influenced by Whitehead, Meland rejected his systematizing and idealist tendencies (which Wieman had to some extent adopted). Believing that “ultimacies and immediacies traffic together,” he sought instead to comprehend the divine through the data of lived experience, complete with their shadowy “fringe” dimensions. He often remarked that “we live more profoundly than we can think,” and in his understanding, the full content of lived experience included not only awareness of what was immediately apparent, but a sense of the network of relationships and possibilities in which it was enmeshed, a field extending beyond our conscious perception. We can encounter this field, which constitutes the “depth” of our experience, Meland argued, through a non-instrumental regard for things (a stance he called “appreciative awareness”) and by bodily sensation (*Higher Education and the*

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Human Spirit 64, 67). These, one should note, are also attitudes commended by many nature writers.

It is primarily from James that Meland received these notions, however, and like James, Meland assigned the fringe dimensions of reality a major role in religious experience. The depth of relations or “overtone of meaning” included in the full datum of experience yields a dimension of “ultimacy,” a sense of possibility and value that “may reach and reorder the relations that constitute our organic life as personalities” (*Faith and Culture* 44). Meland construed this ultimate dimension as a naturalized version of grace, “a good not our own,” that is “not an intrusion from without the plenum of concrete events, but a resource . . . of redemptive love emanating from within the context of lived experience” (“Grace: A Dimension Within Nature?” 134). Redemption, in his system, means a release from habit, and an expanded recognition of value and relatedness. Within the moment of transcendence, Meland wrote, “a good not our own interpenetrates experience, releasing the organism from its fixed path of motivation and redirects it toward a more sensitive order of relations” (*Faith and Culture* 44). The matrix of relations surrounding the data of experience generates “a grace that can carry us beyond meanings of our own making, alert us to goodness that is not of our own willing or defining” (*Fallible Forms and Symbols* 151). Unlike Wieman, Meland saw the phenomenon of grace or creative activity in the world as plural and varied rather than uniform and consistent. He once wrote that the “sustaining activities in life” should be seen as “a *community* of activities, rather than a single behavior” (*Modern Man’s Worship* 124). Meland emphasized that this grace was no simple human projection or mental synthesis by finding one example of it in instances of “subtle tenderness in the behavior of creatures at all levels,” acts which cumulatively represented to him a fund of

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“gentle might” which was integral to the survival and evolution of species (“Grace” 137). As Frankenberry writes, Meland saw fundamental religious import in “the causal efficacy of life,” or in the suggestiveness of concrete and immediate phenomena (*Religion* 132).²⁰

This emphasis upon individual objects and creatures as sources of transcendent value becomes more explicit and takes on a pointedly ecological tone in the writings of Bernard Loomer, dean and professor at Chicago from 1945-1965, and subsequently a professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His most important work stresses the importance of relations among creatures in the development of both individuals and the character of earthly existence as a whole. Borrowing a phrase from ecological discourse, Loomer referred to the full context of relationships within which creatures exist as “the web of life” (*Size of God* 31), and like ecologists (as well as like William James) Loomer saw relatedness as a fundamental dimension of reality. “Interdependence or interrelatedness,” he wrote, “is not an emergent fact. It is indigenous to reality as such, including the realm of possibility” To cultivate relationships with others is not to unite what was previously disjoined; it is a means of “exemplifying and extending the interrelatedness that is a given condition of our lives and of all life” (*Size of God* 35). Any appearance of order in the universe, Loomer argued, was a result of relations among concrete actualities and not vice-versa (*Size of God* 32). In Loomer’s theology, relationships with others serve as “carriers of energy projected from past occasions They are the means by which one actuality enters into the life of another” (*Size of God* 31). This is a familiar concept of process thought, but Loomer attributed more to individual subjects (Whitehead’s “enduring individuals”) more potential to change one another through relationships than most process thinkers. In a 1973 talk, Loomer went so far as to say that every concrete reality could be a divine

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incarnation, or a revelation. Some person or societal situation or group of events could be “of such compelling power, of such attractiveness that you are formed and shaped in relationship to it” (“S-I-Z-E” 8). He identifies constitutive (and divinely creative) energies with the feelings of individuals in writing that “We feed on each other in all dimensions of our lives—physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. We create each other” (*Size of God* 31). The consequence of this idea becomes clearer where Loomer remarks that when we express sympathy or compassion for another, “His suffering becomes in part our suffering; his impoverishment diminished us. Our response becomes his resource. In responding appropriately to the other we are both fulfilled through that act, and life within the web of relationships is advanced” (*Size of God* 33).

Loomer defines what constitutes an advance of “life within the web of relationships” through his notion of “size.” The quality of an individual’s existence, is a function of their size, meaning

the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into you and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. (“S-I-Z-E” 6)

It is size, not goodness or reason, according to Loomer, that individuals and communities approach in the creative advance that unfolds through relationships. To grow as individuals and to increase the meaningfulness of existence generally, one must encounter and engage as many beings, as many modes of being as possible—and not only

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those that are beautiful or nurturing. Loomer saw the order within individuals and the world as an aesthetic rather than a moral or rational order, one composed not only of harmonies, but ambiguities, and unavoidably containing evil as well as good (*Size of God* 44). God, for him, was necessarily the reality of the greatest stature, able to accommodate the widest array of influences and qualities. It was the world itself, at least as apprehended in “the organic restlessness of the whole body of creation” (*Size of God* 41). This notion echoes ancient aboriginal conceptions of a sacred order among elements in landscape that individuals strive to recreate within themselves, which is also an idea that nature essayist Barry Lopez has adapted, referring to the relations in landscape as a “pattern called God” that may center and renew individuals.

During the last ten years, Jerome Stone has extended the thought of Loomer, Meland, and other religious empiricists, offering a more nuanced and critical vision of how varied phenomena in the world may act as agents of redemption or judgement. He makes a more deliberate break with the absolute, maximal legacy of Western religion by articulating what he calls a “minimalist vision of transcendence.” Stone argues that we may encounter this-worldly transcendence in two forms, a real aspect and an ideal aspect. The real aspect is the “*collection of all situationally transcendent uncontrolled and unexpected processes in the universe insofar as they are productive of good*”²¹ (*Minimalist* 13). Several points in this definition deserve close examination. These processes are not transcendent in any essential sense, but only in relation to a situation as perceived from within. So far as we cannot understand or control them, experiences of healing, rejuvenation, encouragement or other kinds of positive transformation may appear transcendent. However, experiences transcendent to some persons may not be so to others, and experiences transcendent at one point in a person’s life may not always be

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so (*Minimalist* 14). The cure that seems miraculous to a patient in pain may be a routine matter to his or her doctor; a movie that opened new horizons to one as a child may seem unremarkable in adulthood. The same processes which may bring good may also have destructive elements—a rainshower that resuscitates crops may also erode a barren hillside. Stone identifies the transcendent only with creative, good-producing aspect of events (*Minimalist* 15). Moreover, instances of transcendence do not cohere into a unity—at least, we have no valid grounds for saying they do. They exist as a collection, with the common property of being creative of good. Any unity these have is simply a result of the fact that “the universe hangs together somewhat” (*Minimalist* 14).

The ideal aspect of transcendence consists of a “*set or collection of ideals*” that “continually challenge us to new attainment beyond our present level” (*Minimalist* 16). These ideals do not refer to any kind of absolute, Platonic reality, and they may not be capable of being realized fully—or at all. They do not comprise a unity or a single end to be achieved, and some may well conflict with one another. Some may take a wholistic or maximal form—a planetary unity or personal deity, for instance. But as figurative statements rather than ontological claims, they do not necessarily conflict with the rest of his minimalist position. (This is a position worth remembering when considering nature writers in this study, who may employ wholistic spiritual rhetoric (Krutch’s professed pantheism, Leopold ruminations on earth as a living entity), but place more emphasis on numinous experiences with discrete elements of landscape.) And while Stone believes certain total or maximal images may act as transcendent ideals, the set of transcendent ideals he envisions is not totally inclusive. Recognizing that ideals may foster complacency and stagnation, Stone limits the set of transcendent ideals to those ideals that continually challenge persons to grow and to seek improvement and new

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accomplishment. Stone observes also that certain ideals may lead one to destructive behavior, and excludes these from the category of the transcendent (*Minimalist* 16-17).

Stone proposes several classifications for these resources of transcendence. The real aspect of transcendence may be manifested in three ways: openness in extremity, courage in spite of finitude, and courage to act in an opportune moment. Openness in extremity refers to the sense one may have in limit situations (defeat and victory, joy and despair) of unexpected blessing, renewal, or forgiveness from beyond the self. Courage in spite of finitude is a feeling of gratitude for life occurring despite recognition of one's mortality and limitations, an attitude which Stone contends must come from beyond the self because of the finitude of the self. Courage to act in an opportune moment means action to bring about good in an unstable situation. Such courage may come from familiar sources, but on occasion, may come from some unexpected quarter (*Minimalist* 34-37). Four types of value pursuit that present us with continually challenging ideals (the ideal aspect of the transcendent) are: reflective inquiry (disciplined attempts at understanding, including mathematics, science, philosophy and "some forms of practical sense"), art, the moral life (making personal moral choices which involve responsibility to the self and others), and social responsibility (one's attempts to form, preserve, and reform institutions and systems) (*Minimalist* 38).

The concepts of natural divinity offered by empirical theologians thus avoid the totalizing metaphysics and the conceptions of the "natural" as a pre-existing normative condition to be maintained that make many contemporary readers skeptical of nature spirituality and its value for addressing present-day environmental problems. But an obstacle to the acceptance of empirical theology as a critical resource still remains in one of its basic doctrines: the association of experiences of the divine with allegedly

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preconscious, prelinguistic states of awareness. Assertions of this sort inevitably raise eyebrows and questions among scholars: Does this idea simply attempt to formulate on naturalistic terms a source of unmediated truth? Does it represent a wish to establish some authoritative meaning uncomplicated by language and history? By defining transcendent experience as something beyond our understanding that communicates or works good, have empirical theologians sought to place their conception of the divine beyond scrutiny and criticism? And, even more basically, isn't such thinking a kind of indulgent mystification that avoids the obligation to inquire into and name the real events, ideas, and agents that shape the quality of human life?

The concerns generating these questions have long preoccupied American religious empiricists. Far from insisting on a direct and unproblematic awareness of religious phenomena, they have always acknowledged and explored the limited, complex, and subjective qualities of our understanding of these phenomena. These explorations have yielded a recognition that the experience of this-worldly transcendence does not sweep away the problems of knowledge, but demands that one negotiate them creatively and responsibly, especially if one is to communicate and preserve its value.

Radical empiricist thinkers have unanimously rejected the notion that experiences which define or alter an individual are situations of some definite external force acting on him or her. Rather, they describe experience as an active and constructive process. William Dean recalls that in James's view individuals do not passively receive realities generated by the world of the past, but actively and creatively read them in terms of the individual's prior knowledge and experiences. Dean cites an early essay of James that contends "The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates . . .

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help to make the truth they declare” (qtd. in Dean, *History Making History* 105).

Dewey’s emphasis on the role of the imagination in discerning the possibilities contained within nature and society also casts experience as a partly constructive act. Bernard Meland contended that worth and trans-personal goodness were discerned most adequately by an active mind, or by the mode of understanding he called “appreciative awareness.” This faculty, he wrote, is “the intellect widening and extending its depth and range without losing its conscious focus.” It is both “more profound than thought, and more disciplined and directed than sheer sensation” (*Higher Education* 67-68). (This description could well apply to the disciplined and directed encounters with nature most American nature writers have undertaken.) Jerome Stone construes experience as a reciprocal activity. He postulates that experience is a transaction between the self and the world and between language and lived feelings. Admitting that these terms do not themselves indicate tidy, uncomplicated realities, he nonetheless feels it is safe to assume that “experience is not a passive affair. Whatever it is, the self is not a *tabula rasa*” (*Minimalist* 128).

For Stone and Meland especially, the self is, among other things, both a product and a wielder of cultural and linguistic meanings, and these have a key role in the experience of natural grace. Meland believed that while our experiences are individual responses to events, they are influenced by a “structure of experience” that is continuous with our personality, but includes “the persisting protoplasmic character of institutional and other corporate processes,” and reflects “all that has entered into the public and private decisions of a people” (*Realities of Faith* 210). Moreover, Meland saw the deliberate application of cultural resources as a necessary step in giving experiences of the transcendent a tangible meaning and effect. He granted that experience could bring

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contact with a worth or power beyond our capacities of expression, and believed that “[f]aith cannot capitulate to form and measure without losing vital force.” But he also maintained that “when indifferent to discipline and structure, [faith] dissipates its vital force in sheer sentiment, divorced from the processes of culture” (*Faith and Culture* 65).

Although most of Meland’s important work concerned the role of cultural symbols and forms in preserving and communicating religious meaning, he never reconciled the impasse between the felt richness of “goods not our own” and the language with which we thematized and communicated these. Nancy Frankenberry points out a serious problem in assuming a total disparity between these: if language and experience are ultimately incongruous, then religious language becomes basically hollow and insignificant. Conversely, assuming that thought and expression are coextensive would amount to a willful flight from a centuries-old problem. She suggests that instead, theologians working in the tradition of radical empiricism might “recognize a reciprocal and codeterminate relation between experience and language” (*Religion* 143). This step appears to have been taken by Jerome Stone, who identifies a number of significant roles language plays in transactions with this-worldly transcendence. First, Stone contends that experiences of the transcendent provide a referent for religious language. Terms such as God, grace, judgement, etc. can remain meaningful when associated with experiences of an unexpected and uncomprehended alteration in one’s life or capacities. Second, religious language can call attention to the transcendent character of certain experiences, underscore their importance and the nature of their effects. In this way, religious language allows one to evaluate and analyze experiences of situational transcendence. By enabling a fuller appreciation of transcendent experience, religious language and the inquiry it supports can prepare one for more intense and varied instances of it. However,

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Stone makes the subsequent point that experience and language can also hinder one another. We can come to associate religious experience strictly with the forms of religious expression, and experience can be so chaotic that it thwarts the communication that would allow transmission or application of the values experienced.

While he also acknowledges the limitations of language as a means of access to sacred values in nature, William Dean has employed resources of contemporary literary theory to suggest that such values may be less foreign to, and more commensurate with, language and other cultural practices than either Stone or Meland acknowledge. Drawing upon Derridean deconstruction, Dean has argued that not only is experience itself a process of interpretation, but the very data which it engages are themselves interpretations of previous interpretations rather than merely given. The worldly phenomena we encounter, as well as our experience as subjects, can be understood as signifieds of past signifiers such as genetic codes, historical events, climactic conditions, etc. At the same time, they signify these past phenomena for present observers. Dean recommends that beliefs about, and experiences of, transcendence be understood similarly.

Through time, the evolution of God is the evolution of the chain of signs, or interpretations, about the worth of the historical process. . . . In the moment when God functions as a past signified, pragmatically impinging on the religious individual or the religious situation, God is real as an influence is real, transforming that individual's life or the shape of a situation. In the moment when God functions as a signifier, God is real as an interpretation of the present individual. In either case, it makes sense to say that God works in history. (*American Religious Empiricism* 58)

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Because the redeeming values we encounter in nature are complex, vague, and often ambiguous, and because our means of apprehending values in the world are fallible, radical empiricists have always argued against a blind faith in or easy acceptance of the goods we experience. What they have promoted is a cautious, critical trust in these, and a commitment to testing their validity. Noting that human thinking inevitably contains much that is erroneous or merely fanciful, James concedes that “the whole system of experiences as they are immediately given presents itself as a quasi-chaos” (*Essays* 63). “Nine-tenths of the time,” he writes, “radical empiricism testifies to external relations which are not actually but only virtually there” (*Essays* 32). Stone makes the point that while experiential evaluations may arise from legitimate, concrete criteria, they are not infallible; they are “corrigible” (*Minimalist* 84). Denying that we are “wholly adrift in a linguistic sea” of arbitrary meaning, he asserts that we do have “fallible, yet often rather helpful, feelers, clues, and hints which may be sharpened or which may become misleading.” For example, if the furniture in a room began shaking suddenly, we may justifiably believe an earthquake is in progress. Even granting that “‘Earthquake’ is a socially-inherited linguistic construct . . . sometimes it is appropriate not to fall on one’s knees to placate God but instead to run out of the building in case it collapses.” But Stone concedes that “[t]here are no guarantees. It may not be an earthquake but shelling, and the street may be filled with combat troops” (*Minimalist* 129). Another reason for caution and reflection in affirming values felt in experience comes from Loomer. More than any other religious empiricist, Loomer sees a moral ambiguity in the world. In his view, creative processes yield both good and evil, and both are necessary for the growth of value in the world. Our valuations drawn from experience of the world are ambiguous, he argued because they accept some evils while rejecting some goods. The

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attainment of any virtue also brings with it a host of attendant and inseparable vices (*Size of God* 45-46).

In response to the problems of experiential knowledge, some empirical religious thinkers have prescribed a pragmatic testing of felt values to determine which produce the best results and hence have the most validity. James contended that feelings had no merit if they had no practical and public consequences for existence. "If your feelings bear no fruits in my world," he wrote, "I call it utterly detached from my world; I call it a solipsism, and call its world a dream world" (*Meaning of Truth* 23). Disagreements over the legitimacy of feelings should be resolved by "arguing what practical consequences would be different if one side rather than the other were true" (*Essays* 73). Similarly, Dewey identified genuine religious experiences as those resulting in a reorientation that is transformative and integrated in effect (Frankenberry, *Religion* 107). A continual testing of our assumptions about the world is entailed by the epistemology of "anticipatory realism" advocated by Stone. This is the view that "the attempt to revise or correct theories, visions, or images by further exploration is worth pursuing, while the present results of such attempts are worth relying on when necessary, although we do not have hope of a definitive answer . . . the process of revision toward what the world really can be is worth the struggle, even though we will never know how adequate the mapping is" (*Minimalist* 130). The continual pursuit of value through testing concepts and experiences is one way of reaching toward the ideal aspect of situational transcendence, Stone contends (*Minimalist* 38). Though it leads to no certain conclusions about the world, this act may promote richness of experience, and this, for him, justifies the effort. It may also show that some feelings and ideas have "greater pragmatic adequacy," but Stone adds that even this criterion is itself subject to revision (*Minimalist* 131).

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Empirical theology holds forth no promise of an easy harmony with the natural world, or of access to some authentic reality from which we have fallen away. Rather than dismissing the problems of knowing and relating to the external world, it confronts them directly and thoughtfully. And thus, empirical theology presents yet another parallel to the American nature essay tradition. Nature writers have consistently tried to understand their surroundings both through participatory observation and the conceptual tools of science, philosophy, and other formal disciplines. As Fritzell contends, the best American nature writers have understood that their efforts to relate to nature through language are constrained by language (20). More than anything else, two basic shared premises reveal the compatibility of nature writing and American traditions of religious empiricism: a faith that the constituents of the material world provide us with all the meaning and grace we will encounter, as well as an abiding recognition that the fullest realization of these values we may have will always be tentative and partial.

The similarities between these two discourses deserve consideration for at least two reasons. First, the concepts of empirical theology can be employed to identify and define important religious claims and experiences in the works of nature writers. Consider, for instance, this superficially unexceptional passage from Barry Lopez describing light falling on the Alaskan tundra in midsummer:

For two months or more the sun doesn't dip below the horizon. In a treeless, winter-hammered landscape like Alaska's North Slope, the light creates a feeling of compassion that is almost palpable. Each minute of light experienced feels like one stolen from a crushing winter. You walk gently about, respectful of flowering plants, with a sense of how your body breaks the sunshine, creating shadow. You converse in soft tones . . .

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. [Y]ou see amid the dwarf birch and willow at your feet speckled eggs
cradled in birds nests. The grace so apparent in first life seems nowhere
else so tender, perhaps because night never comes here. (*About this Life*
122)

On first glance, this could be taken simply as an exclamation at an instance of beauty in the landscape, an emotional response to a serene and unthreatening moment. But reading this with Stone's notion of "situationally transcendent resources" in mind suggests more is occurring here than aesthetic appreciation, at least as we usually think of that act in response to landscapes. The speaker here does respond emotionally to the tundra light, but that response is not limited to some kind of isolated psychic stimulation. Creating a feeling of compassion, the soft light also alters the speaker's regard for other components of the landscape, as well as the norms for human conversation. Note too that the speaker's sense of the light as compassionate and of the vulnerability of tundra life is heightened his knowledge of the winter that will arrive all too soon: in effect, the transforming capacities of the light exist in relation to the situation of the perceiving speaker here. William James might have read this passage as a case of an appreciative attribute of a sensed phenomenon producing tangible, objective effects in the world. Stone could call it an example of the "real aspect of situational transcendence," an infusion of joy into a moment of life where its finitude is evident. Or Bernard Meland might describe the passage as an encounter with "a goodness not our own," or a moment recognizing the "ultimacy peculiar to the interplay of circumstances and limitations of the resources that attend its witness" which Meland believes we may encounter in all experiences (*Faith and Culture* 117). However one might gloss it, this is an experience of a creative power in nature which registers a value and has an impact on individuals and

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the surroundings they perceive. The processes of relating to this power are not examined closely in the Lopez passage. But contact with it is clearly something which the speaker desires and believes will reconcile him to place the place where he stands. The moment reveals no eternal cosmic verity, but it does summon a response we may call religious, and which contrasts with the assured unitive religious perceptions of writers like Muir.

Conversely, nature writing can provide a more concrete and accessible statement of the ideas of religious empiricists, and acquaint a wider audience with their importance. William Dean has remarked that the most appealing and accessible statements of empiricist thought have appeared not in theological treatises, but in the works of modern poets whose work has shown an intimate emotional engagement with the particulars of a local context, especially Williams, Olson, Roethke, and Levertov (*American* 102, 106). (Meland seems to have anticipated this opinion in his 1933 essay.) However, nature writers in many cases not only share an attitude with empirical theologians, but in describing their involvement with landscapes, sometimes present extended, accessible examples of naturalistic theological concepts. Dean praises Williams' *Patterson* (especially the image of the falls) as an exemplification of the empiricists' belief that adequate patterns of meaning must be sought and made within the "roar of the now," the often chaotic welter of experience, rather than in transcendent ideals or in simple force of imagination (*American* 111). We could take this poem as an exploration of Loomer's assertion that "the graces for the living of a creative life emerge within the depths and immediacies of concrete experience" (*Size of God* 21). Nature essays also model in their structure the kind of engaged awareness of the world to which these theologians call us. Dean finds the premier demonstrations of this consciousness in works that Daniel Kartiganer classifies as "process literature," which are characterized by "supple, mobile,

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almost fluid representations, always ready to mold themselves onto the fleeting forms of intuition,” and have the aim of “duplicating the constant movement of nature, of shattering the discrepancies between the intensity of raw experience and its transformation into verbal form” (qtd. in Dean 113).²² Fluid, impressionistic representations are an aspect of nature essays which many critics have commented on, and Fritzell notes that while nature writers have been keenly aware of discrepancies between experience and expression, they have nonetheless done their utmost to confound them (7).²³ Concluding his remarks on literature and religious empiricism, Dean observes that “proximity to the world of raw experience is taken so seriously by some writers of process literature that in their writing they include efforts to describe their own experience with the world about which they are writing” (*American* 113). Dean speaks of this as an extraordinary measure; to nature essayists it is a fundamental practice, the basis for their genre. Arguably, no group of writers has modeled the empiricists’ sensibilities as well as they. The nature writers examined in this study may perform for empirical theology what Giles Gunn believes has always been the most important service that imaginative literature has rendered to religion: filling dogma and formal belief “to the bursting point with new and unforeseen meaning” (78). They can transform an encounter with tenets of empirical religion into something like an encounter with the grace within relations or the situationally transcendent resources that theologians discuss, something that seizes and deeply affects the mind and the senses.

The works of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass and those of American empirical theologians can complement one another in many ways. But the faith whose outlines emerge from an exploration of both can establish a new importance and a new respect for nature spirituality in critical discussions of environmental problems. The ideas advanced

by empirical theology and exemplified by the works of the writers in this study clearly refute the charges by thinkers like Bookchin or Van Wyk that spiritual appreciations of the environment invariably rest upon and promote a kind of fuzzy wholism. They also overcome the common charge that appeals to any kind of spiritual value in nature represent an attempted end run around the conflicts and ambiguities of culture—it is only by working through these things that one can encounter natural value at all, religious empiricists would say. Since empirical theologians and the writers in this study figure the sacred as an effect of relations among elements of a landscape (including human observers), no particular order of the landscape or social order existing on it becomes identified exclusively as authentic or cosmically ordained. As anthropogenic change in the landscape intensifies, and awareness grows of how intrinsic to nature patterns of change and disruption are, this last point may be critical to keeping alive any meaningful sense of a sacred presence in nature.

For many present readers, especially in academia, the sense of the divinity in nature expressed by Thoreau, Mary Austin, or Loren Eisely may occupy now the position that traditional Western religion did when the Chicago School emerged in the early 1900s: a creed entrenched but losing credibility in the face of new social and intellectual developments. Read in combination, the Chicago theologians and those nature writers who eschew maximal understandings of the sacred make a case that an attachment to life which surpasses common reasoning can still be compatible with the contemporary life of the mind. Bernard Meland pointed out in 1933 that imaginative writers were doing more than theologians to overcome the spiritual estrangement felt by many at the time. Today, their combined efforts may hold out the most hope for doing so. In continuing discussions about what place, if any, spirituality should have in reforming environmental

attitudes and practices, empirical theologians and writers like Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass should be recognized as true kindred of the wild and of one another.

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CHAPTER THREE

SAND COUNTY RETREATS: ALDO LEOPOLD'S PILGRIMAGE

Like Thoreau's *Walden*, which it resembles in many ways, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* proceeded from conception to publication through a long, tortuous process of revision and reconsideration. As Dennis Ribbens has documented, the essays on outdoor experiences and environmental philosophy comprising the 1949 book were written and, at the urging of editors and colleagues, rewritten over a period of fifteen years. Although the book's contents do not appear in order of composition, it is still possible (especially in conjunction with the works of scholars like Ribbens and Curtis Meine) to trace through the book a gradual shift in Leopold's stance as a narrator and his attitudes about the value of the natural world. Between early essays like "Marshland Elegy" and late pieces such as "Axe in Hand," Leopold moves from the position of magisterial interpreter of land and wildlife, confidently presenting these to the uninitiated as sources of beauty and enrichment, to that of deeply self-conscious participant in a wider ecological community, keenly aware of the ambiguities attending human interactions with the nonhuman world. Something less easy to see, but important to an understanding of the book and of Leopold's ethical vision, is that these transitions of thought and perspective also mark a spiritual journey. *Sand County Almanac* records an ongoing process of reflection on the nature of the sacred as encountered in the phenomenal world, the consciousness required to engage it, and its role in the maintenance and transformation of both selves and ecological communities.

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The chapters of *Sand County Almanac* may in fact be understood as concluding steps in a religious pilgrimage that had been underway throughout Leopold's career. This journey is significant not only as an individual's path of development, but as a departure from wholistic, "maximal" belief common in earlier nature writers. Although critics have generally equated Leopold's spirituality with the pantheistic or idealistic views of Thoreau, Muir, and their contemporaries, he approached over his lifetime a more limited, critical, pluralistic, and empirical form of belief, one which did not seek a great truth or order in nature, but which cultivated openness to natural phenomena in their uniqueness and contingency. Encountered with this kind of regard, various phenomena promote dramatic changes in Leopold's sense of self or his understanding of a natural community; they convey intense awareness of both finitude and well-being. Other beings, places and things present him with a potency which is a function of their history and environmental context, and while indispensable, it is not easily grasped. It is both intimate and mysterious, calling for both reverence and inquiry. Leopold's faith is a processual one, and its elements are comparable with parts of Whitehead's metaphysics, but even more so with the ideas of American empirical theologians working nearly contemporaneously with Leopold.

Perhaps lacking adequate resources of religious inquiry, some interpreters of Leopold have offered vague and tentative understandings of his spirituality which have lent support to arguments other critics have made against the viability of Leopold's ethics. Though the wisdom of Leopold—like that of any writer—is scarcely transparent or beyond questioning, those questions raised about his work on ground of its religious or quasi-religious aspects have been raised largely in ignorance. To adequately understand

and engage *Sand County Almanac* requires a close examination of Leopold's spiritual development and the beliefs about the sacred within the world to which it led him.

The paucity of scholarship on Leopold's spiritual position is to some extent a result of Leopold's indisposition (in most cases) to make religious pronouncements of any kind and the lack of outward evidence that he subscribed to any recognizable form of belief. Leopold was born in 1887 into an Iowa family that was Lutheran in heritage but non-practicing. His father maintained a distrust of clerics in general, an attitude Leopold himself would display on occasion. While a student at Yale, Leopold attended bible study classes and once wrote an essay which drew analogies between the resurrection of Christ and the renewal of the earth in springtime. On the strength of this, Mark Stoll has contended that at this point in his life, Leopold was a believing Christian (186). The claim is hard either to prove or disprove, but regardless of its validity, there is little evidence he held such beliefs later in life. Upon marrying the devoutly Catholic Estella Bergere in 1912, Leopold signed a pledge not to interfere in his children's religious upbringing. Curtis Meine notes that though he largely kept the pledge, he did on occasion voice mild criticisms of the church. Leopold's daughter Nina recalled that one of the few times her father "consented to enter a church" was for her wedding. The few overt comments Leopold made about his spiritual convictions (which readers receive secondhand) indicate a naturalistic form of belief, but leave its precise character uncertain. His younger daughter Estella reports that when she asked him shortly before he died whether or not he believed in God, he replied that "he believed there was a mystical supreme power that guided the universe But to him this power was not a personalized God. It was more akin to the laws of nature." According to his son Luna, Leopold, "like the rest of us, was kind of pantheistic. The organization of the universe

was enough to take the place of God, if you like. He certainly didn't believe in a personal God, as far as I can tell. But the wonders of nature were, of course, objects of admiration and satisfaction to him" (qtd. in Meine 506). The closest Leopold ever came to writing a spiritual autobiography was in this passage from his journal:

I once heard of a boy who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw there were a hundred-odd species of warblers, each bedecked like the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but did not understand I dare say this boy's convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians. (*Round River* 171)

The similarity of Leopold's background with that of the boy in the vignette, as well as the focus on birds (which throughout his life elicited a special "admiration and satisfaction" from him) give reason to suppose the passage is autobiographical. However, it is silent about what unshakable conclusions this boy reached and thus is of little help in characterizing Leopold's beliefs. To judge from this story they could as well be monotheistic as pantheistic—the medium of the transforming experience seems more important than its message.

Lacking many clues from Leopold about his spiritual beliefs, it is not surprising that critical commentators on *Sand County Almanac* have had more to say about what might be called the religious qualities of Leopold's rhetoric than about what notions of the sacred might motivate this rhetoric. John Tallmadge, among others, has remarked that Leopold assumes the mantle of a prophet, calling an ecologically and spiritually blind society to judgment with a message brought from the wilderness, and describing a new, harmonious future that may result from a change in behavior toward the nonhuman

world (122). Tallmadge also argues that many of the narrative sketches in the first two parts of *Sand County Almanac* take the form of parables much like those of Jesus, using simple, familiar facts to demonstrate broad and novel truths, truths which Leopold (again, like Jesus) subsequently reinforces by offering more overt, discursive points of “doctrine” in the book’s third section which help interpret the narratives (123). McClintock presents an expanded conception of Leopold-as-prophet by demonstrating how he links cherished American symbols and ideals—including those of Judeo-Christian religion—to ecological principles in order to forge a new myth that might guide and unify Americans striving toward more peaceful relations with their natural surroundings. Mark Stoll, noting that *Sand County Almanac* emphasized personal concern and effort on behalf of the land over reforming the environmental practices and laws of society, has described Leopold’s environmental ethic as a “Lutheran ethic,” rooted in the stress upon personal morality in his family’s historic creed (188).

Considering the negligible role of the Lutheran tradition in Leopold’s household, Stoll’s claim seems tenuous at best. Somewhat better support exists for comparisons a number of scholars have made between Leopold’s spiritual outlook and those of earlier naturalists. Stoll has described the spirituality of *Sand County Almanac* as essentially a form of ecological neoplatonism, assigning both divine and moral qualities to the natural world. He traces this position to Leopold’s reading of transcendentalist nature writers but describes his version of it as one suitably attenuated for twentieth century minds (184, 188). McClintock writes that Leopold’s religious sentiment was comparable to Schweitzer’s “reverence for life,” or to his near-contemporary Joseph Wood Krutch’s sense of an elemental kinship among living things (33). Stoll, Roderick Nash, and Curtis Meine concur that Leopold’s spirituality was founded on a sense of a living earth (a

notion which did once appear in his writing) which he had adapted from his reading of the Russian organicist philosopher Ouspensky in the 1920s (Stoll 87; Nash 65-66; Meine 214).

All of these assessments are to some extent accurate. However, it can also be said that they either avoid error by hewing to generality or, in the case of Leopold's supposed organicism, fix upon a few statements in Leopold's work to explain his total spiritual response to the natural world. In both cases, they effectively simplify Leopold's spiritual convictions to products of naive intuition or gestures of adherence to nature writing convention. They all cast his beliefs as assertions of an unqualified maximal claim about the worth of natural phenomena or the ontological status of the planet—features unlikely to win Leopold continuing respect in contemporary intellectual circles. His religious inclinations could possibly be overlooked as minor or transient features of his work, but experiences of transcendence, of a More in James's sense, when encountering natural phenomena recur throughout *Sand County Almanac*. Moreover, his land ethic is rooted partly in feelings of connection to the members of land communities and dependence on them for full human well being. An awareness of Leopold's spiritual sensibilities is indispensable to understanding both the efforts at reconnection to a biotic community he narrates in *Sand County Almanac* as well as the book's ethical message. This becomes readily apparent when considering recent readings that implicitly or explicitly dismiss *Sand County Almanac*'s ethical propositions partly because of what are perceived as naive spiritual assumptions.

One of these is Peter Fritzell's deconstructionist reading of the book in *Nature Writing and America*. Fritzell identifies *Sand County Almanac* as a superlative example of the retreat narrative in the mode of Thoreau's *Walden*. Such works, Fritzell writes,

enact a classic religious (and American) motif—departure from a flawed human society in order to settle in a more peaceful and virtuous natural realm (in Leopold's case, a weekend "shack" in Sauk County, Wisconsin), thereby to improve both the self and, through recording the experience, the society departed. The quest assumes that the natural environment is a source of certain unassailable qualities, harmonies, and virtues that will provide the foundation for the prophetic message of the one who retreats.

