

*The Metamorphosis of the Nature Writer: The Movement of American Nature Writing From Pastoral to Environmental*

Lori Litchman

December 2009

NOTES

Pollan is steadfast in his assertion that Americans need to eat less industrial food, and that assertion becomes his mantra throughout his book.

He also ascertains that consuming an industrial diet will not only continue to threaten the health of humans but the ultimate health of the planet.

---

Years ago, on a post-college pilgrimage to New England, two girlfriends and I set out to find Thoreau's cabin. We were geeky literary types, and we wanted to see the beautiful land Thoreau wrote about. At that point in our lives, we had all been city dwellers for a while, and I think we really wanted to see the tiny cabin where Thoreau got away from it all. We arrived to the area to find Walden State Reservation. What? Who knew that such a pristine place was now trampled on daily by recreating New Englanders? Apparently, everyone but us. I admit that we didn't do our research. After parking our car, we trekked through the paths and came to the site of Thoreau's cabin—well, where Thoreau's cabin used to be. Also unbeknownst to us at the time was the fact that the cabin met an untimely demise and lived out its life as scrap wood. We walked around the area a bit, then trudged away heavy-hearted. This journey of mine is somewhat symbolic of the journey nature writing in America has taken over the decades. While the terms "pastoral" and "environmental" are relatively similar in meaning, they have taken on two entirely different genres of writing. At one time, nature writing was purely pastoral. Now it's hard to find a place untouched by human hands. In turn, nature writing has been forced to evolve into writing that focuses more on humankind's environmental impacts than on the simple beauty of the environment.

Nature writing can be broken down into three different types, according to *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*: natural history, personal response, and philosophical interpretation. These three sections can then be broken down further into sub-genres as follows: natural history essay, ramble, solitude and back country living, travel and adventure, farm, and man's role in nature. Surely an entire book can be written comparing past and present forms of each type of writing, but for purposes of brevity, let's examine one major work from each type of nature writing, past and present, to study the evolution of the prose from pastoral to environmental. In setting up a timeline, we can use Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 as a sort of fork in the road with regard to the evolution of nature writing. Before Carson's publication of her renowned work—harkening an interest in the awareness, preservation, and protection of land from toxic substances—much of what we have come to know as American nature writing was pastoral. (Think Bartram, Muir, Thoreau, and Emerson.) After *Silent Spring*, a nation began to focus more on environmentalism and the writing reflected that change. Congress passed a number of laws designed to protect the environment, and the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970. In turn, environmental writers emerged first in a small group and later in droves. (Think Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams, and Bill McKibben.) Let us look at writers representative of all subgenres, briefly examine the past, and take a more in-depth look at the present types of writing in each sub-genre to see the metamorphosis the American nature writer has undergone over the last several decades.

## Natural History

The classic form of the natural history essay is for the writer to examine the facts of the land. The author's role is secondary, if not nonexistent, to the facts and issues at hand. Take for example the writings of John Muir. Although an environmental activist, his elegant writing paints vivid pictures of the landscapes of the Western part of the United States. "The kingly Sugar Pine, towering aloft to a height of more than 200 feet, offers a fine mark to storm-winds; but it is not densely foliaged, and its long, horizontal arms swing round compliantly in the blast, like tresses of green, fluent algae in a brook; while the Silver Firs in most places keep their ranks well together in united strength."<sup>1</sup> While he occasionally uses first-person, the landscape and its natural history are indeed more the focus of Muir's writing.

Fast forward to a contemporary work of natural history like Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, which could actually be cross-referenced in several genres, including agricultural writing and man's role in nature. For the purposes of this discussion, we'll consider it natural history. In his book, Pollan takes center stage in his tracing the history of four different food chains. Pollan uses first person throughout the text and uses the history of each meal as a conduit to set forth his opinions. Pollan, in fact, actively participates through the journey of each food chain, engaging in such things as buying an "industrial" cow to see up close how mass meat production in the United States works, to embracing the rural roots of hunting for a wild boar that he later cooks up and serves for dinner.

