


THE LITERATURE OF NATURE AND THE QUEST FOR THE SACRED

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N THE EVENING OF 16 JUNE 1979, a group of forty-one sperm whales inexplicably beached themselves on the central Oregon coast. It soon became apparent that the whales were doomed – they were haemorrhaging under the crushing weight of their own flesh and were beginning to suffer irreversible damage from heat exhaustion. Thus, saving the whales was out of the question. Still, as they lay dying, a steady stream of the concerned and the curious – scientists, police, local residents, media representatives, naturalists and environmental activists – poured onto the beach to see this astonishing sight for themselves. Each came with a particular interest in the event: scientists wanted to gather as much data as possible before the corpses decayed (even if it meant applying chain saws to the jaws of the great animals); many of the local residents came simply to ‘see history’; the media was there to get the story; the Oregon Parks Department was concerned to keep order and to keep the threat of disease from gaining ground; for some, the stranding of the whales was a ‘numinous event’.

How to account for these diverse responses to the stranding? One response is to consider the varied questions that witnesses brought to the event. Some asked simply what should be *done* about the whales, immediately. Others wanted to know what could be learned from the whales. Still others had questions less easily answerable: who *were* these mysterious creatures? How should they be treated? In some ways the questions and root impulses behind them were in basic conflict with one another. It soon became clear that it was not possible simultaneously to carry out scientific experiments, facilitate an impromptu tourist attraction, maintain law and order, contemplate these mysterious beings in wonder and ensure that they died with dignity. As the days unfolded, practical exigencies and no-nonsense scientific research gradually came to dominate the proceedings. The event became reduced to a problem-to-be-solved. Engineering prevailed over reflection. This did not come

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without a cost. As one of those present observed, it 'interfered with the spiritual and emotional ability of people to deal with the phenomenon'.¹

Why did this happen? How did such a numinous event come to be so reduced, so impoverished? One witness of the event, writer Barry Lopez, offers this telling explanation: 'As far as I know, no novelist, no historian, no moral philosopher, no scholar of Melville, no rabbi, no painter, no theologian had been on the beach'.²

The absence of such witnesses (and the possibility of their presence) raises important questions about how we perceive the natural world, about what language and categories are most appropriate for describing our diverse experiences in nature and about whether it is possible to speak meaningfully of a spirituality of nature. It is precisely the capacity to see and describe the natural world on many levels at once and to invite the human observer to become implicated in its mystery that characterizes the contemporary literature of nature and marks it as significant for spirituality. In particular, one finds in this literature a deft synthesis of science and art, a sensitivity both to empirical observation and to aesthetic creation. The result is a richly textured vision of the natural world that opens out new paths for exploring the sacred and provides new impetus for cherishing the living cosmos.

Spirituality and the literature of nature

Rooted in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the literature of nature in the North American tradition has in our own time come to be associated with the names of Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Loren Eiseley, Barry Lopez, Mary Oliver and many others. This literature is characterized by an acute attention to the particular, by its local character, by a focus on experience, by its valuation of imagination, by an implicit, oblique evocation of the transcendent, and by an enduring ethical impulse. As such, it holds immense promise for helping us to understand the shape and texture of the diverse, emerging spiritualities of the natural world arising in contemporary experience.

Still, it is not easy to describe the spirituality or spiritualities that emerge from this literature. As Catherine Albanese has noted in her book *Nature religion in America*, this particular expression of religion has tended to arise outside of the bounds of conventional religious structures and ideas. There is no listing for nature religion in the yellow pages, no consensus on what might comprise the spirituality and theology of such a religion.³ Yet it is alive and well in our midst. The growing popularity of the literature of nature is one important indication of this. In the part

of the world I come from, the western United States, readings by these poets and writers draw interested readers and listeners by the hundreds, even thousands. There are writing workshops and festivals throughout the west – cowboy poets gather annually in Elko, Nevada, to declaim their verse, while an ‘Art of the Wild’ conference held each summer in Squaw Valley, California, draws writers and poets seeking to hone their craft. On a national scale nature writers have been honoured in recent years with the Pulitzer Prize (Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*) and the National Book Award (Barry Lopez’ *Arctic dreams*). Although it is difficult to calculate the breadth of appeal or influence of all of the literature of nature, the depth of response it evokes is undeniable. At least some of its appeal, I would suggest, is rooted in its evocation of nature as numinous and transcendent.

