Green Writing
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Foreword

Walking up a mountainside, alone, in a cold Montana winter, I noticed the tracks of a bear in the freshly fallen snow. Examining them carefully, I realized that the long, deeply indented claw-marks must be those of a grizzly. Somewhere ahead of me, I supposed, it was walking uphill, through a forest of tall pines bearing their dark cones in silence. I followed in its footsteps, wondering whether I would see it and how we might appear to each other, meeting suddenly in the snow-laden woods. The bear kept climbing along a dim path known only to itself, and to the occasional deer, and now to me, as we continued upward through the snow. The tracks were fresh, and just then I remembered how a friend of mine had told me of a grizzly he once encountered, in those same mountains, in a clearing where neither man nor beast had expected to find the other. The bear peered at him, grunting with surprise, then reared back on its hind legs and roared out its identity with fierce determination. My friend, moved by an utterly instinctive reaction, stood his ground and roared back in a strange, inhuman voice that he did not know he possessed. Thus we rise, as if by hidden knowledge, to occasions we never anticipate.

On this occasion, however, I did not see the bear. He vanished into a thick tangle of branches, noiselessly, with that unconsidered elegance of motion given only to those who inhabit the wild. Perhaps not seeing the bear that day left a greater impression upon me than seeing him would have done. Twenty years later, I still follow his tracks in the snow and I still wonder when he may appear, unexpectedly, and what those dim traces may portend.

Tracks in the snow, broken thorns, torn pieces of bark, the intense odor of decaying logs, and the sound of crackling brush—all of these are signs by which we and other creatures come to recognize the prey that we seek, the mate whom we desire, the rival whose fierce antagonism lurks beyond the next hill. We of human kind are not alone in our manifold ability to sense the presence of other creatures, and we share with many other species the instinctive means of reading those signs of passage. Bears especially, I am told, see rather poorly and therefore perceive their surroundings most acutely through the sense of smell. If bears had a system of philosophy, their concept of mind would very likely be predicated on the sense of smell: "I sniff, therefore I am."

Twenty years later, I remember most keenly the visceral sensation of the bear's presence, as if he were walking beside me, and I understand better how in many indigenous cultures the discovery of an animal companion marks the transition from childhood into full-fledged adulthood. So I still walk in the footsteps of that bear, whose powerful paw-prints are the only visible sign of his passage in that remembered forest. The snow still falls gently on the forest floor and lingers on the branches. He walks on ahead of me, as do all creatures that know their way by trails as yet undiscovered by our kind.

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Warm personal thanks are due to Kirk McKusick and Eric Allman, whose home in Berkeley provided a base for explorations all over the West. My father, Blaine McKusick, has encouraged my love of nature since I was young enough to get lost in tall grass. And my deepest debt of gratitude is due to my wife, Paige McKusick, whose considerate responses, even to my wildest notions, have been invaluable.

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Introduction

As I write these words, I peer out the window of my study across open fields and gnarled trees crusted with ice. Beyond those trees I see cars and trucks dashing along a busy interstate highway past dirty piles of melting snow that still remain from last week's snowstorm. This is the city of Baltimore, where I live. Like many of my readers, I have spent most of my life in urban and suburban settings. Growing up during the 1950s in the mid-Atlantic region, I became quite accustomed to the sounds and smells of smokestack industry, the penumbra of smog pervading the city on summer afternoons, the rainbow sheen of oil glistening on puddles in the street. Even small excursions into the natural world, whether it was gathering chestnuts along my sidewalk when still a young child, or walking immersed in tall grass along the banks of the Brandywine River, or just contemplating the noisy activities of squirrels and bluejays in a local park, aptly named the "Happy Valley," fired my five-year-old imagination. The astonishing sense of discovery that I felt when, as a teenager, I first ventured upon the vast open spaces of the American West, still resonates deeply in my memory.