Pollan is steadfast in his assertion that Americans need to eat less industrial food, and that assertion becomes his mantra throughout his book. He also ascertains that consuming an industrial diet will not only continue to threaten the health of humans but the ultimate health of the planet. He quotes Wendell Berry, who we'll discuss later, in his first chapter: "'Eating is an agricultural act,' as Wendell Berry famously said. It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it."<sup>2</sup> And Pollan most recently followed up his best-seller with another best-seller, *In Defense of Food*, where he details what people should eat if they are to avoid the industrial food that pervades the American diet.

Pollan's book is an example of the movement of natural history writing from pastoral to more environmental. He discusses the history of the land and the food he observes, but more as a statement of what humankind has done to the land and themselves by supporting an industrial diet. Gone are the vivid images of natural history writers of the past.

## Ramble

The ramble is also a classic form of American nature writing and in it, the natural history and the presence of the author are "perfectly balanced."<sup>3</sup> A perfect example of the archetypal ramble writer is John Burroughs. His writing does indeed present that perfect balance between subject and writer. He uses first person not to tell his story, but rather to draw the reader into his writing and encourage the reader to think about nature philosophically, as he does. "I myself have never made a dead set at studying Nature with notebook and fieldglass in hand. I have rather visited with her.... In the fields and woods more than anywhere else all things come to those who wait, because all things are on the move, and are sure sooner or later to come your way."<sup>4</sup>

Although much more contemporary than Burroughs, Annie Dillard clings to the idea of pastoral writing in her award-winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Her writing shies away from being critical of man's role in nature. She simply and artfully presents stories that showcase the beauty of nature while confronting the notion of human existence:

Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.<sup>5</sup>

She uses first person often throughout her writing, but its usage never pulls focus away from the natural environment that is her subject matter.

However, a more contemporary ramble, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams, puts the author again as a main focus of the book. Williams tells the tale of her mother's battle with cancer, while weaving the story of the historic rising of the Great Salt Lake and the subsequent threat to the birds who frequent the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. In her descriptions, she makes bold statements about man's involvement in nature. Throughout the course of the text, Williams discovers that she and her mother had been exposed to fallout from military nuclear testing, which may have been the cause of the cancer that afflicted both Williams and her mother. Williams's cancer was discovered after her mother's death. She is straightforward in her criticism of the government and humanity in general and the devastation both have wrought not only on the environment, but on her family as well. In the final chapter of the book, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," Williams tells the story of how she and a group of women got arrested for protesting nuclear testing. She writes:

A few miles downwind from the fire circle, bombs were being tested. Rabbits felt the tremors. Their soft leather pads on paws and feet recognized the shaking sands, while the roots of mesquite and sage were smoldering. Rocks were hot from the inside out and dust devils hummed unnaturally. And each time there was another nuclear test, ravens watched the desert heave. Stretch marks appeared. The land was losing its muscle. The women couldn't bear it any longer. They were mothers. They had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth. The red hot pains beneath the desert promised death only, as each bomb became a stillborn. A contract had been made and broken between human beings and the land. A new contract was being drawn by the women, who understood the fate of the earth as their own.<sup>6</sup>

Williams is unapologetic in her criticisms of the destruction humanity—particularly the government—has unleashed on the natural land. She includes natural history in her text, including beautiful descriptions of the birds she seeks out at the wildlife refuge, but the driving force of the text is indeed environmental rather than pastoral.

## Solitude and Back-Country Living

The classic story of solitude and back-country living is without question Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. The author's personal experience with nature is a vital component to the writing, but his role is more of a peaceful interaction and reflection of living in a pristine place. He writes in potentially the most oft-quoted morsel of *Walden*: "I went to the woods

because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”<sup>7</sup> *Walden* is introspective and philosophical and beautifully written. The descriptions of his Massachusetts retreat abound with vivid descriptions of the peaceful tranquility of the natural environment.