What precisely is nature writing and in what sense does it have anything to do with spirituality? Thomas Lyon, in his masterly discussion of American nature writing in the book *This incomperable lande*, argues that the literature of nature has three main features, ‘natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretations of nature’. He suggests that it is ‘the relative weight or interplay of these three aspects’ that ‘determines all the permutations and categories within the field’.⁴ Lyon has developed a provisional ‘taxonomy of nature writing’, distinguishing seven main approaches or types which he situates along a ‘spectrum’. On one end are those works mostly concerned with information about the natural world and on the other end those taken up with more personal, philosophical reflection.

Beginning on one end of the spectrum, we find ‘field guides and professional papers’, whose primary role is to convey precise information about the natural world, though they can also speak with literary grace and poetic force, as in the case of Roger Tory Peterson’s *A field guide to western birds*. The ‘natural history essay’, such as Rachel Carson’s *The sea around us*, also provides an expository description of nature, although it is often fitted into a literary design so that the facts give rise to some sort of meaning or interpretation. The focus moves from the natural world itself to the author’s experience in the natural world in the essay form known as the ‘ramble’, exemplified by Annie Dillard’s luminous *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Moving still further away from the primacy of natural history facts to a clear emphasis on the writer’s experience, one encounters the ‘solitude and back-country living essay’; Edward Abbey’s *Desert solitaire* is one of the most vivid examples of this form in contemporary literature. The ‘travel and adventure essay’, such as Barry Lopez’ lyrical *Arctic dreams*, often draws a contrast between the

too-safe habituated existence left behind and the vivid life of discovery. The 'farm essay', of which Wendell Berry's *A continuous harmony* is a good example, raises questions about whether it is possible to find a thoughtful way of fitting into the natural patterns of a farm rather than always imposing some sort of abstract order upon them. Finally there are the analytic and comprehensive works on 'human beings and their role in nature', such as Thomas Berry's *The dream of the earth* or John Hay's *In defense of nature*. Here, interpretation predominates and the natural history facts or the personal experiences are decidedly secondary.⁵

In what sense are any of these works about spirituality? To answer this, it will help to consider briefly some recent discussions among scholars of spirituality regarding the meaning of the term and the shape of the field. In a recent article, Bernard McGinn distinguished three main approaches to the study of spirituality – 'historical-contextual', 'theological' and 'anthropological'. The historical-contextual approach, McGinn suggests, 'emphasizes spirituality as an experience rooted in a particular community's experience rather than as a dimension of human existence as such'.⁶ The theological approach to spirituality emphasizes the ongoing importance to spirituality of central theological categories without which it is difficult to conceive of spirituality at all. This approach need not be characterized by the subservience of spirituality to categories arising from systematic theology (as was characteristic of much of what was known as 'spiritual theology'). Rather, it recognizes that there is an ongoing, reciprocal, dynamic relationship between expressions of the experience of God (spirituality) and systematic, conceptual formulations of belief (systematic theology).⁷ Finally, the anthropological or hermeneutical approach is the one that seeks to understand spirituality as a fundamental element in human experience. As Sandra Schneiders defines this approach, it is 'the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'.⁸ For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus my attention on this last approach, for it is here that literature of nature and the spirituality evoked there can best be situated.

