Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing

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Annie Dillard
Edward Abbey
Wendell Berry
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Salt Lake City

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To Analinda and Jacinto

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

When we are with Nature we are awake . . .

—John Muir, Journal entry (June, 1890)

When one pays close attention to the present, there is great pleasure in awareness of small things.

—Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (1978)

We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up. We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust. As adults we are almost all adept at waking up. We have so mastered the transition we have forgotten we ever learned it. Yet is is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many willless dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge. We live half our waking lives and all of our sleeping lives in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add—until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into the wide-awake city, in a form that people can use.

—Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse" (1982)

One of the oldest dreams of mankind is to find a dignity that might include all living beings. And one of the greatest of human longings must be to bring such dignity to one's own dreams, for each to find his or her own life exemplary in some way. The struggle to do this is a struggle because an adult sensibility must find some way to include all the dark threads of life. A way to do this is to pay attention to what occurs in a land not touched by human schemes, where an original order prevails.

—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986)

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Approaches to the Psychology of Nature Writing

Sharon Cameron has suggested in her book *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (1985), that "to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and sometimes about how the mind sees itself" (44). I believe this statement holds true not only for Henry David Thoreau, to whom Cameron is referring specifically, but also for many of Thoreau's followers in the tradition of American nature writing. Such writers as Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez are not merely, or even primarily, analysts of nature or appreciators of nature—rather, they are students of the human mind, literary psychologists. And their chief preoccupation, I would argue, is with the psychological phenomenon of "awareness." Thoreau writes in the second chapter of *Walden* ([1854] 1971, 90) that "we must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake." But in order to achieve heightened attentiveness to our place in the natural world—attentiveness to our very existence—we must understand something about the workings of the mind.

Nature writers are constantly probing, traumatizing, thrilling, and soothing their own minds—and by extension those of their readers—in quest not only of consciousness itself, but of an understanding of consciousness. Their descriptions of this exalted mental condition tend to be variable and elusive, their terminologies more suggestive than definitive. Thoreau himself (drawing upon classical sources and daily cycles for his imagery) favors the notion of "awakening"; Dillard and Abbey use the word "awareness" to describe this state, though for Dillard such activities as "seeing" and "stalking" are also metaphors for stimulated consciousness; Berry, at least in his major essay "The Long-Legged House" (1969), emphasizes "watchfulness" as a condition of profound alertness; and for Lopez, two complementary modes of "understanding" natural places, the "mathematical" and especially the "particularized" (or experiential)—serve as keys to mental elevation.

Both nature and writing (the former being an external presence, the latter a process of verbalizing personal experience) demand and contribute to an author's awareness of self and nonself. By confronting face-to-face the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its otherness, the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown. Many literary naturalists imitate the notebooks of scientific naturalists, or the logbooks of explorers, or even the journals of non-scientific travelers in order to entrench themselves in the specific moment of experience. The verbalization of observations and reactions makes one much more acutely aware than would a more passive assimilation of experience. As Annie Dillard bluntly puts it in describing one of her two principal modes of awareness, "Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it" (*Pilgrim*, 30).

Giles Gunn writes that "modern man tends to view the encounter with 'otherness' . . . as a mode of access to possibilities of change and development within the self and the self's relation to whatever is experienced as 'other.' " We associate reality, he continues, "with the process by which we respond to [other worlds'] imagined incursions from 'beyond' and then attempt to readjust and redefine ourselves as a consequence" (*Interpretation of Otherness*, 188). The facile sense of harmony, even identity, with one's surroundings (a condition often ascribed to rhapsodic nature writing) would fail to produce self-awareness of any depth or vividness. It is only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who they are and what's what in the world.

Most nature writers, from Thoreau to the present, walk a fine line (or, more accurately, vacillate) between rhapsody and detachment, between aesthetic celebration and scientific explanation. And the effort to achieve an equilibrium, a suitable balance of proximity to and distance from nature, results in the prized tension of awareness. According to Alain Robbe-Grillet, "This oscillating movement between man and his natural doubles is that of an active consciousness concerned to understand itself, to reform

itself" ("Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," 69). Geoffrey Hartman, in commenting on Wordsworth, uses different terms to say something similar: "The element of obscurity, related to nature's self-concealment, is necessary to the soul's capacity for growth, for it vexes the latter toward self-dependence" ("The Romance of Nature," 291). In other words, the very mysteriousness of nature contributes to the independence and, presumably, the self-awareness of the observer. This dialectical tension between correspondence and otherness is especially noticeable in Thoreau, Dillard, and Abbey, writers who vacillate constantly between the two extreme perspectives. Berry and Lopez, however, do not vacillate so dramatically. Their sense of correspondence with the natural world in general, or with particular landscapes, does fluctuate, sometimes seeming secure and other times tenuous. But for the most part these two writers assume an initial disjunction (that of a native son newly returned from "exile" in Berry's case, and that of a traveler in exotic territory in Lopez's) which is gradually, through persistent care and attentiveness, resolved. The result, for Berry, is a process of ever-increasing "watchfulness"; for Lopez, one of deepening respect and understanding.