As my own trip to the transcendentalist’s former stomping ground proved, gone are the days of Thoreau’s *Walden*, literally and figuratively. While the solitude and back-country element still exist, the genre has moved more toward looking at human-nature interaction. Take for example the nonfiction writings of Edward Abbey—whose fiction novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is said to have inspired the creation of radical environmental group “Earth First!”<sup>8</sup> Abbey’s nonfiction focuses on the author’s time living a solitary life in the deserts of the Southwestern part of the United States. One sentence in his most famous work, *Desert Solitaire*, sums up his feelings toward humanity: “I’m a humanist; I’d rather kill a *man* than a snake.”<sup>9</sup> In another work, *The Great American Desert*, he spends a great deal of time explaining why people should *not* visit the desert. It is clear that through his tongue-in-cheek writing, he is urging all people to keep away from the desert in order to preserve it. In another part of the text, though, he invites hikers to explore the desert to see what has happened and holds nothing back with regard to his feelings toward man’s impact on nature.

To save what wilderness is left in the American Southwest—and in the American Southwest only the wilderness is worth saving—we are going to need all the recruits we can get. All the hands, heads, bodies, time, money, effort we can find. Presumably... those who learn to love what is spare, rough, wild, undeveloped, and unbroken will be willing to fight for it, will help resist the strip miners, highway builders, land developers, weapons testers, power producers, tree chainers, clear cutters, oil drillers, dam beavers, subdividers—the list goes on and on—before that zinc-hearted, termite-brained, squint-eyed, nearsighted, greedy crew succeeds in completely californicating what still survives of the Great American Desert.<sup>10</sup>

Like Williams, Abbey is unapologetic in his criticism of man’s abuse of nature, which seems to be the driving force in his writing.

## Travel and Adventure

Writing that places the focus on travel and adventure is a healthy sub-genre within the personal experience essays. As Lyon aptly puts in *This Incomparable Land*, the travel and adventure writer “often seems like a ramble writer gone wild,”<sup>11</sup> placing more emphasis on the actual movement and experience of the travel and less on the natural history of the place. William Bartram is heralded as the first American nature essayist.<sup>12</sup> For four years he traveled around the American Southeast and subsequently published *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Choctaws*, commonly referred to as simply *Travels*. While occasionally scattered and repetitive, Bartram’s writing focuses largely on his adventure; any smattering of natural history is secondary to the Bartram’s adventure tales. Take for example his story of being attacked by an alligator. “I was attacked on all sides (by alligators), several endeavoring to upset the canoe. My situation now became precarious to the last degree: two very large ones attacked me closely, at the same instant, rushing up with their heads and part of their bodies above the water, roaring terribly and belching floods of water over me.”<sup>13</sup> Bartram survives this encounter of course, but the reader is pulled along through his gripping prose.

A more contemporary travel and adventure writer is John McPhee. In his book *Coming Into the Country*, McPhee spends a great deal of time talking about the natural history of Alaska, but throughout, his focus is very much on the venture he is undertaking. The first section, “The Encircled River,” tells of his adventures, and often misadventures, boating downstream throughout Alaska’s wilderness. McPhee is a master storyteller, and manages to weave in facts and background information without taking away from the story of the journey. And perhaps because he is such a talented writer, McPhee is also able to make subtle comments throughout the book without seeming preachy or like he is pushing an agenda. For example, he takes several pages to explain to the reader how the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act ushered in the development of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. He continues on to explain how Congress attempted to provide a conservation provision which ultimately proved hollow in protecting the Alaskan land from drilling. He writes, speaking of the Congressional provision: “Those who would develop the state for its economic worth got something they much wanted with their eight hundred miles of pipe. In return, the environmentalists were given a hundred and thirty words on paper. All the paragraph provided, however, was that eighty million acres could be temporarily set aside and studied. There was no guarantee of preservation to follow.”<sup>14</sup> McPhee takes a just-the-facts approach to explaining this issue, but by even deciding to address it, is making a commentary about man’s interference with nature.

---

McPhee is a master storyteller, and manages to weave in facts and background information without taking away from the story of the journey. ...McPhee is also able to make subtle comments throughout the book without seeming preachy or like he is pushing an agenda.