One of the benefits of an anthropological or hermeneutical approach to spirituality is precisely its inductive, phenomenological, open-ended way of apprehending and describing spiritual experience. Without prejudging where and in what form spiritual experience ought to be found, such an approach attends first of all to the wide variety of phenomena that might reasonably be considered as evoking a transcendent or depth dimension to existence, seeking to describe and

interpret the phenomenon as it presents itself. This does not mean that such experience is conceived of as contextless (and therefore inaccessible to historical study) or as lacking in cognitive content (and therefore inaccessible to theological reflection). However, if it is true, as Sandra Schneiders argues, that 'the experience of the spiritual life includes more, much more today, than religion, and religion includes much more than theology, and theology includes much more than specifically Christian content', then we must be prepared to look for spiritual experience in new places and to pose new questions about that experience.⁹ It is in this sense that the literature of nature is relevant to the current discussion. It represents one of the new expressions of spirituality emerging in contemporary experience which, although not easily accessible to either the historical-contextual or the theological approach, can be examined through an anthropological or hermeneutical approach. To understand the spirituality evoked by this literature means beginning not with certain *a priori* theological assumptions, but with a willingness to *listen* to the patterns of symbolic and metaphoric language found there.

Discerning the spirit in nature

In the literature of nature, discerning the spirit means above all cultivating an ever deepening sense of relationship with the natural world, a relationship that is rooted in mystery. As ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan has noted, '... natural history writers are really students of relationships. They are more interested in the dynamics between two living beings than in a single living organism as a *thing*.'¹⁰ This literature is respectful of the mystery inherent in these relationships, especially the human relationship with nature. Nature writers take great pains to suggest, in Robert Finch's words, 'a relationship with the natural environment that is more than strictly intellectual, biological, cultural, or even ethical ... they sense that nature is at its very heart, *an enduring mystery*'.¹¹ This involves a careful integration of poetic and scientific sensibilities. By attending carefully both to the natural world itself and to the poetic process through which observations are transformed into art, writers in this genre create an aesthetic climate hospitable to mystery.

Both scientific and artistic sensibilities are required in nature writing because the goal is to probe the mystery of nature and to describe accurately what is there. One might even say the aim is to probe mystery *by* describing accurately. Here, science and art co-operate with one another to construct a complex web of meaning from the experience of the natural world. There is a desire, as Thomas Lyon puts it, to

'harmonize fact knowledge and emotional knowledge'. Edward O. Wilson and Barry Lopez, approaching the same subject from two different vantage points, that of a scientist and an artist respectively, agree that 'science and aesthetic-emotional-intuitive knowledge not only coexist in nature writing, but conspire to suggest something greater, as it were, than the sum of its parts'.¹² Such an approach requires a revision of our conventional assumptions about the respective domains of the scientist and the artist.

The artist-naturalist is called upon to take seriously the study of the limitless minutiae and variation of the natural world, to cultivate the careful habits of observation and the deductive methodology of the scientist. This is one of the reasons why there is so little tolerance among contemporary nature writers for vague, uninformed, romantic ruminations on nature. Note Barry Lopez' intimate familiarity with Arctic biology in *Arctic dreams* and *Crossing open ground*, Annie Dillard's carefully acquired grasp of entomology in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, John McPhee's detailed understanding of plate tectonics in *Basin and range*.¹³ In each case, precise scientific knowledge informs and deepens a larger literary, spiritual sensibility. The metaphors and symbols arise not only from the writer's imagination, but from the natural world itself.

Barry Lopez describes the intricate pattern emerging from close observation of the landscape along the Charley river in Eastern Alaska.