For all of these contemporary American nature writers, the prototypical literary investigation of the relationship between nature and the mind is Thoreau's Journal (*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, hereinafter referred to and cited as Thoreau's Journal). The Journal, far from being a less artful and therefore less interesting subject for scholars than the works published during Thoreau's lifetime, is actually an example of nature writing at its purest, with no conscious attempt having been made to obscure and mystify the writer's intense connection or disconnection with his natural surroundings. In the works published during Thoreau's lifetime, the temporal element tends to be muted (by extensive philosophical digressions in his 1849 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and by the somewhat concealed seasonal movement in *Walden*, for instance) and the authorial self often dissolves into multiple personae. The Journal, on the other hand, generally presents consistent temporal and spatial locations. We receive almost daily entries from a consistent narrator and it's usually clear exactly where Thoreau was and what he did or thought. The Jour-

nal gives us the sense throughout of Thoreau's actual presence in the natural world, something we encounter only intermittently in the other works, even in the many essays organized according to the excursion format. And not only is the author's proximity to nature more consistent and concrete in the Journal, but there is also a more explicit testing of the boundaries of self against the "other world" of nature.

One of the major issues of the text, which covers more than twenty years of Thoreau's life, is whether there is, in Emersonian terms, a "correspondence" between the inner self and the outer world, between the mind and nature. This is a question that Thoreau never answers finally—and thus results the rich tension of identity forging. The Journal, an almost daily record of observations, shows the author's efforts to line up his internal rhythms with those of external nature. There are times when Thoreau takes pleasure in the apparent identity of his own fluctuating moods and the "moods" of the passing seasons. At other times, though, it is nature's very "otherness" which fascinates and delights him: "I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him" (4:445). The idea of nature as distinct from man gives the cranky author more than mere refuge from the annoyances and trivialities of the human world. This understanding, which comes from constant and thorough observation of natural phenomena, helps Thoreau both to enlarge his minute self by anchoring it in nature and, conversely, to become more deeply conscious of his human boundaries. Virtually all nature writers in Thoreau's wake perpetuate his combined fascination with inner consciousness and external nature, but I have chosen to focus my study on Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez because they represent with particular clarity modern variations of Thoreau's two opposing modes of response to nature: disjunction and conjunction.

For the purposes of the writer at the time of the actual observation (or of the journal-writing, which may, in Thoreau's case, often have occurred back at his desk), a journal is simply the most expedient way to keep a record, to protect observations from the foibles of memory. But even more importantly, as Dillard suggests in the quotation above, putting things into language helps people see better; and this can happen either at the moment of confrontation or in retrospect while sitting at a desk hours later. Of course, it is possible to record observations without strictly keeping track of chronology, but for the nature writer the omission of time of day and time of year would betoken a vital lapse of awareness. Nature changes so dramatically between noon and midnight, summer and winter, and sometimes even minute by minute, that the observer fails to grasp the larger meaning of phenomena if he or she overlooks the temporal aspect. Also, by making regular entries, the writer establishes a consistent routine of inspection; the condition of awareness thus becomes more lasting, and is not consigned to occasional moments of epiphany alone. For the reader, the journal form of nature writing (either the private journal or the various kinds of modified journals and anecdotal essays) effects a vicarious experience of the author's constant process of inspecting and interpreting nature, and heightens the reader's awareness of the author's presence in nature.