Wilderness means something different to those who come upon it from a modern city. The English Romantic poets lived at the dawn of the industrial era, and for Blake, and Coleridge, and Keats, the green world of field and forest was a remote, mysterious, and magical place that existed in sharp disjunction from the smoke, crowded streets, and noisy machinery of London, where they lived for most of their lives. To be sure, such a contrast between country and city life has existed in some form since the dawn of civilization, but this dichotomy has taken on new dimensions of meaning in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. New modes of transporta-

tion have brought the two realms into much closer proximity; on rapid stagecoaches or by steam-powered ships and railways, the later nineteenth-century writers could travel from one realm into the other far more quickly, and with much less effort, than was previously imaginable. Today we travel swiftly by airplane through the vast spaces of the American West, crossing deserts that were still terrible, uncharted terrain for the pioneer wagons of the mid-nineteenth century, pressing westward across the wild frontier to California and the Oregon Territory.

An Opportunity to Forget the Old World

In his classic essay "Walking," Thoreau invokes and develops the contrast between city and country, which he maps out as a journey from East to West:

> Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. . . . Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and I am ever leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe.[1]

The "prevailing tendency" to conceive of the West as a place of freedom and wildness is indeed one of the most powerful archetypes in all of American literature, and Thoreau accurately identifies it as one of the underlying polarities of his own imaginary geography. In his celebration of the American West, however, Thoreau overtly rejects all the qualities associated with the East: urbanization, commerce, and the decadence of the Old World. Indeed, he goes so far as to acknowledge the necessity of *forgetting* one's place of origin in order to carve out a space for wildness and freedom:

> We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions. (668)

Such an "opportunity to forget" the urban civilization of the Old World is entirely typical of American writers in the Transcendentalist tradition, and such a gesture reveals something of the essential underlying motivation for

the Westering impulse in American culture throughout our history. The West has always been a blank slate upon which the destiny of the nation may be written. D. H. Lawrence, in his seminal *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), argues that the essential symbolic act of the American is the murder of Father Europe, and another is re-baptism in the Wilderness. Wilderness is thus mentally constituted by an act of forgetting.

What is forgotten, or erased, by such a constitutive act? At the dawn of the twenty-first century, we have grown justly suspicious of the archetypes of Wilderness as an empty space, virgin land, or pathless void. Something was there already, and our cultural predisposition is not to see it. Of course, secretly we know what was there, and therefore I need not belabor the fact that entire ecosystems, with their unique flora and fauna, indigenous peoples, autonomous cultures, free-flowing waterways, and unfenced horizons, were mapped, plowed, hunted, eradicated, exterminated, ditched, dammed, bulldozed, channelized, and utterly destroyed in the westward course of American empire. These things we know, although our curious cognitive apparatus enables us not to think about them. "Wilderness" is therefore a deeply suspect concept. Thoreau helps us to see that it entails an act of forgetting.

What else is forgotten in the act of Westering? Thoreau calls the Atlantic Ocean a "Lethean stream," and it is precisely the Old World origins of American culture that are forgotten, or intentionally repressed, in the making of a New World. We may see this moment of repression quite overtly in Thoreau's treatment of English literature in the essay "Walking," a personal *tour de force* that was his signature piece throughout his travels on the New England lecture circuit, and intentionally held back from publication until 1862. "Walking" is Thoreau's declaration of independence from the English literary tradition. He writes:

> English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets—Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, and even Shakespeare, included—breathes no quite fresh, and in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a greenwood, her wild man a Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself. Her chronicles inform us when her wild animals, but not the wild man in her, became extinct. (676)

Such a dismissive appraisal of English literature is entirely typical of the Transcendentalist writers; Emerson evinces a similar attitude in "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance." The overt rejection of British cul-

ture is of course a deeply held American attitude that was expressed in political terms by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* (1776) and is inscribed in the foundational document of American government, the Declaration of Independence, which itemizes and denounces the corrupt practices of the wicked King George.

There is more to this act of rejection, however, than rowdy American chest-beating or revolutionary geopolitics. Thoreau rejects English literature, and specifically the work of the Lake Poets, because they are too "tame and civilized." Just as the wolf, the boar, and the aurochs have vanished from the primeval British forests, so too the "wild man" has become extinct in all of Britain. According to this view, the study of English poetry is akin to the study of Latin and Greek, dead languages that Thoreau studied at Harvard and found to be of little relevance to his life in the woods. Thoreau imagines a new, utterly wild American literature that is free of any decadent Old World influences. Emerson likewise advocates a new, self-reliant kind of American literature in "The Poet," an essay that arguably unleashed the "barbaric yawp" of Walt Whitman upon the world, to Emerson's initial acclaim and later consternation.