---

## Farm and Agriculture

The focus on farm and agriculture in American nature writing goes back to the writings of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782. This writing marks the beginning of agrarian writing in American literature.<sup>15</sup> Crèvecoeur writes using first person, and focuses greatly on the simplicity, beauty, and trials and tribulations of early American farm living. He writes: "I never see my trees drop their leaves and their fruit in the autumn, and bud again in the spring, without wonder; the sagacity of those animals which have long been the tenants of my farm astonish me; some of them seem to surpass even men in memory and sagacity."<sup>16</sup> Crèvecoeur's writing captures the beauty of the farming life, and his words richly immortalize the agrarian lifestyle that was at one time a standard way of living in the United States.

Fast forward to the days of now legendary farm writer, Wendell Berry. In *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977), Berry rails against the then burgeoning field of agribusinesses in the American agrarian landscape. Crèvecoeur's simple farm life now seems to be only words on a page. Berry speaks freely of how he believes the inflation of farming to the scale of big business would do nothing but harm the American farmer and in turn, the individual food consumer. His writings in *Unsettling* seem almost prophetic, and he writes in the preface to the second edition of his book that the situation has gone from bad to worse. "And now, almost a decade later, it is evident to everyone that, at least for farmers and rural communities, the situation is catastrophic: Farmers are losing their farms, some are killing themselves, some in the madness of despair are killing other people, and rural economy and rural life are gravely stricken."<sup>17</sup> He continues his preface, however, by explaining that the times are changing, if only gradually.

In fact, author Barbara Kingsolver in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* cites Berry as she takes a central role and makes statements about the need to eat locally. She and her family decide to eat locally—that is, food produced or raised within 150 miles of their home—for one year and write an account of the project. Kingsolver and her family are the main characters in this book, which successfully demonstrates to readers how far removed Americans are from their food. Her rediscovering of farming and the agrarian life is a testament to how far our country has moved from the agrarian society it once was. She writes: "Knowing how foods grow is to know how and when to look for them; such expertise is useful for certain kinds of people, namely, the ones who eat, no matter where they live or grocery shop. Absence of that knowledge has rendered us a nation of wary label-readers, oddly uneasy in our obligate relationship with the things we eat."<sup>18</sup>

Kingsolver weaves her story using tales of her learning curve when taking over a farm. She structures the book around a calendar year and peppers her story with recipes and tips for the reader, should he or she wish to try to live more locally. Kingsolver also discusses the environmental impacts of not eating a local diet, particularly the carbon emissions that are given off during the typical vegetable's 1,500 mile journey to the dinner table. She persuasively provides facts and figures while trying to convince the reader that eating locally is one way he or she can change the environmental damage that is being done by eating food grown a world away.

## (Hu)Man's Role in Nature

Writing in the category of the interaction between humans and nature is more philosophical. "In these works, interpretation predominates, and the natural history facts of the personal experiences are decidedly secondary."<sup>19</sup> Although there are trickles of this theme in early American literature, we don't see an increase in the "man versus land" kind of writing until the 1980s. *Silent Spring* would likely be the first work to fit squarely into this category. Carson takes a very scientific approach to the natural environment in *Silent Spring*. She rarely uses first person, but rather uses studies and detailed scientific explanations to amplify her points. The most creative part of the book is indeed the beginning where she describes a silent and toxic world in order to suggest how man's use of chemicals is leading to the destruction of nature. She writes: "No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves."<sup>20</sup> After the publication of *Silent Spring*, numerous legal measures were taken throughout the country, including the banning of DDT. Writing regarding man's role, and often destruction of nature, began to emerge

slowly. The 1980s seemed to signal an uptick in these kind of books, focusing on the environmental impacts man has made as he has and continues to trample through nature.