My interest in the way nature writers both study the phenomenon of environmental consciousness and attempt to stimulate this heightened awareness among their readers has led me to consult some of the scientific literature on environmental perception. Stephen and Rachel Kaplan edited a collection of essays entitled *Humanscape: Environments for People* (1982), which I have found particularly useful. In his introductory essay, Stephen Kaplan cites William James's seminal definition of the perceptual process: "Perception is of probable and definite things" (31). "By 'probable,' " Kaplan writes, "[James] meant that we tend to perceive what is likely, what is familiar, even when the stimulus is in fact not familiar. By 'definite' he meant that we tend to perceive clearly, even when the stimulus is vague, blurred, or otherwise ambiguous" (32). In other words, rather than attending fully and freshly to each new experience when we look at the world, we tend to rely upon previously stored information—what Kaplan and others refer to as "internal representations" (33). Although we may generally feel certainty when we perceive external reality, we are actually making what Kaplan calls "best guesses" (32) and *not* perceiving everything thoroughly, in detail. The reasons for this perceptual process are, of course, understandable. Often we don't have the time for thorough inspection—when we round a bend in

the mountains and glimpse a large gray object, it is useful to decide quickly whether we have seen a dozing grizzly or a mere boulder. What especially interests me, though, is the implication that even when we feel certain we *know* our natural environment, we probably do not—we may not even have really looked at it.

It seems to me that Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey, in their efforts to stimulate our attentiveness to nature and to the foibles of our own minds, our delusions of certainty, take pains to invoke and then upend precisely the system of perception which, echoing James, Kaplan describes. Also in the *Humanscape* volume, William R. Catton suggests in an article entitled "The Quest for Uncertainty," that "one important type of motivation underlying the recreational use of wilderness by the average devotee may be the mystery it holds for him" (114). The attraction of mountain climbing, he explains, "is not in reaching the summit but in carrying on the task in the face of doubt as to whether the summit will be reached or will prove unattainable" (113). With a similar sense of the excitement of uncertainty, Dillard and Abbey tend to place special emphasis on the startling, sometimes even desperate, unpredictability of the natural world. They capitalize on the harsh and chilling features of the landscapes they love, recounting with particular avidness experiences in which perception has not been probable and definite. The emotional results are disgust, horror, annoyance, surprise, and almost always (at least in retrospect) satisfaction with the intensity of the experience.

Critics have traditionally been thrown off track by the flashy catchwords of Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—specifically, the language drawn from either religion or natural science—and by their own desires and expectations. Think of the book's title, for instance. This in itself indicates the usual poles of critical response. Many readers approach the book expecting (and frequently finding) a "pilgrim," a person on a quest for spiritual knowledge, or one fulfilling a spiritual commitment through meditation on wonders of divinely mysterious origin. Others dwell upon the words "Tinker Creek," which are suggestive of a natural place. They expect to read meditations on nature or on man/nature interaction, and these readers are often put off by what they perceive as the work's anthropocentrism. Hayden Carruth, in an early review,

deplores Dillard's abstractness and her failure to attend "to life on this planet at this moment, its hazards and misdirections," and refers to Wendell Berry's writing as being more responsible and "historically . . . relevant" than Dillard's ("Attractions and Dangers of Nostalgia," 640). Still other readers combine the two "poles" of the title and label Dillard a "visionary naturalist," though not always a successful one (Lavery, "Noticer," 270).

But Dillard is not now and never has been precisely a religious mystic or an environmentalist. She calls herself an "anchorite" on the second page of *Pilgrim* and a "nun" in her next book of prose, *Holy the Firm*, which appeared in 1977 and in which one of the few characters other than Dillard herself is an accident-scarred girl named "Julie Norwich." But despite her beguiling hints and suggestions, Dillard is not a latter-day Julian of Norwich, nor is she Rachel Carson's literary daughter, alerting the nation to the urgent problems of the environment. She is, rather, a kind of hybrid—if we were to push this hypothetical lineage to absurdity—of Thoreau and William James. The "wake-up call" of Thoreau's chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" in *Walden* reverberates throughout her works, as does the process of psychological experimentation demonstrated in the Journal, the alternating closeness to and estrangement from nature. Dillard is—and here I believe I deviate, at least in emphasis, from previous readers of her early work—a devoted student of the human mind, of its processes of awakening, its daily, hourly, and even momentary fluctuations of awareness. In this way she is much like William James, an investigator of the varieties of human consciousness. However, whereas James dwelled upon the varieties of religious experience, Dillard's emphasis (especially in *Pilgrim*) is on the varieties of natural experience—or, more precisely, on the experience of both heightened and dulled awareness of nature.

