

I Retreat Outside Myself:
Introspection, Extrospection, and the Present Moment in American Nature Writing
by
Jeff Waraniak

A Thesis Presented for the B.A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2013

To my parents, John and Terri—

For taking me outside.

Acknowledgments

The origins of this thesis can be traced back to 2011 during the 37th session of the University of Michigan's New England Literature Program (NELP). It was then that I began to formulate my ideas about Thoreau's conception of the present moment, which would help me conceptualize this project later as a whole. I am grateful to NELP instructors Ryan Walsh, Nicholas Harp, and Aric Knuth for encouraging me to pursue a thesis based on nature writing and the present moment, for challenging me to confront complexity, and to push my thinking into unknown territory.

I would like to thank Aric specifically for his generosity in taking on the role of primary advisor for this project. Without his kindness, creativity, and inquisitive mind, this thesis would not have reached the intellectual level that it stands at today, nor would the process of writing it have been as enjoyable. Aric's guidance and instruction have helped me become a better thinker and a better writer, which I appreciate above all else.

I am also grateful to Kerry Larson, whose knowledge of American Literature and American nature writing proved invaluable throughout the research process. Additionally, his feedback upon reading early drafts of this thesis was a great help in determining the trajectory of this project. Finally, I would like to thank the director of the Honors English Program, Jennifer Wenzel, for listening to all questions, comments, and concerns while sensibly guiding me through the thesis writing process.

Abstract

Throughout the genre of nature writing, nature writers have consistently sought to understand their relationship with the natural world. In doing so, nature writers have simultaneously sought to understand their relationship with themselves. This thesis examines the relationship between the internal world of the self and the external world of nature as it is portrayed by three nature writers: Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and Bill McKibben. Taken together, these three authors demonstrate a shift in their approaches to nature writing from an “egocentric” perspective (i.e. one that focuses primarily on the self) to an “ecocentric” perspective (one that focuses primarily on the natural world). Precisely where and how this shift takes place for each of these writers can be seen through their portrayals of the present moment, for it is in the present that the nature writers discussed in this thesis cultivate awareness of both themselves and their external, natural surroundings.

Chapter one focuses primarily on passages from Henry David Thoreau’s 1852 essay “Walking,” his 1854 book *Walden*, and his journals, which demonstrate the significance of the present moment for Thoreau as he seeks to develop a greater understanding initially of himself and later of his environment. It is within this discussion of Thoreau’s introspection turned extrospection that I challenge ecocritics such as Dana Phillips who assert that Thoreau’s work represents a “selfish” or solipsistic trend in the nature writing genre. In response to these claims, I assert that Thoreau’s introspection, though at times egotistical, leads him not only to a heightened internal awareness, but a heightened external awareness as well, thereby suggesting a more ecological focus in his work, which Phillips and others overlook.

Chapter two examines Annie Dillard’s 1974 book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, specifically through her encounters with animals and other aspects of the natural landscape that she explores near her home in Virginia. As I demonstrate, the present moment serves as the specific time in which Dillard learns to *see* nature in its entirety, as opposed to passively observing the natural world around her, thereby demonstrating a more distant shift away from the nature writer’s egocentric perspective as she elevates her external awareness, or extrospection, to a degree unsurpassed by other nature writers.

Chapter three discusses the work of author and environmental activist Bill McKibben as a clear example of the emergence of the ecocentric perspective in nature writing. Specifically, McKibben’s 1989 book *The End of Nature* demonstrates a growing concern for global health and the welfare of the global environment. Within the book, McKibben explains that the value of the present moment lies in its utility as it is the only time in which environmental change can take place. However, he simultaneously recognizes the present as the moment in which the individual cultivates his or her relationship with nature. Thus, I use McKibben’s recurring ecological data, along with his personal anecdotes to illustrate that while McKibben indeed seeks to cultivate a greater ecological awareness, he also engages in the process of introspection while experiencing the natural world.

Taken together, these three writers and their differing approaches to both the present moment and the phenomenon of awareness exemplify the nature writer’s struggle to comprehend the complex relationship between nature and the self.