These days, it seems these books are everywhere, and are in fact dominating the bookshelves of the nature section. Take for example the prolific writer, Bill McKibben. Way before the days of Al Gore and headlines trumpeting the doom and gloom of climate change, McKibben published *The End of Nature* in 1989, in which he talks about the implications of massive carbon emissions and global warming. The title gives away his feelings on the natural world, and that is that humans have destroyed nature. He writes:

Now that we have changed the most basic forces around us, the noise of that chain saw will always be in the woods. We have changed the atmosphere, and that will change the weather. The temperature and rainfall are no longer to be entirely the work of some separate, uncivilizable force, but instead in part a product of our habits, our economies, our ways of life. Even in the most remote wilderness, where the strictest laws forbid the felling of a single tree, the sound of that saw will be clear, and a walk in the woods will be changed—tainted by its whine. The world outdoors will mean much the same thing as the world indoors, the hill the same thing as the house.[21](#)

McKibben occasionally uses first person, but only as a device to move his story forward. The writing philosophically focuses primarily on not really man's role in nature, but rather his detrimental impact on the natural world.

In a more contemporary work, *The World Without Us*, author Alan Weisman conducts a detailed thought experiment, asking and answering the question: What would happen to the earth if humans were to suddenly disappear? He breaks his detailed answer down by providing natural history, traveling to some of the last pristine places on Earth, and interviewing countless experts about how our natural environment would react from the damage wrought by humans if humans ceased to exist and ceased to impact the environment negatively. He too uses first-person occasionally, but provides more information through scenarios and well-reported and researched information. His book looks at not only how the world would react to the loss of humanity, but what nature would have to do to return to its natural state, free from plastics, concrete, and other man-made toxins. He sets forth on his mission not just to create an interesting set of ideas, but rather to get people to think deeply about Earth as a whole and as a natural environment, rather than just the place where humanity treads. He writes:

In just decades, with no new chlorine and bromine leaking skyward, the ozone layer would replenish and ultraviolet levels subside. Within a few centuries, as most of our excess industrial CO<sub>2</sub> dissipated, the atmosphere and shallows would cool. Heavy metals and toxins would dilute and gradually flush from the system. After PCBs and plastic fibers recycled a few thousand or million times, anything truly intractable would end up buried, to one day be metamorphosed or subsumed into the planet's mantle. Long before that... every dam on Earth would silt up and spill over. Rivers would again carry nutrients to the sea, where most life would still be, as it was long before we vertebrates first crawled onto these shores.[22](#)

It seems that the metamorphosis is complete, and that the environmental writer has emerged as the final product of the American nature writer. It is somewhat telling that each of the above-mentioned contemporary works, although they are categorized by their writing style or sub-genre, could easily be grouped in the category of humanity's role in nature. The question remains—will we ever return to a world where the pastoral dominates the genre of nature writing? Or has nature writing, reflective of its very subject matter, passed a point of no return where there are fewer and fewer pristine places to write about each day? The future of the planet and its written representation is in the hands of humanity. We will just have to wait and see.

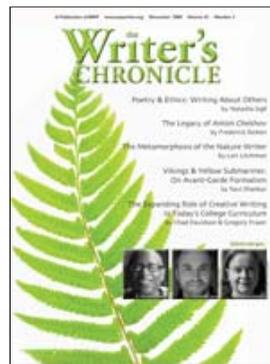
## AWP

*Lori Litchman is a freelance writer and educator based in Philadelphia. She focuses her writing on nature and the environment. She recently received her MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Goucher College.*

## NOTES

1. Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 281.
2. Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), p. 11.

3. Lyon, Thomas. *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing* (Minneapolis: The Milkweed Press, 2001), p. 21.
4. Finch, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, p. 275.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 822.
6. Williams, Terry Tempest. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Press, 1991), pp. 287-288.
7. Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), p. 75.
8. Finch, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, p. 679.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 681.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 688-689.
11. Lyon, *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*, p. 24.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 3
13. Finch, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, p. 69.
14. McPhee, John. *Coming into the Country* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 21.
15. Finch, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, p. 53.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 54
17. Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1977), vii.
18. Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p.10.
19. Lyon, *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*, p. 25.
20. Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 3.
21. McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989), pp. 47-48.
22. Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 167.



Lori Litchman



Alan Weisman



Bill McKibben



Michael Pollan



Terry Tempest Williams

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs; Serving Writers Since 1967

George Mason University; MS 1E3; Fairfax, VA 22030-4444

© 2009 AWP. All rights reserved.

[Contact AWP](#), [eLink Terms of Use](#)

*Send Feedback to [Webmaster](#)*