I do not wish to discount entirely the important religious and natural historical currents in her work, but I do think the central focus of her writing has always been the psychology of awareness. Even *Living by Fiction* (1982), with its concern for how writers working in various fictional and nonfictional genres experience "the raw universe" (145) and transform this experience into literature, is, to a great degree, psychological. In *Pilgrim* and *An Amer-*

ican Childhood (1987), Dillard displays with particular vividness her habit of provoking insight and wonderment by estranging herself from ordinary scenes and events. Fecundity and death, the opposing processes of nature so prominent in *Pilgrim*, are probably the most fundamental and therefore most common processes in the natural world. Yet Dillard, in her dreamlike observations of a giant water bug sucking the life out of a frog, or in her representation of a mantis reproducing ("I have seen the mantis's abdomen dribbling out eggs in wet bubbles like tapioca pudding glued to a thorn" [*Pilgrim*, 167]), uses unexpected language to transform the quotidian into the cataclysmic, thus snapping herself alert to the world and to her own thought processes. By verbalizing experiences, as she herself notes in the chapter of *Pilgrim* called "Seeing," she makes herself a more conscious, meticulous observer of the commonplace, an observer able to appreciate the strangeness, or otherness, of the world. Through her encounters with nature and her use of language, she awakens to her own participation in and distance from the organic world and to the dimensions of her own mind.

Edward Abbey, too, has often found his work co-opted by readers who needed his voice for their own purposes. In his tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Abbey's Road* (1979), Abbey claims to recall an incident which occurred after he gave a reading "at some country campus in Virginia." When a student accused him of not looking "right," not fitting the image of "a wilderness writer," an "environmental writer," Abbey supposedly responded with the following indignant self-definition: "I am an artist, sir, . . . a creator of fictions" (xxi–xxii). But the student is certainly not alone in his failure to sort out Abbey's intriguingly overlapping literary personalities. The critics also have often been baffled, either ignoring his work altogether or applying rather predictable labels to it. Virtually all of Abbey's writing, both his fiction and his nonfiction, defies easy categorization—much like George Washington Hayduke, the Green-Beret-turned-ecoterrorist in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Abbey's 1975 novel. Abbey's language feints one way, dodges capture, hides out until the coast is clear, then parades itself once again before carrying out yet another daring escape.

Desert Solitaire, his most famous work of nonfiction, exists for many readers as pure rhapsody—indeed, as an elegy for the lost (or, at least, fast-disappearing) pristineness of the Canyon Country in Utah. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, on the other hand, is usually read as a straightforward call to arms for environmentalists, and such radical preservationist groups as Earth First! have even claimed it as their Bible. But neither reading is adequate. Ann Ronald encompasses part of the truth when she explains, in *The New West of Edward Abbey* (1982), how he uses "his sense of humor to pronounce a sobering message" (200). I have tried to push this explanation one step further in my chapter on Abbey by suggesting that his abundant humor—which typically takes the form of wordplay, like the pun in my chapter title on Abbey—is merely one aspect of his broader devotion to the aesthetics of language. I believe that Abbey's true project, his essential consciousness-raising effort, hinges upon the conflation of pure aesthetics with volatile moral issues (such as the sacredness of the wilderness, the inviolability of private property, and the appropriate use of public lands). This tension between aesthetics and morality is evident throughout Abbey's work, but I will focus on *Desert Solitaire* and, particularly, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, reading the latter work as the *Lolita* of the environmental movement. Just as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* throws its reader into richly conflicting states of disdain, pity, admiring sympathy, and aesthetic pleasure, Abbey's novel heightens our attentiveness to issues of the environment (while providing little explicit dogma) by presenting disturbing extremes toward both preservation and development of the land, within a literary context aimed to *please*. Obviously, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a novel and hardly a journal-like one at that. But it demonstrates a bold extension of the exploration of human awareness which Abbey began in *Desert Solitaire*, a more direct echo of Thoreau's own psychological journal.

I selected Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez for this study because they contrast so vividly with the more flamboyant and whimsical modern nature writers. Whereas Dillard and Abbey tend to emphasize disjunction and unpredictability in their efforts to prompt awareness, Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez take the opposite approach, mirroring the correspondential swing of

Thoreau's mental pendulum. For Dillard and Abbey, the most effective stimuli of intense alertness are change, surprise, disruption of facile certainty implied by the Jamesian concept of perception. But Berry and Lopez assume ignorance or limited awareness to begin with, then proceed to enact a gradual and almost linear progression toward a deepening of awareness. What most people merely perceive as "probable and definite" in the external world, these two writers attempt to make evermore solid, evermore certain. Neither of these writers ever claims to have achieved a fully developed consciousness, an unsurpassable plateau of awareness. Like Thoreau, they emphasize the ongoing process of mental growth, but they deviate from the dazzling erraticness of Thoreau's other heirs, Dillard and Abbey, in their steady and (perhaps to some readers) tediously persistent movement toward the world.