What is stunning about the river's banks on this particular stormy afternoon is not the vegetation (the willow, alder, birch, black cottonwood, and spruce are common enough) but its *presentation*. The wind, like some energetic dealer in rare fabrics, folds back branches and ruffles the underside of leaves to show the pattern – the shorter willows forward; the birch taller, set farther back on the hills. The soft green furze of budding alder heightens the contrast between gray-green willow stems and white birch bark. All of it is rhythmic in the wind, each species bending as its diameter, its surface area, the strength of its fibers dictate. Behind this, a backdrop of hills: open country recovering from an old fire, dark islands of spruce in an ocean of labrador tea, lowbrush cranberry, fireweed, and wild primrose, each species of leaf the invention of a different green: lime, moss, forest, jade. This is not to mention the steel gray of the clouds, the balmy arctic temperature, our clear suspension in the canoe over the stony floor of the river, the ground-in dirt of my hands, the flutelike notes of a Swainson's thrush, or anything else that informs the scene.¹⁴

Here careful, spare description of what is 'presented' by the land yields insight and understanding. The individual species of trees come alive

and speak as a whole, their subtle variations in colour and form comprising a rich, complex vision. The metaphoric evocation of this vision emerges as a gradual unfolding and is inseparable from Lopez' hard-won knowledge of the place: it is only after several days on the river and increasing familiarity with its rhythms that a pattern finally emerges.

Co-operation between science and art also requires the scientist to abandon the myth of objectivity toward, detachment from, or comprehensive knowledge of the subject matter. It means that the scientist must develop the aesthetic, interpretive sensibilities of an artist. Here consider the elegant aesthetic quality of the writing of Loren Eiseley, E. O. Wilson, Rachel Carson and Richard Nelson. Steeped in careful scientific research, their work also reflects an uncommon level of imaginative, emotional engagement with the subject matter and graceful literary expression. The style and form of the work are significant. Loren Eiseley, trained as a scientist, became frustrated with the conventions of scientific discourse and was increasingly drawn to articulate his vision in what he called 'the personal essay' or 'the concealed essay'. Here, the personal anecdote 'was allowed gently to bring under observation thoughts of a more purely scientific nature'.¹⁵ Eiseley developed this into a fine art, weaving together personal insight and scientific understanding to create a resonant vision of the natural world.

The possibility of deep imaginative interaction with nature means paying attention to the utterly subjective and personal character of one's interest and inclinations. 'You start', says E. O. Wilson,

by loving a subject. Birds, probability theory, explosives, stars, differential equations, storm fronts, sign language, swallowtail butterflies – the odds are that the obsession will have begun in childhood. The subject will be your lodestar and give sanctuary in the shifting mental universe.

Sometimes these inclinations have their origins in something as basic as physical make-up. Wilson tells how the great metallurgist Cyril Smith was drawn to the study of alloys by the fact that he was colour blind. His impairment led him to turn his attention at an early age to the intricate black-and-white patterns which are found everywhere in nature, 'to swirls, filigree, banding; and eventually to the fine structure of metal'.¹⁶

The creative value of one's personal inclinations and orientation does not always sit easily with the assumptions about acquiring knowledge prevalent in western science. Anthropologist Richard Nelson's early training in biology exposed him to a kind of science from which the self and its wider interests were *a priori* excluded. Its emphasis on quantified data, controlled experiments, technological monitoring devices and

theoretical analysis left him with the sense that it would never be able to teach him what mattered about nature. Thus his pleasure at finding a refuge in anthropology 'where the descriptive approach had persisted like an orphan child, and where the study of Native Cultures revealed traditions of natural history that seemed richer than anything accessible in Western science'. During his long years spent with the Koyukon people of Alaska, he absorbed an entirely different attitude toward the natural world. It was their humility that struck Nelson most deeply: 'I never heard them speak of how much they knew, but of how little, and of how much there was to learn, how difficult it was to understand even the smallest mysteries surrounding them'.¹⁷ This attitude of humility creates the mental atmosphere, Nelson suggests, for approaching nature respectfully, with openness, for seeing deeply into its heart.