Yet in Thoreau's essay on "Walking," the category of "wild" literature remains an empty one. He regretfully concedes, "I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild." To be sure, he imagines a future mythology to be generated out of the land itself, much as the ancient Greek mythology "is the crop which the Old World bore before its soil was exhausted, before the fancy and imagination were affected with blight" (677). In some future epoch, Thoreau hopes that "the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology" (677). In the meantime, however, the utter vacuity of the concept of "wild" literature should alert us to the act of intentional forgetting that it perhaps unwittingly manifests. The "wild" is constituted here as the erasure of all previous literature, especially that which is *written* (in contrast to the *orality* of ancient mythology). And the most immediate target of Thoreau's ironic dismissal is the writing of the Lake Poets, known today as the founders of English Romanticism: Wordsworth and Coleridge.

There is certainly an ironic tone implicit in Thoreau's sweeping dismissal of all English writers, because elsewhere in the same essay he cites their works approvingly, in support of his own ideas. Chaucer, for instance, is cited on the topic of pilgrimages (669), Milton's *Lycidas* is quoted in favor of westward journeys (669), and the following anecdote is recounted of the leading Lake Poet: "When a traveller asked Wordsworth's servant to show him her master's study, she answered, 'Here is his library, but his study

is out of doors' " (663). This latter example is especially telling because it reveals that the *topos* of rejecting book-learning in favor of meditative walking out-of-doors is in fact immediately derived from Wordsworth. Indeed, it should be apparent to any reader of Wordsworth's poetry that the main theme of the "Walking" essay is largely indebted to such poems as "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned." Both of these poems develop a contrast between boring, irrelevant book-learning and the vital stimulus of meditative wandering in the natural world. The symbolic significance of westward travel is most explicitly developed in Wordsworth's poem, "Stepping Westward," which describes a walking tour by William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy into "one of the loneliest parts" of the Lake District.[2] Anticipating Thoreau's characteristic emphasis on wildness, this poem evokes travel to the West as "a *wildish* destiny":

> *"What, you are stepping westward?"—"Yea."*
> —'Twould be a *wildish* destiny,
> If we, who thus together roam
> In a strange Land, and far from home,
> Were in this place the guests of Chance:
> Yet who would stop, or fear to advance,
> Though home or shelter he had none,
> With such a sky to lead him on?[3]

In the two following stanzas, this poem develops the symbolic resonances of a journey "through the world that lay / Before me in my endless way" (25-26). Such contemplative wandering into the boundless realm of the unknown is indeed one of the most characteristic and distinctive themes of Wordsworth's poetry.

What could possibly have motivated Thoreau to deny the influence of the Lake Poets while overtly citing Wordsworth in the same essay? Is he being ironic or merely perverse? One is tempted at first to rely upon a neo-Freudian psychological explanation, invoking what Harold Bloom terms the Anxiety of Influence.[4] According to this theory, every writer must clear out space for his own creative activity by symbolically killing off his precursors. Yet such a grim Oedipal struggle for dominance seems utterly out of keeping with the sauntering, jocular tone of the "Walking" essay. By claiming to reject British influence, yet frequently citing British authors (along with classical Greek and Roman texts), Thoreau perhaps evinces nothing more than an uncouth American irreverence for the monuments of European greatness, much as Mark Twain does in *The Innocents Abroad*

(1869). Like Ben Franklin and James Audubon before him, Thoreau is appearing in coonskin cap and fringed leather garb to enact the Noble Savage before his shocked and delighted Anglo-European audience. It is merely a pose, a theatrical mask.

Or is it? Can we imagine a more plausible motivation behind Thoreau's simultaneous rejection of and reliance upon his English Romantic precursors? If the political, psychological, and theatrical explanations of such perverse posturing are regarded as inadequate, then what mode of explanation could possibly suffice? Perhaps for a writer like Thoreau, so deeply attuned to the significance of the places he chose to inhabit, a more adequate explanation may emerge from a thoughtful investigation of mental geography. For Thoreau, as for many other Americans, East and West are mapped onto many other opposing categories: city and country, tame and wild, servile and free, civilization and wilderness. Such binary oppositions are intrinsically unstable and prone to collapse into each other because they are grounded in acts of ontological bad faith: one category in each pair is constituted as the negation or absence of the other, and therefore has no substantial existence on its own account. Thoreau's playful irony emerges from his intuitive awareness of the acts of bad faith (and historical injustice) that underlie the great American mythology: Northern freedom entails Southern slavery, and the making of the American Wilderness entails the wanton destruction of its former inhabitants. In wildness is the decimation of the world.