In "The Long-Legged House," the lengthy essay which is the primary focus of my chapter on watchfulness, Berry presents the history of his attachment to his native place along the Kentucky River, showing "how a person can come to belong to a place" (145). It was only after contemplating Andrew Marvell's poetry about humanity's place in nature that Berry began "that summer of [his] marriage the surprisingly long and difficult labor of *seeing* the country [he] had been born in and had lived [his] life in until then" (141). Thus Berry's work implies the need to move beyond complacent acceptance of our "internal representations" of the places where we live or visit, the need to see things consciously, to become aware—and it indicates also the role of literature in inspiring and guiding "awakening" (to use Thoreau's word) in its readers. The essay sweeps through many years of Berry's life, recounting the history of the place where he eventually, after years as a wandering academic, came back to live and revitalize his roots. Berry also digresses from direct discussion of this place, known as "the Camp," in order to reflect abstractly on connections between the self and the natural world, and on ways of coming to know intimately a specific natural place. The place, he says, will reveal its secrets to the human observer, but it takes prolonged contact: "The only condition is your being there and being *watchful*" (169—my emphasis).

This necessary watchfulness is enhanced by the process of writing. At the point in the history when Berry and his wife have returned to the Camp and he has vowed to become (as he later puts it) "intimate and familiar" with the place (161), he recalls that he began writing "a sort of journal, keeping account of what [he] saw" (146). Immediately after he mentions this, the style of the essay changes—it becomes much more detailed and concrete, the pace of the narrative slowing to allow the presentation of specific natural observations, examples of how "the details rise up out of the whole and become visible" to the patient observer (161). What is interesting to me about this process of observation is that Berry associates it explicitly with the act of writing, a connection manifested even in the way the prose of the essay changes, becoming more journal-like and immediate, at the point in the history when the author is finally making contact with the place. The result of this increasing intimacy with the Camp and the nearby river landscape, despite the deepening sense of attachment, is an awareness that the man belongs to the place without the place belonging to the man. So there remains a disjunction between Berry and his most familiar natural place—the separation lessens, but is never erased entirely. This awareness does not mitigate the author's feeling of attachment, but it does result in the distinctive humility of Berry's work, in the frequent reminders that people are part of a vast world.

Although Berry narrates this process of return and reconnection most thoroughly and explicitly in "The Long-Legged House," he also meditates compellingly on exile, homecoming, and belonging to a place in such works as "Notes from an Absence and a Return" (a 1970 essay/journal which tersely parallels "The Long-Legged House"), the Odysseus section in *The Unsettling of America* (1977), and "The Making of a Marginal Farm" (1980). In the most recent of these essays, Berry makes an important distinction between writing about a place from afar, treating it merely as subject matter, and actually living on the land. He writes,

> In coming home and settling on this place, I began to *live* in my subject, and to learn that living in one's subject is not at all the same as "having" a subject. To live in the place that is one's subject is to pass

> through the surface. The simplifications of distance and mere observation are thus destroyed. . . . One's relation to one's subject ceases to be merely emotional or esthetical, or even merely critical, and becomes problematical, practical, and responsible as well. Because it must. It is like marrying your sweetheart. (*Recollected Essays*, 337)

For Berry, awareness or watchfulness is indeed an exalted state of mind, but it is not an innocently blissful one. "The Long-Legged House" tends to emphasize the difficulty of achieving watchfulness and the pleasure of paying attention to the subtleties of place once one's mind begins to get in shape. However, "The Making of a Marginal Farm," written a decade later, admits that paying attention can reveal horrors as well as delights. In this essay Berry is particularly attuned to the problem of erosion, a problem so severe along the steep slopes of the lower Kentucky River Valley that "It cannot be remedied in human time; to build five or six feet of soil takes perhaps fifty or sixty thousand years. This loss, once imagined, is potent with despair. If a people in adding a hundred and fifty years to itself subtracts fifty thousand years from its land, what is there to hope?" (335). Despite this expression of despair and futility, Berry's life and literary work are both processes of reclamation, rehabilitation. To write about a problem is not necessarily to produce a solution, but the kindling of consciousness—one's own and one's reader's—is a first step—an essential first step.