Careful attention to the intricate patterns in nature and to the language appropriate to them means cultivating a fresh vision of the natural world which only the eye of the poet, the clash of metaphors, can produce. That eloquent chronicler of the Southwest, Joseph Wood Krutch, suggests that the cultivation of a poetic sensibility is indispensable if we are to have any chance of even *noticing* the natural world, much less taking it into ourselves: 'It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things which alone is true living . . . the faculty of wonder tires easily . . . Really to see something once or twice a week is almost inevitably to have to try . . . to make oneself a poet'.¹⁸ Rachel Carson speaks in similar terms to describe the predicament she faced in writing her acclaimed book, *The sea around us*. When asked why this book about the sea, based on close, scientific observation of the underwater world, was so 'poetic', she responded: 'If there is poetry in my book about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry'.¹⁹

Poetry here means paying attention to metaphors, whose tensive force enables us to experience the natural world in a new way and to uncover the significance – the 'truth' in Carson's words – of this experience. It also means learning to open ourselves to the unexpected, learning to use our imaginations to discern previously unforeseen relationships. There is the suggestion here of the need for an emotional involvement with the subject matter, a quality that Edward Abbey contends is necessary for any authentic engagement with the natural world: ' . . . sympathy for the object under study, and more than sympathy, love. A love based on prolonged contact and interaction. Intercourse if possible. Observation informed by sympathy, love, intuition.'²⁰ The cultivation of such an attitude can help open us to encounter the transcendent in nature.

Nature writing suggests endless possibilities for genuine encounter with the natural world, for entering into relationships of mystery. This is especially true of what might be called 'narratives of conversion' which convey, sometimes directly, more often obliquely, the place and manner in which an author was beckoned, even seized by the sense of mystery in the natural world.²¹ Such narratives suggest both the revelatory power of natural epiphanies and their capacity to transform those who experience them. Moreover, their effects often pass beyond the immediate subject to open up new horizons of understanding for countless others. One such narrative, which has taken on extraordinary significance in the American conservation movement, concerns a turning point in the life of Aldo Leopold who discovered to his surprise both the immense cost of waking to a sense of relationship with the natural world and the endless possibilities it engendered.

Travelling as a young man through the canyon lands of Arizona, he and his companions stopped one day to eat lunch on a high rimrock. Gazing into the canyon below, they suddenly caught sight of what appeared to be a doe fording the river. Only when she had crossed the river and had begun climbing toward them did they realize their error: they were watching a wolf. Following behind her were a half-dozen others, grown pups who 'sprang from the willows and . . . joined in a welcoming *mêlée* of wagging tails and playful mauplings. What was literally a pile of wolves writhed and tumbled in the center of an open flat at the foot of our rimrock.' Leopold and his friends did not hesitate: 'In a second we were pumping lead into the pack', bringing the old wolf down and scattering the others. He reached the old wolf in time 'to watch the fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain.'²²

Reflecting on this bloody epiphany many years later, Leopold noted with chagrin how disjointed his own relationship with the natural world had been at the time, how shallow his judgement and perspective. Not only had he callously assumed the right to kill the wolf, but he had completely misunderstood the delicate ecological balance he was disturbing – 'I thought that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise'. The systematic application of this principle during the subsequent years in state after state throughout the west had caused deer populations to explode and vegetation to be decimated. The result? 'Starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too much . . . dustbowls, and rivers washing the futures into the sea.' All this because we had not learned, as Leopold put it, to 'think

like a mountain', to consider the implications of our actions from the perspective of the earth. The birth of Leopold's new sense of relationship with the natural world and the land ethic he helped to articulate emerged from that chilling moment when he glimpsed 'the fierce green fire' dying in the eyes of the old wolf. This unexpected epiphany removed a veil from Leopold's understanding and revealed to him a heretofore unimagined dimension of reality. It would nurture his lifelong search for a balanced, respectful relationship with the natural world and become a touchstone for the modern ecological movement.