Fritzell writes that narratives like Leopold's express the desire

to escape history or civilization, to return to Eden, and become again an . . . unsinning part of nature, as we say . . . but also that drive to improve upon history, to practically, if not programmatically, advance and even perfect it—often, ironically, by attempting to retire from the social or civilized scene, and, even more tellingly, by *writing that document* or recording the experience that will tell all history what it's like to know

The Natural or The Wild. (6)

The flaw Fritzell observes in this scheme is that the process of settling oneself in a landscape also involves trying to "settle" the constituents of that community by defining and knowing them, an effort that inevitably proves frustrating for the narrator in retreat. Seeking to know and relate to a pure and untarnished nature, he or she is thrown back upon inherited terms and ways of knowing that are "troublesomely institutional, fundamentally linguistic and stylistic" (8). The central problem in such texts is "how to know that which is . . . 'beyond words' without mucking it up . . ." The unavoidable failure in this endeavor leads to "recognizing . . . that one can't know or comprehend or even 'experience' The Wild or The Natural, feeling either that one has failed or that one has somehow polluted or betrayed it" (15-16). Furthermore, the acknowledgment that

our efforts at and methods of discovery are irremediably unnatural implies that “we by nature and condition are at odds with NATURE . . .” and “have somehow left it and our natural instincts behind . . .” (13). The ideal of a return to Eden, or at least to a purifying and instructive nature, is shattered.

Fritzell uncovers complications of this sort at the simplest and the most complex levels of argument in *Sand County Almanac*, particularly concerning Leopold’s central contention that humans ought to live as citizens rather than overlords of land communities. He points to a passage in its opening essay, “January Thaw,” that apparently satirizes anthropocentric attitudes toward the land, reading “The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that the grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack To the mouse, snow means freedom from want and fear” (*Almanac* 4). However, Fritzell argues that this apparently prescriptive commentary could also be read as descriptive, since egocentric, exploitive tendencies seem to exist throughout the biotic community: for the hawk who can readily catch mice left exposed when their subnivean tunnels melted, “a thaw means freedom from want and fear” (*Almanac* 4). This suggests to Fritzell the conclusion that possibly it is natural for all creatures to exploit others to their own advantage (214). This equivocation emerges more subtly in Leopold’s continual uncertainty about humanity’s place within a wider biotic community. To paraphrase an argument made in various ways by Fritzell, if humans are in fact members of nature, of the biotic community, then there can be nothing “unnaturally” destructive about their actions or their assumed role as conqueror. If humans can cause distinctly unnatural changes in the biotic community, then they can be said to exist apart from that community.

The genius of *Sand County Almanac* in Fritzell's eyes is that Leopold presses and reiterates such tensions, whereas lesser nature writers would overlook or deny them. This reading is by no means an unsympathetic one, but it involves a kind of irony that demeans the very authorial initiative it praises. Fritzell recognizes a great deal of critical self-consciousness in Leopold's efforts to know that natural world, yet presumes that these efforts proceed from simplistic (and unchanging) intuitions about the significance of the natural world. This begs the question of why, if Leopold brought such a probing intellect to his reflections on nature, he would have simply accepted traditional understandings of natural value and all their attendant problems without trying to envision alternatives. Focusing in this way on impasses of knowledge or belief is consonant with Fritzell's deconstructionist methodology, but not with Leopold's obvious and unabandoned hope that contact with and knowledge of nature might reform public attitudes toward land and wildlife. His reading renders *Sand County Almanac* at once a triumph of critical intellect and a failure of imagination, and figures the book's spiritual sensibilities as formulaic and incidental.

The problems with accepting conventional understandings of Leopold's spirituality emerge most sharply against the backdrop of philosophic criticisms of *Sand County Almanac*'s primary ethical assertion, the "land ethic." The land ethic states that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224-25). Presenting in refined form a belief expressed by most nature writers, this idea presumes an intrinsic value in natural objects which holds some claim on humanity's respect. It is possible to describe this value as religious, since it is intangible and only partly definable, yet appears to hold redemptive potential. Many philosophers have balked at accepting the land ethic because

of its intrinsic value claims, accusing Leopold of violating a fundamental maxim of modern (and especially scientific) thought—it attempts to derive a normative principle from a factual statement, an “ought” from an “is.” To do so is allegedly an act of fancy, not understanding—a charge, it is worth noting, long leveled by moderns against religious belief in any form. John Passmore, an early philosophic critic of Leopold, implied this when he decried the land ethic as irrational mysticism, a flight from reason that would ultimately undermine environmentalism (123).

However, defenders of Leopold have challenged the logic of these arguments, and in doing so, they have suggested indirectly an alternative understanding of Leopold’s spiritual vision and its role in his efforts to reform attitudes and actions affecting the natural environment. They claim that arguments like Passmore’s (and, by extension, Fritzell’s) appraise Leopold in terms of a conventional epistemology that he is in fact challenging in *Sand County Almanac*. Holmes Rolston III points out that the language of ecological description includes value-laden terms such as harmony, interdependence, etc. Such qualities may be discovered in nature because ecological scientists are disposed to value them, Rolston concedes, but the study of ecological phenomena may also expand and inform these values. Eventually, he writes, “we find the character, the empirical content, of order, harmony, stability is drawn from, no less than brought to, nature [I]n the marriage and mutual transformation of ecological description and evaluation . . . an ‘ought’ is supposed not so much derived from an ‘is’ as discovered simultaneously with it. . . . For some observers, at least, the sharp is/ought dichotomy is gone; the values seem to be there as soon as the facts are fully in, and both alike are properties of the system” (20). Reinforcing Rolston’s ideas, Don Marietta observes that the fact/value dichotomy invoked against Leopold grows from a “man and nature” perspective, which

sees objects of attention as fully separable from human consciousness (in essence, the classic Cartesian view which underlies modern science). In phenomenological and existentialist thought, however, Marietta finds support for an alternative view of experience: “man-*in-nature*.” Positing that human beings, including their mental lives, unavoidably connected to and implicated in the world of their experience, this view denies the possibility of perceiving neutral, value-free facts. In this mode, “the relation between fact and value is not so much circular as immediate Both factual and valuational observations of the world are constituted together by consciousness” (199-200). Granting this, the formulation of an environmental ethic is a matter not of deriving an ought from an is, but of “recognizing the values embedded in our observations of the world, observations in which factual cognition and value cognition are fused, only to be separated by reflection” (200).

Like radical empiricists and process thinkers, Rolston and Marietta deny the primacy of simple and valueless sense impressions. The “objectivity” of clear and precise data is to them an abstraction from a richer field of experience. And for Rolston in particular, unparsed experience can become the basis for spiritual transformation. He notes that wild phenomena frequently present us with a mystery or unpredictability that gives profound satisfaction and suggest “a value that is uncaptured by science” (140). Just as William James identified such fringe perceptions with the redemptive More, Rolston sees a sort of regenerative capacity in these values, noting that they are the aspects of nature to which people turn when they wish to define themselves “in relation to nature,” and that attending to them “leads to our further spiritualization” (121, 141). Hence, the experience of value in nature is potentially an experience of the sacred, an

encounter with a uniquely compelling quality that transforms one's well-being, loyalties, and awareness.

Rolston does not elaborate on this spiritual proposition, but it gives sufficient grounds for a reconsideration of Leopold's spiritual orientation. Particular wild phenomena do provide Leopold unusual satisfaction and meaning, though not unimpeachable truths or insight into any ultimate reality. American empirical theologians have elaborated in detail the religious import of such encounters, and their work can be a light to the spiritual path traced out in *Sand County Almanac*. Despite Leopold's likely unfamiliarity with the empirical tradition in theology (and his confirmed reservations about inductive theologians), it makes sense to engage his work with this tradition because its expositors share with Leopold (and his supporters like Marietta and Rolston) certain basic notions about knowledge, experience, and the value of nature. Drawing on the limited naturalist theology of the Chicago empiricists, we can observe that Leopold's movement toward a man-in-nature attitude was also a spiritual metamorphosis. *Sand County Almanac* records a series of retreats not only from human society, but from maximal forms of nature spirituality—from Gaia.

The evolution of Leopold's spiritual beliefs may be traced from his earliest public statements on behalf of wilderness preservation in the 1920s. During the first decade of his career with the U.S. Forest Service, Leopold had been a staunch utilitarian, in the mold of Gifford Pinchot, in matters of conservation and land use. But as undeveloped areas in the Arizona and New Mexico national forests where he worked became scarcer, Leopold became aware of a loss that concerns for efficiency and sustained economic growth could not justify. Through discussions with other Forest Service officials and articles in professional journals, he began to promote the preservation of wilderness with

arguments that carried mystical overtones. Wilderness, he said, provided a crucial source of “adventure,” or contact with the unknown. Such adventure might be found in the study of ordinary but neglected phenomena or in journeys through large tracts of wilderness, but in either case, Leopold believed, it could save both individuals and nations from lives of dullness and convention. In the *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, Leopold would credit the experience of pioneering an unknown continent for giving Americans their “distinguishing marks” of individualism, industry, and practical intelligence, and insist that the survival of such virtues depended on “preserving the environment which produced them” (*River of the Mother of God* 138).

These comments hearken more to the Turner thesis than to any tradition of natural theology. But while he was advancing these notions in print, Leopold was privately developing ideas about the spiritual value of wild nature that went beyond strenuous life ideology and the inchoate lure of the unknown. In 1923, Leopold penned “Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest,” an essay whose bland title belies a provocative appeal to mystical notions as a basis for conservation. Never published in Leopold’s lifetime, “Fundamentals” describes ecological characteristics of the region and highlights the economic advantages of restraint in exploiting its resources. In closing, however, it reflects that persons in many times and situations have at least sensed that the earth might be a fellow animate creature and that “there existed between man and the earth a closer and deeper relation than would follow from the mechanistic conception of the earth as our physical provider and abiding place” (*River* 94). “Possibly, in our intuitive perceptions,” Leopold wrote,

we realize the indivisibility of the earth—its soil, mountains, rivers, forests, climate, plants, animals, and respect it collectively not only as a

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useful servant, but as a living being, vastly less alive than ourselves in degree, but vastly greater than ourselves in time and space—a being that was old when the morning stars sang together, and, when the last of us has been gathered unto his fathers, will still be young. (*River* 95)

This possibility represented to Leopold a reason “why we cannot destroy the earth with moral impunity . . .” (*River* 95).

The concept is an example of Gaian wholism that, according to Meine and others, had long appealed to Leopold. However, this expression of it bore the acknowledged influence of the Russian mystical writer Piotr Ouspensky, whose *Tertium Organum* had been translated into English in 1920 and which Leopold bought and read shortly thereafter. As a rationale for the idea of a living earth, he cited Ouspensky’s contention that “anything indivisible is a living thing.” Leopold supported this by summarizing the Russian’s argument that the parts of the earth might be regarded “as organs, or parts of organs, of a coordinated whole, each with a definite function.” And since earth possessed all the visible attributes of a living being, it followed that it also possessed “that invisible attribute—a soul or consciousness . . .” (*River* 95). Casting the earth as a sentient totality whose status as such demands human respect and self-restraint, Leopold’s spiritual thought at this time falls into line not only with Ouspensky, but with the maximal beliefs of earlier nature essayists and poets.

Leopold never attempted to publish “Fundamentals,” partly because colleagues among whom he circulated draft versions were skeptical about the essay’s religious overtones. In the view of some of his readers, “Fundamentals” marked Leopold’s first and only attempt at articulating a spiritually grounded environmental ethic; subsequently, they argue, he would exchange spirituality for “the evidence of history, and, increasingly

... the ability of the natural sciences to reveal and interpret this evidence” (Meine 306).

It is true that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Leopold delved deeper into the ecological theory of his day, paying special attention to the ecological community concept advanced by Charles Elton. But as Roderick Nash writes, core ideas from “Fundamentals” would not only survive this scientific turn, but reinforce and place in perspective what he learned from ecological science. While drawing more deeply on science, Leopold would still argue that a purely materialistic or economic vision was inadequate for shaping an ethic to guide human interactions with the land and other creatures (Nash, “Intellectual Heritage” 78). Leopold would continue to place his hopes for ethical renewal in a spiritual appreciation of creatures and things, but his spirituality, while continuing to show Ouspensky’s influence, would be less wholistic than that which informed “Fundamentals.” Exemplifying an idea expressed by empirical theologians, Leopold would refine concepts of devotion through the practices of scientific inquiry.

Of special importance to Leopold during this time was a scientific statement particularly supportive of a relational and pluralistic world view: the ecological community concept of Charles Elton. Elton’s theory described the natural world as a social organization in which each member occupied a distinct niche that contributed to the operation of the whole, absorbing and transmitting energy via its consumption or creation of food and by its death and consumption by others. The scheme recognizes the significance of both individuals and the wider network that they comprise. Individuals of all species are interdependent and interrelated, but critically important as members of their individual species. The concept could support minimal empiricist spirituality since the functioning of any member of the community could become a source of wonder and mystery and thus provide an experience of situational transcendence. On the other hand,

the imagined community of all could serve as an instance of what Stone calls the “ideal aspect of transcendence.”

For Leopold, more immediate aids to recognizing spiritual agency in discreet ecological communities and their members lay in the thought of Ouspensky. J. Baird Caldicott has pointed out Ouspensky’s idea of the planet-as-organism would appear, at least in a subdued form, in Leopold’s writings until at least 1944 (“Conceptual Foundations” 203). But Ouspensky supports this idea by ascribing to individuals and objects a kind of transcendent quality similar to the minimal sense of divinity or transcendence discussed by empirical theologians. For Leopold, the image of a sentient Earth may have been more of a means than an end.

In *Tertium Organum*, Ouspensky defined two types of reality: the phenomenal realm, which includes what is visible, measurable, and predictable, and the *noumenal*, which is not perceptible by the senses, unpredictable, and qualitative. Both dimensions exist in each object or individual, the phenomenal component comprising the body and behavior, the noumenal, each thing’s “hidden meaning and function,” or its “soul” (161, 208). As all things possessed a soul, they were capable of thought—even mountains (200), an idea that Leopold would employ in one of his most powerful essays. If mysterious, the noumenal realm was still potent. Ouspensky called it “the world of cause and change,” something bringing about the transition in the universe from inanimate matter to life, life to consciousness, etc. (161). This is analogous to the idea of minimal resources of transcendence operating as creative forces. Undetectable by the senses and certainly not to the positivistic inquiries of science, the noumenal, Ouspensky believed, could at least be sensed intuitively—especially by “poetic consciousness”—and was best evoked and communicated through works of art (146, 161, 178). He denied that such

intuitions were merely projections by an observer, claiming that all objects could speak to those with the sensitivity to hear them (161). The activity of a thing's noumenal aspect was not limited to transmission of information, either. Ouspensky contended that the lives of all things were influenced by, even composed of, the psychic lives of all surrounding things. The lives of the things we experience, wrote Ouspensky, "enter into our lives as we enter into theirs, helping, hindering" (202). By bringing an emotional openness to our efforts to understand things, he claims, we might discover "subjective relations between objects which astonish us" (159). Here, Ouspensky describes a kind of creative goodness within relations not unlike that theorized by Meland. Similarly, his call for emotional openness and reliance on "poetic consciousness" outlines an attitude resembling Meland's "appreciative awareness."

If Leopold retained the idea of planetary consciousness into his latest writings, it is reasonable to think that he also kept in mind the principles that underlay it. As Leopold began writing the essays that comprised *A Sand County Almanac*, he would develop ideas much like these minimal motifs within Ouspensky's maximal vision. Comparable notions within empirical theology are more critical than Ouspensky's, more rooted in historical awareness and scientific knowledge. As such they provide valuable guides to Leopold's spiritual reflection after he ventured beyond Gaian wholism.

Evidence of a turn toward a minimal, pluralistic naturalist spirituality appears as early as Leopold's 1933 address, "The Conservation Ethic." The speech presented tentative versions of ideas that would appear in "The Land Ethic" some fifteen years later, and Meine has cited it as an example of Leopold's departure from mysticism in favor of science and history as sources of guidance for the conservation movement (306). It is true that the speech carefully surveys American land use practices and the extent to

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which they have cooperated with or disrupted natural processes. However, Leopold does not place his hope for improved relations between Americans and their physical environment in practical reforms alone. He wished instead to call upon “a deeper . . . sub-economic stratum of human intelligence” which he believed all people possessed in some degree, a sensitivity that would regard destruction of the land with “intuitive and instantaneous contempt” (*River* 189). New laws or land management practices, he asserted, needed to grow mainly from “love of nature” rather than from scientific projections or fears of environmental ruin (190). The ultimate goal he proposed was not simply the establishment of preserves or greater efficiency in use of resources, but a “*universal symbiosis with land*,” or a “fellowship in land” in which the economic functions of land were integrated with the aesthetic and spiritual (189, 191). Leopold may not urge the recognition of a world soul, but his appeal to intuitive affinity with earth and a pre-rational intelligence suggests an extension of Ouspensky’s idea of “noumenal” consciousness, and an approach to the idea of “appreciative awareness” that Meland and other empirical theologians were developing in his own time. What he calls for is an open-ended development of the “intuitive perceptions” that, for some, point to conclusions of a planetary organism, but which might also lead to varied and sustainable ways of human participation in land communities. If this address marks a more scientific turn in Leopold’s thought, the science here is an enriched one, dealing not in quantitative facts solely, but in what James would call “full facts,” involving a relation between observer and observed that included some definite value.

By the mid-1930s, Leopold had begun to describe “intuitive perceptions” of nature leading to awareness of distinct values or tendencies arising from the interactions of significant organisms with their environment. He saw these profoundly impacting the

lives of landscapes and all their constituents, humans included, but recognized their power as limited, contingent on the sensitivity and responses of observers. An important statement of this emerging idea was “Marshland Elegy,” published in 1937. The essay evokes not merely the physical beauty of the birds, but a compelling and ineffable dramatic essence about them which imbues their habitat with a “thick and heavy” sense of history. This is first conveyed to Leopold through their bugling cries, “a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, and croaks which almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing whence it comes” (*Almanac* 95). The confident bugle of a crane rising from the sphagnum impresses Leopold with the possibility that the birds themselves might know to what end “the endless caravan” of generations of cranes “has built of its own bones this bridge to the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die” (*Almanac* 96). Understood as a “full datum,” the cry of cranes indicates not merely an isolated value but, hazily, some tendency and direction.

Of course, as Leopold subsequently points out, this sense history and meaning is perceived not only intuitively and prelinguistically, but through scientific inquiry. “Our appreciation of the crane,” he writes, “grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history.” Fossils tell researchers that the sandhill “stems from the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills.” The drill and the shovel contribute as much as does appreciative consciousness to our sense of the crane’s significance. Crane music suffuses a peat bog with a sense of history because we know its peats are “the compressed remains of mosses that clogged the pools, of the tamaracks that spread over the moss, of the cranes that bugled over the tamaracks since the retreat of the ice sheet” (*Almanac* 96). Thanks to ecological science, we can recognize in the call of the crane “the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution.” This bird is

“the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible weep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men” (*Almanac* 96).

Baird Caldicott refers to this essay as a clear statement of Leopold’s “land aesthetic,” an extension of the Kantian doctrine that experience is shaped by the concepts one brings to bear on perceptions. According to this aesthetic, a deep appreciation of natural objects proceeds not from recognizing them as scenic artifacts but understanding their role in a natural community as ecological science describes it. In part at least, Caldicott’s assessment is correct. But the experience being described here entails more than aesthetic appreciation, and is not finally dependent on the wisdom of science. After his reflections on the crane’s place in marsh history, Leopold suggests the elemental, precognitive, and creative aspect of its value by noting the fascination this bird has held for human beings over the centuries, from emperors devoted to hunting them with falcons to a Swedish ornithologist who found his vocation the day he first saw them on the wing (*Almanac* 97). Long before paleontologists weighed in, the crane still established powerful claims on the loyalties of these people. It was for them in some small measure a resource of situational transcendence, changing the habits, setting, even direction, of their lives.

In the ensuing portrait of relations between cranes and human inhabitants of Wisconsin, Leopold expresses a belief that the birds could have promoted the healthful development of local human societies—had these societies possessed sufficient receptivity. Leopold observes that the pioneers who settled Wisconsin regarded the cranes as a nuisance that pillaged their grain. Still, they unwittingly created an ideal foraging ground for the birds when they burned off tamarack forests surrounding the bogs to create hay meadows. This ushered in, according to Leopold, “an Arcadian age for

marsh dwellers. Man and beast, plant and soil, lived on and with each other in mutual toleration to the mutual benefit of all. The marsh might have gone on producing hay and prairie chickens, deer and muskrat, crane-music and cranberries forever” (*Almanac* 99). In Leopold’s portrait, these alterations in the marsh created a network of relations among its various constituents that prospered them materially and, possibly, in terms of enriched experience and awareness also. At least in his eyes, a human order in which the crane, the living expression of deep evolutionary time and its myriad events and histories, could also thrive took on a mysterious but compelling drama and vigor. In this situation, Jerome Stone might say, the crane might have functioned as an situationally transcendent resource of blessing confirming the inhabitants in the goodness of their way of life, a sort of spiritual indicator species.

But for the new overlords of the crane’s habitat, Leopold writes, dividends from the hay meadow economy were too meager. Not content with farming the edges of the marsh, “[t]hey envisioned farms . . . *in* the marsh. An epidemic of ditch-digging and land- booming set in” (99-100). The farmers “knew nothing of cranes and cared less.” “The song of the power shovel,” Leopold writes, “came near to being an elegy” for the birds (100). However, the settler’s entrepreneurial ambitions were thwarted by the acidity of the boglands and unquenchable fires that caught in the dried peat and smoldered for years. During the 1930s, federal conservation agencies moved in to restore the scarred land, but the roads that they brought with them further damaged the cranes’ habitat (101). They may have had the techniques and knowledge of science, but, like the pioneers, lacked the receptivity that might have enabled its judicious application. So far as Leopold could tell in his time, these actors in the drama of the marsh may be penning the final act.

Leopold's first discussion of discrete parts of natural communities as resources of situational transcendence is thus a powerful but conflicted statement. While Leopold strongly intuitively finds a compelling value in the cranes, one which is augmented by scientific understanding, he also has doubts about its capacity to widely influence and transform human behavior. Readers might be left with the impression that only the powerful or highly learned may experience the magic of cranes. In his next series of reflections on transcendent qualities of creatures and places, the first of the "shack" sketches written in the early 1940s, Leopold would keep his observations within a narrower realm where he could speak with more certainty: his individual response to creatures of special significance.

Geese migrating northward in spring invigorate the dullness of early spring marshes and arouse Leopold's respect, curiosity, and sympathies in "The Geese Return" (1941). Though he delights in their noisy arrival, Leopold is more fascinated with the geese's apparent sense of awareness, which manifests itself as an ability to fly with assurance over the points and islands they avoid in fall when hunter's guns await them (19). This awareness is a mysterious and intriguing phenomenon for Leopold, a resource of transcendence that, in Jerome Stone's words, "breaks down speciesism" (110). It forces Leopold to question the adequacy of human ways of knowing, or at least those most authoritative in his culture. Recalling a highly educated acquaintance who was unaware of the geese that pass overhead twice yearly, Leopold wonders if "education is possibly a process of trading in awareness for things of lesser worth?" (18). The wish to know better the More suggested by the birds' abilities calls for a perspective no amount of formal education can cultivate: Leopold finds himself wishing to spend a little time as a muskrat, "eye-deep in the marsh" (19).

Of course, Leopold must resort to other means to experience the worth of the geese more fully. Pursued with sufficient openness and empathy, systematic field observation (a form of inquiry which does enjoy considerable cultural sanction) serves this purpose very well. One mystery the birds presented to Leopold was their habit of flying almost invariably in either groups of six or singly. After some years of observation, both on his own and with his students from the University of Wisconsin, he found that the groups of six were family units; the singles, then, were likely widowed or orphaned by hazards of migration—something he had long suspected because of the sense of loneliness evoked by the solitary birds. The case bolsters the idea of the empiricists—as well as Ouspensky—that emotion creates a fuller degree of awareness. Leopold finds it gratifying that “cold-potato mathematics” vindicates his intuition. More importantly, though, this gain in knowledge alters Leopold’s relation to the geese. He has reason to believe that humans and geese share in an emotional life. The essay as a whole demonstrates an individual’s sense of value in a creature and the effects of that value on him growing through transactions between immediate experience and knowledge gained through formal inquiry and reflection. Birds that at first simply raise his spirits after a long winter move him to study their lives more closely and deepen his interest in the land community.

During his next period of sustained work on essays that would appear in *Sand County Almanac* (1943-44), Leopold returned to consideration of how experiences of value within specific landscape constituents might alter the attitudes of wider human communities. He would present more nuanced conceptions of how these experience might aid understanding of the relationships that formed land communities, and also guide the participation of people in their environments. Just as importantly, Leopold

would emphasize the accessibility of resources of situational transcendence and the capacity of individuals to perceive them—something of which he had been deeply skeptical in “Marshland Elegy.” This second endeavor led to an alteration of Leopold’s narratorial strategy.

Leopold’s typical stance of the lone voice crying in the wilderness, the informed one standing outside the environmental standards of his culture to judge them, gives his words the stark appeal of prophecy yet also risks making his message seem alien and impractical, if not simply arrogant. At least some of Leopold’s editors and scientific colleagues did remark on an “elitist” tone in much of his work, and encouraged him to write in a more personal and accessible voice (Ribbens 97). The result of these criticisms was “Thinking Like a Mountain,” one of Leopold’s most famous essays. There, he recounted his own conversion from a utilitarian view of land to one recognizing an intrinsic value in it and the life it supported. As Tallmadge observes, this conversion narrative (like the works of other memorable prophets) presents an example for readers to emulate (124). The essay makes awareness of resources of transcendence in nature and change in response to them seem more viable by tracing a key point in his own transformation and how it led him toward moral regard for the land. It lent humility to Leopold’s perspective even as the complexity of his spiritual outlook grew.

“Thinking Like a Mountain” recalls the day early in his Forest Service career when he shot a wolf and, as he watched the “fierce green fire” dying out in her eyes, began to understand the creature had an unsuspected role in maintaining the well-being of its environment, possibly even of his own. The essay begins with Leopold establishing the wolf and signs of its presence as resources of situational transcendence. The import of the creature varies according to the perspective of the being that experiences it, yet it

seems to Leopold to evoke always a sense of creatural finitude, a characteristic function of the sacred in any form. For all living things (and possibly, Leopold speculates, to many things already dead), the wolf's call carries a message not to be ignored. "To the deer," he writes, "it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a promise of midnight scuffles and blood on the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet" (129). But beyond these meanings, Leopold believes, there is a deeper meaning to the wolf's howl. This meaning, though not accessible to human observers, is implicit in myriad small events in wolf country—the rolling of rocks, the nervous whinny of horses, the patterns of shadows, and the leap of a startled deer. Here, Leopold is clearly under the influence of Ouspensky, affirming that lives are interpenetrated with other lives. And he turns to Ouspensky also in stating that the deeper meaning of a wolf's howl is known only to mountains, that only they have "lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf" (129).

If mountains can have objectivity about wolves, it is due to a historical depth and a sort of distance in their perspective. All of that animal's history, all that wolves have done, experienced, and sensed, has transpired before—even on—their faces. Mountains may offer little evidence of consciousness, but they also are little affected by the short-term concerns that color other creature's reactions to the wolf. A mountain is perhaps a more limited version of the earth-organism Leopold discussed in "Fundamentals of Conservation" a being "vastly less alive than ourselves in degree, but vastly greater than ourselves in space and time" (*River* 95). Secure in the values of his own time and culture, Leopold shot a wolf, supposing that it and its kind represented only a threat to good deer hunting. But while he watched it die, he began to suspect that it, and the

surrounding mountains, are aware of a critical value being lost from the landscape, that relations which sustain the entire community are unraveling. The suspicion is gradually confirmed as he watches state after state exterminate wolves and sees the brush and foliage on newly wolfless mountains browsed “first to anemic desuetude, and then to death”—followed by the acceleration of erosion, causing “dustbowls, and rivers washing the future to the sea” (132). Perhaps only with a mountain’s scope of awareness might these effects have been foreseen. What Leopold begins to realize is the wolf’s function in the land community, not only as a predator culling the numbers of prey species, but as a key contributor to the well being of the full community. That fire in the wolf’s eyes, and the testimony of the creature’s habitat and neighbors confronted Leopold with a worth that could carry him beyond meanings of his own making. Settlers and federal officials may have sought what they believed was their well being in destroying wolves, but Leopold, in a situation he caused but could not entirely contain or control, finds in the call of the wolf a reminder that “too much safety leads to danger in the long run” (133). Perhaps, Leopold ventures, this is the meaning behind Thoreau’s dictum “In wildness is the salvation of the world” (133).

This paraphrase of Thoreau emphasizes the active, creative dimension of limited resources of transcendence within nature.²⁴ One might also say it suggests that wildness, or that experience of the meaning of wolves or mountains, holds the possibility of some ultimate redemption of human society, that wild nature is here (as Fritzell claims it is for Leopold) the supreme good or authority, or the Real itself. However, the creative force and the experience of salvation depicted here are limited. The meaning in the wolf’s eyes might have changed Leopold forever, but it remained imprecise for him, and its effects unfolded only gradually, through years of subsequent observation and experience. The

conception of salvation in “Thinking Like a Mountain” is much like Bernard Meland’s, an increase, incremental and partial, in relatedness and perceived worth in existence. Leopold does not achieve the awareness of the mountain—but the impression of its awareness, and of its implication in the lives of all creatures in the landscape, expands his own understanding of the land as a community and of previously unsuspected values in its members. That awareness, and the community it suggests, also provides Leopold with challenging ideals that supply ongoing inspiration in his journey towards biotic citizenship.

Given the importance of mountains and their association with enlightenment in all religious traditions, *Sand County Almanac* would perhaps be remiss as a spiritual memoir if it did not contain an episode in which Leopold received a vision up on a mountain. Yet if mountains suggest to Leopold an ideal of eco-consciousness humans should approach, this ideal is neither the sole one offered for guidance, nor necessarily the best. In response to “Thinking Like a Mountain,” one might say that mountains present a “limited omniscience” regarding the worth of land community members, but they give no example of active participation in that community useful to shorter-lived creatures with more pressing needs to fulfill and who cannot avoid impacts on the land and their fellow beings while fulfilling them. As a pluralistic spiritual vision, however, *Sand County Almanac* presents varied ideals and values in nature that might redirect environmental actions and attitudes. Leopold did not rest on his mountaintop; shortly after drafting “Thinking Like a Mountain,” he would describe a different ideal of humanity’s role in the landscape, one according it an active, yet supportive involvement with other creatures even while acknowledging an inevitable distance from them. It is a more complex vision, encountered through experience of a different resource of transcendence, one found not

upon the heights, but in low and obscure places. Leopold's preceptor in this case is the western grebe, the subject of his essay "Clandeboye."

To most that hear it, Leopold writes, the call of this reclusive bird resembles a bell, and hence is transcribed with a syllabic paraphrase like "'crick-crick' or some such inanity." It suggests to Leopold "something more than a bird call . . . a *secret*²⁵ message, calling not for rendition in counterfeit syllables, but for translation and understanding" (160). Conceding that he is as yet unable to translate this message, Leopold still apprehends in the bird's shrill, "derisive" cries a cluster of qualities which outline an knowledge of and attitude toward its habitat and fellow creatures humans would do well to adopt. While he lies prone in the muck of Manitoba's Clandeboye marsh in order to gain a glimpse of the grebes, Leopold comes to suspect that while human sciences and arts ought to impart to people a deep sense of history, "the grebe, who has neither, knows more history than we do." If it does not know who won the battle of Hastings, it does, to Leopold, seem "to sense who won the battle of time." Were "the race of men as old as the race of grebes, we might better grasp the wisdom of his call" (161).

The grebe, as a member of its species, bespeaks a long biotic history, a narrative of conflict and survival, involving contact with innumerable players, that was well advanced before earth heard the first human utterance. It speaks from a position of long, direct involvement with its habitat, the kind of engagement that promotes knowledge-of-acquaintance. Like the cranes of "Marshland Elegy," the grebes of "Clandeboye" present an impression of transcendence in nature amplified by the contribution of scientific knowledge. But their import extends beyond an aesthetic beauty for informed humans or an avian stamp of approval on human land-use arrangements. Leopold entertains the possibility that having lived so long in its environment, the grebe may know the

importance of each member of the biotic community and of that community they form. The call of the grebe is by a “peculiar authority,” the sound that dominates and unifies the marsh, Leopold writes. And perhaps

by some immemorial authority, he wields the baton for the whole biota. Who beats the measure for the lakeshore rollers as they build reef after reef for marsh after marsh Who holds the sago and bullrush to their task of sucking sun and air, lest in winter the muskrats starve, and the canes engulf the marsh in lifeless jungle? Who counsels patience to brooding ducks by day, and incites bloodthirst in marauding minks by night? Who exhorts precision for the heron’s spear, and speed for the falcon’s fist? (161)

Conventional wisdom and official science hold that such things occur through merely mechanical processes or instinctual proddings. But possibly, Leopold proposes, weariness is not unknown to wild things; possibly only the grebe is immune to it and it reminds the rest that “if all are to survive, each must ceaselessly feed and fight, breed and die” (162).

What he implies as well is that possibly all creatures need to be jolted into transcending their ordinary impulses and habits. But more than this, the grebe’s calls seems to suggest a mode of human existence that promises fuller and beneficent participation in the biotic community that still recognizes the unique capacity of human beings to direct that community. It lays the foundation for a conception of environmental stewardship rooted in naturalistic rather than theistic belief. Grebes may proclaim, to Leopold’s ears, a dominion over their marsh, but one exercised to preserve the value of each part of it, and of that marsh as a whole. The pride and imperiousness of their voices,

bolstered by ages of intrication in their habitat, presents to Leopold an alternative ideal of human being: creatures who recognize their membership in and obligations to the biota, yet accept that their species has effectively assumed the role of “‘a King . . . one/ of the time-tested few that leave the world,/when they are gone, not the same place it was’” (223). In what is once again a partial, incremental deliverance from received ideas about the value of wildlife and its use to humans, Leopold approaches a notion of dominion entailing commitments to the well being of other land community members.