One of the important issues in contemporary nature writing is determining how this literature translates into concrete changes in a reader's attitude and behavior toward the environment. Cheryll Burgess, the author of a paper entitled "Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism"—delivered at the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association—argues that it is the responsibility of critics and teachers to point out the environmental implications of literary texts, or, in other words, to engage in "ecocriticism." At the panel discussion "Building a Constituency for Wilderness," which took place during the Second North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference in February 1990, such writers and editors as Michael Cohen, Stephen Trimble, and Gibbs Smith contemplated more specifically the likely audience for nature writing and the possible effects—or lack thereof—that this writing

might have. Are nature writers "preaching to the choir," or do their voices reach out even to the unaware and uncommitted? With the 1990 Earth Day celebration now more than two years behind us, it is clear that the Thoreauvian process of awakening is not merely a timeless private quest, but a timely—even urgent—requirement if we are to prevent or at least retard the further destruction of our planet. But how can nature writers lead the way in this awakening, this "conversion process"?

This is, of course, the problem Barry Lopez presents movingly in the prologue to *Arctic Dreams*: "If we are to devise an enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic, we need 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, itself, another sort of civilization we had to reach some agreement with" (11). The book itself consists of nine chapters, which could be said to represent such academic categories as anthropology, geology, biology, history, and aesthetics. Much of this material, however elegantly worded, is discursive—that is, non-narrative. And this alone is not enough to achieve the special understanding Lopez seeks for himself and his readers. But what he does do is crystallize all of his scholarly passages around vivid kernels of personal experience, demonstrating his own profound engagement with the place and thus soliciting his readers' imaginative engagement as well, the first step toward active concern.

In his interview with Kay Bonetti, Lopez explains that "the sorts of stories that I'm attracted to in a nonfiction way are those that try to bring some of the remote areas closer for the reader by establishing some kind of intimacy with the place, but also by drawing on the work of archeologists and historians and biologists" (Bonetti, "An Interview with Barry Lopez," 59). This passage demonstrates the approach in much of his work, including *Arctic Dreams*. It is a process of venturing to exotic, seldom-experienced landscapes, of describing terrain, flora, fauna, and human inhabitants, and of reporting back to his North American readers in a detailed, respectful mode of storytelling calculated to generate in his audience a concern, not only for the specific subject of the narrative, but for the readers' own immediate surroundings. As Lopez asserts at the Fourth Sino-American Writers Conference

held in 1988, "The goal of the writer, finally, is to nourish the reader's awareness of the world" ("Chinese Garland," 41).

The chapters in *Arctic Dreams* are frequently aloof, factual, and coolly prophetic, but then Lopez suddenly presents a pulsing human heart amidst the frozen landscape, pushing understanding beyond the merely mathematical, the intellectual. The personal anecdotes do not show the author melting easily into the landscape, despite his intimations of reverence for its beauty and the inspiring abundance of Arctic life—rather, the emphasis tends to be, for instance, on the author's insecurity, his vulnerability, as he stands on the edge of an ice floe which could without warning break adrift or be shattered by the predatory battering of a submerged polar bear. The work depicts insecurity, alienation, even gawking wonderment (at the appearance of icebergs, for instance), yet there is also a sense of deep respect for the place, an awareness of the simultaneous fragility and power of the landscape and its inhabitants. Lopez achieves his thorough understanding of the Arctic by coupling academic research with personal experience of its otherness, of its separate, inhuman reality. He makes use of the personal anecdote to recreate the experiential moment and thus guides his audience through a vicarious conversion.

One of the purposes of Lopez's writing, a goal he hopes to extend to his readers, is to develop an "intimacy" with the landscape that does not interfere with attentiveness (by causing excessive comfort and ease), but rather fuels it and deepens it. When asked by Kenneth Margolis how he served the community, Lopez responded that "There has always been this function in society of people who go 'outside'. . . . If you come face to face with the other you can come home and see the dimensions of the familiar that make you love it" (Margolis, "Paying Attention," 53). The writer who goes "outside" in order to help himself and his audience understand both the exotic and the familiar requires his readers to draw upon their capacity for metaphor, to associate their own landscapes with the writer's, their language and conceptual patterns with those of the story. Lopez's own multidisciplinary approach, as he suggests in his public dialogue with E. O. Wilson (in Edward Lueders's *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors*, 1989), has profoundly impressed him with the idea that people "all see the world in a different way." He continues,

> And I lament sometimes, that there are those who lack a capacity for metaphor. They don't talk to each other, and so they don't have the benefit of each other's insights. Or they get stuck in their own metaphor, if you will, as a reality and don't see that they can help each other in this inquiry that binds people like ourselves together. So this issue arises for me: what do we know? how do we know? how do we organize our knowledge? (14-15)