Forgetting Romantic Origins: Some Further Examples

It might be argued that Thoreau's "Walking" is merely an isolated instance of such complexly motivated forgetting, and that for the overwhelming majority of American nature writers, the influence of the English Romantic poets is so pervasive and so freely and openly acknowledged as to be merely a commonplace. It is quite "obvious" to all observers that the American nature writers, particularly those in the Transcendentalist tradition, are overtly indebted to the Romantic tradition as it emanates from the English Lake District to the shores of Walden Pond and thence to the Big Wilderness of the American West. And if something is obvious, then why bother to talk about it?

Yet there is always something gained by investigating the things that everyone knows, since the most valuable information may be hidden in plain sight, like Poe's Purloined Letter. And Thoreau is certainly not the

only American nature writer to hide his indebtedness to the English Romantic poets through a strategy of foregrounding his knowledge of their writings while denying the Romantic origins of his most fundamental insights. To take a contemporary example, in a fascinating and provocative 1995 essay entitled "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon sets out to re-examine the historical roots of the idea of wilderness.[5] As one of the pre-eminent modern historians of environmental ideas, Cronon is well aware of the significance of the English Romantic poets in the formation of contemporary awareness of the natural world, and he spends several pages describing the emergence of the Romantic Sublime in the writings of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and William Gilpin, and its deployment in such key passages of Romantic poetry as the Simplon Pass episode in Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850). Cronon convincingly argues that the concept of the Romantic Sublime was pervasive in the establishment of the first National Parks:

> God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset. One has only to think of the sites that Americans chose for their first national parks—Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Rainier, Zion—to realize that virtually all of them fit one or more of these categories. Less sublime landscapes simply did not appear worthy of such protection. (73)

Cronon goes on to describe the other essential elements in the cultural construction of the American Wilderness: the primitivism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the rugged individualism of the American frontier. Composed of these largely mythical elements, the American Wilderness is, in Cronon's view, essentially a fantasized or fictional place from which any dissonant elements (such as Indians, large predators, and any lingering evidence of forestry or agriculture) have been forcibly removed:

> The removal of Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness"—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, how constructed, the American wilderness really is. To return to my opening argument: there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. (79)

Cronon's argument here is forceful and compelling, especially his claim that the American Wilderness arises from a "thoroughgoing erasure of the his-

tory from which it sprang" (79). There is indeed a motivated forgetting that underlies the construction of "Wilderness" out of places that have been inhabited by Native Americans for thousands of years. Cronon's call for a return to historical awareness, and a corresponding sense of responsibility for the displaced inhabitants of the landscape, is one that any ethical person would surely endorse.

Yet Cronon himself falls prey to the same lack of historical awareness that he so accurately diagnoses in other American nature writers. Toward the end of his essay, he calls for a rejection of the "romantic legacy" (88) that conceives wilderness as vast, remote, and sublime. As an antidote to this kind of Big Wilderness, Cronon proposes that we develop a sense of wonder for cultivated landscapes and everyday experiences:

> Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit. Nothing could be more misleading. The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and our respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw. (88)

Cronon's argument here is powerful and persuasive, but he is mistaken in his view that this argument comprises an antidote to the "romantic legacy." Indeed, "the tree in the garden" is a familiar *topos* of English Romantic poetry, and the notion that beauty can be found in everyday objects, not just in vast and sublime ones, is nowhere better expressed than in Coleridge's poem, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison."[6] Composed in June 1797, almost exactly two centuries before Cronon's essay, "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" expresses the poet's sense of frustration and longing as his friends set off to climb a local mountain. Temporarily lamed by a household accident ("dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot"), the poet remains trapped at home while his friends are off enjoying the sublime scenery of the Quantock hills:

> Now, my friends emerge
> Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
> The many-steepled tract magnificent
> Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
> With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
> The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
> Of purple shadow! (20-26)