At no stage in the evolution of his beliefs does Leopold assume that the values he perceives in natural phenomena are transparent, or that their transforming potential is irresistible. This reticence is evident in his lingering pessimism about his fellow citizens' potential for change, and in his habit of broaching some alternative valuation of places or creatures with “perhaps.” Leopold would not overcome these uncertainties by the end of his life. However, he would confront them directly. The latest essays in *Sand County Almanac* (1946–47) tend to stress the complications of attending to spiritual values in the landscape over the possibility and benefits of communion with them. In these, Leopold is not merely wary about specifying the precise import or meaning of a transcendent phenomenon, but more attentive to such phenomena as results partly of one's situatedness, the personal, geographic, and cultural experience that one carries into the world. He seems to accord with Stone's notion that different events can present experiences of ultimacy for different persons or different creatures, while the same event might affect different observers in different ways—and some not at all. In “Thinking Like a Mountain,” for instance, he had considered varied responses to the wolf's howl among different creatures; likewise, “January Thaw” demonstrates how an uncontrollable, unexpected event—the thaw—dramatically alters the well-being of

creatures for better and worse, besides increasing his own awareness of the land community.

Another late essay, "Axe in Hand" (1947), probes deeper into the relation between experience of the sacred and an individual's geographic, historical, and cultural positioning. "Axe" reflects on the fact that in using tools to manage the land, one writes their signature upon it, revealing one's tastes, knowledge, sensitivity, and even personal history. Examining his management of trees on his Wisconsin shack property, Leopold confesses that he typically finds himself chopping down readily-growing birch to create space for more vulnerable white pines. Pines are a species that hold a great claim on Leopold's affection and loyalties. We could say that, in a very limited way, they hold a sacred value for him. However, he is at a loss to explain his fascination with these trees. He can state a variety of reasons, but none seem fully satisfying: pines have become scarcer than birch in his neighborhood; the pines will outlive the birch; the pine will remain green throughout the winter. More significant considerations include the fact that a greater variety of wildflowers will eventually spring up around the pines (which brings them closer to the realm of the sacred as catalysts of creative activity); pileated woodpeckers will eventually nest in the pines, and their evergreen boughs will provide music in the windy, bleak days of April (69). Still, these do not explain his attraction to pines, and he is led to ask, "Does the pine stimulate my imagination and my hopes more deeply than the birch does? If so, is the difference in the trees or in me?" (70). *Sand County Almanac* as a whole suggests it is both—certain natural objects have a strong appeal due to their immediate presence and their role in ecological communities, but our responses to them are determined to some extent by our enculturation, predispositions, vocations, and avocations. The relative role of each remains uncertain nonetheless.

Expressions of sacred power that Leopold meets with in the land thus present him with a double mystery: an event whose meaning and effect cannot be specified, and in whose emergence he plays an unavoidable if also undefinable role.

In a sense, the spiritual pilgrimage described here concludes in a position not far from that in which Fritzell places the literary project of *Sand County Almanac*. If the book is at least partly an autobiography of faith, the profession it offers is a conflicted one, checked by paradox and ambiguity. There is no final triumph over doubt, no certainty about deliverance by nature from the economic or epistemic habits that, in Leopold's view, threaten both the health of the environment and the well being of human societies. Leopold never achieves the prophetic confidence of a Thoreau or Muir. Where Fritzell sees a sort of noble failure in Leopold's effort to "settle" humans as biotic citizens through the narrative of *Sand County Almanac*, readers focused on his spiritual development might also see it as, if not a failure, certainly an inconclusive journey.

But to do so is to take a narrow and superficial view of religious faith and thought. Traditionally in Western religions, the willingness to admit to doubt and persevere in faith despite it has been acknowledged as a mark of spiritual maturity, not spiritual inadequacy. In modern times, this tendency has been more pronounced, and has become increasingly cultivated. Facing the challenges posed by modern intellectual and social developments, religious thinkers (among them Kierkegaard, Tillich, James, and all empirical theologians) have frequently sought not to vanquish the doubts these developments raised, but to find ways of accommodating them to faith or to manage a kind of coexistence between faith and doubt. Remarking on trends in a number of theistic traditions, sociologist of religion Peter Berger has noted a growing call for "epistemological modesty" about religious claims, and a decline in the tendency to

associate authentic belief with unwavering certainty (783). This tendency has resulted in a retreat from traditional, “maximal” belief in some churches. Yet, according to Berger, institutions that embrace this position often show a greater level of social involvement and more dynamism in congregational life than do more conservative counterparts (796). Faith chosen against doubt, he suggests, is rooted in a deeper and more reflective commitment than faith unchallenged. Berger ultimately argues that uncertainty is not the rock on which religious faith will break, but simply part of the medium in which it now operates, and perhaps a source of some of its vitality.

If we consider the spiritual perspective of *Sand County Almanac* in the context of modern religious belief, there is no reason to assume that the ambiguities and doubts expressed by Leopold about knowing and responding to divine values in the world undermine the faith he articulates. We can acknowledge with Fritzell the conflicts in Leopold’s ecological conscience—but we need not identify these as the ultimate outcome of his attempts to understand and to find ground for renewal in the ailing but still rich landscapes that he encountered and of which he wrote. Even in essays like “Axe in Hand,” where his uncertainties and sense of paradox are most on display, Leopold still affirms the transcendent value of particulars in the land, and the possibility that it may help fit people to their landscape, and to broaden a purely economic view of land. The frequently religious tone of *Sand County Almanac*, the book’s stated concern for the transformation of social priorities by nature, and Leopold’s documented spiritual tendencies give good reason to approach this work as a record of religious reflection and a prophetic exhortation. Regarded as such, *Sand County Almanac* is less a failed or foredoomed aesthetic exercise than a provocative and original spiritual statement, remarkably attuned to the sensibilities of the world it would enter.

The book's aims may appear less dramatic in this light, yet may also prove more tenable, and of more enduring significance. To be sure, the old dream of pastoral harmony with the natural world does lurk behind the book's chapters. But along with the recognition that this dream cannot be fully or easily realized comes an understanding that critical receptivity to some parts of the landscapes where we find ourselves can work in surprising ways to promote a richer, if imperfect, integration with these places. The imperative tone of the "land ethic" notwithstanding, Leopold derives no absolute principles or values from nature. He offers no final definition of the "land community"—if anything, he continually explores the extent and nature of the relations encompassed by his felt sense of community.²⁶ Instead of a grand design for ecological renewal, or a promise of discerning an unchanging authentic order lying beneath or beyond the world we encounter, what Leopold leaves his readers with are accounts of values rooted in an immediate and limited relational context, and how these promoted—or might have promoted a less exploitive, more mutualistic way of living with wild creatures, cycles, and lands.

Sand County Almanac records a spiritual journey that, like its text, emerged gradually and incrementally, against obstacles of doubt and resistance (both on Leopold's part and on that of others). Nonetheless, the direction of this journey is clear. Like the culture that produced him, Leopold rejected the idea of a living earth, but he never rejected spiritual concepts as a basis for environmental ethics. In smaller, particular aspects of creation, Leopold sensed an active power, that could restore some of the harmony between people and the land lost when Western culture took that step, and improve the condition of both. Rather than collapsing the individual into a kind of pantheistic whole, Leopold's spiritual vision looks to the limited and sometimes confused

awareness of individuals to bring the values of nature into a society increasingly distant from it. One cannot say that Leopold inaugurated a school of religious thought or attracted conscious disciples, but *Sand County Almanac* does provide a starting point for considering the often-overlooked diversity of naturalistic spirituality in American nature writing, as well as significance of American empirical theology for the study of that genre. It marks an early retreat from maximal and totalistic forms of naturalism that dominated American nature writing into the twentieth century.

CHAPTER FOUR

A KIND OF PANTHEISM? THEOLOGICAL NATURALISM AND THE CREED OF JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

The association of nature writing with maximal and wholistic spirituality receives frequent if unwitting reinforcement from critics and general readers who, at least in passing, describe the spiritual sensibility of certain environmental texts or writers as “pantheistic.” This label generally reflects a default assumption rather than a careful analysis. In casual usage, “pantheism” indicates a generalized feeling of reverence for nature, leading some readers to construe any spiritual appreciation of nature not clearly grounded in a theistic tradition as what may be the supreme form of maximal naturalistic belief. Strictly speaking, pantheism denotes belief in an all-inclusive divine unity (Levine 1). Evaluated with that more rigorous definition, writers or texts assumed to be pantheistic often prove to be something short of that. Leopold—labeled a pantheist in widely circulated remark by his son—offers a case in point.

Joseph Wood Krutch is one of the few American nature writers who actually claimed to be a pantheist, but the label is no more accurate in his case than in Leopold’s. In a number of essays, the literary-critic-turned-naturalist would confess what he called “a kind of pantheism.” Though he gave little definition to this faith, he would identify its sources in his observations of various animals and his intuition of sharing a common existence and destiny with them. In his introduction to the anthology *Great American Nature Writing*, he summarized his faith as the sense that “life, rather than something more mysterious called the cause of life is the bond between fellow creatures” (73). Krutch felt this most strongly with creatures who manifested at least some degree of consciousness, will, and freedom of action—the humanistic values he had spent his

literary career defending against mechanistic science and deterministic social thought. However, Krutch's sense of kinship with other beings wore thin when confronted with examples of what he saw as mindless, aimless, rigidly instinctual behavior; with examples of what seemed patently inhuman. The sentiment is perfectly understandable, but squarely at odds with any profession of pantheism.

The limitations in Krutch's notion of a sacred unity of life invite analysis of his beliefs from the perspective of empirical religious naturalism; the particular nature of these limitations introduces important social and cultural questions to a consideration of naturalistic religion. The roots of Krutch's faith lie as much in culture as in nature. To a far greater extent than Leopold did, Krutch recognizes society and the cultural traditions shaping it as sources of value in themselves which may be reinvigorated or improved by contact with sources of spiritual value in nature. He looks deliberately to nature for support for certain cherished ideals of "humanity" more than for contact with some radical otherness that may redeem a society fundamentally corrupted by its embrace of a flawed economic logic. His commitments to these values (whose worth is, at least to him, self-evident) select and identify what resources of transcendence he finds in nature.

On one level, the selectivity in his faith simply testifies to the impossibility of any unmediated perception of nature. Krutch's work offers a clear demonstration of how one's worldview conditions whatever sacred reality one perceives in the world (and this in spite of Krutch's assumption that he writes in defense of essential and universal human qualities). But when evaluated by the concepts of radical empiricism and the American empirical theology, Krutch's spirituality offers more than a lesson in the situatedness of our understandings of nature, or (his own claims notwithstanding) another example of the quasi-transcendentalist pantheism found in many classic American nature essays,

especially those by privileged white male writers. Chicago School theologians and their successors always acknowledged that persons encounter resources of grace in the world only through their cultural and historical situation. This situation shapes or constrains their experience of the sacred, but does not render it flawed or inauthentic; the perspective from which one could make such a judgement objectively is unattainable. Our historical situation is still a point of meaningful contact with resources of this-worldly transcendence, and, as Krutch's case demonstrates, it can define these resources in ways that gives them special pertinence and appeal. The cultural frame through which he encounters the world effectively sculpts his sense of the divine whole into a sort of limited religious naturalism—just as the divine power he sees in nature alters his sense of the values imbibed from culture. Krutch's center of value in the natural world is not a totality of being but a limited collection of transcendent resources set among harmful or degrading potentials in both society and nature. His faith approximates what Jerome Stone identifies as loyalty to all *worthy* elements of existence rather than an attempt to embrace them all. Integrating outcomes of natural history with those of cultural history, Krutch's vision of the sacred illustrates how a spiritual appreciation of nature can address other than purely ecological concerns.

However one might label it, Krutch's faith was the outcome of a long pilgrimage that began with a rejection of spirituality. Born into a family of nominal Episcopalians in Knoxville, Tennessee, he had by his teenage years abandoned his family's creed, and through independent study of Spencer and *Scientific American*, confirmed himself in what he called an "assured, rather narrow rationalism" that would dominate his thinking for years to come.²⁷ The only hints of youthful interest in nature on his part are the experiments with electricity and studies of protozoa under a borrowed microscope that he

describes in his autobiography, *More Lives than One* (30). Originally intending a career in science, he turned to literature as an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee after reading a play by Shaw and sensing the potential of literature to “connect the past in which [his] imagination had been living and the actual world . . .”, and to do still for the modern world something like “what Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Shelley had done for their contemporaries” (*More Lives* 51). Aspiring to a life that offered more freedom, excitement, and intellectual activity than did the provincial atmosphere of Knoxville, Krutch enrolled in a graduate program in English at Columbia after graduating from Tennessee, eventually establishing himself in New York as drama critic at *The Nation* and, later, professor of English at Columbia. If Krutch felt any kind of spiritual stirrings by the time he entered adulthood, all outward appearances would indicate that the hills and forests of east Tennessee had done nothing to prompt them.

It was literature, and especially the ideals of humanity articulated in western literary traditions, that furnished what might pass for Krutch’s first mature spiritual convictions. From his student writings onward, Krutch defended the modern notion of humans as autonomous, individual subjects possessing free will at least in some degree. Approximating the ideas of James, he also insisted that intangible phenomena such as values, feelings, and desires, even if products of the imagination, were real and were fundamental to a fulfilling, genuine, and distinctly human existence. Such notions rest at the core of western humanistic traditions, but as Krutch realized, they were increasingly at odds with the science he had once embraced.²⁸ Affirming that “the universe with which science deals is the real universe,” he nonetheless felt that the light which science sheds on humanity “is not adapted to our eyes and is not anything by which we can see.” In *The Modern Temper*, a collection of essays on these themes published in 1929, Krutch

would write that “[t]he most important part of our lives—our sensations, emotions, desires, and aspirations—takes place in a universe of illusions which science can attenuate or destroy, but which it is powerless to enrich.” Such “illusions” were Krutch’s pearl of great price, “the thing which we recognize as ourselves, and if it is lost, then all that counts is lost with it” (qtd. in Margolis 78). To uphold morality, love, and freedom was, for Krutch, to “live spiritually” in an age when belief in God had failed, yet this commitment was also less a means for overcoming alienation than a strategy for making alienation tolerable. His pronouncement in *The Modern Temper* that “it is better that we should die as men than live as animals” (169) characterizes this project of “living spiritually” as one carried out in anthropic isolation.

However, even as these thoughts were reaching print, Krutch was undergoing a quiet conversion of sorts. In 1925, at his wife’s urging, he rented a farmhouse in northern Connecticut for the summer. He went with some reluctance, regretting the temporary loss of the urban pleasures for which he had left Tennessee. Figuring to survive the isolation by burying himself in writing and visiting with New York friends summering nearby, he developed a fondness in walking in the woods and fields that surprised him, and began studying the plants and animals of the region (Margolis 53-54). Though at first little more than an curious observer of natural phenomena, Krutch gradually began to regard the countryside less as a retreat than as a home. By 1932 he and his wife bought a house outside Redding, Connecticut, and soon they were spending most of their time there, with Krutch returning to the city only a few days a week to carry out his reviewing and (after 1937) teaching responsibilities (Margolis 113). His attachment to the countryside grew through extensive and meticulously recorded observations of local events and creatures, and through a new interest in the works of Thoreau, on whom he

published a book in 1948. Thoreau helped bring him to the realization that the greatest asset of country life was not a respite from city toils and congestion, but companionship and intimacy with a vast array of living things, and awareness of a delight in living that suffused it. Shortly after completing his work on Thoreau, he began attempting his own nature essays, thus beginning a new literary career in which he enlisted the animals he had dismissed some twenty years before as allies in his struggle to “live spiritually” in a culture rife with reductionism.

This career began with deliberate efforts to articulate a new spiritual sensibility. In his first nature essay, which became the opening chapter of *The Twelve Seasons* (1949), Krutch would write that the first calls of spring peepers each year represented a “Universal Easter,” a day when “the most ancient of Christs is arisen” (13). A year later, in his introduction to *Great American Nature Writing*, Krutch first referred to his faith as “a kind of pantheism” (73), (a phrase he would often use in subsequent writings) by which he indicated a belief that he shared with other living things capacity for awareness of and spontaneous, feeling response to the environment. In *The Twelve Seasons*, Krutch described this feeling of connection as it came to him while listening to the spring peepers on a Connecticut pond. Although these animals could not belong to us as pets do, Krutch observes, their exaltations coming at the end of a long winter give him the feeling that both he and they belong equally “to something more inclusive than ourselves” (10). The peepers, Krutch admits,

have an aspect which is inscrutable and antediluvian. His thoughts must be inconceivably different from ours and his joy hardly less so. But the fact is comforting rather than the reverse, for if we are nevertheless somehow united with him in that vast category of living things which is so

sharply cut off from that which does not live at all, then we realize how broad the base of that category is, how much besides ourselves is, as it were, on our side. (10)

Even more important to Krutch than this intimation of a common capacity for sentient awareness is his belief that that humans and other creatures participate in a common adventure. To him, the life shared with other creatures is not merely a state of being over and against nonbeing, but the emergence and growth of consciousness and intelligence. He speculated in *Great Chain of Life*, a extensive meditation on evolution and the emergence of humanity, that the development of consciousness, culminating in the appearance of human beings, was not merely instrumental to survival, but the end or aim of nature (127). All creatures, he wrote in *The Twelve Seasons*, were united in “a rebellion against law and probability, an intrusion—perhaps spontaneous and anarchical—into what would otherwise have been . . . perfect in neatness and regularity” (182). If conventionally valued human mental and emotional traits were real, Krutch argued, they became real “as soon as there was something in the universe that could defy law and habit” (*Voice of the Desert* 68). This shared enterprise among creatures mandated to Krutch an integration of human well being with that of all other creatures. In wild landscapes, Krutch wrote, one reaches the realization that “one is no longer a separate selfish individual but part of the welfare and joy of the whole” (*Voice of the Desert* 215). Or, as he whispered to the peepers that spring night in Connecticut, “Don’t forget . . . we are all in this together” (*Seasons* 13).

The belief sketched here by Krutch corresponds to what Michael Levine’s study of pantheism classifies as “naturalistic” pantheism, or belief in some common principle or destiny working out through the whole of creation.²⁹ However, one need not read far

into Krutch's works to find significant strains on belief in a pervasive life-principle or a wholistic reality of any kind. His pantheism is, at the very least, a paradoxical one because of his persistent concern for individuals, human or otherwise. Krutch departs more strikingly from the beliefs of most pantheists (both ancient and modern) in excluding non-living things from the sacred unity he intuitively feels. Unlike John Muir, who believed he could feel sunlight make "every particle of the mountain throb and swirl and dance in glad accord" (*First Summer* 73), Krutch attributed no awareness or feeling to matter except as organized into living things. His intimations of unity depended on his ability to recognize and partly share in an emotional life, however meager. It is this capacity for feeling response to the world which marks off that sharp cut between the humblest creatures and that which does not live at all. A fern growing in a rock cranny suggests to Krutch a will to survive that he can never find in a flowerlike pattern of frost, however beautiful the latter may be. We can sympathize with such feelings, Krutch contends, and hence "know that the fern is like us, while the frost flower is not" (*Great Chain* 191). Krutch did on occasion voice a wider identification with nature: in *Voice of the Desert*, for instance, he argued that conservation programs needed "love, some feeling for, as well as some understanding of, the inclusive community of rocks, soils, plants, and animals, of which we are a part" (193). Theories of contemporary physics comparing unpredictability in individual atoms to the behavior of human individuals led Krutch to speculate in *Great Chain of Life* that life and freedom could be understood as potentials within matter at every level, needing only proper organization to achieve dynamic expression (207). In most of his writings, however, Krutch expresses no sense of vital connection with inanimate creation.

Yet inconsistencies in his attitude toward inanimate things are less serious obstacles to Krutch's pantheistic claims than lapses in his usual sense of biotic solidarity. Though he often claims that we can relate to all living things by virtue of their efforts to persist against antagonistic or indifferent environments, he writes in *The Desert Year* that any consciousness birds have (if they have any) must be so different from our own that "[a]ny sense we may have of an emotional identification with them is largely fictitious. They are not so much fellow creatures aesthetic objects on the one hand, and symbols on the other" (230). In *The Twelve Seasons*, he expressed doubts as to whether humans could feel any sense of kinship with microorganisms since we cannot easily share their experience of the world or, in ordinary circumstances, be aware of them as fellow creatures. While he recognized important similarities between them and human beings—both are composed of the same protoplasmic fluid—these were insufficient as a basis for an emotional identification with them (59). Gazing at paramecia under a microscope seemed to him an experience much like gazing at stars through a telescope: "in both cases, we are brought face to face with the sense of discontinuity, the sense of being eternally shut off from something which is, nevertheless, as real . . . as we are" (62). He could find them lovely, he admitted, but could not suggest any way in which he might love them. Was this, he asked in closing an essay, simply because "responsibility could not bridge the gap of continuity established by nothing but size?" (62). If the answer is yes, this would undermine the notion of continuity with atomic particles he proposed in *Great Chain of Life*.

Of course, that work followed *The Twelve Seasons* by seven years. Two years prior to *Great Chain of Life*, he had made his call in *Voice of the Desert* for conservation based on a fellowship of all earthly things, inanimate as well as animate. Perhaps his

capacity for relationship had grown as his career as a nature writer unfolded. Yet even granting this, *Great Chain of Life* introduces another complication for Krutch's pantheism not resolved anywhere else in his writing. As much as Krutch was drawn to living things of almost every kind, there were some that repelled him. Two he names in *Great Chain* are dandelions and ants. Both represent to him an example of devolution, of departure from the continual growth of sensitivity and complexity that seems to characterize the development of life generally. Dandelions, relatively new members of the plant kingdom, reproduce asexually, and do so with a frightening efficiency. Durable as dandelions are, they cannot continue to develop as other plants do through crossbreeding, and thus forgo the possibility of developing new capacities or creating new forms of life altogether. "If [the dandelion] lasts for another hundred million years," Krutch wrote, "it will change very little and 'improve' not at all." Though they would presumably "pay a biological penalty" for this mode of reproduction they in fact seem to be inheriting the earth. Their success, along with that of other plants which have simplified the reproductive process, gives Krutch the worrisome thought that, "for plant life at least, nature is giving up not only sexuality, but along with it, one of the Grand Principles that have dominated evolution. What the vitalist calls 'nature's passion for change and improvement,' and the mechanist would describe as 'a set of fortuitous circumstances favoring change' would then actually be only a passing phase . . ." (178). Ants and other insects suggest to him this trend is not confined to the plant kingdom. While they demonstrate an enviable capacity to survive and engage in remarkably intricate behaviors, their actions appear almost entirely instinctual and mechanistic. Because they are "presumably incapable of love or any other emotion or thought," Krutch writes, "their techniques, no matter how ingenious or successful, leave us cold" (67-68).

They represented “that part of the part of the universe which operates beyond our comprehension and almost beyond our sympathy. They are precisely what we don’t want to be” (68). Not just alien to Krutch, they also appeared sinister, confronting him with the possibility that evolutionary achievements such as consciousness and emotion were merely passing trends. Moreover, he feared that the denial of free will and the validity of value judgements might start humanity along the path to a similar existence, something he saw already underway in intensive efforts at social planning and in growing acceptance of the view that humans were basically conditioned products of an environment. With regard to insects and their devolved counterparts in the plant world, Krutch’s belief in life itself as a bond between creatures stretches thin. If there is a pervasive animating or directing principle manifested in living things, it would seem to function inconsistently or ineffectually in some cases. We all might be in this together, but so far as Krutch is concerned, some of us are clearly in it more than others.

Finally, Krutch’s humanistic commitments clash with his pantheistic affirmations. Levine observes that pantheistic belief has been consistently marked by a forthright anti-anthropocentrism (242), yet clearly, one of the chief attractions of nature for Krutch is that it provides evidence of the human qualities that he believes modern culture is discarding. The idea that emotion and intelligence are found in all living things is a common notion in nature writing, and helps support the idea that they define a unity of some kind. But Krutch assumes that the qualities of mind he defends are of central and normative importance in the world. He does not consider that other forms of life may present other qualities which humans might do well to understand and adapt, or, if irreconcilable to humanity, might form another indispensable element of a pantheistic unity. Krutch occasionally downplayed the importance of humans in the scheme of life;

in *The Twelve Seasons* he reminds us that “Life is not something entrenched in man alone, in a creature who has not been here so very long and who may not continue to be here so very much longer It is not something that will fail if we should” (10). In one of his last articles, he expounded a “faith in wildness” that puts trust “not in human intelligence but in whatever created human intelligence and is, in the long run, more likely than we to solve our problems” (“If You Don’t Mind My Saying So” 204). But such ideas receive neither the thought nor the emphasis that go into Krutch’s pleas for the freedom and the survival of human intelligence. One suspects Krutch would be repelled by the exuberant denunciations of human uniqueness one finds in the works of John Muir or Robinson Jeffers; that he could warm to little in Spinoza’s insistence that humans and other beings were merely transient modes of an underlying eternal substance, or in the Taoist teaching of an ongoing cosmic process that eludes and confounds willful human attempts at understanding or control. Often as not, he looked to the whole in order to buttress a cherished vision of one of its more interesting parts.

Thus, Krutch’s spiritual convictions do not conform to the label he applies to them. Though the idea of a unity of all beings appeals to him, he does not speculate at any length on what the nature of that unity is, and what ideas of unity he does offer are undermined by numerous contradictions. The absence of any formal elaboration of his belief likely is due in part to Krutch’s habitual discomfort with abstract speculation or metaphysical affirmations of any kind—the “narrow rationalism” Krutch adopted early in life seems to inform even his most expansive and spiritual writings. Additionally, his instinctive attraction to individual creatures deflects and undercuts reflections on some sacred whole. But this does not strand us with the conclusion that Krutch was simply a vague or inconsistent pantheist. While his faith clearly does not encompass the whole of

nature, it does focus on a distinct core or cluster of worthy objects and beings, something Stone might label a “collection of situationally transcendent resources.” This collection or cluster is distinguished in part by sharing a common direction. In this it compares with notions of a teleology in nature offered by John Burroughs and others. However, Krutch’s sense of unity and direction in nature is clearly limited both in scope and power. There is much in nature that it excludes, and both other parts of nature and certain valuations of human culture threaten both its influence and its endurance. In this respect, his notion of a critical center of value or direction in nature approaches that of certain naturalistic empirical theologians. Comparing their work to Krutch’s reveals in the latter a measured departure from maximal ideas of teleology and unity common in earlier nature writing, a position that reconciles the idea of a pervasive, though not universal, purpose operating in the development of life with an acknowledgement that that development has been marked by considerable randomness and chaos. Some forms of religious naturalism developed by Chicago empiricists and those they have influenced demonstrate how Krutch’s selectivity in his embrace of fellow creatures, and even his commitment to traditional humanism, work not to impede his spirituality, but to produce a profound and suggestive spiritual position that eludes conventional labels and assumptions.

The development of empirical theology parallels on a larger scale the career of Krutch in that it attempted to articulate redemptive values in the external world despite originating from and, in most cases, continuing to reflect some values of a solidly anthropocentric tradition. Theologians in the early or “sociohistorical” phase of the so-called Chicago School, such as Shirley Jackson Case, E.S. Ames, and Shailer Matthews (as well as some of their immediate successors, especially H.N. Wieman), attempted to

define God as a transforming power expressed and encountered through historical events and processes which advanced human welfare and consciousness. The representative of the school whose thought draws most deeply on ideas of biological evolution, and which most nearly approaches that of Krutch, was Shailer Matthews.

For Matthews, science was not an enemy of religious truth, but the source and warrant for it. In his understanding, the findings of science disclosed “infinite activity” in the material world which, when interpreted with “analogies from our own vital activity,” demonstrated “appreciable tendencies,” even evidence of “immanent reason, purpose, and personality in the cosmic environment . . .” (*Contributions* 391, 394, 407). Most important among these tendencies was the emergence and growth of “personality,” a quality Matthews never precisely defined but which essentially correlates to a modernistic form of human subjectivity. Its characteristics include self-consciousness, an urge for material and intellectual progress, and capacity to appreciate “non-physical values” (*Contributions* 398). Matthews locates the sources of personality within the general scheme of matter and life rather than in a transcendent power with a unique relation to humanity. “It is impossible,” Matthews wrote in 1924, “to think that personality could have evolved from the exclusively impersonal. There must be something in the environment which the personality-possessing organism can appropriate, and with which it can act harmoniously” (*Contributions* 400). God, for Matthews, was the sum of these personality-producing forces. He went on to characterize the evolutionary process as the “successive development of organisms sufficient to appropriate or respond to personal elements in the environment.” The necessity of an active response by organisms to these elements underscores that this succession was not inevitable. Matthews wrote that “As an animal must live like an animal rather than as a crystal in the universe which has

produced him, so a person must live personally in a universe from which he springs” (*Contributions* 402). Otherwise, “Man loses his personal life when he tries to live as if he were impersonal, just as a plant would lose its life in conditions in which a crystal could continue indefinitely” (*Contributions* 402).

Matthews’s position demonstrates succinctly how some of the conflicts in Krutch’s spiritual thought can be reconciled into a coherent religious naturalism. Matthews is as forthrightly anthropocentric as Krutch—in fact, he is nearly as anthropocentric as the orthodox Christianity to which he seeks to provide an alternative. He identifies ideal human traits as essential qualities of nature, and sees the expression of these traits as a fundamental process of the universe. However, this process is not an inexorable one. The achievement of “personality” requires engagement of and cooperation with the elements of nature which support it. Like Krutch, Matthews believes that the deliberate affirmation and exercise of human capacities for emotion, reason, and valuation is necessary to maintain the reality of these capacities, and to achieve a harmony with one’s natural surroundings. A commitment to classical humanism is thus compatible with a broad attachment to and reverence for nature; traits understood as distinctively human become the grounds for human intimacy with the rest of creation. Describing a distinct sacred center to nature (a center defined in part by Matthews’s humanism), Matthews’s vision falls short of being pantheistic, since it identifies some aspects of nature as inimicable to the emergence of personality. His concept of the divine is expansive, yet not all-inclusive.

Matthews’s notion of the sacred is also limited in that human cooperation with it is needed for its expression. Neither its scope nor its power is absolute. Yet it is still maximal in that if human beings cooperate with personality-producing forces in nature,

its effects are virtually certain. Moreover, these effects seem preordained to Matthews. Divine creativity seems to him to operate on a fixed path. For Matthews, the seeds of personality are a fundamental part of nature, ineradicable even if not irresistible. Matthews's lacks Krutch's sense of the fragility and contingency of will, emotion, valuation, and other qualities of personhood. Where Krutch saw the emergence of conscious life as a "spontaneous and anarchical" event, Matthews looked at it as an expression of the primordial order of nature.

A more recent theologian, Gordon Kaufman, has also turned to patterns of evolutionary development to articulate a limited and immanent model of the sacred, but is more cautious about affirming that these patterns are directed by spiritual agencies or that they work toward a definite end. His work helps illuminate further Krutch's ideas of both unity and direction in nature.

Although he acknowledges that the empiricists of the Chicago school have influenced his work, Kaufman, a longtime member of the Harvard Divinity faculty, rejects the empiricist notion that divinity, even when associated with this-worldly processes, is something that can be experienced directly. Throughout his long career, he has argued (somewhat along the lines of Dewey) that theology is wholly a constructive activity; that the divine is an imaginative and evaluative unification of the processes that, from the perspective of a given worldview or discourse, create and sustain humanity which serves as a focus for devotion and service. While his methodology sets Kaufman apart from the other theologians discussed here, the metaphysical reticence from which it proceeds is a trait shared with them and with Krutch. His thought resembles Krutch's further—and contrasts with Matthews—in that it links divinity to the individual existence and the acts of various other creatures.

Kaufman's writings from the 1960s to the 1980s mostly addressed the role of theological construction in advancing the causes of peace and social justice. Broadening his concerns during the 1990s to include the environmental crisis, he has argued that theologians ought to apply the term "God" to the physical and biological processes, as well as historical ones, which provide the context for human life because, as the natural and social sciences (not immediate experience) demonstrate, these are what creates and sustains human life ("Nature, History, and God" 381). The designation is appropriate, he contends, because it recognizes both our dependence on these processes and the mystery that surrounds them even (and perhaps especially) as our knowledge about them expands ("Nature" 380).

Kaufman's God is not a creator but the ongoing creative activity of the cosmos ("Nature" 383). In contrast to Matthews's divinity, Kaufman's is not identified exclusively with what sustains and advances human life. Its creative activity is random, undirected, and variform. Nonetheless, natural processes appear to have produced a steady increase in variety and complexity among living things. Accordingly, Kaufman believes that natural processes manifest what can be called a "serendipitous creativity" existence ("Nature" 383). Even though this serendipitous creativity lacks a definite *telos*, one might still trace within nature certain *trajectories*, or patterns of development which, at least in hindsight, could be interpreted as indicators of purpose in the cosmos ("Nature" 384).

Krutch's ideas about creativity in nature acknowledge a comparable role for serendipity, undermining his claims of pantheism but sketching a coherent theory of emergent value in nature in their place. One instance of this appears in his discussion of the saguaro cactus in *The Desert Year*. He admires the saguaro as a superb manifestation

of hardiness because of its ability to thrive in the Sonoran desert (a region where Krutch relocated permanently in 1952). Though he wrote that he preferred to explain the survival strategies of the Sonoran creatures by saying they had “shown courage and ingenuity in making best of world as they found it” instead of regarding them as products of mechanical adaptations, he acknowledged that the appearance of sagueros had as much to do with serendipity as with whatever ingenuity they might have possessed (28). His descriptions of the cacti follow scientific accounts that trace their ability to exist in extremely dry environments partly to a distant, chance environmental factor—the gradual rise of mountain ranges along the Pacific coast that turned the semi-desert environment of the saguaro’s ancestors into the highly arid desert it now is—and partly to the “ability to vary” that they and all organisms possess (*Voice* 49), which itself proves as much a set of fortuitous and primordial reflexes as a freedom of response. Had its environment changed more quickly, the saguaro’s ability to do without water might not have been refined quickly enough to allow it to survive. Possessing an “ability to vary” suggests a plasticity that enables adaptation as needed, but Krutch often discusses possible variations as possibilities determined in advance, unelicited by the circumstances of a creature’s life (*Chain* 144). Creatures seem to him to possess a set of certain possibilities—from what source he cannot say—which may or may not be able to meet the challenges the environment brings. Looking back on the development of the saguaro, Krutch believes one can say that the cactus was able to develop such a “hidden potential” (*Voice* 140). Such adaptability, whether found in cacti, mice, or human beings, is a quality of great worth to Krutch, one he strives to defend against modern reductionists. Krutch’s defense of it here is significant because it clearly presents this quality and its emergence as a trajectory of value constructed from an account of facts generated by

natural science. It is one apparent tendency in the world worth affirming, not some vital impetus or inherent, “objective” quality in nature.

The tendency in creation that concerns both Krutch and Kaufman most is the emergence of human subjectivity. Kaufman believes one can describe what might be called a trajectory toward human “historicity,” or the existence of people as “beings who create and shape and come to know and understand themselves within and through unfolding historical processes” (*In Face of Mystery* 103). The term implies for Kaufman the self-consciousness, creativity, and purposiveness imputed to humans in some form by all cultures.³⁰ Most broadly and fundamentally, it is the ability to conceive of a “world,” a comprehensive picture of existence showing distinctive (if also fluid) limitations and possibilities for human life within which persons may act to achieve definite aims (*In Face of Mystery* 105).