In my discussion of *Arctic Dreams*, I will discuss not so much what Lopez has come to know about the Arctic, but how he has organized this knowledge so as to prompt his readers' engagement with a multiplicity of eye-opening metaphors or alternative modes of perception/conception. Much like Thoreau, who demonstrates a constant shuffling of perspectives in both *Walden* and the Journal, Lopez interweaves the perspectives of various disciplines, cultures, and physical vantage points in an attempt to make us conscious of the constraints of static perspectives. I believe that both Berry and Lopez attempt in their work to demonstrate and explain the process of achieving "intimacy" with the landscape, but while Berry (to adapt his metaphor) establishes a monogamous relationship with one particular place and peels away layer after layer of surface appearances to come to know the place, Lopez travels to remote locations throughout the world and then returns to Oregon to write about them. However, just as Thoreau dreamed of world travel before deciding it was challenging enough to become "expert in home-cosmography" (*Walden*, 320), Lopez has told recent interviewers, "I'd be happy for the rest of my life to just try to elucidate what it is that is North America" (Aton, "An Interview with Barry Lopez," 4).

My goal in this study is to illuminate the purposes and processes of "paying attention" in American nature writing since Thoreau. By examining Thoreau's Journal, we can see demonstrated the two principal relationships between the human mind and the natural world—"correspondence" and "otherness"—which recent writers have continued to investigate. Thoreau's Journal marks the obvious starting point of this psychological tradition in

American nature writing because it records the author's empirical scrutiny of his own internal responses to the world. The more recent works considered in this book differ in important ways from Thoreau's Journal—I have not traveled to Tucson to read Edward Abbey's Journal, nor have I bothered Barry Lopez for a peek at his (though he told Bonetti that he has kept one since the age of nineteen as a way to "make sense—daily sense—out of [his] life"—68). Instead, I have tried to focus on what I consider to be the primary investigatory genres of each author: Dillard's coherent, episodic collections of nonfiction essays; Abbey's aestheticized prose in *Desert Solitaire* and, more exaggeratedly, in his fiction; Berry's individual essays of exile and return; and Lopez's psychological essays in *Arctic Dreams* and self-reflective interview performances (he has participated in so many interviews in recent years that perhaps it would be reasonable to view "the interview" as one of his chief modes of communication).

There remains more work to do along these lines. For instance, the political and historical contexts of these literary investigations of awakening could use further attention. Although I recognize that several of these writers have political agendas, I prefer to view them as epistemologists, as students of the human mind, rather than as activists in any concrete sense of the term. Ray Gonzalez titled his 1990 interview with Barry Lopez, "Landscapes of the Interior: The Literature of Hope," and this captures precisely the approach that I try to take in this book. Nature writing is a "literature of hope" in its assumption that the elevation of consciousness may lead to wholesome political change, but this literature is also concerned, and perhaps primarily so, with interior landscapes, with the mind itself.

Lopez once said: "The two ways I have learned to pay attention are to read and then to go to the place myself, to walk around in it, to see what the ground feels like under my feet, to listen to the sounds of the birds . . . " (Bonetti, 59–60). I, too, value the complementarity of literary experience and direct sensory experience, and my understanding of what Thoreau, Dillard, Abbey, Berry, and Lopez have achieved in their writings derives not only from hours spent cooped up with heaps of books and papers, but from what happens when I put down the literature and step outside. For this reason—and with the support of John Elder's insight in *Imagining the Earth* (1985) that "It seems important to acknowledge that natural scenes engender and inform meditations on literature as well as the other way around" (3)—I have concluded the book with several brief, summarizing "Excursions" (outdoor narratives) and "Incursions" (parting thoughts on the aims and contexts of psychological nature writing).

CHAPTER 2

The Inner Life and the Outer World: Thoreau's "Habit of Attention" in His Private Journal

Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tributes of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson,* Nature *(1836, 6)*