Conclusion

In Leopold's narrative we have a vivid reminder of the intimate connection that exists between the encounter with mystery, the emerging sense of relationship with other species and the growth of a sense of responsibility for the natural world. If we are to respond in a meaningful way to the increasingly rapid ecological degradation of the planet, we will need to rethink many of our most cherished assumptions about the natural world and our place in that world. The literature of nature can help us to do that. By attending carefully to the texture of the natural world and its endless capacity to illuminate and transform our existence, nature writers help us to recover a genuine sense of belonging to the living cosmos. Those of us who study and teach spirituality can learn a lot from these writers and poets about where we need to be and how to think about the deepest challenges facing us. Perhaps they can help lure us, as Barry Lopez suggests, 'onto the beach' where together with the scientists, novelists, historians, painters, poets, we can learn to listen carefully and give imaginative voice to the elusive traces of the spirit in nature.

NOTES

¹ Barry Lopez, *Crossing open ground* (New York: Scribners, 1988), p. 127.

² Lopez, *Crossing open ground*, p. 146.

³ Catherine Albanese, *Nature religion in America: from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴ Thomas J. Lyon (ed), *This incomparable land: a book of American nature writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 3. For a further indication of the breadth of the genre, see also: Thomas Lyon (ed), *Witness: new nature writing III*: 4 (1989); Daniel Halpern (ed), *On nature: nature, landscape, and natural history* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987); Stephen Trimble (ed), *Words from the land: encounters with natural history writing* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1989); Robert Finch and John Elder (eds), *The Norton book of nature writing* (New York: Norton, 1990); John A. Murray (ed), *Nature's new voices* (Golden CO: Fulcrum, 1992); Peter Sauer (ed), *Finding home* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

⁵ Roger Tory Peterson, *A field guide to western birds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961); Rachel Carson, *The sea around us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950); Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

(New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Edward Abbey, *Desert solitaire* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988); Barry Lopez, *Arctic dreams: imagination and desire in a northern landscape* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986); Wendell Berry, *A continuous harmony: essays cultural and agricultural* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972); John Hay, *In defense of nature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Thomas Berry, *The dream of the earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

⁶ Bernard McGinn, 'The letter and the spirit: spirituality as an academic discipline', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1:2 (Fall 1993), p 6.

⁷ On this question, cf Bradley Hanson, 'Theological approaches to spirituality: a Lutheran perspective', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2:1 (Spring 1994), pp 5-9; Philip Sheldrake SJ, 'Some continuing questions: the relationship between spirituality and theology', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2:1 (Spring 1994), pp 15-18.

⁸ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the academy', *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), p 684.

⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'A hermeneutical approach to the study of Christian spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 2:1 (Spring 1994), p 10.

¹⁰ Trimble, *Words from the land*, p 5.

¹¹ Robert Finch, 'Being at two with nature', *The Georgia Review* 45:1 (Spring 1994), p 101 (emphasis mine).

¹² Thomas J. Lyon, 'Introduction', in Edward Lueders (ed), *Writing natural history: dialogues with authors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), pp 3-4.

¹³ Barry Lopez, *Arctic dreams: imagination and desire in a northern landscape* (New York: Scribners, 1986); Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); John McPhee, *Basin and range* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981).

¹⁴ Barry Lopez, *Crossing open ground* (New York: Scribners, 1988), pp 78-9.

¹⁵ Loren Eiseley, *All the strange hours: the excavation of a life* (New York: Scribners, 1975), p 177.

¹⁶ E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia: the human bond with other species* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p 65.

¹⁷ Richard Nelson, *The island within* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p 161.

¹⁸ Joseph Wood Krutch, *The desert year* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp 37-38.

¹⁹ Trimble, *Words from the land*, p xiii.

²⁰ Edward Abbey, 'Down the river with Henry Thoreau' in Trimble, *Words from the land*, p 62.

²¹ On this question, cf also: Douglas Burton-Christie, 'A feeling for the natural world: spirituality and the heart in contemporary nature writing', *Continuum* 2:2-3 (Spring 1993).

²² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County almanac and sketches here and there* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp 129-130.