The focus in both thinkers on human values and to the emergence of these in nature might be construed as a naturalization, perhaps deliberate, of the traditional anthropocentrism of Western religion. In part, it likely is. However, Kaufman abandons traditional Christian anthropocentrism in that he asserts neither the centrality of humanity within creation nor the superiority of human historical existence to other forms of existence within nature. Kaufman values both of these supremely and assumes that his audience shares this valuation, yet makes clear that this is simply a reflection of his perspective as a human being and not because he assigns these an ontological primacy. Human historical existence is for Kaufman not an essential component of the universe, but a result of its serendipitous creativity. It thus marks both connection with and separation from the nonhuman world since, as Kaufman writes, historical existence enabled humans to move “from the strictly biological order into a cultural or spiritual

order,” yet took shape through the development of other creatures and through certain physical processes (*In Face of Mystery* 106, 283-84). Once it had appeared, human historicity changed the nature of the creative process, adding a genuinely teleological component to it (*In Face of Mystery* 296; “Nature” 383). Hence, the historical consciousness of human beings operates somewhat differently than other creative forces in the cosmos, yet is still closely involved with those forces, both influencing what novelty or value they will generate, and being influenced by them in turn.

Kaufman’s exposition of a limited and strongly relational anthropocentrism provides a helpful key to interpreting Krutch’s humanism and its relation to his ideas of the sacred in nature. Krutch attributes features of human subjectivity to a random and serendipitous creativity, to “spontaneous and anarchical” events in creation. He looks upon mindedness not as an essential quality in things, but something that “could not help coming into existence,” a product of preexisting factors and conditions that became, as noted earlier, “a rebellion” against them (*The Measure of Man* 134). In a late article, Krutch draws on Thoreau to claim that natural forces characterized by chaos and operating through conflicting experiments, “have brought us from a beginning of some humble glob of protein to the state where we are beginning to believe ourselves superior to creative nature . . .” (“If You Don’t Mind My Saying So” 204). He affirms that the appearance of mind or consciousness introduced into evolution a new element capable of directing change (*Measure* 130). But Krutch finds instances of purpose or mindedness—and hence instances of transcendent power—in creatures whose abilities fall far short of human historicity. One case of this is the chapter in *Voice of the Desert* where he praises scorpions, which seem mindless and mechanical in his direct encounters with them, for the courage to act in an opportune moment their ancestors displayed as the first creatures

to attempt living on land. Dim as they appear, Krutch grants that they can at least see, and “seeing itself is a process beyond comprehension,” involving “awareness of a sort.” If its vision can be compared to ours, Krutch asks, why can its impulse to leave the sea, the only home then known to animals, not be compared to the human traits of enterprise or courage (76)? In a number of his books, Krutch argues that humanity’s emergence into a cultural order replicates a similar, if more restricted, tendency among other animals. The most thoroughgoing treatment of this appears in *Voice of the Desert*, where Krutch examines the phenomenon of love to argue that the emotional and imaginative faculties enabled animals—especially humans—to enhance and transform instincts into complex, conscious actions that have aesthetic or moral as well as functional value. The most thorough example is *Voice of the Desert* where he argues that love is an emotional reality, operative in much of nature and grown from the biological fact of sexuality, rather than an illusion reducible to this fact by noting analogues of human expressions of love in other animals:

Marital attachment? Attachment to the home? Devotion to children?
Long before us, members of the animal kingdom had associated them all with sex. Before us they also founded social groups on the family unit and in some few cases even established monogamy as the rule! Even more strikingly, perhaps, many of them abandoned *force majeure* as the decisive factor in the formation of a mating pair and substituted for it courtships, which became a game, a ritual, an aesthetic experience. (181-82)

Of course, Krutch does note that many creatures have arrived at other sexual behaviors, some quite repulsive by most human standards, which serve satisfactorily enough for their species. His point is not that this trajectory leading to human love and monogamy is

morally superior to or more authentic than others, but that it—and the consciousness behind it—is real, that it connects us to other creatures, and that it is a source of orienting goodness for people.

Just as importantly, the particular creatures that manifest “humanizing” values are themselves resources of grace for Krutch. This points to a significant elaboration on Kaufman’s theology that Krutch’s work offers. Noting the problems associated with personalistic concepts of divinity that have dominated the West, Kaufman contends that personalistic ideas of God may yet be useful because of the roles certain persons—parents, friends, teachers, etc.—play in shaping individuals and their particular sense of historicity. Following the lead of Sally McFague, Kaufman argues that these other roles be added to the traditional patriarchal conception of God as father (*In Face of Mystery* 337). This is an important point because it links “humanizing” effects to encounters with unique, situated individuals—who could be regarded as resources of situational transcendence.³¹ This adds a more empirical and pluralistic aspect to his notion of divinity as a set of humanizing trajectories of development. While Kaufman does not consider the possibility that nonhuman beings have contributed to the humanization of *homo sapiens*, the work of numerous anthropologists, as well as the oral traditions of many primal peoples, attests that they have.³² Krutch’s writings also trace the trajectory towards human historicity, or better, toward rich and reflective consciousness, through other, “lower” creatures and argue that it is still advanced by them, as well as by fellow human beings and larger natural events. There is a limit to Krutch’s embrace of animals in that he does not consider that they might enrich human life with any qualities or values not directly comparable to human ones, with any distinctive “otherness.” Even so, Krutch’s works give reason to ask whether the faces of lover, teacher, and friend on Kaufman’s

model of God the might be complemented by those of bear, raven, muskrat, and spring peeper.

For both Krutch and Kaufman, random developments and creatural choices generate a plurality of discrete values that sustain experiences of goodness, of purpose, and of connection. However, they warn that neither these values nor their sources are infallible. Kaufman stresses that the continued emergence of novelty and value has become partly dependent on the conscious actions and aspirations of humans, as well as on the worldviews that human groups fashion and dwell within (*In Face of Mystery* 261). Accordingly, careful examination of the worldviews and values we hold becomes an ongoing obligation. Though he holds that it is impossible to discern which worldview or cluster of developmental possibilities is correct or most authentic, Kaufman does believe that people may identify which ones accord better or worse with their chosen values and aims.

Kaufman is especially wary of the mechanistic worldview that dominates modern science. Because of “its structural thinking and its inclination to regard physical matter as the ultimate reality,” a mechanistic orientation serves to “discount the significance of emergence and evolution, the significance of creativity and of time. Such a view . . . tends to undercut human work and human efforts to take responsibility” (*In Face of Mystery* 260). Kaufman advocates a perspective which understands “the universe . . . as in some sense actually facilitating or promoting historical existence,” and which allows humans to take orientation from “both the evolution of the web of life and human historical development within that web” (*In Face of Mystery* 261).

Krutch assigns to human individuals and communities a similar responsibility for the continued creativity of nature and for the continued meaningfulness of human

existence within both nature and culture. In *The Measure of Man*, noting the diminished estimate of humanity emerging from the natural and social science and the isolation from nature these promoted, he stated that we could not wait for “creative evolution” to produce something better than man (27). Continuing prospects for meaningful existence, and for a natural world that could still enrich and instruct that existence, he argued, would depend on what views people took of themselves and of their natural environment. For Krutch, “living personally” (as Matthews would say) included affirming a sense of relation to other creatures. He wrote in *The Twelve Seasons* that “when man forgets he is an animal, the result is to make him less humane” (186). In *Voice of the Desert*, Krutch tied both the future vitality and the meaningfulness of nature to recognizing other-than-utilitarian aspects of nature. He thought conservation was doomed if people could not see that the world was beautiful as well as useful. The inability of science to explain life in purely physical terms suggests to him that “moral and aesthetic questions should be discussed in connection with what we know about living creatures . . . ” (200, 209). The final meaning and explanation of other creatures—if there was to be any—would be found only by “admitting the mystical element” (214). Neither the “humanity” he praised nor the worth of nature could be said to be mere products of the convictions he urged on his readers; these had been shaped in large part by ancient and undirected processes and interactions. Nonetheless, Krutch believed that neither could survive without human faith in them. Though he held that the appearance of mindedness had changed the nature of creativity in the material world long before the appearance of people, developments of his time led Krutch to believe that the progress of human mindedness had pressed on people a responsibility to uphold a vision of the world as

vital, dynamic, meaningful, and complex. To retain any contact with divinity in the natural world, Krutch concluded, people needed to assume participation in it.

The work of Kauffman and, to a lesser extent, Matthews, helps establish both the shape and the significance of Krutch's religious thought—even as his own work gives concrete expression to some of the theologians' ideas. Examined through their theology, Krutch's works reveal belief in a divine unity that is neither all-inclusive nor an expression of some fundamental *logos*. Krutch's spirituality is less a form of pantheism than a devotion to a limited unity that, like Kaufman's, is an event stretching across boundaries of epochs and species. Instead of a vision of the whole, he offers one of a sacred center in nature that is continually achieved and re-achieved, made by and making its participants. The constituent parts of this unity are not subordinate to the whole they form; it is by close attention to them that the idea of the whole acquires meaning and become concrete for Krutch. Being a portion of nature and not its totality, this unity coexists, sometimes uneasily for Krutch, with other developments in nature, some of which may eventually eclipse it and its participants. That it will continue requires, as Krutch admits in one of his final writings, a faith in the world's creative capacities as well as commitments to the values that accompany it. But while these limitations on Krutch's ideas of divinity disqualify it as a genuine species of pantheism, that label is appropriate insofar as it has traditionally signified a deeply felt connection to and immersion in the natural world. It functions for him as the inherited term "God" does for Kaufman, Loomer, and other theologians who describe manifestations of grace or creative tendencies in nature. "Pantheism" connotes the intensity of Krutch's attachment to the sacred center he perceives in creation, even if the customary sense of the term does not characterize its structure. Unaware of an alternative theological vocabulary that

might have communicated his ideas, Krutch is a pantheist less by conviction than by linguistic default.

Genuine or not, Krutch's proclamations of pantheism identify him with older traditions of nature writing.³³ However, the pluralistic and relational aspects of his spiritual outlook clearly place him beyond these and their problems. Where Luke and VanWyk decry visions of ideal unity for stifling agency in nature, Krutch sees even the humblest parts of creation carrying out actions that will influence creatures alive presently, and in ages still to come. If he sees a tendency working for some goods valued by humanity, he also sees that this good is not inexorable, and may falter through the same processes of evolution that otherwise advance it. His thought rises above a nebulous feeling of reverence for nature (akin to Ross-Brynt's and Burton-Christie's norm of spiritual sensibility in nature writing) that collapses differences, and avoids contrasting a profane humanity against a sacred and redeeming nature. Processual, participatory, and plural, Krutch's idea of the holy marks an important transition away from idealist and totalizing notions of the sacred that dominated earlier nature writing.

It is, of course, not a radical transition by any means. Krutch has firm ideas about the direction in which the transformation of life ought to proceed, and as noted previously, he has little to say about what humans might learn from other creatures except the reality of their own consciousness and freedom. Moreover, Krutch's ideas of human or human-like qualities reflect a single, narrow definition of the human (the same might also be said of Kaufman). One could argue that the sort of faculties for which he seeks analogues in nature are characteristic not of the human species per se but of a particular culture and historical epoch. Finally, because Krutch generally interacts with other creatures as a spectator or in some cases as a quasi-scientist, conducting controlled

observations of them in his home, one might ask just how much freedom (or agency) he granted either to himself or to other living things in his relations with them.

Yet even acknowledging these limitations does not make irrelevant the metaphysical retreat Krutch makes from the spirituality of many earlier nature writers. If Krutch erects his vision of unity under the sign of modern humanism, he avoids the Emersonian conviction that all of nature is a reflection of an authentic individual mind, as well as Muir's profession of intention behind the progress of evolution. Any ideas about creative tendencies in nature that run through his thought are much reduced from the vitalism of John Burroughs. Krutch could be said to ignore or downplay the otherness of some creatures he identifies closely with, he does not subordinate the uniqueness of their lives to its place in any overarching cosmic trajectory or process, as is sometimes the case with places and things in the works of Jeffers. Despite holding certain cultural biases that many other contemporary critics would find objectionable, Krutch has at least abandoned one that they resist vigorously—the passivity and roteness of the nonhuman.

This may be a highly qualified advance beyond more absolute forms of nature reverence, but it is a significant one, bringing out a new complexity and gradation in the spirituality of nature writing. Krutch builds a faith around the narrative of human evolution that does not sweep aside or overshadow the importance of other parts of nature. Whereas scores of commentators urge the cultivation of a biocentric spirituality, Krutch's writings demonstrate that a religious orientation growing from a particular concern for the welfare of humanity may foster a strong sense of ecological awareness and connection. Admitting the attraction of a mystical unity with creation, Krutch still does not discount conflict, strains, and difference within creation. A modest, skeptical voice expressing doubts about the present course of his species and growing acceptance

of the value of others, he opens up options for naturalistic faith in an age suspicious of transcendental schemes, bringing to bear an awareness of the many on the irrepressible human intuition of the One.

CHAPTER FIVE

BARRY LOPEZ ON LANGUAGE, LANDSCAPE, AND "THE PATTERN CALLED GOD"

Whether their creed is pantheistic, theistic, naturalistic, or otherwise, environmental writers with spiritual concerns eventually face a fundamental problem known to spiritual writers of every age and tradition: how to communicate a conception or experience of something that is by nature incommunicable, something that confronts one with an infinitude, strangeness, or mystery that utterly defies human modes of thought or systems of expression? How can one use forms of expression which reflect the valuations of a culture to present some reality felt to have the potential to change these valuations? Regrettably, few American nature writers have engaged these questions with any seriousness. Most, with the way prepared by Emerson's broad certainties about the ability of the individual mind to encounter the Oversoul, have merely offered confident pronouncements about sacred values of landscapes, related their exhilaration during transcendent experiences, or readily admitted an incapacity to express what they encountered or felt without suggesting much about its general tone or quality. Gestures like these can outline a profound spiritual position (indeed, Leopold and Krutch do so with little more), but undermine that position's intellectual appeal to a culture keenly aware of the role of language and other cultural forms in constructing our experiences and perceptions, and limit the ability of texts to convey the experience that generated the position. Often, nature writers who are conscientious of the incommensurability of literature and the sacred depict experiences of the divine in nature not by reconstructing the source of that experience or attempting to represent the divine quality they encountered, but by following the strategy of the *via negativa*, evoking a sense of the

numinous by paradox, disjunctions of tone and perspective, elision, and other forms of linguistic strain. Supreme examples of this approach appear in the work of Annie Dillard, who, as Sandra Johnson notes, promotes epiphany by juxtaposing disconnected images and words. These “holes” or “discontinuities” in language cannot readily be assigned a meaning, which “forces readers to search out their own meanings, to dive down into their own psyche for connections to fill the epiphany” (Johnson 182-83).

These techniques can produce remarkable writing. However, they deny or disregard the possibility that the external world can “fill” the epiphanic moment in a text. This brings into question what many practitioners and critical promoters of nature writing see as one of the genre’s chief merits: an ability to place readers in touch with the natural world and reveal a value in it that can alter environmental attitudes and behaviors. If literature does adequately present the textures, surfaces, and appearances of the material world but does not transmit any positive sense of the creative and effectual qualities of that world that are associated with the sacred, then the world nature writing places us in touch with is a diminished thing, or more precisely, a dis-enchanted thing, less able to draw concern for and alter attitudes toward the material world.

The works of Barry Lopez propose that this divide between text and world, between word and spirit, is neither complete nor inevitable. They present a conscientious attempt to communicate transcendent values of particular places or natural phenomena through literary texts. Lopez sees narrative and other language practices not as distractions from transcendent experiences in nature, but as fundamental to experiencing and participating in what he refers to as “the pattern called God.” In support of this ideal, Lopez articulates and applies an elegant theory of why texts can accomplish this. His theory is rooted in a limited naturalistic conception of the sacred

and an understanding of language as something that does not impose meanings on the world, but provides a way to approach them, if only in a partial degree. It consists of two primary contentions: first, that linguistic forms are compatible with manifestations of the sacred in landscape by virtue of sharing a common structure and mode of functioning with it; second, that certain ideas, terms, images, or motifs out of the cultural traditions on which Lopez (along with his readers) draws are uniquely effective for revealing and defining sacred qualities in nature. Theories of divinity and notions about language and other forms of culture in the works of empirical theologians can help illuminate both Lopez's theory and the faith underlying it. Lopez's work can be understood as an important, ecologically-informed extension of empirical religious thought on the role of culture in experiencing and describing the sacred. Empirical theology provides a rich resource for understanding both Lopez's religious orientation and his basic purposes as a writer.

Belief in the reality and importance of contingent, local manifestations of divinity is both the origin and the continuing motivation of Lopez's distinguished career. While growing up on the outskirts of Los Angeles, Lopez raised pigeons, and the sight of them spiraling up from their roost each day filled him with wonder every time he witnessed it. It was the desire to capture this spectacle in words, he has said, that first motivated him to write, and as a mature writer, he bears in mind while working "the child in California wishing to give away what he's just seen" (Address; *Life* 15). This means giving away not only an image or appearance of what he has seen, but its capacity to act on or engage one as a vital presence, to uplift or change those who see it. His ambitions as a writer are "to contribute to a literature of hope," and "to create a body of stories in which men and women can discover trustworthy patterns" (*Life* 14-15). Patterns as simple as those of a

wild animal darting through creosote brush, or that form three lines of overheard conversation, he believes, might contain “everything we need to understand to repair the gaping rift between body and soul” (*Life* 15).

In his earliest works, particularly the short fiction collected in *Desert Notes* and *River Notes*, Lopez called attention to patterns among particulars of the natural world as sources of value; his wandering narrators asserted that “explanations” rose from the austere outlines of the desert (*Desert Notes* 4), that rocks made an “essential statement” about perseverance, or that from trees and fish one might learn joy or circumspection (*River Notes* 44, 46). The speakers of these early tales often traveled far and waited long in wild habitats to find these insights. With openness and patience, they suggested, one could find the patterns that would make sense of one’s surroundings and one’s life.

These ideas are reminiscent of Leopold’s and Krutch’s spiritual intuitions, but in developing them, Lopez showed a much keener awareness of the difficulties of knowing and representing them than did either of the earlier writers. The speaker in *Desert Notes* who finds explanations emerging from the desert still cautions that these can be deceiving. “You will think you have hold of the idea,” he warns, “when you only have hold of its clothing” (4). A *River Notes* narrator who believes that the mouths of rivers reveal “a whole life” in a moment immediately concedes that he may be wrong, that “[i]t is impossible to speak with certainty about very much” (xiii). In *Of Wolves and Men*, Lopez observes that people “create their animals”(5), attempting to understand creatures with partial and often flawed knowledge, sometimes with disastrous results. This expansive and meticulous survey of interactions between wolves and human beings in various cultural settings shows up both the danger and the inevitability of imposing understandings on charismatic or engaging elements of the natural world. Clearly, these

early writings of Lopez hold out little hope for an easy or certain connection with transcendence through the landscape.

The 1986 book *Arctic Dreams* and some contemporaneous shorter essays present Lopez's most energetic and incisive reflections to date on the notion of a limited divinity within the land and the problems attendant upon knowing and portraying it. *Arctic Dreams* is an account of travels in the North American Arctic which brought him into contact with vast stretches of the region's austere yet hauntingly beautiful landscape, the diverse wild animals inhabiting it, and persons interacting with it in a variety of different ways—Eskimo hunters, oil industry managers, and marine scientists, to name a few. *Arctic Dreams* identifies the values and graces encountered there squarely with unique, local, unique material and relational circumstances rather than some generalized order or spirit of Nature. Lopez sees in many of its features a capacity to challenge or alter the assumptions most persons in the developed world have about the pliancy of nature, about human abilities to describe and control it, and about what in the world is beautiful or what enriches life. It presents to him a collection of values that promote both endurance and enriched awareness. Scott Slovic argues that Lopez presents the ways in which the Arctic changes and challenges him in order to model for readers the process of overcoming alienation from the land; depicting his own reshaped expectations and expanded awareness is a powerful gesture, Slovic writes, because "it indicates the hopefulness of the narrator's conversion process, and this hopefulness envelopes the reader as well" (164-65). From this point of view, it is the form of the pilgrimage undertaken that is important, not the scenes along the way. But *Arctic Dreams* leaves no doubt that Lopez sees phenomena of the Arctic themselves as essential to the sort of transformation or healing he is trying to promote. His model of conversion is dependent

on contact with them. Lopez writes that while gazing on a particularly beautiful and desolate region, he found “in adumbrations of the land, in suggestions of the landscape and all it contains, the ways human life sorts through itself and survives” (404). The extreme cold and remoteness of the region, as well the presence of sudden and deadly perils, like icebergs that may rise without warning from the sea to smash a settlement, reinforce an awareness of life’s fragility (as Meland would say, a “creatural sense”) that existence in more temperate places often lulls away. Extended periods of continuous light or darkness “point up the narrow impetuosity of Western schedules” and “expose . . . the complacency of our thoughts about land in general” (12). The lives of many of the region’s animals still remain largely mysterious to scientists. Frequent mirages over Arctic waters “serve as a caution against precise description and expectation, a reminder that the universe is oddly hinged” (24). Sea lanes that freeze quickly, spongy tundra that cannot support roads, or other impediments to commercial development of the far north make it an “irritatingly and uncharacteristically uncooperative” landscape to some (12). The radically differing ways in which people in different situations understand the Arctic forestall simple generalizations about it. Still, the abundance and tenacity of wildlife there, the stunning range of color that the light brings out in ice, rock, and tundra, and the success of aboriginal peoples in adapting to this harsh place, suggests a beauty or value that is strange, but worth attending to. These things attain some transcendent, sacred quality in Lopez’s eyes not by pointing to some greater order beyond them or a plan they carry forward, but because in their concrete and particular manifestations, bound up with other components of the land in both discernible and mysterious ways, they provoke a wonder or fear that demands some response, yet cannot easily be named or defined. Asking how the far north can alter our desires or our sense of what it means to grow rich

(13), Lopez looks to its landscape for what Bernard Meland would call “a goodness not our own” which “interpenetrates experience, releasing the organism from its fixed path of motivation and redirecting it toward a more sensitive order of relations” (*Faith and Culture* 44).

What makes *Arctic Dreams* especially powerful—and relevant—as a testament of such a faith is that it affirms the possibility of experiencing qualities in the landscape as genuine sources of redemption while acknowledging unflinchingly their fallibility and their partially constructed and mediated character. Though looking to the landscape for some sort of redeeming value, Lopez concedes that one’s response to a landscape is never a direct registration of what is there, but a result of “what one knows, what one imagines, and how one is disposed” (*Arctic Dreams* 271). Among his chief concerns in *Arctic Dreams* is how desires of various kinds shape people’s responses to the land and how the imagination guides attempts to understand it. Travelling through and studying the Arctic, Lopez was continually reminded of the persons driven into the region over the centuries (sometimes with tragic results) by desires for knowledge, wealth, or adventure, and he concluded that “people’s desires and aspirations were as much a part of the landscape as the wind, solitary animals, and the bright fields of stone and tundra” (xxii). Though he affirms that “the land still exists quite apart from these,” Lopez recognizes that the desires that have shaped the history of the region—as well as desires for what its future might be—are an inescapable context for further attempts to understand it. The visions of those who resided in or visited the Arctic and the stories that resulted are part of what is “really there” to experience. Yet admitting the mediated quality of perceptions of the land does not mean that the qualities or forces Lopez (or others) experiences there are reducible for him to culturally and historically derived meanings. The strange and

severe Arctic landscape still presents values that cannot be contained by images and associations readily at hand. However, such resources seem essential to Lopez for sensing and responding to such values. Where *Of Wolves and Men* emphasized the limitations of any human understanding of natural phenomena, *Arctic Dreams* and its companion pieces consider the capacity of human interpretations and constructions to connect people—however tenuously—with creativity and worth in the land that owe nothing to human valuations.

Some of the complexity of *Arctic Dreams* (and of much of Lopez's other work) stems from his conflicted insistence on both the authority of the land itself and the inability of humans to perceive the land itself. The literary consequence of this is an ongoing tension between realism and stylization in Lopez. His practice of close and precise observation of landscapes would suggest that his approach to giving away his experiences of their transcendent features is to depict them with a richly detailed realism. The introduction to *Arctic Dreams* endorses this view. There, Lopez writes that a more enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic depends on the achievement of "a more particularized understanding of the land itself—not a more refined mathematical knowledge but a deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were another sort of civilization I would draw you, therefore, back to the concrete dimensions of the land . . . simply to walk across the tundra; to watch the wind stirring in the leaves of dwarf birch and willows; to hear the hoof-clacket of migrating caribou. Imagine your ear against the loom of a kayak paddle in the Beaufort Sea, hearing the long, quivering tremelo voice of the bearded seal" (12-13). The power to transform consciousness and redirect a culture's actions proceeds, apparently, from engagement with the all of the nuances and specificity of the land.

Even so, Lopez readily admits that one cannot represent the land in its full complexity by simple description or by rendering it without artful use of metaphors and other narrative devices. Some of his real confrontations with the Arctic show up the shortcomings of realism: the region's frequent mirages, for example, reinforced for him the impossibility of exact knowledge and definition of landscape phenomena. His familiarity with both Western and aboriginal artistic traditions brought him to the recognition that people trying to understand foreign landscapes inevitably relied on either "bald assertions of human presence" or "intangible, metaphorical tools of the mind—contrast, remembrance, analogy," in order to render them intelligible (247). This runs the risk "of finding our final authority in our metaphors rather than in the land," but making sense of land without such aids is, he concludes, nearly impossible (247). Though Lopez often does offer meticulous realistic representations of places and their elements, his well-chosen metaphors and his survey of Arctic history and myth bring to emphasize dimensions of ultimacy, grace, or judgement he senses in the landscape that cannot be related through simple exposition or description. To reveal what is trustworthy or redeeming in the concrete dimensions of the Arctic, Lopez relies on patterns extrinsic to them.

So again, we apparently confront, the dilemma that Peter Fritzell argues is intrinsic to nature writing—efforts to know the wild and reveal it to society as a locus of redeeming value are inevitably "mucked up" by reliance on the language and ways of knowing inherited from society. By this logic, we must accept that the transcendent quality of any natural order is blunted, warped, and diminished by the linguistic and cultural apparatus through which we encounter or describe it. However, empirical theology offers a way out of this dilemma without discounting the influence of culture or

resorting to naïve realism. Empirical theologians do not deny that the dust of words and images our minds kick up in encounters with nature may block whatever illumination nature might give. But they also remind us that the cloudy apparatus of culture may refract that light in startling and unimagined colors.

One of the foundational notions of empirical theology is William James's position that the patterns of relationships we experience are given rather than projected, yet not given precisely or in forms easy to communicate. According to James, patterns of relation and the values or tendencies they express lie on the "fringe" of awareness that we access through knowledge of acquaintance. We can attempt to define these and render them more articulable (as "knowledge about") through logical inquiry, but never with complete certainty about the accuracy of such calculations (*Principles* 258). William Dean, among others, extends this idea by emphasizing the value of cultural resources for clarifying intuitions of value. The past beliefs and practices of a people, Dean notes, can serve to interpret vague but novel perceptions of worth (*American* 73). Whether undertaken analytically or anthropologically, this sort of interpretation is a process not of penetrating to reality, but of abstracting from it; nonetheless, it is indispensable if dimly sensed qualities and patterns are to have any meaningful influence in individual or group life. As Nancy Frankenberry writes, "unless we are content with wordless absorption of felt qualities, we will want to relate the deeply rooted prepredicative perceptions . . . to the predicative patterns of expression" (*Religion* 141).

Religious empiricists generally agree that the "patterns of expression" that most effectively convey transcendent qualities in the world are those belonging to traditions of myth, poetry, and (of course) religion. This is due partly to their ability to foster numinous experience themselves. According to Bernard Meland, such discourses enable

us to see and understand more than we can through purely functional ways of communication and understanding (*Faith and Culture* 62). Their evocative and suggestive qualities foster a sense of values and connections that are not immediately evident to the senses or accepted as a matter of custom. Because of this capacity, Jerome Stone contends, poetry, myth, and religion provide a “translucent” language which can express the insights gained through appreciative awareness (*Minimalist* 121, 158). They represent aesthetic orders than can impart profound but mysterious forms of satisfaction.

Beyond this, religious and mytho-literary traditions provide existing conceptions of things such as divinity, transcendence, redemption, etc., and of the proper response to them. These conceptions, according to Dean, are earlier generations’ interpretations of the experience of transcendence (*History* 132). They can provide handles by which to make sense of and communicate encounters that defy a simple understanding, or symbols whose referent is one’s novel experience of this-worldly transcendence (Stone, *Minimalist* 163). Such inherited concepts, images, and rituals clearly serve to construct what we would call the sacred, and Fritzell might describe their use as an instance where a writer fails at the lofty ambition of communicating nature-itself to society and succumbs to the forms and valuations of society. We would have to regard them either as impositions upon the land or adulterations (if not erasures) of whatever value in nature a text might convey. But empirical religious thinkers, especially in recent years, have rejected the notion that experience is wholly defined or constructed by language and other inherited cultural forms. Stone, for instance, argues that the “translucent language” or “language of devotion” deriving from religion does not constrict or delimit the worth encountered in situational resources of transcendence, but serves to make us aware of dimensions of worth beyond our prior expectation, or to “nurture experiences of

transcendence” (*Minimalist* 160). Additionally, the application of the resources of culture to patterns of this-worldly transcendence can be an occasion for exposure to their creative power. Noting that the terms we bring to bear on experience can themselves be reinterpreted in light of experience, figures such as Dean, Frankenberry, and Stone, have argued for a reciprocal or transactional relation between religious language and religious experience. In striving to name and understand our perceptions of value, according to them, we arrive at new understandings of the names or symbols on which we rely. Linguistic and cultural forms may not allow us final knowledge of the sacred in any form. But they can give it a shape, a force, and an effect on the lives of persons and communities it would not otherwise have. These allow some recognition of and relationship with what might simply remain a broad impression of ultimacy. They supply patterns by which one can incorporate such impressions into one’s thoughts and the pattern of one’s life. They also suggest another way in which the kind of naturalistic divinity being described here is limited and contingent: the fullest possible manifestation of a natural divinity depends on the practices by which creatures respond to it. As Bernard Meland writes, “We cannot say that energies of grace and judgement appear and do work without the benefit of human forms. The ultimate efficacy of spirit is received within structured relationships” (*Fallible Forms and Symbols* 159).

For Lopez, narrative and other verbal forms provide “structured relationships” which effectively convey energies of grace and judgement emergent from particular landscapes. The brief essay “Landscape and Narrative” outlines the two-pronged theory with which Lopez supports this belief. There, Lopez recalls an evening in Alaska when he met with Eskimo men to listen to stories about wolverines and departed the gathering with feelings of exhilaration and a renewed sense of purpose. This kind of response to

storytelling, he writes, is a common one, especially in aboriginal cultures (*Crossing* 63). He attributes it to the ability of certain kinds of stories to bring together within a human subject two different structures of reality: the *exterior* and *interior* landscapes. The exterior landscape is “the one we see,” including the contours and colors of the land, its illumination at different times of the day, its weather and plants and animals. What ultimately defines an exterior landscape and renders it comprehensible is not its individual components, but the relations between them. By way of explanation, Lopez invites readers to imagine walking up an arroyo in the Sonoran desert; the bank of the arroyo is likely to crumble at a touch, and “in that tangible evidence you will sense the history of water in that region.” In other words, an inert feature of the land begins to signify as we grasp the events and relations that have produced it. Likewise, a black-throated sparrow landing in a paloverde bush may create a momentary integrity among parts of a place suggestive of a wider order there. “[T]he resiliency of the twig under the bird, that precise shade of yellowish-green against the milk-blue sky, the fluttering whirr of the arriving sparrow,” Lopez writes, “are all what I mean by ‘the landscape’” (*Crossing* 64). Relationships that compose the exterior landscape include those that are named and discernible, like the nitrogen cycle, and those that are “uncodified and ineffable, such as winter light falling on a particular kind of granite” (65). Lopez sees in these relationships purpose and order that is beyond human analysis, yet “unimpeachable.”

The interior landscape, on the other hand, consists of the thoughts, ideas, impressions and memories ordinarily referred to as mind. Like the exterior landscape, it holds together by virtue of relationships both obvious and subtle. One’s interior landscape, Lopez believes, is “deeply influenced by where on this earth one goes,” by

“the intricate history of one’s life in the land—even a life in the city—where wind, the chirp of birds, the line of a falling leaf, are known.” Such impressions are further ordered by “the thread of one’s moral, intellectual, and spiritual development” (*Crossing* 65).

When they meet certain conditions, Lopez contends, stories can bring about a profound sense of well being by uniting the interior and exterior landscapes. A story that is effective in this way is grounded in intimacy, which Lopez defines as a feeling deriving “from the listener’s trust and the storyteller’s sure knowledge of his subject and regard for his audience.” Such intimacy deepens when teller and listener share an acquaintance with the story’s physical setting and idiomatic terms of expression (*Crossing* 63-64). Additionally, the story must exhibit fidelity to both the concrete elements of the landscape and to the discursive conventions that will give the narrative coherence and engage the audience. “Insofar as the storyteller depicts various subtle and obvious relationships in the exterior landscape accurately,” Lopez writes, “and insofar as he orders them along traditional lines of meaning to create the narrative, the narrative will ‘ring true.’ The listener who ‘takes the story to heart’ will feel a pervasive sense of congruence within himself and also with the world” (*Crossing* 66). When combined harmoniously, according to Lopez, the various elements of story, like syntax, mood, and figures of speech, recreate the harmony of the land in an individual’s interior, leading him to believe that story holds an inherent power “to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call the land” (*Crossing* 68).

To put this another way, story provides contact with the contents of the physical landscape as resources of situational transcendence, or with a more dimly sensed beyond them felt to be of redemptive import. The theory of the two landscapes states this is

possible in part because of a kind of compatibility between the order of story and the order of landscapes that is experienced as transcendent; under the right conditions, according to Lopez, story recreates within individuals the *harmony* of the land, a kind of value or integrity which can work positive transformation. In short, story establishes contact with or relation to what is experienced as sacred. Support for this first plank of Lopez's theory requires a closer look at his understanding of what the sacred is.