Watching the Seasons: A Journal of Correspondence and Otherness

Two modes of apprehending the natural world predominate in Thoreau's Journal. The more commonly recognized approach is that of "correspondence," a belief in the subtle mirroring of man and nature, a sharing of vital rhythms; this notion pervades the work of Thoreau's fellow transcendentalists, particularly in Emerson's *Nature*. The other mode, which Thoreau inherited from Coleridge, suggests that a fertile tension, a rise in consciousness, results from the recognition of the "polarity" of man and nature rather than their connection; but even this idea rests upon the possibility of engaged interaction between the two poles. Sharon Cameron goes so far as to argue that "when the mind sees nature what it sees is its difference from nature, is the way in which correspondences fail to work out. . . . The harmony and confluence so central to Thoreau's other works and to Emerson's *Nature* (with which Thoreau's Journal can profitably be compared), in which nature and the mind evoke each other, is posited by the Journal so as to be frustrated" (*Writing Nature*, 44–45). This is frequently the case, but not always. What we encounter in reading the Journal is the writer's exploration of his own mental processes, processes which coincide intermittently with those of the natural world. "The poet must be continually watching the moods of his mind, as the astronomer watches the aspects of the heavens," he proposed

on August 19, 1851. The poet and the astronomer are united in the keeper of "a meteorological journal of the mind" (2:403). Thoreau's Journal may have begun as a self-conscious workbook for the preparation of public lectures and essays, but it gradually evolved into a testing ground of consciousness. In particular, attentiveness to the passing of the natural and internal seasons became, as years went by and journal writing ceased to be an artificial activity, Thoreau's principal habit of mind.

In the early decades after Thoreau's death in 1862, his closest friends were granted access by Thoreau's sister Sophia to the "nearly seventy handwritten volumes" (Howarth, *The Book of Concord*, 5) of his private journal. Emerson, savoring the aphoristic brilliance of the Journal, made a series of scattered extracts available to the public in his memorial essay shortly after Thoreau's death. But when it came to the publication of more extensive selections of the Journal, Bronson Alcott advised Harrison Blake to refine and reorganize the chronological but erratic sequence of observations and meditations in the original notebooks; and thus Blake came up with the seasonal format for its initial publication, compressing over twenty years' worth of journal entries (1837–1861) into the four seasons of a single, undated year. Perhaps Blake found his precedent for this act of artful compression in Thoreau's own presentation of the two years he spent living at Walden Pond as a single year in his literary account: a year, however, in which the passage of the seasons is surprisingly obscure and unemphasized when compared to the highlighting of seasonal changes which one finds in the "raw" version of the Journal.

Then there is the idea, expressed by William Ellery Channing in *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist* (1873, 1902), that Thoreau himself hoped eventually "upon a small territory—such a space as that filled by the town of Concord—[to] construct a chart or calendar which should chronicle the phenomena of the seasons in their order, and give their general average for the year" (67). Emerson, too, sensed that Thoreau had been working on an enormous, synthesizing project when he died, and Emerson felt it "a kind of indignity" that "he should leave in the midst his broken task, which none else can finish" ("Biographical Sketch," 33). The mere fact that so much of the Journal remains intact, not yet mined for

lectures and essays, suggests that the author died before he could put his notes to their ultimate use. The notion that the Journal was intended as a working draft of some literary product other than itself, together with the conspicuous attention to the seasons, seems to have inspired his posthumous publishers to adopt the seasonal format. The choice of format had little to do with an understanding that Thoreau's extreme attentiveness to the seasons resulted from his testing of the transcendental theory of correspondences, his ongoing scrutiny of the overlappings and oppositions between himself and nature.

It was logical for Thoreau's friends to assume that his Journal was not an end in itself but rather an inchoate testing ground of words and ideas; this was an assumption truly based on intended faithfulness to Thoreau's secret goals, but I think it diminishes the flights of imagination and the recurrent cycles of observation to remove them from their natural chronology. The Journal in its original year-by-year form displays what Thoreau intimated already in his early statement that "The highest condition of art is artlessness" (1:153). This appreciation for rough form and artless expression emerges again and again in the Journal, suggesting implicitly that Thoreau valued the crude form of his Journal above the more crafted form of his published works, in which he bowed to the demands of publishers and, to some extent, to the palates of his expected readers. His well-intentioned posthumous editors, in determining how to present the Journal to the public, actually relied more upon their own notions of a finished work of natural history than on the Journal's internal clues regarding Thoreau's literary values.

But this is not to say that Thoreau did not place great emphasis on seasonal progression in his daily Journal entries. In a sense, every natural observation he made was a kind of sighting, a note regarding a seasonal landmark, or timemark. "On *this* day at *this* hour at *this* location, I saw *this* plant or animal doing *this* or having *this* done to it," Thoreau seems to say in his most characteristic entries. Sometimes the sightings are less individualized, consisting of lists of sightings and dates that run for pages. But what was the real reason for this meticulous record of the emergences and disappearances that mark the progression of the seasons? Was this