While Lopez speaks of a "pattern called God," and sees in the order of "unmanipulated" landscapes "the face of God"(Aton 17), *Arctic Dreams* makes clear that the divine pattern Lopez identifies in nature is not a maximal one as found in Spinoza's pantheism, Linnaeus' notion of an "economy of nature" ordered by God, or transcendentalism's assertions that natural facts reveal universal spiritual facts and laws. Neither is his notion of the sacred, as William Ruckert contends, some generalized notion of "wildness," something "prehuman" or utterly beyond the human that serves as the "ultimate ground of all being" (138, 140). The patterns which most concern and interest him are localized, subtle, and contingent, and he does not extrapolate from them a universal design. Wherever Lopez leaves off from recounting historic or scientific accounts of the far north and presents the landscape as an immediate observer, he does so at least initially by identifying various elements in his view (usually not dramatic in themselves) that somehow relate or connect to one another functionally or aesthetically (or both), often presenting sequences of such groupings. These orderings in the exterior landscape give it character and significance. Early in the book, for instance, he describes how when approached with a desire for intimacy (or with what amounts to "appreciative awareness"), the Arctic tundra may be transformed from a seemingly barren region into a complex and dynamic place, worthy of admiration, respect, and inquiry. Turning from

the bleak far horizon to a nearer view, he notices “spots of brilliant, red, orange, and green . . . among the monotonous brown. A wolf spider lunges at a glistening beetle. A shred of muskox wool lies inert on the lavender blooms of a saxifrage” (xxiv). Simple as they are, these observations refute the generalization about the tundra as a bleak wasteland that he, like many visitors to the Arctic, initially forms. In such moments, the tundra can “open suddenly, like the corolla of a flower.” From these small-scale, local patterns of relation emerges an order with a new, if uncertain value that alters prior assumptions.

Hence, Lopez concurs with the radical empiricist belief that relationships in nature do not reflect an underlying order, but are the source of whatever order one finds (Loomer, *Size of God* 32). Further agreement between Lopez’s ideas and those of Chicago school theologians and Jamesian radical empiricism surfaces in his comments on the importance of relationships to an adequate knowledge of the natural world, and on what constitutes such knowledge. Like James and like Bernard Meland, Lopez finds that relations are in some way creative of what persons experience as discrete objects. Writing of the awareness of Eskimo hunters, Lopez observes that to be intently engaged with land is to be released from conventional ideas of what something “means” and to “recognize that things exist only insofar as they can be related to other things” (*Arctic Dreams* 200). This recognition and the level of awareness is what enables people to survive in the Arctic—to find food or shelter, to avoid dangerous animals or severe weather, to coexist with the lives they depend on. Such awareness takes on validity to Lopez because it supports a human culture that permits the flourishing of other life in the region—something Western technological society has largely failed to achieve. He remarks in “Landscape and Narrative” that by perceiving relationships among things in

the land, rather than just learning the name or identity of these things, is how one “finally learns a landscape” (*Crossing* 64). The emphasis here should be on “learns”; “finally” designates a sufficient penetration into the workings of a place to feel an intimacy with it, a dependency on or identification with that place, rather than an exhaustive, completed factual knowledge of it that would allow the exploitation of its resources with maximal efficiency. Indeed, Lopez believes all attempts to analyze living things and the land eventually lead to confrontation with a fundamental mystery (*Arctic Dreams* 151).

By ordering environments, sustaining life, and vouchsafing mystery, such patterns carry out functions of the divine. But they do so more importantly by their capacity to alter our understanding or loyalties and to suggest patterns around which one may shape a richer and more centered existence—by their potential for reorienting one’s interior landscape. When one approaches the land with sufficient openness and “a sense of obligation,” Lopez writes,

it is possible to imagine an extension of dignified relationships throughout one’s life. Each relationship is formed of the same regard that makes the mind say: the things in the land fit together perfectly, even though they are always changing. I wish the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of wind, the voice of a bird, the heading of a seed pod I see before me. This impeccable and indisputable integrity I want in myself. (405)

The pattern that Lopez calls God is thus like the God Bernard Meland described, a “creative and sustaining matrix of relationships, from which matrix come resources of grace that alert us to goodness in existence”; or, “a community of activities” that can promote well-being (*Fallible* 151; *Modern Man’s Worship* 185).

Attributing a “fundamental mystery” or “inexplicable coherence” to these local unities may underscore their religious import for Lopez, but does little to suggest why their sacred qualities may be conveyed through texts; indeed, these assertions threaten to render Lopez’s writing a vague gesture of reverence. However, Lopez offers other characterizations of the order he experiences in the landscape that is more promising. The land’s “inexplicable coherence” suggests to him that it is “like a poem” (*Arctic Dreams* 274). The openness of the tundra suggests comparisons to a stage, a site for impending events. These remarks suggest, if not an equivalency, at least a kind of compatibility between landscape and cultural forms. Various philosophical traditions offer reasons to believe that this compatibility rests on more than a felicitous analogy; that language acts can convey a sacred order manifested in nature because they are phenomena basically similar in structure and effect.

A poem or any other creative artifact displays an order of a sort, a unique arrangement of signs that generates an affective response in a reader or viewer. Works of art are the most obvious examples of what thinkers as diverse as Confucius and Whitehead have called an *aesthetic order*. Creating a sense of harmony or unity that is more than the sum of its parts, an aesthetic order is distinguished from a *logical order*, whose different components, according to Whitehead, merely represent “alternative factors in a composition,” each fulfilling “an assigned role in the pattern of that composite entity” (*Modes* 83). Discussing the two concepts as developed in Chinese philosophy, Roger T. Ames notes that a logical order derives from “a preassigned pattern of relatedness,” the unity of whose constituents is anterior to their plurality. It reveals the concrete particularity of things only to the extent necessary for them to fulfill a role in the preassigned pattern, and purports to express closure or completeness which allows its

description in quantitative terms. Based on necessity, it is hostile or indifferent to creativity. The “rightness” of any component in a logical order is judged by its conformity to the preordained pattern (321). The Platonic realm of ideas, which calculates the goodness of things on the basis of their approximation of ideal forms, is one example of a logical order. An aesthetic order, on the other hand, proceeds from the uniqueness of particulars as they collaborate in an emergent relational pattern, and the plurality of these particulars is anterior to their unity. Its harmony derives from the relationship of concrete details to one another. Because it is an emergent pattern that reveals continual creativity, it is describable in qualitative terms. The rightness of any concrete detail within such an order depends on how effectively it relates to and join with other details to express a pleasing aesthetic effect (Ames 321-22).

Bernard Loomer’s theology construed God essentially as an aesthetic order within nature, “the organic restlessness of the whole body of creation” which, through the relations of myriad entities, worked to generate greater good or evil (the tension between these creating a high degree of aesthetic value) (*Size of God* 41). Lopez’s “pattern called God” can also be understood as an aesthetic order in the natural world. The plurality of details in places where he finds a rich, uplifting integrity never are melted into unity. His reliance on qualitative description is obvious. The animals, weather patterns, plants, and arrays of light that form a landscape are dynamic, suggestive elements in a pattern whose meaning and order are never final. Lopez clearly distinguishes an aesthetic order as the source of transcendent experience in a recollection of geese arriving at their wintering grounds in California from every corner of the Arctic. The sheer numbers of the birds and their intricate motions of flight interest him, but not so much as “how each bird while a part of the flock seems part of something larger than

itself .” They are “endlessly attractive to the eye because of a tension they create between the extended parabolic lines of their flight and their abrupt but adroit movements” (*Arctic Dreams* 154-55). Like the words or images in a story or painting, these geese from two continents gathered in their winter retreat interact to generate feelings of wonder that strain toward a sense of ultimacy, suggesting to Lopez “the outlines of the oldest mysteries: the nature and extent of space, the fall of light from the heavens, the pooling of time in the present, as if it were water” (155)

The works of Lopez and other American religious empiricists challenge the belief that human symbolic expressions are radically incompatible with manifestations of the sacred as experienced in the natural world. Experience of one, they suggest, is in a limited way comparable to experience of the other. The idea that art may have numinous overtones or produce a “religious experience” is hardly new, but Lopez and religious empiricists contend that verbal forms, such as narrative, can represent the divine by effectively reconstructing it for audiences. Story and other forms can establish relations between the natural elements that form a pattern of transcendent worth to the narrator comparable to those that exist between them in the material world, or recreate the “matrix of relations” alerting us to goodness in existence. Such forms do not transmit the situationally transcendent event as it took place. But they may transmit a some represented portion of it within a order that acts upon audiences much in the way that a local order of landscape constituents work upon those who experienced transcendence among them.

Yet even granting this does not sweep away all questions that attend efforts to convey an experience of the sacred in nature through the resources of culture. Critical problems for this argument for the compatibility of literature and the divine arise when it

is considered against a basic tenet of modern intellectual life: that neither experiences nor expressive artifacts deliver a pure, direct, or complete rendering of the external world. It is not difficult to describe aggregates in nature as aesthetic orders and compare their effects to those of artistic works. But the constituents of orderings that evoke experiences of transcendence in *Arctic Dreams* (or, for that matter, in the life of any individual) are consciously or unconsciously selected from vast numbers of details actually making up a landscape that lie beyond human perceptual capacity. The emphasis in *Arctic Dreams* on the differing ways different groups of people have understood the northern landscape underscores the fact that our visions of a place are constructions motivated by certain desires and conditioning. Likewise, a text takes shape through various stylistic and semantic choices, as well as various subconscious influences on the writer. If an aesthetic order experienced in the land or in reading about the land is inevitably a construction or rendering of a place, how can any goodness truly not our own emerge from it? Furthermore, if an author or observer has been conditioned to make certain choices through his or her cultural background, education, or past experiences, we could say that any order of landscape experienced mentally or presented in his or her text conveys the symbolic and ideological orders in which he or she is situated as much as it does an order “more fundamental” than these—a point which could undermine seriously the shared hope of empirical theologians and nature writers that openness to landscapes or the texts that celebrate them might redirect industrial society’s prevailing attitudes of disregard for or indifference to the natural environment toward more sensitive ones. Where Lopez says that “adumbrations” of the landscape suggest “the ways human life sorts through itself and survives,” one might ask if these adumbrations are shaped at all by preconceptions of what challenges to survival exist and how they may be overcome?

What might one sense in a place if they approached it with different ideas about the situation of the species?

Lopez does not simply duck these questions and assert that story or other cultural forms offer transparent access to the sacred. His rejection of the possibility of unmediated perception of the land, and his acknowledgement of the influence of desire and preconditioning on the valuations one finds in the land have been discussed above. Aboriginal story customs make him aware not only of the compatibility of narrative and the sacred, but the dependence of the latter on the former. Structures of story and myth, Lopez believes, serve to keep land alive inside of persons in primal societies, and make visible for them the invisible powers within it (*Arctic Dreams* 278, 298). And as he wrote in "Landscape and Narrative," the "traditional lines of meaning" within such societies, as well as the skill of the individual storyteller, are essential to making these powers visible and transmitting their regenerative influences (*Crossing* 66). This underscores the contingent and limited quality of Lopez's natural divinity, but may also force us to accept that any experience of the sacred in nature is an effect of culture rather than of any patterns inherent within the physical world—at least if one presumes that significance of our experience is basically determined by culture and language. However, Lopez describes a more reciprocal or transactional relationship between experience and the resources of culture. Admitting that a people's myths may keep the land alive inside them, he notes also that the land itself "makes the myth real" (*Arctic Dreams* 296). Language itself, Lopez reminds us, "is not something man imposes on the land. It evolves in his conversation with the land" (*Arctic Dreams* 278). Whatever authority a system of beliefs or any "traditional line of meaning" has is, in traditional societies, given and verified by the land in which it takes shape. The cultural apparatus

required to make the wisdom of the land show itself can be understood as something partly created by the land. The language and concepts by which we figure the divine as encountered in the relations that make up a place *limit* its scope and effects, but scarcely contain them. Empirical theologians see a similar kind of reciprocity between verbal forms and experience. Their discussion of this relation can help illuminate the outline and application of the second principle of Lopez's theory on how language can transmit the sacred: that, within the resources of language and culture, certain materials are present that hold unique potential to make the limited transcendent qualities of landscapes appear and work.

Narrative obviously is one of the cultural forms which Lopez believes can, under certain conditions, convey sacred dimensions of nature on account of a common structure and effect. In "Landscape and Narrative," Lopez states his belief that his observations about storytelling in aboriginal societies "can be applied to nonfiction as well as to traditional narrative forms such as the novel and short story, and some poems" (68). This naturally begs the question of whether his own nonfiction—especially *Arctic Dreams*, which also develops his theories about the transcendent potential of storytelling—can be said to convey to readers any of the grace or worth emergent from the relations that form natural places. That is, after all, Lopez's stated objective for the book. Yet if we search his work for the characteristics he ascribes to tribal stories that successfully bring together the order of the land with the order of the human subject, we may find reason to doubt that his own work can accomplish this. For story to effect "inexplicable renewal" in its auditors, Lopez writes, its context must be intimate, it must describe the landscape and relations that form it clearly and in detail, and the terms of expression as well as its physical setting must be shared by the storyteller and the audience (*Crossing* 63-64). On

two of these counts, Lopez's work, or that of any nature writer, may fall short. No book can establish the intimacy of the context in which some of his own experiences of renewal after hearing stories are set: a few people, most residents of the same village, gathered together in a home or camp. Calling intimacy "a feeling that derives from the listener's trust and a storyteller's certain knowledge of his subject and regard for his audience" (*Crossing* 63-64), and thus locating it in the attitude of those party to a story rather than in their situation, does not necessarily overcome this. Skepticism about authors and texts runs high in contemporary audiences, and is cultivated almost as a reflexive response by academic literary study. Besides this, few readers of *Arctic Dreams* have lived in or seen the far north, making it difficult to say they share with Lopez its physical setting. If Lopez's audiences do sense some of the Arctic landscape's "authority" or value, it is perhaps in an unavoidably attenuated form.

But other elements of *Arctic Dreams* and certain other works suggest that Lopez's writing does share features with the aboriginal stories he admires, and can be said to place readers in contact with the order in the land he recognizes as sacred. First, while no printed text may establish the intimacy felt when telling stories in a remote Alaska cabin, many readers do describe the tone of Lopez's writing as intimate. This impression likely derives in part from Lopez's adoption of a pronounced and conscious humility in narrating encounters with landscapes, a quality he believes enhances the intimacy of storytelling (*Crossing* 64). To walk carefully and lightly among the nests of birds on open tundra, bowing to the creatures who manage to thrive among harsh conditions of the place, is not the act of the romantic egoist stepping forth from society to lay hold of ultimate truth or beauty bare. It is rather one of a wise person aware of the limitations of knowledge that he shares with his audience, and bound at times to simply honor what

cannot be understood. While these attributes are not unique to Lopez among nature writers, few display them as conscientiously or persistently as he does.

Secondly, Lopez, like native storytellers, takes care to set forth clearly relationships between the parts of a landscape. This practice, discussed earlier in this chapter, enables readers to see how an order might arise out of these. What elements of a landscape Lopez depicts may be only a selection from among many a place holds, yet some of their significance can be grasped directly by readers by virtues of their connections that suggest function, qualities, or purpose. This tactic proceeds less from a presumption that writing represent the exterior landscape as it “really is” than from the more modest notion that one can represent some of the things it really contains, some of its fragments and surfaces.

Thirdly and most significantly, Lopez employs what we might call “traditional lines of meaning” from Western culture to attune his educated audiences in more developed regions that can point to a recognizable “spiritual landscape” behind the physical one under discussion. Often, but especially in *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez turns to varied realms of knowledge, to science, art, history, anthropology, and religion, among others, to interpret a particular place. This emphasizes the irreducibility of the natural world, the inability to know it sufficiently through any one perspective. However, Lopez draws stories or motifs from Western traditions of thought which point to dimensions of ultimacy or transcendence in a landscape. These may describe experiences of ultimacy others have had in a place, or draw on conventional symbols of the sacred to suggest spiritual qualities in a strange and forbidding place.

One instance of the latter is Lopez’s reconception of *agapé*. In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez taps Christian language of devotion to characterize the kind of relation to the land he

believes Westerners need to develop, and underscore the unavoidable religious dimension of this relation. Reflecting on the intelligence necessary to sustain such relationships, he reaches for this term because it is “an expression of intense spiritual affinity with the mystery that is ‘to be sharing life with other life.’” Traditionally, *agapé* has been understood as “the love of another for the sake of God.” But more broadly, Lopez remarks, “it is a humble, impassioned embrace of something outside the self, in the name of that which we refer to as God, but which also includes the self and *is* God” (250). This “desire to embrace and be embraced by the pattern that both theologians and physicists call God” may be the knowledge requisite to living equably with the landscape. What he describes here could be understood as a kind of appreciative awareness that permits openness to the matrix of relations (inclusive of the self) where we encounter resources of grace. But the term *agapé* enriches this concept with implications of sacrifice and unselfish regard for others stresses the importance of renouncing possessive or exploitive attitudes toward the land.

Agapé, Lopez writes, is “a word from the time of the cathedrals” (*Arctic Dreams* 250). He also makes use of these structures themselves as metaphors for interpreting his favorite feature of the Arctic landscape: the icebergs that reflect every tone of the sky, sea, and land as they drift through the Arctic waters (thus presenting a microcosm of the entire Arctic region). Noting that many people have likened icebergs to cathedrals, Lopez argues that the comparison is appropriate less because of similarities of line and scale than because the appeal of both derives from a “passion for light” (*Arctic Dreams* 248). Light, of course, is among the most important resources of situational transcendence to Lopez; he finds the light of the far northern summer “shot through with compassion,” and “suffused with wisdom and creation.” He finds a shared sense of

light's spiritual value in words of landscape painters, philosophers, and prisoners consigned to solitary darkness, and reflects that "Western civilization . . . longs for light as it longs for blessing, or for peace or God" (228). The theology of the middle ages figured both God and the human relationship to God as light, and the cathedrals built at the time were concrete expressions of these. In the efforts of their builders to capture and distribute light in striking ways, Lopez sees a yearning and reach for the divine, and desire for a space where an encounter with the divine seems possible, even symbolically realized (248). The cathedral-as-metaphor serves Lopez as an instrument of spiritual awareness. Impressive as they are from a purely physical standpoint, icebergs also capture and concentrate light in stunning ways. Their striking contours and refractions of light give many observers—and readers of *Arctic Dreams*—impressions of the numinous or transcendent. The figure of the cathedral serves as a structure of culture that can give shape to these impressions, and relate them to familiar notions of the divine. Fritzell writes that the invocation of traditional religious symbols by nature writers is typically an attempt to transfer their significance to the land, but this oversimplifies Lopez's use of them. Jerome Stone proposes a function for religious language that is not strictly determinative in writing that "the language of ultimacy can nourish the experience of ultimacy" (*Minimalist* 160). Lopez's use of the cathedral metaphor (among others) exercises this nourishing function. He understands metaphors not as explanations but as "tools of comparative inquiry" (*Arctic Dreams* 250); he uses the image of the cathedral not to assign the qualities of the Christian trinity to icebergs or to the Arctic, but to expand and sharpen the sense of transcendence experienced before them. The observer or reader is directed toward qualities of the icebergs which are comparable but not identical those of the Christian God, and may be defined better

through further experience and inquiry. Using the metaphor of the cathedral helps Lopez transform icebergs and their environs from being merely aesthetically interesting into things answering deep-seated needs and aspirations in the culture of his readers.

Lopez taps even older, more overtly mythic Western traditions to ground his sense of the Arctic, places in it, or the creatures he encounters there as ideals or concrete resources of blessing or challenge. In the prologue to *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez writes of the notion held by classical Greek civilization that, beyond a frigid and forbidding borderland, the Arctic was an idyllic country where fruit grew year-round, animals were abundant, and the human inhabitants led lives of peace, ease, and contemplation (16-17). Depicting a place beyond the zone of the familiar where one might live in close and enriching contact with the natural world, these tales of Hyperborea (as the Greeks called this dreamland) express a vision much like that which draws Lopez to both visit and write about the Arctic. They are mythic valuations from the past which give form to Lopez's intuitions of worth and enable readers to see accounts of mountains, caribou, and midnight sun coalescing into an ideal drawing them toward a more compassionate regard for the land.

Of course, these legends are balanced with other European myths reviling the far north as a hostile, accursed land for hostile, accursed beings. In late Roman times, Lopez recounts, writers depicted it as a wasteland of scouring winds and frozen mountains whence poured the invading Goths and Vandals; early medieval theologians believed the Antichrist dwelt there (17). These stories add a dimension of ultimacy, an undertone of radical peril, to the very tangible threats of shifting ice, predacious polar bears, and severe cold that Lopez describes. They can have a role in aesthetic "pattern called God" by virtue of deepening a reader's creatural sense, their awareness of finitude

provoked by Lopez's narrative. Furthermore, they add an intense contrast that increases the pattern's complexity, hence its aesthetic power.

The Arctic's potential as a transcendent resource of judgement is further underscored by Lopez's survey of Euroamerican exploration efforts there. Stories of sailors seeking a Northwest Passage, or of Cooke and Peary striving to reach the North Pole have, especially in American culture, become myths of modern times, stories presenting extremes of aspiration, danger, heroism, and failure. As Lopez passes through the same lands and waters they did, and sees the places where they met with rewards, disappointments, or doom, the sense of the land as an agent of mysterious and fearful power increases. These stories provide a context for defining the foreboding impressions it often gives. We also see in these stories, as Lopez tells them, failure to respect the Arctic landscape and the wisdom of the people living there, openness and appreciation of the place subordinated to a desire for wealth or renown. Quite often, these attitudes proved fatal to sailors and explorers, and Lopez sees an arrogance like theirs responsible for the continuing abuse of the land and people of the north. Their experiences show up the inadequacy of prevailing Euroamerican attitudes toward land. If exploration history lacks the supernatural drama of ancient visions of Arctic terror, its episodes strike closer to home because the explorer's misguided motivations for profit and fame are so widely shared by modern audiences. They can convict readers of harmful attitudes as older myths cannot, and bring about a reexamination of one's own attitudes toward land.

To apply these narratives, concepts, or images to the Arctic landscape is, of course, an act of the imagination, and we could take these examples as instances where the imagination is employed to gain a perspective on the land other than that inculcated

by industrial society. This is how Lynn Ross Bryant has assessed Lopez's use of history, metaphor, story, and various fictive techniques. According to Bryant, Lopez asserts throughout his works that by encountering the landscape with imagination, "knowledge is gained—not simply of one's imagination, nor purely of the land, but of the mysterious process by which land and humans—all living things—are involved" ("Nature and Texts" 41). But Lopez means to impart more than "knowledge" by his employment of the images and ideas discussed above. In *Arctic Dreams*, he strives to bring readers into contact with qualities emergent from the order of the northern landscape that can alter their identification with landscapes. As his insistence on the unique aspects of the Arctic demonstrates, that landscape contributes something to the text that is not an effect of imagination alone. If, as Slovic contends, he wishes to model a transformation that his readers can undergo in relation to their home places, the land of which he writes contributes some motive force that aids this transformation. Lopez's work articulates and defends a belief in patterns in the world that can work our enrichment and survival, and in the capacity of literature to convey these, if only in some minimal way. The material reality of the land is perhaps forever beyond the reach of literature. Yet the spiritual value emergent from that is, by Lopez's account, uniquely accessible by it. The paths of migrating seals or the density of ice are things best revealed through mathematical statements. But it lies with words, with stories, to probe that which reveals goodness, worth, or judgement in these things, that network of connection that forms a pattern called God.

CHAPTER SIX

RICK BASS AND THE WILL TO BELIEVE IN WILDNESS

When Rick Bass moved to the Yaak valley of northwestern Montana in 1985 in search of solitude for writing, he found the kind of landscape where Lopez might have seen the perseverance of an “original order.” A sparse human population shared the valley with all mammal species present there when Europeans first arrived. With towering larch and pine, flower-speckled meadows, daunting mountains, clear-running streams, and an almost bewildering profusion of plants, birds, and other small creatures, the valley presented to him “a lush and dripping diversity.” This diversity revealed “cycles and rhythms”—patterns—that he and his wife-to-be felt were shaping and reshaping them everyday, fitting them for life in the valley. Daily routines of wood-gathering, hunting, walking, and observing brought them in contact with an energy such as they had never encountered before, and Bass believed this energy—which he likes to call *magic*—was guiding him into the life of writing that he had come west to live. Though he confessed himself “so tired of churches I could roar” (*Winter* 110), he identified a clearly religious value in the patterns of the Yaak. Bass calls the wilderness of the valley “a kind of church A place with the residue of God—the scent, feel, sight, taste, and sound of God—forever fresh upon it” (*Book of Yaak* 112).

Bass’s experience of inhabiting the Yaak suggests another instance of gradual conversion toward a pluralistic, limited, religious naturalism, an experience of grace within ecological relations that changes and renews individuals in ways they cannot fully understand. But over time, events in the valley precipitated a spiritual crisis of sorts for Bass, one which raises serious questions about the continued viability of the limited

religious naturalism this work has examined. After a few years of residence in Yaak, Bass noticed gaping holes starting to appear in the valley's forests. Once a steady but inconspicuous part of life in the Yaak, logging became more intensive and widespread, with the all-too-familiar consequences. Clearcuts spread on the once-lush mountainsides. Soil eroded from scarred slopes and choked the streams. Habitats of many creatures became fragmented, their migration routes cut off. A single road served the Yaak when Bass moved there, but 1000 miles of roads wormed through it by 1998. Plain as the material impacts of logging were, Bass found its spiritual impacts just as obvious and disturbing. Where the trees and the soil that had supported them were swept away, he found "emptiness rather than grace," and "confusion of spirit" (*Book of Yaak* 5). If an original order had ever prevailed in the Yaak, it was disintegrating.

Bass testifies here to a death of God by piecemeal, and the spectacle is not confined to the Yaak valley. With the disappearance of so many species, the subtle but omnipresent influence of global warming, the fragmentation of landscapes, the loss or alteration of natural features that command awe or respect, and the constant expansion of industrial culture into remote places, where can one find a place with an order not mostly imposed by modern society? What possibilities remain for encountering a goodness (or any other quality) distinctly "not our own"? If any spiritual potency remains in the natural environment, is it too feeble to have any effect on individuals or societies? To be sure, these questions and concerns are not entirely new. Nature writers and others have long denounced the destruction of landscapes and natural features as a form of desecration. But the present scope and momentum of environmental exploitation gives them special urgency, particularly from the standpoint of limited empiricist spirituality. Since empirical naturalism figures the sacred as a function of relations between particular

elements of landscape, the loss of any elements in the landscape threatens a tangible contraction or attenuation of the sacred. With the relational matrix of objects in the world simplified, the values such objects can manifest to observers become simplified also, suggesting the loss of a power to shape and direct those who encounter them. Bass fears just such a loss in the Yaak, writing that the loss or “slippage, of even one or two of these elements in the Yaak—water howelia, shorthead sculpin—can lead to a diminution of the magic, a disappearing” (*Brown Dog* 37).

This is a spiritual crisis without easy answers. Attempts to protect wild areas from development or restore damaged landscapes are one reasonable (and ongoing) response. Intensive management of withered landscapes to restore ecological and aesthetic values might well create places in which vigorous natural processes continued and some persons might find renewal and regeneration. But such places would be human creations in obvious ways, a fact which undercuts the possibility of meeting in the land some goodness or other value not our own, some quality that might shape our awareness in unimagined ways. An alternate approach directs its efforts at people’s minds. Since, as many observers would point out, our sense of the sacred is itself a construct, a value envisioned and imposed by human subjects, the loss of species and fragmentation of ecosystems would not in themselves threaten any diminution of value or meaning; human beings could still construct and act upon whatever worth they might assign to ravaged environments. Again, though, this leads people back upon themselves and amounts to forswearing the possibility of contact with some transforming otherness.

Radical empiricism and the theological tradition that succeeded it offer grounds to demur on any such acquiescence. These traditions deny that the transcendent values we encounter in experience are expressions of some original order that we fall away from at

our peril. We encounter them amidst relata that are outcomes of historical and ecological processes. Whatever matrix of relations among things we encounter is an alteration of some earlier matrix that generated different values. The values we encounter can be understood as transformations of earlier values, but not necessarily as adulterations of them: in a continually evolving world, which order provided the original and authentic standard of value? Empirical theologians have taught that people encounter the divine in the events of history, no matter how chaotic or confusing. Accordingly, there is no reason to suppose that even the most devastating events of ecological history expunge all possibilities of transformative worth in physical environments. Just the same, there is no reason to suppose these possibilities will be obvious to those who seek contact with them. To seek them at all is an act of faith, and empirical theology understands faith not only as belief that some divine worth exists, but as the attempt to salvage or imaginatively grasp it within the ambiguous and disjointed inheritance of history. Where the network of relations in landscapes appear in disarray, stronger measures than Lopez's metaphorical tools of inquiry are in order. Recent religious empiricists in particular have described faith as a reconstructive process that functions similarly to the processes of nature and history even as it resists some of them. In works of appropriation, reconstruction, and interpretation, they suggest, lie rudiments of a faith in nature that may endure even in a future that threatens continuing environmental decline.

Rick Bass's works, especially from the mid-1990s onward, can be read as applications of this sort of faith. In confronting the devastation of the Yaak, and other landscapes around the American West, Bass has looked past losses to find and communicate values within the land and in communities engaged with it that may continue to renew individuals and society, and permit places, creatures, and society to

endure. His writing manifests a will to believe that within the land—no matter what losses it has sustained—and in human cultures that engage it, there exist fragments or traces of historically and relationally-derived value that can be redeemed or reconstructed as sources of spontaneous and undirected creative power. Ironically, conscious engagement of these values seems necessary to Bass to sustain what he and other nature writers refer to as *wildness*, the ongoing creative activity of nature undirected by human beings and their technologies: it is the work of faith that makes the object of its belief tangibly real. This discussion of his writing will center on *The Lost Grizzlies*, his 1995 account of a search for Colorado grizzly bears long presumed extinct, and *Fiber*, a brief 1998 narrative whose unique form exemplifies the sort of spiritual reconstruction that Bass pursues in it and in his other writings.

The Lost Grizzlies recounts three journeys Bass made with various companions into Colorado's San Juan mountains in the early 1990s to investigate rumors that grizzly bears, believed extinct in Colorado since 1975, still existed there. The work is especially important because it depicts a gradual transition (or conversion) from a maximal, wholistic nature spirituality toward a more pluralistic, minimalist one. Yet it also renders and explores in more depth than do Bass's other works the sense of absence felt in places that have undergone dramatic alterations at human hands. Such experiences of absence can be seen partly as a result of older, maximal spiritual perspectives, a fact which itself argues for the increasing importance of the minimalist view in the world that is taking shape. Of course, other responses to these experiences are possible, and certain aspects of deconstructionism and other forms of postmodern thought offer intriguing religious alternatives to the empirical spirituality that Bass adopts. While Bass does not address these directly, they need and will receive consideration in some detail.

Deconstructionism, which denies the authenticity and authority of the category of the “natural,” is a lion in the path of any contemporary appeal to natural values that lie outside the practices of culture. Moreover, deconstructive religious thought holds potential for alleviating the pain and the feelings of tragedy that environmental degradation brings to many. But it does so only so far as it sacrifices the possibility of mutuality between human beings and the nonhuman environment and what benefits such a relation brings. Declaring that we can retain such mutuality despite an inescapable artificiality in our landscapes and the apparent enfeeblement of wild nature (to say nothing of the role of language and culture in constructing our experience of nature), *The Lost Grizzlies* has a significance that extends well beyond the realm of nature writing.

The book’s theological and philosophical meditations arise from an endeavor that is stingily empirical in its aims. Superficially, the excursions the book relates are biological surveys. The participants are looking for material evidence of the bears’ presence they can present to skeptical wildlife management officials to convince them to implement a grizzly recovery program. However, it is clear from the start that these searches are spiritual quests also. Settlements on the fringe of the mountains comprise a profane realm filled with sullen and suspicious yokels, but the terrain above seems vested with numinous energy, filled with signs and portents. Certain places, animals, and events radiate an almost tangible energy, a swirl of “negative ions rubbing around our head, glimmering wild ions brushing our shoulders, dancing like glitter . . .” (24). A campsite is illuminated by millions of “[h]ard stars . . . each possessing the brightness of soul of a person who lived before us” (50). One of Bass’s companions, the self-taught bear expert Doug Peacock, says he feels “magic,” and “lots of things going on” in a mountain meadow filled with bear forage where he discovered a half-buried bear skull (114-15).

While enroute to the first expedition, Bass establishes that the project is motivated principally by faith, by a belief in the bears' survival that, probably, has little objective justification. Skeptical about the continued existence of grizzlies in Colorado (an attitude supported by scientific and popular consensus), he nonetheless feels strongly that "there is a place in our hearts for them, and so it is possible to believe they still exist, if only because that space of longing exists" (6).

Still, Bass wants tangible results. The sight of a live bear in the mountains, he believes, would have important consequences for people by nearby and far away. He is intrigued by the observation of Apaches nearby in New Mexico that the question of the bear's existence concerns "a matter of great power." A San Juan grizzly, he reflects, might mean "power for this country." He would like to think there might always be one more "last" Colorado grizzly, that "one more will always climb out of the earth, out of the center of the country, just when the power of its presence is needed: a wellspring of power, a small trickle, but unceasing" (208-9). While pondering certain personal losses, and the loss of environmental health evident nearly everywhere, Bass imagines that "[o]ne bear, one Colorado grizzly, would kick this century of loss, of greed and of taking, square in its ass" (106). As he begins his quest, Bass has faith in the bear as a maximal force, capable of producing a sure and marked effect—if it still exists.

As the first expedition proceeds, however, questions about the bears' continued existence become overshadowed by the broader and more fundamental issue of whether transcendent worth of any great potency can still be found in wild places or things. At every turn, the searchers confront signs of loss, destruction, and disregard that undermine the vigor and integrity of the mountain environment, and intimate the erasure of anything that might give the land a cast of the sacred. A federally-designated wilderness area, the

search terrain proves in many ways to be a wilderness in name only. It is scenic, and it abounds in animals and deep forests. However, cattle trails score the meadows of its lower elevations. Campers have dumped refuse along lakes and streams, and though motor vehicles are prohibited on the ground, hunters scouting for game skim the treetops in helicopters. Outfitters maintain tent cities deep in the wilderness for hunting clients. On one day's explorations, Bass and the others discover ancient, rusting traps dangling from pine trees with skeletons of martens still clutched in their jaws. It seems that congressionally-drawn wilderness boundaries are unable to keep out the pressures of the world that Bass has come to escape, what Peacock calls "unhealthy and perverse impulses that don't belong in this ecosystem" (67). The searchers pass repeatedly between soaring elation at being in remote splendor and sinking frustration when they come across litter or graffiti and "feel the momentum of the day shift as if . . . an iron door were creaking shut" (59).

The problems that Bass and the others find when they step outside have their roots at least partially inside, in preconceptions about wilderness. Traditional (and maximal) American conceptions of wilderness place it wholly apart from the influences and projects of industrial culture. Wilderness is a virgin goddess in the American mythos, and virginity knows no degree. Once a landscape's purity is lost, its sanctity is also. Typically, concerns about the loss of wilderness and its attendant virtues have motivated attempts to shield or even restore its purity, but there are reasons to doubt that these measures can effectively preserve a wilderness that measures up to conventional ideals. One is suggested Bass's experience in the San Juan wilderness area of Colorado, where institutional safeguards have failed to maintain a state of wilderness that lives up to Bass's ideals and expectations. A case might be made that better management of

protected areas might sustain their integrity and capacity to evoke humility and wonder, though this approach has its limits: wildness loses its quality of otherness or its status as a creative power beyond human control if its survival depends on the intensive intervention of bureaucracy and technology. Also, Thomas Birch's Foucauldian critique of legal wilderness protection indicates an important sense in which legal wilderness areas effectively undermine wild nature as a spiritual resource even while preserving it. Wilderness areas permit the survival of things and values that oppose the expansion of the commercial –scientific regime of modern society but circumscribe them with boundaries which restrict or block the influence of these things and values on modern society. This, according to Birch, testifies to the enlightened and benign character of the commercial-scientific regime and the state that supports it, but limits and blunts the potential transformative or (as Birch emphasizes) sacred power of the “incarcerated” creatures by narrowly defining the ways that people may interact with them. Instead of sustaining wildness as a vital and omnipresent power, Birch writes, legal wilderness preservation “consigns sacred space to the museum of holy relics . . .” (464).

Contemporary philosophers offer or provide a grounding for two primary responses to the possibility of permanently losing the kind of the wilderness that stirred the imagination of earlier generations: either we deny this loss is a problem or embrace the new, humanized landscape as a source of new kinds of pleasure and challenge. One may approach the first through the work of constructivist thinkers of various stripes who argue that we always engage external nature as a construct, something ordered according to cultural preconceptions. Thus “wilderness,” or a grizzly bear as a source of power, represent not objective realities but interpretive conceptions of a society or a group within that society, and undermine any simple appeal to natural value. Extreme versions of this

thinking dispute whether we can have meaningful experience of anything beyond language, or whether anything has a knowable reality other than that which humans assign to it. These claims reject the possibility of encountering a goodness—or any other quality—not our own in the world, or of a reciprocal relation to any object or creature. Additionally, recent environmental historians have refuted the idea that any landscape has existed free from human interference and alteration. For instance, the “virgin land” that European settlers thought they had found in North America has been shown to be the product of a long human history. Besides this, “chaos ecologists” like Daniel Botkin have attacked the notion of a normative configuration of landscapes, showing that ecosystems reveal a great deal of change and instability. Backed by considerable field research, these positions make it very difficult that any particular ecological order has an authoritative and enduring value that ought to be maintained.

Ideas like these have become familiar in contemporary environmental discussions and need no elaboration here. To be sure, they offer a useful corrective to facile beliefs about natural value or the role of human beings in creating environments. But they also compound the spiritual crisis that environmental destruction poses for religious naturalism by placing established concepts of divinity or worth in nature beyond recovery. If one accepts them, Bass’s quest in the San Juans, or any person’s hopes for spiritual renewal in nature, appears naïve or misguided.

The second path keeps open the door to continuing spiritual experiences, albeit ones very different from the kind Bass anticipates as he searches for the bear. Deconstructionist thinkers like Jaques Derrida and the theologian Mark C. Taylor have outlined religious positions that could be adapted as the basis for a pluralistic naturalism viable in the fragmented and dis-encharmed landscapes of the present. For the

deconstructionists, the apparent absence of the God of traditional theism opens up new possibilities for religious life—and experience of a sort of more than human creativity—through the engagement of the signs and texts of culture (and perhaps especially those of a culture’s religious traditions). Derrida and Taylor, among others, abjure classical notions of God as an absolute and transcendent being, possessed of fixed and eternal qualities whose creative work manifests a discernible purpose. Yet while we are bereft of a divine presence, we do nonetheless have textual traditions about God, and for deconstructive theologizers, engagement with these through *writing*—the ongoing and unbounded production of new meanings and interpretations—becomes the focus of religious experience. Derrida takes his paradigm for this sort of literary divinity from the Judaism of his own background. The Pharisees, he writes, understood that “God no longer speaks to us; he has interrupted himself: we must take words upon ourselves. We must be separated from life and communities, and must trust ourselves to traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden” (68). Cast into the “desert” of writing, the Hebrews acquired the freedom to reinterpret the meaning of their law and of their God, and only through that reinterpretation did God and the law remain real—if only as the sense of continued separation from God and his original utterance. In this tradition, Derrida writes, “God himself is, and appears as what he is, as difference, that is to say within difference and dissimulation” (74). Adapting Derrida’s thought into a Christian framework, Taylor sees the collapse of traditional theological ideas as a sacrificial death of God as “the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar”; writing is the incarnation that “*irrevocably* erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script in the infinite play of interpretation” (7).³⁴ Taylor identifies God as

play, the continual slippage of meaning between signs. It is never anchored, ordered, or directed, but “constantly in transition and perpetually transitory . . .” (68). Carnival, rather than pilgrimage, best characterizes the nature of the spiritual life in Taylor’s thought. In the pursuit of writing, one forever deconstructs old meanings of the divine and creates new ones, but with no preconceived standards or objectives; it is a pleasure of merely circulating. Rather than striving to discover truth and avoid error, one commits to a path of “erring,” wandering without a goal but also without dismay in the continuous play of signs.

For some commentators, this continued play with the verbal traces of an absent God becomes the grounds for an experiential recovery of that God, or at least for the continued growth and potency of established traditions of faith. Critic David Klemm argues that the loss or absence of God as formulated by traditional theology effectively makes God present for new interpretations in times of crisis. “The very recognition that I am not God or that theology has no power,” he writes, “can become the symbol by which God is present through negation and present so as to enable me to find hope beyond defeat” (185). Struggle and loss thus become grounds on which to meet God anew (if not necessarily as our deliverer from those travails). Likewise, David Jasper believes that Derrida’s negative theology and the Jewish tradition underlying it opens the path for a spiritual literature (and a theological criticism) that will not reassert or attempt to reinvigorate old theological truths, but approach new and resonant—if also tentative and open-ended—conceptions of the sacred by engaging the moral and religious vacuum of our time. Pointing to post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers like Elie Wiesel as a model for contemporary theological criticism of literature, Jasper contends writing against the

suffering, loss, and the absence of God has become the most important means by which faith is formed and renewed (“Study” 5-6).

Arguably, these notions outline a promising response to the ravaged physical landscape that Bass confronts on his grizzly search, and that is the inescapable setting of most of our lives. Perhaps the ubiquitous negation of wildness has made wildness a more forceful presence to human consciousness: after all, has not the decay of the natural environment spurred the rise of ecological consciousness (along with the proliferation of nature writing and ecocriticism)? Has the damage done to ecosystems by modern lifestyles not driven home the truth of the “connectedness” of living things? This greater sense of interdependency might, in view of Klemm’s ideas, be a sort of naturalized truth that sustains a hope about the worth of the ecological community or of membership in it long after that community has been defeated or dismembered materially. The “space in the heart” that motivates Bass’s search for the grizzlies against the odds represents the sort of presence-in-absence that Klemm believes the God of theism can attain in situations of hopelessness or defeat. And a sense of the “death of nature” (or at least maximal views of nature) could be the context against which an important new body of environmental thought and writing emerges—one might say that this adequately describes the development of nature writing over the last century. The deconstruction of older notions and values of “pure” or wild nature and the clear fragmentation of landscapes could open still another path to new sorts of relations with places and their still wild constituents, allowing “play” with them in ways that generate new and pleasing meanings. (The helicopter-borne hunters of the San Juans might embody just this possibility.) Developments such as the increasing overlap of the urban and the wild, the expanding role of technology in recreational encounters with wild nature, and the free

circulation of natural images in contexts far removed from their sources could be taken as instances of reinterpreting or “rewriting” the significance of natural places and objects of culture’s relation to them. Such play could, of course, go on indefinitely, regardless of any actual deterioration of the environment, and provide an infinite and protean source of *jouissance* if not of orienting or sustaining values. With the adoption of the viewpoint outlined by Derrida, Taylor, and other deconstructionists, what Bass and others see as the contamination or degradation of wild nature becomes an opportunity for a new exercise of imaginative freedom in relations with nonhuman others in order to guide ourselves through and find a fleeting meaning in a world where nature is no longer understood to speak with a voice distinctly not our own.

But the embrace of such freedom poses serious problems. First, it renders all environmental judgements or interpretations purely relative. Since environmental facts are merely constructs, having no intrinsic, “natural” value and merely waiting to be constructed anew, there is no ground for saying that one choice for using or constructing the environment is better than another, for resisting or critiquing any design upon a particular landscape. According to Donald Worster, the historical relativism that follows from deconstruction “can only lead either to complete cynicism or to the acceptance of any set of ideas or any environment that humans have created as legitimate. Disneyland, by the theory of historical relativism, is as legitimate as Yellowstone National Park, a wheat field is as legitimate as a prairie, a megalopolis . . . is as legitimate as a village.” And by extension, guernseys have as rightful a place in the San Juan mountains as grizzlies. Each term in these pairs, Worster writes, “is the product of history and therefore stands equal to its opposite” (“Nature and the Disorder of History” 78).

Accepting this logic, however, negates the prospect of any dialogue with the nonhuman world that might serve to test, challenge, or inform particular human values: nature, by this logic can neither convey anything to its human observers nor act upon them. The long history of aboriginal peoples learning to exist in their home regions by observing other creatures, along with the growing recognition that interactions with the physical environment have helped shape or construct human cognitive abilities, should give us pause about accepting the view that places or their constituents are experienced only as constructs. Moreover, as ethicist Jim Cheney (among others) has pointed out, a strong constructivist perspective reinforces the logic of domination that has contributed to contemporary environmental problems. Though such perspectives claim to deconstruct fixed conceptions of identity, Cheney argues, they effectively “leave the transcendental subject in place, freely creating world upon world of words—finally not taking responsibility for its worlds but merely pouring them forth in conversation after conversation” (“Postmodern Environmental Ethics” 119). Thus, a postmodern deconstructive nature spirituality might emphasize the possibility of “free play” with the land, but recognize no creative freedom on the part of the land or of wild beings themselves.

One of Bass’s comments near the end of *The Lost Grizzlies* can be taken as a rejection of the logic behind such a spirituality. Discussing virtual reality experiments with a friend during a long auto trip, Bass considers the claims of some virtual reality promoters that they can create a world in which individuals are all-powerful, where even gravity and the speed of light can be altered on a whim and for any purpose. His response: “I do not believe it. We can only change our perception of these things. Nature, and the original system that created us, must always remain somehow with us,

the bedrock of our movements and actions” (236). Somehow, the reality of nature, and its features and processes, must be acknowledged. Fortunately for Bass’s hopes, we are not forced to choose between naïve romantic assertions about the unity and worth of unblemished nature and deconstructionist relativism that denies agency and value to natural world. The very historicism that reveals the constructedness of the environment and undermines the possibility of a normative or authentic natural state also outlines the possibility of recovering value and guiding qualities in a nature that is degraded and pointedly artificial. Worster contends that certain historical outcomes such as successful instances of species adaptation, human communities that successfully integrated themselves into a natural community, and ecological changes which enriched—or impoverished— natural communities represent not values per se, but “lessons drawn from nature” that might guide the development of environmental values (“Nature and the Disorder of History” 80).³⁵ This statement offers empirical grounds to reject the idea that alterations in the landscape are value-neutral transitions or arbitrary redactions in a text evolving endlessly and aimlessly. We may credibly view them instead as losses or gains with real consequences for the well being of people and other creatures. Just as significantly, Worster’s statement recognizes that values and norms are, in part, constructs, dependent on individual and communal responses to environmental realities. But where it manifests a quasi-religious logic, it also points toward a fuller vision of how meaning and transformative potential may be found in the wounded and demystified landscapes of the present. Worster calls readers to, and rationalizes for them, a kind of faith that qualities worthy of attention and respect exist in one’s concrete situation, and prescribes action to give them force and meaning. Thus, he virtually describes the fundamental nature of the religious enterprise as understood by American empirical

theologians, whose works have distinct, if rarely noticed, relevance to ecological situation Bass and other environmentalists must contend with.

Empirical theology may claim kinship to contemporary environmental thought insofar as both arise out of a sense of crisis and ubiquitous loss. The empiricists of the Chicago School were responding to the decay of established religious traditions and authorities over the course of modernity. The key to their method (and perhaps to their relevance for the present ecological situation) was to seek redemption not by looking beyond the chaos and uncertainty of their historical situation, but by diligently engaging it. Salvation, if it was to be found at all, would have to be found within the flux of history. Experience of God, if it came at all, would have to come (at least in part) through encounters with inherited traditions of faith whose influence was wavering. Empirical theologians extended the hope that within the chaos and tragedies of history, God could still be found, even while acknowledging that neither the presence nor the efficacy of the divine could be taken for granted. As religious historian William Dean observes, while the empiricists' position "meant that history day by day was filled with theological and religious urgency, it also meant that nothing was finally secure, for God could be overpowered by history, and history, in all its terror and ambiguity, was the final arena for human salvation" ("Empiricism and God" 110). Faith, in this tradition, was as much the active commitment to seeking out grace and redemption within history as the conviction that these might ever be found.

The earliest representatives of the Chicago School conceived of faith not as the affirmation of a received idea, but as a response of a people to history informed by the spiritual traditions of their culture. For Shailer Matthews in particular, these responses were inevitably revisionist in nature. When religious traditions came into tension with

new social conditions, he argued, they needed to undergo revision if they were to remain effective in connecting individuals with the world's "personality-producing forces."

Later Chicago School thinkers, most notably Meland and Loomer, extended these ideas into the sphere of individual religious life. Loomer saw the religious quest as "a discerning immersion in what is most deeply present at hand and concretely at work in our midst," an attentiveness that strives to recognize and appreciate the fullest possible range of values within nature and society (*Size of God* 29).

Meland emphasized both the deliberate nature and the limitations of faith in the empiricist mode. Calling faith "a vital response to realities inhering in immediacy of experience as resources of grace and judgement" (qtd. in Frankenberry, *Religion* 3), he observed that this attitude "will open up a man to the depth of his own experience," but

does not cancel out the fact of evil or preclude visitations of tragedy. It discloses within these sobering and defeating events of our existence the redemptive good which can transmute evil and tragedy into an emergence of good, thus bending the threat of dissolution toward the creative intent. The fulfillment of life, amidst repeated and often disillusioning experiences of unfulfilled hopes, is to be sought and found in an abiding affection for this redemptive good, the source of our very life and the hope of our renewal when our worlds crumble. (*Faith and Culture* 116)

Rather than a trust in something—God, wildness, or anything else—that will deliver one from the disappointment and wreckage of the present, faith, as understood by American religious empiricists, is the work that enables one to endure and to find continuing (if finite) enrichment among them.

Of course, the modest retreat from idealism made by Meland, Matthews, and others does not go far enough for some postmodern thinkers, who might note that the grace or “creative goods” or “personality-producing forces” the theologians urge us to seek and interpret are still qualities presumed to be “out there” objectively, even if they are interpreted by observers. This is a valid objection, but one that is answered well by William Dean. In recent years, Dean has contended that the objects or places we encounter, as well as the worth attending them, are less discrete phenomena than interpretations generated by previous passages in social or natural history. The cultural or natural realities we encounter at any given time, and the values they present, have emerged through the responses of persons, social groups, natural communities, or environmental processes to earlier realities and values. The past presents certain possibilities which limit (but do not determine) the world any agent or process will encounter—including those elements of it experienced as transcendent. Dean’s Derridean position (outlined in Chapter Two) explains how the divine can work through such continual processes of reinterpretation. God, he writes, can act as a signifier, a force of reinterpretation, “real as an influence is real, transforming [an] individual’s life or the shape of the situation.” Or God can represent a signified, a tradition or inherited value that is altered by events of nature or “the workings of historical practice.” In any event, the divine is not static, but continually transforming or being transformed by present realities, with the scope and form of its creative power limited by the inherited past. The continuing presence of the sacred in the world could be understood as “a chain of signifieds, changing as each new signifier alters its past and then becomes part of what will be the past for future signifiers” (*American* 57-58).

Dean parts company with Derrida and most other deconstructionists, however, where they argue that the play of signs is arbitrary and value free, an aesthetic rather than moral exercise. Against such positions, he argues that there is some quality or presence we can refer to as God (or as grace within relations, or a resource of situational transcendence) within the activity of the world or the legacy of the past with a dramatic potential to alter our present or future well being. We inherit from the past—through nature as well as culture—certain achieved values which can be apprehended and given new potency and direction through reinterpretation. (The sort of historically-produced “lessons” Worster discussed could be examples of this trace of value passed down through time.) For Dean, such things (all clearly relational phenomena) would be actual goods that can be perpetuated and enhanced by choices and practices of the present, and the central concern of religion is to understand and encourage the choices that would sustain the greatest value. The religious outlook for him is essentially “faith that the tropism toward greater historical value is real and that it can be sustained through interpretation” (*American* 60).

If value experienced in nature is shaped by previous interpretations—is an interpretation rather than a raw fact—then wildness (as a dynamic or enlivening force) would be something emergent from a place or our interactions with a place rather than something definitely found or missed in a place. The wild vigor of a landscape would depend less on the lack of human involvement than on the sort of involvement humans undertake with it; on whether the values, the signifieds, of a landscape’s past can be grasped and reinterpreted in a way that extends or increases their influence. Accepting that the natural landscape is itself engaging in and undergoing continual reinterpretation, we can also accept that the human interpretation of these places is compatible, even

continuous, with natural processes. A landscape, however degraded, will necessarily bear some trace of a values generated by its past history and hence a value that might be affirmed, internalized, pragmatically tested, and enhanced to the benefit of both the experiencing person and the place experienced.

In section one of *The Lost Grizzlies*, grizzly bears, interpreted by their long and mostly unhappy history of their interaction with Euroamericans in Colorado and the American West generally, approximate such a value. Bass begins the quest with inherited conceptions of the bears' value as an emblem of wildness and of survival that are basically maximal, growing from older impressions of the bear as a manifestation of almost overwhelming natural power. But the context of the present search suggests a new significance for them. The searchers theorize that any existing San Juan bears must be unlike grizzlies elsewhere, more solitary and elusive. Bass feels that if it has endured, the bear population there "must be a traditional one, steeped in the culture of their hard-surviving ancestors. It's a matriarchal society, and the mothers' trails and dens have for the young bears a lucid significance" Human persecution has made them "incredibly smart and strong" but discouraged their freedom and spontaneity. "If only we could loosen the constricting bands around them," suggests Bass, "perhaps our own hidden wounds, our own limits to spontaneity, would begin to heal." Losing a relation to these bears has distorted our sense "of who we were, and who we might be": reclaiming that relation, then, would bring to us a new inheritance of possibilities from which to shape our future, as well as a new influence to guide that process of shaping (51). Bass actually has suggested in many places that animals who have survived rampant encroachment and persecution by humans are in some ways more valuable, more significant than they would be without any human influence. They have proved

extraordinarily resilient and resourceful, the genetic equivalent of “high grade ore,” and thus hold an exceptional potential to regenerate ravaged ecosystems (*Book of Yaak* 80).³⁶ However, the realization of this potential depends heavily on how people respond to its presence in bears, mountains, fish, or grasses, and on how widely people can expand their sense of wildness. It can work as a force if accepted and affirmed by the human cultures engaged with the places where it abides. A faith like that articulated by American religious empiricism is what Bass ultimately sees as necessary to give substance to and evidence for a wildness that is hoped for yet too often unseen.

During the second and third expeditions into the San Juans, Bass starts to break markedly from older, maximal valuations of wildness and undertakes the wider and more critical search for values that Meland and other empiricists commend. He and his companions attempt to recover or reinterpret values both in and beyond the landscape that can keep the possibility of a transcendence (albeit a limited one) in nature—to say nothing of himself—alive. Threats to Bass’s own survival cause him to view the later searches very differently than the first. In the months after the first expedition, Bass began to suffer from mysterious neurological symptoms—mispronounced words, numb limbs, and blizzards of blue sparks intermittently obscuring his vision. Tentative diagnoses of either a brain tumor or multiple sclerosis went unconfirmed. Able to continue his normal routines, Bass still felt vulnerable and shaken by the symptoms, emotions intensified by the subsequent deaths of his grandfather and mother. Dreaming and thinking of Colorado bears while these ordeals unfolded, he believed that, for reasons he could not explain, “[a] relationship was forming” between him and them (96). Perhaps more explicably, the search widens and acquires what Dean might see as a heightened “religious urgency” after this. No potential resource of grace, of healing,

either for him or for wild land, can be overlooked now, and many are threatened. He summarizes the lessons of the first search and the crises following it as “*Don’t coast It’s all being stolen from you.*”³⁷ It is imperative to “hurry and look, pay attention, learn, if we are to earn a glimpse of the mystery of above and beyond” (99). The quest for bears is beginning to resemble Bernard Loomer’s ideal of the religious quest, the search for the widest possible range of values within the facts of nature and history. And this concern for perceiving a breadth of value may eclipse the significance of proving the bear’s existence, as indicated by Bass’s ironic reflection that “[T]he longer we can go without finding a bear, the more I am going to learn” (98). The magic, that sense of power transcending understanding that he associates with the bear may not finally depend for him upon an encounter with a bear. “We want to rediscover the bear in Colorado,” he writes, “even if we never find one.” (140).

Some of the resources that might help renew or invigorate the power of wildness emerge, surprisingly enough, from human communities and their cultures. What began as an outing by three friends becomes the enterprise of a wider community on the second and third searches, bringing new challenges and new blessings of companionship. Though at the beginning of the second search Bass feels “a little annoyed at how crowded the project is becoming,” he eventually recognizes this as a step toward a broader appreciation of it and its environs. “What started out as a straight-line approach—to find clues, even proof,” he writes, “has become something wilder, something fuller. Whereas in the beginning we were . . . looking for tracks and scat, what is instead developing, like deep-growing muscle, are friendships” (97). Expanding and intensifying his relations with other humans reveals a creative good he likens to wildness. The growth of these bonds is, after all, a process, and an unpredictable one. It strengthens individuals and

their concern for the land, in effect creating a new line of defense for the diversity and health of the landscape. Moreover, persons living on the edge of the mountains emerge as allies and supporters. The almost reflexive suspicion about people outside the search group evident in part one is noticeably muted in the second section of *The Lost Grizzlies*. Certain characters (a gun-waving survivalist, a manipulative official from an environmental organization) do cause uneasiness for Bass and his cohorts. But other locals, especially those who have encountered bears or their sign, demonstrate a respect for the wild, an attachment to the San Juans, and a will to believe in the grizzlies. As Bass begins to grasp and appreciate these qualities more, they reinforce his own hopes for the bears and their habitat. Indeed, Bass sees the commitment of people's hearts to wild places as an essential component of wildness in a world where it seems everywhere threatened or constrained; it can no longer be considered something utterly outside human will or action. Without question, Bass acknowledges, the San Juan mountains and other places like them need formal legal protection. But, he argues, "just to throw up more boundaries is not a real answer. It is a partial answer, a stalling tactic, a delay against the loss of wildness." If wildness is to return, "reverence must also return." To retain the creativity of wildness, wild places need the involvement of human understanding and sensitivity, need people's "[r]espect, awareness, caution, providence, prudence, compassion" What could be "a shopping list for the Quakers," Bass reflects, "is really more of a checklist of the wild" (157).

A further revaluation of human communities occurs in part three when Jim Tolisano, the director of a conservation school (who is also a veteran of the second search) who has led a group of students into the mountains to continue the search, expounds on the importance enlisting the people of neighboring towns in the grizzly's

preservation. Skeptical of bureaucratic maneuvering, Tolisano advocates “a more humanistic approach” that includes finding an overlap between the goals of preserving bears and their wild habitat and the needs of local communities in hopes that “the communities will get involved, will help give positive and directive force to the San Juan’s future” (223). As one student summarizes this, the duty of the searchers is “to talk to the people in towns, in the bars and Laundromats”(224). This sounds less appealing than simply camping and wandering in the mountains, Bass thinks, but he also acknowledges that it is the right thing to do (224). If successful, the result would be a wilderness that was very much a result of human inputs, one that was not radically other. Bass seems here to anticipate the argument that ecophilosopher Jack Turner would make shortly that the term “wilderness” properly designates not the absence of human activity in a place, but a certain type of human interaction with it (88). And the kinds of human interactions that will sustain the mountains as a source of creative power and value are beginning here to assume a form in his eyes.

None of which implies that the land itself holds no seeds for the recovery of wildness. The searchers encounter new resources of transcendence in the San Juan landscape that promise its reenchantment. The lamentations about the degradation of wild country that filled part one largely disappear. Replacing them is increased attention to the details of the landscape and the interrelations between these: discussions of how rain, sun, soil, and temperature patterns interact to influence the distribution of mushrooms; the seasonal feeding habits of birds; the plant communities of the high ridges. Such things seem like small manifestations of magic to Bass, enough to make him proclaim “the earth is a miracle!”(160). Taken by itself, this could be the utterance of any starry-eyed backpacker. But turning to the language of inquiry—to the thought of

Aldo Leopold in particular—Bass interprets his experiences of spiritual uplift in the wilderness in a way that relates them to the ecological functioning of wild landscapes, giving greater definition both to the experiences themselves and their pragmatic value for individuals and land communities. Leopold used the image of a “Round River” to illustrate the circulation of matter and energy through landscapes. In a simple version, rocks decay to make soil, which grows plants which feed animals which feed humans whose remains settle into the soil which is pressed into rocks—which decay to make soil, etc. Such chains, according to Leopold, grow “longer and more complicated with each revolving century of evolution. Round River . . . grows ever wider, deeper, longer.” Of course, some things return to the soil after a short journey, which amounts to a premature “spillage” of energy from the system, and some energy is diverted into other “branches” of the river. The image is one of potent, but unpredictable and variform creative power.

Adapted by Bass, and considered against his experience in the San Juans, the Round River of matter and energy spirals into a hermeneutic circle that connects human consciousness and reflection to the cycles of nature. Musing before a campfire one evening, Bass perceives that he and his cohorts have been in a stream of “*mountain, snow, sun, chanterelle, bear, man.*” Tracking bears, picking mushrooms, cowering from storms and running up mountains has put them right in the “spillage,” which, according to Bass, is what “gives meaning and richness to the way a life is lived, to the flow of the river.” The various parts of the landscape represent distinctive qualities generated by the natural history of the San Juans. All have some role in maintaining (or altering) the rest of the system. However, Bass sees their interactions as producing a quality whose value goes beyond its functional value in the system, something that enriches experience or consciousness as well as the material system. At the very least, the relationships of the

wild offer “something to distract us from, or instruct us during, our kicking return to the soil” (165). The moment is a superb expression of “discerning immersion” in the realities of the mountain environment, and of continuity between representatives of limited empirical spirituality in American nature writing. Leopold’s concept (itself a reinterpretation of an ancient symbol) signifies to Bass something about the integrity of the land where the search takes place. Yet during Bass’s experiences in the San Juans, it becomes a signified of a spiritual quality in that landscape. The landscape leads Bass to a reinterpretation of Leopold’s ideas of “spillage” (recall that he identifies spillage with the feeling of “magic” experienced in a place) and circulation that integrates human spiritual and emotional responses into the flow of matter and energy through the land.

In a lecture to his students, Tolisano presents other reasons for attentiveness to more-than-material factors in understanding and applying scientific concepts in conservation work. One operating concept in conservation biology is the “rule of one hundred,” which enumerates “the smallest an isolated population can be and still have a ninety-nine percent chance of surviving for a hundred years” (202). In regard to large predators (such as grizzlies), many biologists posit as an ancillary to this a “rule of fifty,” which maintains that at least fifty individuals are necessary to ensure the survival of a population for a hundred years. Tolisano points out that these concepts are distinctly non-empirical, deriving less from hard data about predators than from principles of human genetics and a desire for ease of calculation. It does not account for reproductive strategies of particular predator species, or the possibility (argued by some biologists) that chromosomal variation is less important for them than for humans. Nonetheless, as Bass notes, these formulas are seized by resource industry spokespersons to suggest the

hopelessness of saving dwindling animal populations. “The Rule of One Hundred and the Rule of Fifty,” he observes, “are abstract, dangerous enemies of hope” (203, 206).

They are certainly theories that attempt a comprehensive understanding of animals, that make absolute pronouncements about the viability of a species. They close down inquiry into that species or its habitat, and effectively dismiss the need for the kind of ongoing intimacy with the land and with creatures Bass and others in this book have undertaken. But maintaining hope in the survival of the wild does not require the dismissal of science or a groundless insistence on the ability of species to overcome the odds against them. Conservation biology has formulated other concepts that are considerably more empirical in ways that James, Meland, and Dean would appreciate, and which may reveal a basis for hope, for faith that wildness survives. During the same lecture, Tolisano discusses the concepts of keystone species, indicator species, and recovery species. Keystone species exist near the top of the food chain in their habitat, and depend on a network of other creatures to survive; indicator species are species especially sensitive to change, fluctuations in their numbers can indicate subtle changes in their environs; recovery species, on the other hand, can signal an increase in the general health of the land. (Grizzly bears, as Bass notes, could occupy all three designations). Popular environmental writing has familiarized these concepts widely as ways of measuring ecosystem health, but Tolisano notes that they also offer a means of overcoming “linear thinking” about nature and the tendency to study species in isolation (204). Keystone, indicator, and recovery species provide a way to “assess the diversity in a system,” to consider the relationships that ecologists recognize as the context and support of a species—and that James, Meland, and Bass recognize as context and support of worth, of grace, and of creative goodness. Like Leopold’s notion of the Round River,

they enable a broadened and more contingent view of the wildness of a place, and a means of sensing some fragment of a wildness too dispersed to be experienced directly, one that may work upon an appreciative observer regardless of the presence, absence, or vitality of the designated creature.

All the same, uncovering new resources of creative goodness by appreciative awareness does not yield any kind of easy assurance about the efficacy or survival of wildness in the world. Faith remains for Bass a constant struggle with doubt, and, more specifically, with ingrained and culturally sanctioned ways of thinking (as well as inescapable signs of abuse of the environment) that conspire against any belief in wildness. Personal or societal renewal by the powers of wildness is not an automatic process, and “rediscovering the bear” is not a foregone conclusion of a quest for wildness—even when the evidence is staring Bass in the face.

While on a solo hike above treeline one day during the third outing, Bass encounters three strangely-behaving mule deer. They seem spooked by him, yet also hesitant to bound away. Moving closer to them, the source of their anxiety becomes clear when from behind a fallen tree thirty feet in front of him, “a creature leaps up . . . seemingly right in my face, a brown creature with great hunched shoulders. It’s a bear with a big head, and for the smallest fraction of a second, our eyes meet” (214). This moment of connection ends quickly when Bass and the bear flee in opposite directions.

The feelings of exhilaration, joy, and fear that the episode initially left him with soon give way to “an inexplicable sense of loss.” The emptiness of the rock chasm where he saw the bear and the deer now “seems too huge, and the briefness of the encounter too severe.” Having seen what he came to the mountains to see, he still cries “I want *more*” (216). Confronted with a bewildering sense of anticlimax, he wonders if the proper

response is “to protect myself, to create doubt within myself, perhaps to keep the notion of the search going in my mind, rather than a two-second glimpse that ends it” (216). And there may be reason not to trust that the search has succeeded, for Bass’s brief sighting of the bear is not the kind of proof that forest and wildlife managers would accept. It will not mandate new protections for the San Juans that would safeguard their wildness. “I want to hold something,” Bass writes. “I want to have my picture, anyone’s picture, taken next to the bear. I want the bear to return from the woods, loll in the meadow . . . and say, Okay, the jig’s up, here I am” (216-17). In short, he wants knowledge of fact, data that are transportable and manageable. He wants the presence of things apprehended, the photographs of things seen; in short, the narrowly empirical proof necessarily to wrest an assent from modern skeptical culture.

After a second episode of disappointment and irritation on the trail, Bass feels once again that there’s “nothing to do but climb.” He bounds furiously toward the summit, possibly “to get away from the truth.” Despite his literary celebrations of mystery and magic in the wilderness, he admits that he is a little afraid of it. An intuition that his reckless climbing might lead to a dangerous accident induces him to repair to a small cave to rest and eat. There, he continues to ponder what he saw. “I am so rattled,” he admits, by the sanctity and strangeness of the encounter that I continue to try and construct in my mind ways for it *not* to have been a bear,” for it to have been, perhaps, a hallucination brought on by his still-mysterious neurological condition (218). What leads to acceptance of the event is not a rationalization, but a moment of openness to wider patterns in the land that brings about a new valuation, a reinterpretation, of the bear that uncovers in it and its habitat a new sense of transcendent worth. Recuperated from his punishing climb, Bass reflects that it seems he can feel the mountains thrusting upward

beneath him, “feel them swelling above the tectonic plates of their birth, and yet simultaneously being stripped down from above by the quick, furious passions of weather . . . like any one of our lives.” He can feel too the altitude working on his body, altering his breathing and heartbeat (218). The moment offers a classic description of radical empiricist or Whiteheadian nonsensual perception, an experience informed by relations, tendencies, and the influence of past events. As such, it offers insight into a deeper natural history than can be immediately comprehended or described, one whose extended pattern of relations conveys a worth and a grace that give Bass new courage for life lived in the shadow of loss, and new understanding of what he has sought in the Colorado mountains. His brief sighting of the bear might not be enough to convince anyone else of its existence. Nonetheless, it seems to him that “a two-second glimpse of the Old Man . . . is just about right, just about correlative for a sighting of the most keystone of species.” It was enough to experience the bear as something fully engaged with its habitat, yet mysterious and unexpected; as a powerful resource of situational transcendence, desired but finally beyond understanding. Enough of a glimpse to leave him filled with “[t]he utter holiness of being alive and a part of such a system, the utter holiness of being allowed to be a lichen within the system” “I’m not normally a cheery person,” Bass confesses, “but here on the chalk-rubble slope. . . I find myself grinning, then laughing at how tenuously alive I am. To hell with electricity, with sizzling nerve endings and mispronounced words. I want to learn a new language anyway, the language of breathing forests, the language of further mystery” (219).

This moment is a true rediscovery—and reinterpretation—of the bear. Bass has not merely accepted that he saw a grizzly and thus realized the objective of his search or confirmed the existence of wildness (conventionally understood) in the San Juans.

Appearing to him when he held no expectations about it, when he did not anticipate it, the grizzly is experienced as a being with great presence engaged with a natural system whose roots are ancient, whose existence is fabulously complex. However, the bear is not here the symbol of almost indestructible vitality was to earlier observers. In Bass's eyes, he (and possibly all humans) shares with the bear a condition of endangerment. Yet the bear is able to endure and thrive within, to be fully itself within a rich environment. No longer a symbol of overwhelming power, it conveys the possibility of vigorous endurance against obstacles through adaptation. It may be the ultimate manifestation of courage in spite of finitude, and its survival makes the chances for his own look better. As Meland might say, the visitations of tragedy Bass has struggled with have not been cancelled out—he has not forgotten his mysterious illness, nor has he been able to escape indicators of human abuses of the land. Nonetheless, the threat of dissolution—personal and ecological—that has dogged Bass during this narrative has been bent toward renewal, toward joy. Such resources are available to persons not by virtue of the inherent power of wildness, but when they engage the wild world creatively and spontaneously, free of preconceptions of a lost Eden. Wildness still may exist as a source of spiritual support and renewal, but only when individuals have the will to seek it off the trail of their inherited ideals about the wild earth, and the courage to embrace a landscape in spite of its brokenness, and through their own.

If the spiritual vision of *The Lost Grizzlies* is an innovative one, the book is a conventional religious quest narrative in that it depicts the narrator's retreat into a wilderness in search of healing or enlightenment. Bass's works after *The Lost Grizzlies* continue to develop this vision by taking it into more mundane and pragmatic settings. *The Book of Yaak*, a 1996 collection of essays, examines locales, animals, people, and

social customs in the Yaak valley that contribute to the place's distinctive identity and suggest values that could inspire and shape resistance to the trends of development that threaten the Yaak and places beyond. Closing with a call for readers to join efforts to gain legal protection for the Yaak, the *Book* might be regarded as an attempt to transmit the unique transcendent elements of the place to transform sympathies and commitments of readers. Bass's 1998 novel *Where the Sea Used to Be* is set in a fictional valley that resembles the Yaak. Its inhabitants find peace, purpose, and dignity there, but only through continual adjustment to changes that occur within the valley naturally as well as those imposed from outside. The values of the place—along with the lives lived in the place—must be rediscovered, renewed, and remade to sustain a sense of vigor, hope, even of magic there.

In his brief, polymorphous narrative *Fiber* (1998), Bass undertakes what is arguably his most adventurous and provocative treatment of the critical and interpretive faith he began to articulate in *The Lost Grizzlies*. The book consists of its narrator's reflections on a series of transitions in his life that can be understood as reinterpretations of his identity and work. Like Bass, the narrator of *Fiber* is a ex-geologist from the South who moved to Montana and became a writer, an occupation he (unlike Bass) eventually leaves to become a logger. Accompanying these changes of vocation, however, are more subtle transformations in his understanding of his work, as well as an incremental expansion of his "appreciative awareness" of the land where he has settled. His reinterpretations of himself and the accompanying growth of his sensitivity lead him to discern, within the land, the community, and in his work itself, values with the potential to alter economic practices and cultural attitudes that are damaging nature, communities, and, perhaps, the art of writing.

As a petroleum geologist in his “first life,” *Fiber*’s narrator was, he admits, a taker. He took oil from the ground, but soon began taking other things from “the surface”: large boats that he would sail in for a night, then sink or burn; license plates, a picnic table, cars, jewelry that he would leave in birds’ nests or tree limbs. The narrator offers no reason for this thievery, other than satisfaction of some vague inner compulsion. “I would look at my two hands,” he recalled, “and think, What are these made for, if not to take?” (12). The narrator’s attitudes and behavior make him a metonym for an industrialized society driven by the reckless extraction and profligate consumption of natural resources. Juxtaposing these widespread beliefs and practices to opportunistic, random burglary, the passage delivers an underhanded indictment of them.

This is not to say that a moral epiphany drives the narrator out of Louisiana into a pristine Montana valley: an impending arrest warrant does that. In Montana, he embarks on his “second life” as a giver, specifically as a writer, a giver of stories. He is slowly learning the landscape at this time too, becoming increasingly attuned to *things*—wildflowers, deer, stones, insects, the shadows in the forest. He begins to feel that the valley is carving and fitting him, altering him in subtle ways. Eventually, distress at the destruction of the valley by intensive logging, and frustration at what he sees as the superficiality and impotence of art (it seems powerless, after all, to check the greed and violence of modern life), launch him into a life as an environmental activist. Here too, he is attempting “to give . . . after a life of taking,” though this too is work of taking, as he finds himself always “asking for something—petition signatures, letters to Congress—instead of giving something” (4, 17). These efforts also lead to despair and discouragement. But wallowing in grief and failure is not an option—food needs to be

put on the table and the plight of the forest and its wild inhabitants still needs to be told to the world. To do both, the narrator starts earning a living by cutting and hauling logs.

It is a startling choice to say the least, and one that would by conventional wisdom indicate a reversal or violation of the narrator's prior environmental commitments.

Logging, after all, signifies commodification and destruction to most environmentalists.

Yet it carries also traces of closeness to and knowledge of the woods, and these are what the narrator seizes and expands on in his reflections on the job, revealing it as a possible mode of resistance to exploitation of the forest. The narrator does not adopt the vocation in its customary form but adapts it—reinterprets it—to signify potentially transformative values.

For him, cutting trees is not simply a process of harvesting natural resources, but an act of relating to and giving himself to some vital power. It is fundamentally a labor of love—love for the real. It feels good, the narrator tells us, to leave the sedentary trade of writing and “be hauling real and physical things out of the woods” (15). He relishes “the green sweet gummy sap of fir stuck to my gloves and arms The weight of logs as real as my brief life, and the scent of blue saw smoke dense in my leather boots”: also “[t]he scent of sweat, of fern, of hot saw blade . . . damp bark” (16, 36). “I suck these things in like some starving creature,” he says, and under such influences, the visionary world of art once so important to him seems less and less important, less and less a source of meaning or guidance. The books lining the shelves of his cabin sit there “motionless and unexamined . . . like photos of dead relatives, dearly loved and deeply missed” (36-37).

Other consequences of this way of life are more tangible. Hauling log sections out of the forest on his shoulders both strengthens and weakens the narrator. His muscles

grow strong, but “certain accessories or trappings, such as ligaments, cartilage, disks, etc., are fraying and snapping . . . ” (18). Since he uses the right side of his body more than the left, it is wearier after a day’s work, and he remarks that “because of this slight imbalance, accumulated and manifested over time, my steps take on a torque that threatens to screw me deeper and deeper into the ground” (33). The prospect of growing shorter and sinking deeper into the earth every year, seems “neither delicious or frightening. It is only a fit” (19). Thus, the taking of trees becomes a way of adjustment to the landscape in the most basic, the most materially real sort of way. The narrator understands logging as a reciprocal process which physically reorders both him and the landscape.

As he works on the forest and the forest works on him, the narrator also comes to recognize certain values in it which strike him as manifestations of power or grace, formed within networks of ecological relationships, that have importance not only to him, but to persons or communities he knows, as well as to those far away and unknown. He notes that while all of the trees he cuts are about the same size, not all are equal in quality, and the factors that influence the hardiness of the trees fascinate him. He loves to think of all that goes on in the one or two or five centuries of a tree’s life—“all the ice and snow, the windstorms, the fires . . . ” (15). Trees that live in the shadows of the ancient forests, growing slowly and enduring these influences for many seasons, are the narrator’s favorites, strong, durable, and bulky. One could say they represent interpretations of long passages in the life of the forest. Conversely, fast-growing second-growth trees in former clearcuts may grow nearly as large, but are light and flimsy, seemingly made of “liquid sunshine” (7). They interpret a much shallower range of events.

The narrator's need to make a living requires him to harvest both sorts of trees, but when he takes the younger, flimsier ones, he imagines that when some distant carpenter drives a nail into them, they will split and the carpenter will curse, condemning unconsciously the system that denies forests the chance to grow strong. But he imagines that the dense logs from the "forests of darkness . . . standing staunch and strong within their individual houses' frameworks," making "houses and homes stronger, one at a time . . . as they feed on my magical forest." These homes, he supposes, might then raise strong families and act as "cells or cores" of health that "will help shore up the awful sagging national erosions here at century's end." What he envisions here is the reinterpretation and transmittal of a value achieved during the life of the forest, spillage from the Yaak branch of the Round River. This may be only a fantasy, he concedes, yet he wonders why we should regard solid, sap-dripping wood as less powerful than airy ideas that people fight over and profess to live by? (20-21). His logic here ties land health to social health, rooting both in a diverse ecological matrix. By contrast, the sickly trees call to mind the sickly and superficial art that contributed to the narrator's loss of faith in writing. Both are results of a ravenous and relentless economy, and of insufficient contact with the forces and substances of nature.

Despite his strong belief in the inherent qualities of trees or their habitat, the narrator's hopes for the transformation of the culture do not rest on these alone. An unorthodox (one might say artful) conveyance of the wood to market is equally important to his faith. In protest against the sawmill's insatiable demand for wood, the narrator begins to haul his logs there ever more slowly, to take more time with them. He memorizes their feel, their smell, and he analyzes the pattern of growth rings on each (37-38). These are aspects of the logs that markets have no interest in, but by attending to

them, he challenges the market's presumed right to and need for an uninterrupted flow of resources. The narrator's love of the real and cognizance of non-utilitarian values has an effect, however fleeting and feeble, on the operation of the market and its agents.

Besides lingering over his best logs, the narrator also "tithes" some of them to other loggers in his valley. In the dead of night, he deposits logs into the trucks of neighbors, reflecting how they "will think it is a strange dream when they look out in the morning and see the gift trees . . . but when they go out to touch them, they will be unable to deny the reality" (33). These "fairy logs," as the puzzled community calls them, serve not as objects of exchange, but tokens of wonder, testifying to the mysterious creative power of the forest. Placed outside their usual context, where they are encountered as resources waiting to be taken, their trace of wild value can pierce through the usual valuations of them.

As he works at logging, the narrator of *Fiber* effectively inverts the values of the market economy he serves, and makes his work a means of fighting the environmental destruction the industry historically has wrought on the land. His gestures also trace a vision of an economy that considers more than the appropriation and processing of materials; engagement with the forest and its myriad relationships has in his case worked transcendence of established notions of worth and work. Work for the narrator is a practical matter, but also a ritual, even a devotional practice by which he seeks the release of power to heal the land, and the nation. Of course, success is uncertain. The mills keep devouring logs, and he notes that factors ranging from cheap overseas labor to electoral politics work to keep the economy hot and pressure on the land intense. Still, the narrator continues to interpret and convey the creative potential of the land through ongoing redefinition of his interaction with the land, and with human society. In a

postmodern condition of flux, of loss, and of ever-shifting meanings, he may be the supreme embodiment of the critical and imaginative empiricist faith that Meland, Dean, and others commended as a response to a world where uncertainty, creativity, and integrity are abiding components.

Being a fictional character, however, he embodies not the practice of this faith, but its product: he is a sign that interprets traces of worth or possibility in the forest and the work done there. *Fiber* underscores this at the opening of the book's final section when the true narrator admits that there is "no story: no broken law back in Louisiana, no warrant, no fairy logs" (45). What remains is a valley suffering from unrestrained logging, and one overextended activist/logger/writer losing patience and tact along with his battle to protect the valley. Much of the last section of the book delivers a simple but desperate plea for help in this battle, punctuated by castigations of toothless art and compromised politicians and environmentalists. The narrator recognizes that this plea is a tinny yelp, a snarl at fellow activists and artists, inartistic. Like a trapped wolverine, he is "snapping illogically at everything in [his] pain . . ." (50). But readers are prepared for his hard sayings by the story-within-a-story told by the false narrator, a John the Baptist in coveralls who enlists readers' curiosity and imagination.

In several works, Bass has wrestled with the conflicting pulls of art and activism. They seem to him to require different mindsets, and to chip away at one another's integrity when kept too closely together in one's work or one's life. By reinterpreting or reimagining the relation between art and activism in *Fiber*, establishing a compatibility between them, the book's actual narrator, and by extension, Bass, succeeds in drawing attention to the problems of the Yaak while pointing to a critical strategy for engaging them. In *Fiber*, Bass heeds the admonition not to "coast" that he gave in *The Lost*

Grizzlies. Its message is that if we wish to mount effective resistance to ecological problems (or merely retain a personal equilibrium and a vital connection to the earth), we cannot continue to appeal to old notions of the forest primeval, of rapacious lumberjacks, and art (especially nature writing) as an assured path to wisdom and to intimacy with the land. The work reflects a complete commitment to renew and reempower, through ongoing interpretation, resources of historically-achieved value in both culture and the land that can counteract the forces of environmental ruin and the despair they cause.

If Lopez's works stressed the importance of art in accessing resources of limited transcendence and a kind of structural correspondence between landscapes and texts, Bass's works, and especially *Fiber*, point to art, and to a general attitude of discerning sensitivity, as an extension, or perhaps a transmutation, of processes in nature whereby resources are appropriated, reorganized, and applied to achieve new ends. Expressions of wildness we encounter will in fact be constructs, but not of a sort radically different from things shaped or constructed by climate, predation, or fire. And while they will bear the trace of our participation, they can still remain something transcendent to our situation, not fully knowable or definable. Our reclamation and re-imagination of the sacred in nature influences but does not determine its shape and effect. Bass conceives the San Juan grizzlies as guides to survival in an increasingly hostile world, but they direct his attention to and work in him an identification with the land that is unanticipated. Thus, the active faith that Bass portrays, the will to believe in and recover traces of vital power in landscapes that are far from pristine, argues that encounters of some value not entirely our own remains possible despite the ecological decay of our time. Our appropriation and interpretation of what the land presents can function not as an imposition on it, but a means of extending its power.

So it is that “protection” of the wild (especially as a source of sacred value) now demands not the withdrawal of humans, but a certain form of involvement and a higher degree of intimacy with them. Bass’s writings propose a new sense of ecological “wholeness” in which human concern and intervention replaces certain natural functions which once sustained wild systems. This, however, does not indicate a new unitary or maximal conception of the sacred in nature. The transforming power of the wild as described in Bass’s recent works is a contingent and limited thing, a function of the relation of things within the landscape, not excluding human inhabitants and visitors. *Fiber* and *The Lost Grizzlies* depict experiences of transforming or renewing worth in the land as products of a mutuality or interdependency between objects of experience and an interpretive context. A weakening or diminution of either would mean a loss of divine potency. Grounding experience of the sacred in one’s response to the landscape, however, does not doom religious naturalists to simply watching and mourning the passage of creatures and habitat. The critical faith articulated by Dean and placed in an ecological context by Bass’s work hold out the chance that within what has so far survived development lies some saving remnant of value that might be redeemed for the good of our environment, our communities, and ourselves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MINIMAL NATURALISM IN DIALOGUE

The spiritual visions of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass represent four striking departures from a spiritual orthodoxy reflected in nearly every religious tradition in the West. Yet it would be incorrect to see these as purely individualistic beliefs, isolated or wholly disjunct from spiritual responses of other nature writers, or from other currents in recent environmental thought. The development of a limited naturalistic faith in the works of these four writers can be understood partly as a long-established yet minor spiritual motif in nature writing moving from a subordinate to a dominant position. In addition, aspects of this faith correspond to ideas emerging from recent environmental literature and theory, presenting the possibility of a mutually enriching dialogue between these discourses.

The movement of these four writers away from maximal beliefs toward limited naturalist spirituality represents a break with most of their predecessors and contemporaries among nature essayists, but not a complete one. Even in texts which reflect a maximal religious outlook, instances of a minimal sacred presence or event (comparable to what Stone calls resources of situational transcendence) still appear, sometimes alongside or in tension with a maximal view. By means of their elusiveness and their “long-drawn unearthly howl,” the loons Thoreau studies in *Walden* confront him with an acute sense of his own creatural limitations and a mysterious beauty that bespeaks resilience and pride (170-71). The quality the loons suggest is independent of Thoreau’s sense of “grand laws” executed in every particle of creation or of an underlying unitary power expressed in natural objects.³⁸ In *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard

muses that “every day is a god” (11), indicating an appealing vitality in each day and the elements of the environment that present themselves in a given moment. She muses on awakening one morning that the day’s god “lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders” (12). While she “worship[s] each god” and “praise[s] each day,” (11), she finds these day-gods impotent to bestow much more than passing wonderment and maintains a sense of “one great god” beneath all being who may be ultimately unknowable, but whose existence still moves her “to want to worship him by any means at hand” (43, 55). Terry Tempest Williams often interprets the landscape of her native Utah in light of her Mormon faith, and consequently figures the religious significance of these lands in maximal terms much of the time. A passage in *Refuge* renders the earth as an embodiment of the “Heavenly Mother” described in Mormon doctrine. Noting that this would provide a logical balance to the transcendent Heavenly Father and Jesus, the conception is rooted firmly in the context of maximal theism (*Refuge* 241). Even when not explicitly invoking Mormon theology, Williams often personifies landscapes and depicts interaction with them as relating to some sort of maximal individuals. A narrator roaming the canyons of Utah in *Desert Quartet* embraces the ground as the body of a lover, synchronizing her breathing to the rise and fall of wind coming from a cleft in a sandstone wall and replicating the experience of “two breaths creating a third, mingling and shaping one another like clouds” (10, 52-53). However, individual creatures, places and processes also present her with limited powers of renewal and creation. The birds that feature so prominently in *Refuge* could be said to represent in themselves a vast collection of situationally transcendent resources, each manifesting some unique and potent value aiding her acceptance of ecological and

personal losses chronicled in that book. As in the writing of Dillard and Thoreau, encounters with limited forms of the sacred appear in Williams's work, but not with the prominence or consistency of maximal religious conceptions.

Because of his adamant rejections of any kind of maximal deity, order, or meaning in a nature which otherwise gives him joy and wonderment, Edward Abbey stands out as another possible representative of a minimal religious naturalism in American nature writing. In his best-known nature essay, *Desert Solitaire*, he gives an oblique indication of naturalistic spiritual leanings by defining himself not as an atheist but an "eartheist" (208). The label connotes skepticism as well as reverence, but there is no question that what reverence Abbey felt for the book's setting is genuine. *Desert Solitaire* is filled with instances in which the features of the Utah canyonlands transform one's awareness in unexpected ways and renew contact with an elemental but undefinable reality. At one point in that work, Abbey reflects that the tourists visiting the Delicate Arch formation find in it either a sign of God's existence, evidence to the contrary, or a symbol of some other sweeping truth. Rejecting such interpretations, he proposes that if that arch does have any significance, "it lies . . . in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle the senses and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit, to compel us into a reawakened awareness of the wonderful . . ." (41).

This passage describes something Stone would call a "resource of situational transcendence"—but Abbey would vehemently reject the comparison. In his skeptical mode, Abbey doggedly resisted any impulse to define the source of their power to unsettle, or any value they might represent, other than by pointing to the irreducible fact of their concrete existence. Whatever possibilities he admits for transcendent experience are invariably pushed aside by a religious skepticism that borders on hierophobia and a

veneration of mute materiality. Abbey confessed at the outset of *Desert Solitaire* that his sojourns in canyon country were motivated by a desire “to confront, immediately and directly . . . the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental . . . [t]o look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description” (6). The ambition is one from which he rarely strays. Although he may find himself in one moment gazing at a rock, a tree, and a cloud under the noonday sun and “praying—in [his] way—for a vision of truth,” he admits he receives no response and merely takes comfort in the solidity and resistance of the sand and rock beneath him. He also sees with gratitude that under the searing light of midday “each stone, each plant, each grain of sand exists in and for itself with a clarity that is undimmed by any suggestion of a different realm” (155). With only the proper imagination to see them, he contends, we might find in such bare phenomena reason to “abandon forever . . . fantasies of the supernal,” and still find ourselves with a more than adequate measure of “the absolute and marvelous” (201).

The speculations of empirical theologians would probably seem to Abbey as otiose as any “fantasies of the supernal” proffered by classical theism. The writers and theologians examined in this study may not connect worldly phenomena with another ontological realm, but they do discern some form and tendency in the values suggested by these phenomena, and they posit in these a worth to humanity beyond the mere possibility of savoring raw and elemental facts. Abbey admits to “a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact,” but ventures little about the nature of either (x). Werner Bigell suggests a very limited definition for the values Abbey sees in natural facts insofar as his encounters with “existential nature,” the landscape void of any meaning or

purpose, are a starting point for questioning cultural constructs (284). Elemental, material nature could thus be seen as a limited “resource of judgement,” showing up inadequacies of received understandings. But this is still a very diffuse concept of sacred value in nature, only remotely comparable to the sense of “natural judgement” described by Leopold and Bass. A final, and obvious, divergence between Abbey and voices of religious naturalism in this study appears in the willingness of empirical theologians and the four writers examined at length here to employ cultural themes and symbols in apprehending redemptive resources in nature. While they emphasized caution and a critical approach to doing so, they see a validity in the practice Abbey could not accept.³⁹ Taking all these points together, it is clear that Abbey is operating within a very different spiritual framework from Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass.

It would be possible to argue that the difference is not so great, that Abbey beats these other writers (and the empirical theologians) at their game, as it were. One could construe Abbey’s “eartheism” as a severely limited form of religious naturalism, a faith in which the wholistic skepticism and metaphysical modesty of Chicago School empiricism and its variants are carried to extremes. Or one could interpret the difference between Abbey and the others as a matter of emphasis: all assign spiritual values to natural facts, but Abbey finds any shape or definition others might give to this spiritual value insignificant against experience of the simple, unarguable concreteness and presence of the material. Of course, by reinforcing the superlative importance of the material world for Abbey, this second objection actually argues against Abbey’s profession of a super-minimalism. His spiritual vision in fact remains a profoundly maximal one. For all his attention to particulars, Abbey —like Robinson Jeffers, who he

deeply admired—manifests an abiding affinity for some aspect of nature that is vast, infinitely mysterious, overwhelming, and radically other.

To see the limited naturalism in the works of the four writers in this study as an extension or accentuation of ideas long present in American nature writing offers a more nuanced understanding of how the genre has developed. To observe parallels between their spiritual position and several emerging trends in nature writing and ecotheory presents possibilities for this position to assume a relevance and exert an influence well beyond the nature writing canon. Three recent developments or statements (which are themselves challenges to traditional, stingy empiricism) converge with limited religious naturalism in especially suggestive ways: ecofeminist thought and literature, the neo-animism articulated by philosopher David Abram, and various postmodern conceptions of natural objects as conversational partners. Limited religious naturalism, as expressed by the Chicago School and the essayists examined here, yields a pertinent critique of these recent trends while pointing to possibilities for their further development. In turn, these scholarly and theoretical perspectives suggest a broader importance to this religious outlook and pose considerations for future exponents of it or similar faiths to take into account.

Readers may have noted that the consideration of gender has been thus far absent from this study. The writers examined here and the theologians used to trace their beliefs have all been male, and neither they nor this author (also male) have reflected on what significance that status might have in their relations with landscapes and natural objects. One could make the case that limited naturalistic religion is the product of a male outlook since no female nature writer expresses a similar spiritual position—most adhere to a more maximal outlook, often rooted in an established Eastern or Western religious

tradition. However, the thought of certain women nature writers who are labeled as *ecofeminist* or are of interest to ecofeminist critics does converge with that of the male writers in this study. A brief examination of some of their works and of ecofeminist philosophy points to possibilities for introducing gender concerns to empirical religious thought and for applying that thought to certain problems in ecofeminism.

Positions labeled “ecofeminist” differ widely and sometimes antagonistically, but all focus on connections between women and the natural environment. While some ecofeminists argue that women are naturally closer to the nonhuman world, others see male domination of women as an extension of exploitive attitudes with which male-dominated societies view the natural world. Ecofeminist writing and literary theory concern themselves with links between representations of gender⁴⁰ and representations of nature, and with the experience of nature from a consciously female subject position. These last concerns—focused on relationships and the employment of symbolic forms—are particularly germane to the issues taken up in this study, and various expressions of them (in literature and in other fields) elicit comparisons to concepts in empirical religious thought.

Works by female nature writers tend to depict experiences in the natural world as more richly embodied than do works by male writers. Whereas vision generally dominates men’s writing, women’s nature writing pays heed to a wider array of sensory inputs. Bernard Meland stated that appreciative awareness relies upon the “wisdom of the body,” but the most comprehensive illustrations of how bodily experience leads toward a complex, intuitive awareness of one’s natural surroundings lie in the works of some ecofeminist nature writers. For example, in Terry Tempest Williams’s meditation cited above on sandstone gripping her skin and air currents merging her own breath, she

conveys a sensation growing from both internal and external stimuli of the earth as an active and challenging presence. In *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman draws on the sensations of her full body and her consciousness of it to grasp an ongoing connection to the source of all life in the oceans:

Scuba diving in the Bahamas some years ago, I became aware of two things for the first time: that we carry the ocean within us; that our veins mirror the tides. As a human woman, with ovaries where eggs lie like roe, entering the smooth undulating womb of the ocean from which our ancestors evolved millennia ago, I was so moved my eyes teared underwater, and I mixed my saltiness with the ocean's. Distracted by such thoughts, I looked around to find my position vis-à-vis the boat, and couldn't. But it didn't matter: home was everywhere. (20)

This is an insight comparable to Leopold's intuition of sandhill cranes as emissaries from the deep past, but with far deeper somatic reinforcement. Intuition, acquired knowledge, and raw sensations join here to create a powerful sense of belonging, and break down the boundaries between the epochs of life. Broadening one's sensory openness in this way suggests ways of transcending incrementally whatever sense of worth or purpose one may sense in a natural object through vision and reflection alone.

Another characteristic of ecofeminist writing, according to many commentators, is a strong awareness by the narrator of the complexities and particularities of her subject position—her race, class, cultural inheritance, and, of course, her gender—and how these influence her interaction with natural environments. Empirical religious thought recognizes that one's situatedness influences what one perceives and relates to as the sacred, but tends to neglect elements like gender and class in both its theological and

literary expressions. Ecofeminist texts indicate ways in which questions of gender especially might enter into representations and critical discussions of a limited sacred presence in nature. These are questions that invariably arise when a female narrator ventures into that traditional domain of enlightenment-in-nature—the wilderness. Wilderness is traditionally figured as male space, and the activities performed there (hunting, fishing, surveying, etc.) are traditionally male enterprises. To wander freely in forests or deserts is virtually a birthright for male writers like Thoreau, Leopold, or Lopez, but entering such spaces often involves conflicts or a passage through some ordeal—sometimes a struggle against one’s heritage—for women writers. A simple commitment to openness scarcely assures an encounter with any kind of creative or restorative power in the land.

In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Janisse Ray recalls growing up in a fundamentalist Southern family which forbade her to wear short sleeves or skirts, to date, or to climb trees (with this last act deemed particularly “unladylike”) (12, 105). Expected to emulate her mother’s example as a devoted homemaker, Ray had fewer chances to play and explore outdoors than did her brothers (203). These gender expectations, bound up with a religion in which “the world around [her] was subverted by the world of the soul,” meant that for Ray, “the chance to be simply a young mammal roaming the woods did not exist” (120-21).⁴¹ Only after venturing further into the realm of secular culture (the “world” from which her parents sought to shield her) by going to college, travelling, reading Thoreau, and making friends with people from different backgrounds did Ray start to roam in wild places and perceive them as loci of spiritual values. By early adulthood, Ray writes, nature rather than heaven represented “the other world” to her and “claimed” her (262). Entering into the kind of relations with the

nonhuman world that allowed her to sense affirming or renewing potencies there required for Ray a more complex and concrete engagement with the forms and practices of human culture than Meland or Lopez envision. Her case argues that for some individuals, particularly some women, institutions and customs of modern culture and the opportunities these present figure crucially in the “matrix of relations” that sustains experiences of transcendence in nature.

And still humbler elements of life may have vital roles in this matrix for women writers. The critic and essayist Gretchen Legler entered life with far more privileges than Janisse Ray knew while growing up, among them an abundance of encouragement and opportunities to participate in outdoor sports. But in spite of a youth spent hiking, hunting, and fly-fishing, Legler still found the outdoors a hostile space at times. As she relates in her memoir *All the Powerful Invisible Things*, her presence at boat landings, deer stands, and hunter’s hangouts often brought stares and rude remarks. Because of her gender, excursions into the wild meant experiences of conflict, isolation, and revulsion, not encounters with grace or renewal. Merely avoiding the presence of men, and of people generally, cannot solve the problem because, as she admits on an extended solo canoe trip, “I do not enjoy being alone. I need the company of others. I yearn for contact.” Escaping from the social realm does not appeal to her: rather, “People are the most important thing. *Relations*, connections, contact with other live creature—that is the most important thing.” If other people are a hindrance to intimacy with landscapes for writers like Muir or Krutch, Legler finds that human connections “work like soft knots holding me to my place in the world” (167). In *All the Powerful Invisible Things*, nature seems to exercise a transformative influence primarily within groups of individuals who share a close emotional bond. Small groups of women friends who venture into wild

places together find a space where they can accommodate their pasts or heal relationships, and also experience a presence in the land that is sometimes daunting, sometimes luminous. Possibly as a response to the conventional figuring of wilderness as male space, the formation of an intimate community among women is in Legler's book a prerequisite to an enriching experience in the wild.

With a heightened concern for interpersonal relations, gender roles, and the sensual, ecofeminist texts offer logical and significant extensions to the ideas about the relational nature of reality and its connection to experiences of the sacred developed by empirical theologians and recent American (and male) nature writers. Recent ecofeminist critics—including Gretchen Legler⁴²—characterize canonical male nature writing as centered upon a solitary individual's quest to encounter a (usually maximal) sacred presence in nature. Close attention to the form of belief expressed by Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass indicates that connections between ecofeminists and at least some canonical male writers are closer, and possibilities for dialogue between them better, than some critics have been willing to believe.

Ecofeminism joins with several other strains of recent environmental thought in conceiving of the natural world as an active presence with whom people may communicate in various ways. These emerging notions present the field in which limited empirical religious thought has its best chance to make an immediate and substantial impact. Like religious empiricism, these viewpoints envision a creative interchange between humans and their natural surroundings. A limited naturalistic spirituality provides a powerful tool of inquiry into some of these newer developments, posing important questions about that supposed nature of communication with the world and the

grounds upon which it is possible. By the same token, these developments suggest new directions for the progress of empirical religious thought.

One of the most commented on and artfully presented of these is David Abram's call for a revival of animism in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). In this book, Abram makes an elegant and complex argument for persons in industrialized, developed societies to recultivate an immediate and sensual relationship with their natural surroundings. Because contact with physical nature is increasingly mediated by technology and disembodied information, he claims, modern societies have developed ways of life that are fundamentally flawed. This is a familiar theme in environmental texts, but unlike most bearers of this message, Abram does not simply assert an inherent need for humans to remain connected to the physical context in which they evolved. He argues instead that sensory disconnection from the natural world is problematic because it promotes superficial modes of perception as well as a view of physical nature as inanimate, passive, and inert. Though he acknowledges that this conception of nature forms the basis for much of modern science, Abram identifies it as the source of a fatal disorientation in modern life that contributes to the rising incidence of psychosis, violence, and other contemporary problems. Travels in rural Asia, among people whose daily experience was still dominated by the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of physical nature and who attributed dynamic or spiritual qualities to natural phenomena, suggested to Abram an alternative to the stingy empiricism and techno-dependency of the West. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram draws on these traveler's intuitions and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception to argue that our physical environment is properly understood as a "living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded," a field that is everywhere alive and alert (65). Within this field, the act of

perception is not an atomic individual's experience of discrete phenomena, but a sympathetic and reciprocal relation between the perceiver and the perceived; experience equates to a "ceaseless dance between the carnal subject and its world," in which "at one moment the body leads, at another the things" (54). Abram believes that an increased physical openness to the environment that proceeds from this understanding of the earth and humanity's place in it will not only promote environmental well-being, but will ground human meanings and identities in authentic and enriching ways.

The animistic philosophies of preindustrial peoples could be considered precursors to every form of enriched empiricism, so it is not surprising that Abram's modern adaptation of these philosophies has features in common with the religious empiricism of the Chicago naturalist theologians and the nature writers discussed in the preceding chapters. Like them, he privileges "the wisdom of the body" and precognitive perception. Abram construes every feature of the world as an active and conscious presence and attributes to each a capacity to engage and transform individuals in the manner of Leopold's "numenon" or Stone's "resource of situational transcendence." When we engage natural phenomena with our senses working in concert, he contends, "we may suddenly feel ourselves in relation with another expressive power, another center of experience" (129). Each phenomenon presents a kind of value with which we must reckon:

Anyone who has walked through cornfields knows the uncanny experience of being scrutinized and spoken to by whispering stalks. Certain rock faces and boulders request from us a kind of auditory attentiveness, and so draws our ears into relation with our eyes as we gaze at them, or with our hands as we touch them—for it is only through a

mode of listening that we can begin to sense the interior voluminosity of the boulder, its particular density and depth. (130)

Abram's emphasis on the synaesthetic nature of prereflective perception emphasizes that we encounter all objects embedded within networks of relations. We approach a full understanding of objects when we grasp and integrate different aspects of them and different ways that they relate to their surroundings, such as the ways they break light, catch wind, or develop textures or behaviors in response to environmental pressures. Moreover, Abram concurs with Meland and Barry Lopez in ascribing a transformative grace to patterns of relation in nature, writing that as natural patterns arise and evolve, they "draw our awareness in unexpected and unpredictable directions" (64). Describing perception as a kind of dance, or a process of call and response between bodies, Abram approaches the idea of experience-as-transaction which is essential to radical empiricism and the religious thought that developed from it. To be sure, Abram's philosophy is a maximal one. Following Merleau-Ponty, he posits the earth as a kind of wholistic field of sensation ("the Flesh of the world") (66). He also views human speech as part of a larger "discourse of the earth," and, like representatives of many preindustrial traditions, associates breathing and speech with the currents of air swirling about the globe (179, 238). Nonetheless, Abram's book makes a strong case for recognizing distinctive and conditional creative qualities within the particulars of nature.⁴³

When considering Abram's views on the way that language and other cultural forms connect with those particulars, a significant difference between Abram's work and that of empirical theologians and the four nature writers in this study appears, along with some pointed shortcomings in his perspective. Abram sees—at least under ideal conditions—considerably less distance between our immediate sensory experience of

vital qualities in the land and our linguistic figuration of them than do these thinkers, or most contemporary literary theorists. Language, in his view, is not a specifically human endowment or a capacity of sentient beings, but a property of the animate earth. The Western sense of a disconnection between language and the physical world, he argues, is simply an effect of the rise of alphabetic writing, which disconnects sounds from any natural referent.⁴⁴ Drawing on various anthropological studies, he notes that for preliterate societies, the earth “grounds” and creates linguistic meanings. “In the absence of any written analogue to speech,” he writes, “the sensible, natural environment remains the primary visual counterpart of the spoken utterance The land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates” (139-40). Rather than language constructing nature, the natural landscape actively constructs language by supplying its rhythms and timbres, reinforcing the messages of stories, supplying narrative forms, and serving as a mnemonic repository (a “canon,” of sorts) for myths and tales. Accordingly, language is not a tool to access some portion of the land’s reality, or to sort our fringe perception of it (as Meland and Lopez would have it), but something intimately and essentially related to it.

In some respects, Abram’s vision is not so different from that of Barry Lopez, who believes it is possible to align the symbolic order of the “interior landscape” with the ecological order of the exterior landscape (both being *aesthetic* orders) to achieve psychological and environmental harmony. But recall that for Lopez, one’s interior landscape may include texts, memories, and ideas not derived from a landscape that one resides in or knows well. Lopez sees spiritual enrichment and “congruence with the world” (experiences of meaning, or of meaning-ful existence) arising from the coordination of orders which are comparable yet different. He does not admit the

possibility for a seamless and indivisible union between our symbols and our surroundings. On the other hand, Lopez (along with Meland, Stone, and other empirical theologians) does see metaphor and a variety of other cultural resources as ways to apprehend, however dimly, a portion of the land's transforming worth and vitality.

This view suggests an important reason why the kind of religious naturalism examined above may be a more viable option than Abram's philosophy for persons in the developed world to attain a deeper and more dynamic relation with their natural surroundings. Abram's ideal models for human interactions with nature and human verbal culture are drawn from preindustrial, aboriginal societies. The kind of landscapes that speak vividly enough to impact people are those which show no trace of intensive human settlement. Technologies that are mundane in both urban and remote areas—electricity and motor vehicles, for instance—seem to undermine fatally the kind of intimacy with the land he promotes. Abram recalls returning from his Asian sojourns being able to banter with squirrels and feel the “tensed yet poised alertness” in the muscles of a high-stepping heron that he watched—but admits he lost such abilities after only a short time back in technological society and its print culture (25). He found he was able to tap again the perceptions and sensation he had cultivated in the “undeveloped world” by living for extended periods on Indian reservations or by weeks of hiking in wilderness preserves (27). Such opportunities for retreat are unavailable to most people in both the developed and developing worlds, and for numerous reasons are unlikely to become more generally attainable. Only “unadulterated nature” (a fiction itself) seems to hold the potential to energize the senses and engage the body and mind in potent ways. Only autochthonous culture and language are able to maintain mutualistic bonds between human societies and their material environments. Ideas like these do appeal to many

environmentalists and nature writers, but they are impractical for most persons, and, as Meg Holden notes, unlikely to appeal to large numbers of people who rely on the comforts of technology—or who still strive to obtain them (53).

It is true that Abram holds out the possibility for persons in developed, technologized setting to recover a sense of animate nature by trying to engage their surrounding with their senses—but his own experiences suggest that only regions affected little by modern technologies can sustain the reorientation of outlook that he urges on readers. By contrast, the nature writers featured in this study and American empirical theologians recognize the possibility for encountering creative goods even in intensely humanized settings. Moreover, they see a role for many vibrant cultural forms, practices, and traditions in helping people reconnect with that creative power. Holden observes that Abram almost completely ignores science as a means of knowing the material world (55). For religious naturalists of all stripes, science often reveals not only utility, but surpassing wonder in nature. The spiritual perspectives of Krutch and Leopold in particular were heavily influenced by scientific developments. Lopez and Bass show how cultural artifacts and practices—even those as remote from pristine nature as cathedrals and industrial logging—can sustain or communicate wild values. The faiths of these writers offer a bridge from the dominant perception of nature as inert or valuable only in the form of commodities into an experience of it as a site of numerous values and potencies. Abram seems only to call us to this experience from across a chasm. Yet given all they have in common, Abram's animism and pluralistic religious naturalism might complement one another. *The Spell of the Sensuous* presents evocative statements of tenets much like those of the naturalists, while their faith offers a "theory of transition" into the kind of relation to the world that Abram promotes.

Nostalgia for the primitive is not the only impulse driving efforts to hear nature's voice anew. Green critical theorists attentive to the relations between discourse and social power have contended that, just as the liberation of marginalized humans depends (according to the work of their non-environmentalist counterparts) on acknowledging the voices of these humans, the establishment of a more just relation to the nonhuman world depends on recognizing its constituents as speaking subjects with whom we can and must converse. Proponents of this move say it would restore to nature both the intrinsic value and the agency stripped from it by the scientific revolutions of early modernity. These recent theories of nature-as-subject are essentially a form of animism chiseled by the language of postmodern theory, or what we might call a "minimized" animism, one eschewing or downplaying both the personalistic imagery and the wholism that pervade the work of Abram and other neoprimitive writers. Also free of the God-talk of empirical theologians and of most of the nature writers in this study, the work of these theorists could be viewed as an alternative to empirical spirituality well-suited to the world of secular academe. However, certain shortcomings in these theories of nature as subject give reason to look at religious empiricism not as their competition but as a desirable complement to them.

Some of the most compelling recent arguments for recognizing speaking subjects in nature grow from consideration of the ways in which nonhuman nature supports and participates in human discourse and knowledge. Suspicious of spiritual interpretations of the natural world (which he defines exclusively in terms of subject-erasing organic wholism), John Dryzek contends that Habermasian principles of communicative rationality might be expanded to guide human interactions with nature.⁴⁵ In part, this move would involve the recognition of ecological principles such as diversity,

homeostasis, flexibility, etc., as “critical standards in human discourse.” Such values would, according to Dryzek, have to be adopted not automatically, but only through debate, trial, and scrutiny (204). Additionally, Dryzek, argues that ecological processes and interactions that sustain life—and the very possibility of human discourse—be recognized as rules that guide a non-centralized, collaborative “intelligence.” Human actions and decision-making processes should be carried out in ways which are cognizant of and compatible with these rules (207-08). Dryzek admits that “perfection is impossible,” and that norms derived from observations of ecological processes “will have to be contingent on time, place, and particular human and ecological circumstances” (207). Nonetheless, his work holds out the possibility of a natural world which operates by principles that are comparable or congenial to those that define rational discourse, and is to a degree present behind every one of our utterances.

The environmental philosopher Jim Cheney sees a role not only for regularized natural processes but for specific environmental components in our attempts to know and communicate with nature. A relationship with the natural world rooted in dialogue and reciprocity becomes possible, he argues, when we reject modernist epistemologies that cast objects of knowledge as passive and inert and begin to understand knowledge as relational. Cheney believes that aboriginal traditions, ideas of Thoreau, and a number of contemporary philosophers supply us with credible ways of seeing knowledge not as a matter of an individual’s “knowledge about” something, but an experience of “‘knowing with,’ a knowing that arises, or is present, in the togetherness of the human and more-than-human . . .” (“Universal Consideration” 272). When humans approach the natural world with this understanding, Cheney writes, “earth others” become “active moral and epistemic agents, co-participants in the construction (or shaping) of knowledge”

(“Universal Consideration” 265). A heightened respect and reciprocity attends this regard for nature as well, not as a result of any human commitment, but because it “is simply *there* as the condition of [one’s] existence as a knowing subject embedded in a more-than-human-world.” Epistemic encounters, in Cheney’s view, necessarily involve an ethical component, since methods of knowing entail types of etiquette, and ethical encounters are necessarily epistemic encounters as well, shaping knowledge in certain ways (“Universal Consideration” 272). Thus, elements of the environment can be said to communicate to human subjects both information and values, and otherwise act as potent, limited, and discreet shaping forces.⁴⁶ When illustrating his points by discussing his own attempts to exercise an openness and respect toward one sort of earth other—rocks—Cheney tends to describe these components in terms of personal consciousness and communication. Once we abandon objectifying ways of knowing, Cheney writes, it is possible to see that rocks “are, perhaps, ‘watchful’ Rocks, in their enduring presence . . . may become our first and most profound teachers of the most fundamental aspects of moral presence in and to this world” (“Universal Consideration” 274-75). During a hike in northern Ontario, as he reflected on aboriginal interpretations of that landscape, certain rocks by the trail struck him as approximating human dimensions, both in size and in *character*.⁴⁷ He writes that they were, “in a sense, companions, partners, some of them quite active and youthful, with funny stories to tell, perhaps, if we had listened with more care” (“Universal Consideration” 276).

Patrick Murphy contends that through our conscientious character-izations, natural others attain the status of a speaking subject. Drawing on Bahktinian dialogics to argue for the agency of nature, Murphy posits the human self as a “*chronotopic relationship*,”⁴⁸ i.e., a social/self construct within given social, economic, political,

historical, and environmental parameters of space and time” (150). Consequently, “the ‘other’ participates in the formation of the self” (151). This brings Murphy to a position similar to Cheney’s epistemology. However, Murphy is less wary about the possibility of nature speaking to humans, arguing that “when the [human] self enters into language . . . so too does the ‘other’ enter into language and have the potential to become a ‘speaking subject.’ The ‘other’ is constituted by a speaker/author who is not the speaking subject but a renderer of the ‘other’ as speaking subject” (151). Through the incorporation of natural events and nonhuman beings into our texts, Murphy claims, we create the possibility that nature’s long-neglected voice may speak “by proxy,” and consequently influence human cultures and their power structures.

These three positions promote a kind of attentiveness not unlike what Meland describes as “appreciative awareness.” They also construe natural objects as limited and concrete manifestations of creative power, forgoing Abram’s wholism as well as religious terminology like “resources of grace and judgment.” However, defining agency in the natural world strictly through the concepts of human communication and subjectivity entails problems of its own. To be sure, anthropomorphic interpretations of nature have, (despite the scorn heaped on them by modern thinkers) been of genuine help to both modern and premodern peoples in understanding their natural environments. But such interpretations, when rigidly and persistently employed, deny to environmental components any influence unlike those that people might exercise, and constrict the creative interchange persons might have with natural others to the familiar patterns of conversation. To open our ears to nature with the expectation that its voices will be much like those we have been taught to trust and respect is to overlook differences between humans and nonhuman nature (as well as differences within nonhuman nature)

that are a key part of the natural world's presence and appeal. Moreover, such assumptions of familiarity hurt the chances that human subjects might hear anything that might transform them or the ecocidal culture in which many of them reside. Christopher Manes observes that Western culture's traditional humanism, which posits a universalized concept of "Man" as the only being capable of meaningful expression, pervades environmental discourse of many kinds, effectively "eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying" the natural world it seeks to liberate and unmuzzle (24). He points to Dryzek's acceptance of reason as the essence of communication as one example of this humanist taint—reason, Manes writes, is a sort of discourse particularly favored "by that small portion of [humans] who are heirs of the Enlightenment" (23). Cheney's suggestion that wild others could serve as moral teachers seems undermined by the readiness with which some of these assume in his eyes the "dimensions" of the human.⁴⁹ We might ask of him what these nonhuman others could teach us that we have not already learned from human culture, and whether they could impart to us any goodness truly not our own. Murphy's claim that natural entities move into language when humans do offers us no better chance of hearing the suppressed voices of nature—indeed, it risks drowning them out. As Eric Smith has commented in response to Murphy, attempts to discern what nature is "saying" through a given text will almost certainly become mired in questions of authenticity, of "which 'proxy' legitimately reflects nature's interests" (34).

Both Manes and Smith argue that if contemporary societies wish to have meaningful exchanges with their natural environments, they need to adopt modes of thinking and speaking which do not focus on a universal and idealized conception of human subjectivity as the focus of value and meaning. Among the possible sources they name for such modes of engaging the world are certain strands of postmodern

philosophy, and Smith sees particular promise in one: Donna Haraway's theory of "situated knowledges" and the attendant concept of "cyborg identity." These widely-read statements avoid some of the problems of other theories of conversation with nature, and provide in some respects a secularized variation on or extension of empirical religious thought. Yet in avoiding the pitfalls associated with modern ideas of subjectivity, Haraway's thought introduces other problems which lead to questions about the desirability of the impulse to secularize our notions of interaction with nature; about whether we are not better off retaining some fuller notion of mystery, and acknowledging indefinable yet transforming graces in our encounters with the nonhuman world.

In her essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Haraway describes an enviroing world that does not speak so much as it *signs*. These descriptions are the outcome of an epistemological inquiry: the essay is Haraway's attempt to define a sense of objectivity—or, the possibility of "faithful accounts of a real world" (187)—while discarding traditional Western epistemologies that posit a transcendent knower who pretends to a total and determinate vision of a passive object of knowledge. In pursuit of this goal, Haraway figures knowing as a dialogue between a situated, embodied knower and an object of knowledge that is understood as an "actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource . . ." (198). The agency Haraway attributes to the world takes the form of communication, and she contends that our understanding of the world does not "depend on a logic of 'discovery,' but on a power-charged social relation of conversation" (198). Being historically and physically situated, engaging an object which is not simply given, Haraway's embodied knower attains through such conversations an understanding of the object that is inevitably partial and incomplete. Nonetheless, she still sees this outlook

as a source of trustworthy and sharable accounts of reality that acknowledge the historical contingency of both knower and known while avoiding relativism.

Haraway admits that her idea of the world as an active and expressive presence is not a new philosophical move. What distinguishes her idea of a communicative nature from those discussed above is her resistance to characterizing the expressions of the external world as fundamentally similar to those of human languages, or as easily accessible by a well-intentioned human listener. "The world," she writes, "neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read." (198). Whatever a natural other signifies is, in this system, opaque, disparate from human meanings, and in need of vigorous interpretation. Any objective understanding we would take from our encounters with the world requires "[d]ecoding and transcoding plus translation and criticism . . ." (196). And like Bernard Meland, Haraway sees the need for invoking cultural forms to assist in these interpretations, writing that "local knowledges must be in tension with productive structurings that force unequal translations and exchanges—material and semiotic—within the webs of knowledge and power" (194).

The image of "coding" is particularly rich and appealing. It upholds the otherness of the nonhuman world while still recognizing its familiarity. A code requires close analysis and, often, expert knowledge to interpret; computer codes and genetic sequences testify to this. However, with both of these particular codes assuming greater influence over daily life and receiving ever more attention, they form an increasing part of the medium of contemporary existence and become customary elements of people's consciousness and concern, even if their details remain occult to most. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," published contemporaneously with "Situated Knowledges," Haraway cites

the increasing importance of information in technology and commerce and the emerging understanding of organisms as coded texts themselves as indicators of a collapse of the accepted boundaries between organism and machine, animal and human, and the material and immaterial. Codes thus form links between very different entities, creating new possibilities for relationships with our tools and with our nonhuman neighbors. From Haraway's reasoning, one might well conclude that it is science after all and not religion that offers the best available guidance in recovering a mutualistic relation with nature.

Yet Haraway does advocate a personal conversion of sorts before one can find enrichment in this vision of a world encoded; taken by itself, the worldview of the ascendant scientific regime is, as far as Haraway is concerned, just as likely to bring bondage as liberation. As hegemonic powers and the science practices supporting them come to view the world as a "problem of coding," they undertake "a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange" (164). Such totalistic (we might also say *maximal*) ambitions, Haraway fears, threaten many social groups with increased vulnerability and disempowerment (166). In response to these ambitions, and as a vehicle for advancing her socialist-feminist goals against them, she outlines the concept of "cyborg" subjectivity, which she calls an "ironic political myth" of hybrid identity that might help redefine both experience and agency in the emerging society. Cyborg selves, she writes, are not concerned with being pure or authentic; they are "not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (154). They are highly conscious of their historical situatedness and deny any story of origins in a primal unity. Furthermore, they reject any "seductions to organic wholeness" (including "identification with nature in the Western sense") and aspiration to total knowledge; they are instead

“resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (151). Cyborg identities take shape through local connections—their relations with other bodies, tools, symbols, etc. Deeply attuned to matters coding—of reading and writing—cyborgs keep their eyes open for possible allies (even across conventional boundaries of ideology, class, species, etc.) with whom they might join to script and enact alternatives to the exchange-driven global grid scenario being penned by high-tech transnational capitalism (170). Her cyborg vision, Haraway writes, “is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (154). Admitting that this vision is an “illegitimate offspring” of the world brought about by militarism, patriarchal capitalism, and state socialism (151)⁵⁰, she still commends it as a guide to how people at odds with dominant power structures can still exercise power and contest for meanings in a world that is increasingly fragmented and mediated by technology.

Haraway’s myth of cyborg identity explains how the coding and interpretation practiced in situated knowledge might give rise to energies with the potential to change lives and societies. It describes the emergence of creative powers with varied and limited manifestations through relations between entities, albeit in more secular terms than do the theologians or essayists discussed in this study. By introducing the images of genetic and computer codes, Haraway applies a “productive structuring” to interactions between things that is particularly accurate for this intensively technological age. One arguable advantage of Haraway’s theory over the various forms of religious empiricism is that it does not posit the activity power that, however limited, is beyond definition or comprehension. She writes in “Situated Knowledges” that she wants to avoid “a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of mediations,” and

likewise does not want “a theory of innocent powers to represent the world.” By acknowledging the interpretive dimension of our attempts to know others and the mediations it involves, according to Haraway, we assume responsibility for knowledge we acquire (187). Making no recourse to an inexplicable grace in relations between beings, Haraway’s theories could be said to represent a further minimalization of the doctrines of religious empiricism. Yet they could be too minimal for their own good.

Haraway’s preference for the image of “coding” to describe communication between subjects is, despite its dual connotations, reductive in that it implies that the messages transmitted by various others are fixed inscriptions which act to execute a specific function, as the codes of genes and electronic circuits certainly are. Haraway never claims that we may read codes precisely or that they will inevitably produce certain outcomes. But connected to Haraway’s view of a world bound by an electronic web and evolving with the growth of biotechnologies, the codes of which she speaks still appear to be determinate things whose agency is task-specific. Like the more naïve, humanist formulations of Cheney and Dryzek, Haraway’s theories sacrifice some of the complexity of both human and nonhuman others in order to render their expressions in a form to which readers can readily relate.

This shortcoming in Haraway’s scheme raises the more significant issue of whether one must be able to codify one’s experience of objects in the world to some degree in order to experience their agency. Prior to our interpretive acts, is the world not only silent, but inert? Aldo Leopold’s experience with the dying wolf in “Thinking Like a Mountain” suggests not. That incident suggested to him some value which demanded his respect and in part initiated his shift away from utilitarian attitudes toward the natural world, despite the fact that its codification would take decades and hardly began before

Leopold started reading Ouspensky in the 1920s. Meland, Lopez, Bass, and others discussed above affirm the importance of interpretive and figurative acts in accessing and extending the power of this-worldly resources of transcendence. However, none of these assert that such resources operate solely within the bounds of our interpretations.

Haraway does not explicitly confine the agency of others to the parameters of our translations of them. Nonetheless, her determination not to “lose track of mediations” indicates at the very least a suspicion about claims for any potential in another entity that cannot be accounted for. At times, Haraway characterizes the environing world as a trickster persona, possibly with an unsettling and independent sense of humor, who will inevitably “hoodwink” us in our attempts to know it (199). This evokes a sense of a broad potency in nature that defies codification, but it is not clear if this is identical with any constructive agency. If Haraway does isolate one’s experience of the agency of nature within a partial and provisional interpretation of it, that is a move barely more generous than the presumption in traditional Western science of total accessibility to passive objects of knowledge.

Both of these problems in Haraway’s thought provide openings for a fruitful engagement with minimal religious naturalism as represented by American empirical theology and the four essayists in this study. The works of all of these describe or theorize interactions with specific elements of nature by subjects who acknowledge their own historical contingency (their situatedness) and that of the objects they engage. These interactions begin and end with only partial knowledge of the object confronted—yet they promote (if only in small and fallible ways) survival and enrichment, just as Haraway believes that her ideas of situated knowledge will. Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass refute the idea that a passionate outreach to physical nature necessarily amounts

to any “seduction to organic wholeness.” They reveal myriad values and relations within the natural world, as well as varied ways of engaging them; they avoid the search for the one true order or meaning in the world as Haraway does. Eric Smith commends Haraway’s work primarily because it elaborates ways of “defining value not according to subject status, but on the basis of ongoing relationships”(37). This it does, but the limited naturalistic faith outlined by the four essayists (to say nothing of the traditions of radical empiricism and process thought) does so at greater length and with more complexity, and has considerably more to say about the kinds and functions of value arising from relationships. Furthermore, the expressions of naturalistic religion studied here demonstrate the application of an enormous range of “productive structurings” to experiences of the world, opening up numerous options and strategies for responding to the creative activity of nature. Haraway appears open to metaphorical and evocative aids to translation, as she suggests we look at the world as a trickster figure similar to the Coyote of Native American mythologies; she also praises feminist science fiction as a “visualization technology” which can help persons engage the world in its active capacities. The works of the writers discussed above present not only more resources for interpretation, but meticulous demonstrations of their use.

Of course, one of the productive structurings which these writers (and of course, the theologians of limited naturalism) bring to bear on their experiences is that of religion, the notion of some mysterious sustaining and creative quality in existence that is identified as the divine. This is a concept that could be of tremendous value in acknowledging and accommodating those aspects of natural entities which can be sensed yet not easily clarified within the partial understandings arising from our conversations with our material environments. Although she does not explicitly reject religion as a

means of decoding experience, Haraway does not explore it as a possible aspect of situated knowledge.⁵¹ In her skeptical embrace of spirituality, Haraway is an unlikely soulmate of Edward Abbey. Yet there is no valid reason within her theory—or in other postmodern environmental positions (like Peter Van Wyck's) which reject traditional forms of scientific objectivity or the imposition of humanist subjectivity on natural entities—why a religious outlook might not contribute to a valid understanding of a thing. As William Grassie points out, Haraway's dethroning of classical empiricism as the sole authoritative means of understanding the physical world

destroys the sacrosanct boundaries between science and nonscience, indeed that separate science from religion, for some the worst nonscience of all. There is no longer a basis in an epistemology of location and positioning to exclude religion as a credible location and positioning in truth discourse Truth seeking and truth doing require the integration of as many perspectives and vectors and disciplines and cultures as possible. (300)

Where one's "situatedness" is informed in part by religious outlook or tradition, it makes perfect sense to draw on such resources in comprehending what one encounters from within it, particularly given the unique power of religious ideas and practices to shape loyalties and behaviors. The religious naturalism examined here would be one means of enriching and intensifying the relations with things that are the source of valid knowledge for Haraway, adding a deep ethical and valuational component to the conversations she would have us strike up with our world. It is easy to imagine *Arctic Dreams* or *Fiber* serving as a prayer book for cyborgs.

Needless to say, these prayer books would reveal no eternal or inerrant message, but that is no blemish on them or the faith underlying them. Rising out of the interstices of an older naturalist faith, the limited naturalism of Meland and Stone, or of Leopold, Krutch, Lopez, and Bass, cannot be recommended here as a new orthodoxy or a teaching truer than the words of Thoreau and Muir. It presents no unshakeable foundations for beliefs about the purposes or the potencies of that world and its constituents. What it does offer are new possibilities for finding meaning in our various situations (whether corporeal, cultural, or geographic), and greater mutualism and creative interaction in our relations with our surroundings. Having the capacity to enter into conversation with a variety of other significant intellectual and spiritual discourses, limited naturalism can collaborate with and inform the full range of other ideas, practices, and perceptions with which people engage their world. At the same time, limited naturalism makes no claim of universality and thus is a form of faith well-suited to an age marked by skepticism and an increasing acknowledgement of the complexity and constructedness of phenomena. It restores a sense of mysterious active powers in the world while not absolving those who experience them of responsibility for the meaning of such experiences and subsequent applications of it. This faith calls us to increased consciousness of the ways that cultural forms and assumptions shape individuals' and groups' perceptions and expressions of what they find sacred. The spirituality expressed in varied ways by the empirical tradition in American theology and the four writers in this study is a spirituality for persons who wander in a landscape that is void of fixed and unimpeachable meanings, yet still beautiful, terrifying, or inviting in many of its concrete aspects. With its gaze drawn to forests, deserts, grizzlies, frogs, and human communion with all places and creatures, this limited and pluralistic naturalism seeks hope, direction, and healing. Yet it

does so looking neither for a God who proclaims knife-edged certainties through the works of his hands, nor for the erasure of difference, conflict, specificity, and doubt in the lush but suffocating embrace of Gaia.

NOTES

¹ See William James. *Essays in Radical Empiricism* 150-51.

² Oversoul

³ See *The Breath of Life*, 48-49.

⁴ See Chapter Four below.

⁵ Willem Drees offers a full discussion of this principle and its variations (116).

⁶ Albanese's *Nature Religion in America* would be an exemplar of this approach.

⁷ Eliot's High Church orientation makes it unlikely he could have meant anything else.

⁸ Meland borrowed the phrase from critic Louis Untermeyer.

⁹ See *Sand County Almanac* 201-203.

¹⁰ As used by empirical theologians, and especially Jerome Stone, "transcendent" pertains not to things beyond earthly reality, but to things beyond understanding which promote a powerful transformation of one's life or awareness. The "transcendence" which interests religious empiricists is not an escape or deliverance from the world, but a beneficial alteration of one's present situation and consciousness. This sense of transcendence is comparable to that which Patrick Murphy has developed in relation to Gary Snyder's career in *Literature, Nature, and Other*, although empirical theologians understand the causes for transcendent experience differently.

¹¹ The difference between thoughts and things were the kind of relations each was capable of having. For instance, James said that mental images of hotness and wetness had as much of these qualities in them as physical sensations of them, but they were not capable of starting or putting out real fires (*Essays* 32).

¹² James's italics.

¹³ See Frankenberry, *Religion*, 95-98.

¹⁴ Dewey's italics.

¹⁵ "Actual entities" for Whitehead are minute occasions of becoming, the feeling-driven passage of simple, discrete particles of matter. Such particles may join into "societies" to form objects or creature, which may themselves be conscious and capable of feeling.

¹⁶ Like James, Whitehead often voiced suspicion of the Cartesian emphasis on gaining precision of understanding. Declaring the "precision is abstraction," he argued that to equate truth with certainty alone was to reduce and distort it.

¹⁷ And in this, it suffers from what James decried as "methodologism," proffering a total and unitary system built through logic that sweeps aside the often conflicting impressions of experience and fails to account for variety and change in the processes and causes of becoming.

¹⁸ The story of the Chicago School's origins is too complex to discuss at length here. Excellent brief summaries are available in Tyron Inbody's "History of Empirical Theology," pp. 18-21, Bernard Meland's "The Empirical Tradition of Theology at Chicago" pp. 13-24, and Dean's *History Making History* pp. 49-58.

¹⁹ For Wieman, the quality or value of any discrete thing is a function of the relationships within which it exists, of the "complex, structured, togetherness" of any components of experience (*Source of Human Good* 303). This idea is directly descended from James, and consonant with ecological thinking.

²⁰ Whitehead described awareness of one's own formation through reception of the feelings of past events as "perception in the mode of causal efficacy" (*Process and Reality* 120). As Frankenberry points out, Meland differed from Whitehead and the process theologians who followed him by associating divinity with such impressions, rather than with the lure of ideals and possibilities in the future (*Religion* 133).

²¹ Stone's italics.

²² In *Imagining the Earth*, John Elder discusses nature essays, particularly Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, as process texts which exemplify Whitehead's metaphysics by presenting continually unfolding change in their narrative flow and in their attention to the emotional import of specific features of landscapes. The writers discussed in this study show these qualities, although not the maximal metaphysical grounding of Dillard, Matthiessen, or Whitehead. See *Imagining the Earth*, ch. 7.

²³ Although recognizing the problems of "locating" oneself on the land through conventional language and categories of thought, nature writers still undertook the effort.

²⁴ The phrase from Thoreau's "Walking" is actually "In wildness is the preservation of the world" (*Natural History Essays* 112).

²⁵ Leopold's emphasis.

²⁶ Biologists advocating what they call "chaos ecology," most prominently Daniel Botkin, have criticized the idea of the land community on the grounds that stable, distinct groupings of organisms are almost impossible to define in nature. This position gained considerable support during the 1990s, but has been challenged recently by scientists who contend that species communities can be said to exist, but show more flux and disruption than older ideas of the "stable ecosystem" accounted for. Leopold's sense of land communities as contingent and evolving is consistent with this newer interpretation of them.

²⁷ Krutch's characterization of his intellectual outlook appears in his autobiography, *More Lives than One*, 16. The first chapter of that work outlines his youthful reading and scientific studies.

²⁸ Krutch feared this was becoming the case with modern literature as well, writing that in modern texts "love is at times only a sort of obscene joke . . . which quickly becomes bitter on the tongue, for a great and gratifying illusion has passed away, leaving the need for it still there" (qtd. in Margolis, 79).

²⁹ As Levine remarks, the term "naturalistic" is a bit misleading, since the kind of teleology claimed by this position presumes some metaphysical grounding (38).

³⁰ Kaufman concedes that other definitions of humanity could be employed for the kind of project he is undertaking. He argues, however, that this normative conception of humanity largely avoids the limitations of such conceptions offered by specific cultures while emphasizing capacities for sensitivity, knowledge, and freedom widely imputed, in one form or another, to human beings. This definition, he writes, will enable us "to take all the varieties of humanity and the understanding of the human . . . with full seriousness." See *In Face of Mystery* 103-04.

³¹ Jerome Stone finds many similarities between his work and that of Kaufman. The greatest point of difference he notes is that Kaufman emphasizes orienting power of his imaginative unification of humanizing agencies over that of the individuals, things and processes that comprise it. To Stone, this risks reifying an abstract concept of God. See Stone, *Minimalist*, 209.

³² See especially Paul Shepard's *The Others: How Animals Made us Human*. Tracing human interactions between humans and other creatures since prehistory, Shepard argues that a sense of animals as spiritual or "numenal" is essential to the formation of human selves, with different animals contributing different dimensions of human personality or revealing something important about the environment. "The big animals," he writes, "are momentary embodiments of the atomic vitality that energizes nature itself": while smaller creatures "are mnemonics of a small but diverse and structured world. Just as our physical substance comes from scattered molecules brought together as food, we begin as mental selves strewn around. Everything out there, especially living forms, has its resonance in us . . ." (330). He argues also that exploitive or ill-guided relations with animals resulted in various kinds of cultural harm or strife, just as Krutch maintained that the devaluation of animals and other natural presences contributed to the devaluation of humans.

³³ Krutch's statement that with the return of spring peepers "the most ancient of Christs is risen" would indicate he connects his convictions with primal forms of nature reverence.

³⁴ Emphasis Taylor's.

³⁵ Worster denies these represent actual values.

³⁶ A number of scientists have concurred with what Bass calls his "goofy survivor's theory." See *Book of Yaak*, 80-81.

³⁷ Bass's italics.

³⁸ Thoreau's observation of the loons prefigures Leopold's encounters with cranes and grebes in *Sand County Almanac*, making it possible to argue that Leopold's refinement of Ouspenskyan mysticism was guided by his knowledge of Thoreau.

³⁹ Obviously, Abbey cannot forego the use of cultural forms and allusions entirely, but he does not do so as conscientiously or persistently as the writers examined in previous chapter, and seems skeptical about the practice generally, especially as applied to his beloved deserts. He accounts for the desert's general absence from art and literature with the assertion that "[t]here is something about that desert that the human sensibility cannot assimilate, or has not so far been able to assimilate" (272). Generally, his explicit use of them is cursory and superficial, as when he observes that "The Waste Land" evokes the aridity of the desert, and the music of serialist composers represents to a degree the "the apartness, the otherness, the strangeness of the desert" (286).

⁴⁰ And, frequently, with representation of class, race, and sexuality as well. See Legler, "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism," 227, 229.

⁴¹ It is interesting to compare Ray's upbringing with that of John Muir: while Muir also grew up in a strictly religious household where regard for nature was viewed as a sin, he developed powerful feelings for the natural world early in life and urged his father and brothers (unsuccessfully) to exercise restraint in exploiting their land.

⁴² See Legler "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism," 229.

⁴³ Even with its maximal themes, *The Spell of the Sensuous* could still be considered a retrenchment of the work Abram was doing ten years earlier: responding to the Gaia Hypothesis in a 1985 article. Abram asserted that "perception is the experience of communication between the individual microcosm and the planetary macrocosm" ("The Perceptual Implications of Gaia" 98). *The Spell of the Sensuous* still posits a wholistic dimension to perception, but places more emphasis on its intersubjective dimensions.

⁴⁴ By contrast, earlier systems of writing employed characters which resembled natural forms—thus, landscapes still served as a foundation for linguistic meaning. See *The Spell of the Sensuous* 95-102, 131-35.

⁴⁵ Habermas, of course, believes that nature itself cannot be truly known because it was inaccessible to human language. Dryzek argues the appearance of independent “values, purposes, and meanings” and of feedback systems in nature makes the restriction of communicative rationality to human communities arbitrary and ill-founded (206).

⁴⁶ Cheney’s position resembles Abram’s in some ways, but Cheney’s vision of knowing as a mutualistic process does not posit human knowers as parties to some knowledge of the earth as a whole; it is more limited and pluralistic.

⁴⁷ Emphasis mine. The term “character” is important to Cheney in this context, and he acknowledges that he turns to the word frequently because of its connotations of personality. See Cheney 275.

⁴⁸ Emphasis Murphy’s.

⁴⁹ Cheney seems to approach, then retreat from, the possibility that we might encounter some extrahuman form of wisdom or creative power, even some sort of sacred otherness, in natural objects. He writes that once we adopt the relational epistemology he advocates, “nature’s complexity, generosity, and communicative abilities, its kinship and reciprocity, come to mark our epistemological relationship with the earth matrix” (274). Yet when he begins immediately thereafter to discuss his experiences with rocks, he unwaveringly adopts the terms of human personality (“character,” etc.). Although he identifies these descriptions as metaphoric, he does not venture beyond metaphors of human subjectivity.

⁵⁰ Just as Rick Bass in *Fiber* sees logging as a possible route to environmental and social renewal, Haraway sees liberatory potential in the technologies and conditions spawned by Cold War conflict and economic globalization.

⁵¹ In the “Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway identifies “Church” as one of the institutions that will play an important role in the increasingly technologized world that cyborgs will inhabit, and predicts that spirituality will remain relevant in future political struggles (172). Clearly she does not dismiss religion or spirituality outright, even though she does not define how it might enter into cyborg subjectivity or the partial understandings of the world it seeks.

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