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Introduction

Throughout the genre of American nature writing, nature writers have consistently investigated the role of the self in relationship to the natural world. While some writers have sought to achieve a better understanding of the self *through* nature, others have sought to achieve a better understanding of nature itself. More often, however, nature writers have typically sought to achieve both simultaneously, though to varying degrees. This process of cultivating either a heightened internal awareness of the self or a heightened external awareness of the natural world is frequently accompanied by a sincere appreciation for the present moment as the time in which the nature writer can accurately observe and explain both internal and external phenomena. This thesis examines how three nature writers, Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and Bill McKibben, each writing in a different century, attempt to cultivate both internal and external awareness within the present moment as it is portrayed in their writing. Thoreau, writing in the 19th century, represents a nature writer who looks primarily inward while observing the self and nature. Dillard, writing in the 20th century, represents a nature writer who looks primarily outward at her natural surroundings, and McKibben, writing in the 21st century represents a nature writer who looks even further outward, cultivating an ecological awareness that extends beyond his immediate surroundings and encompasses the entire globe.

In order to lay the groundwork from which the remainder of this thesis will build, it is necessary to define both 1) nature writing, and 2) the present moment. For the phrase *nature writing*, I borrow a definition from the work of ecocritic Dana Phillips, who explains nature writing as “a nonfiction prose essay describing a first person narrator’s efforts to establish an intensely felt emotional connection with the natural world” (193). This definition applies to the nonfiction that will be analyzed over the following three chapters.

Secondly, the term *present moment* refers to the moment of the nature writer's experience as it is *portrayed* within the narrative by the speaker. It refers to the "here and now" of the present within the narrative with full acknowledgment that the writer most likely did *not* record his or her observations with pen and paper as the experience occurred. To assume that the writing was recorded at the exact time that a natural event took place would be to commit what ecocritic Scott Slovic terms "the written-in-the-field fallacy"—the false belief that a nature writer's words were written precisely as the natural event occurred (70). Thus, in referring to the present moment, I refer to the *literary* present as opposed to the *lived* present. I acknowledge that the "present moments" I analyze in my thesis are, perhaps, more accurately the recorded memories of a writer's experience, but for the purposes of this study, I will assume that the nature writer's *portrayal* of the present reflects his or her feelings as they happened at the moment of his or her experience. It is in the *literary* present, whatever is happening in the *now* of the narrative, that the nature writers discussed in this thesis engage in both introspection and extrospection; thus, these are the moments that play a significant role in the examination of the relationship between the natural world and the self.

Some ecocritics such as Dana Phillips, Alfred Tauber, and Charles Deemer argue that this examination can cause a writer's work to become selfish or egotistical, asserting that a solipsistic ethos pervades throughout the nature writing genre. I argue that Phillips and others who maintain this view of nature writers and nature writing as "selfish" stems from a restrictive, limited understanding of the self—that the self as a literary tool is not merely a gateway to the present moment and inner, self-cultivation, but to a heightened external awareness as well. Similarly, I argue against Phillips' assertion that nature writing, from Thoreau onward, consistently attempts to glorify *only* the experience of the individual; instead, I propose that the process of cultivating

self-awareness is not exclusively an internal phenomenon that places the self at the center of all knowable experience, but is a simultaneous external phenomenon that shifts the nature writer's focus away from an "egocentrist" perspective and towards an "ecocentrist" perspective (Tauber 220).¹ In other words, in his or her pursuit of both internal and external awareness, the nature writer gradually shifts his or her focus away from the inner self (egocentrist) outwards into the natural world (ecocentrist). This pattern can be observed in each of the nature texts included in this thesis, and frequently in others as well.

However, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive study of the evolution of nature writing as a genre from an egocentric to ecocentric perspective. To do so would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Consequently, I have left out a number of well-known nature writers such as Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Barry Lopez, whose work I believe also lends itself to similar analyses of introspection, extrospection, and the present moment. I have chosen to focus specifically on the work of Thoreau, Dillard, and McKibben for their recurring, direct references to the present moment and the processes of introspection/extrospection, which often serve as the central subjects of sections or chapters in their books or essays. Additionally, the three writers I have selected frequently discuss the subjects of the present, the self, and nature simultaneously, thereby allowing the reader to encounter all three subjects within the same passage. Thus, my intention with this thesis is to demonstrate how the shift from egocentrism to ecocentrism can be observed in the three main texts I have selected, analyzing instances and representations of the present moment in order to illustrate precisely how this shift occurs.

1. I borrow these two terms from ecocritic Alfred Tauber as he uses them in his book *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*.

Chapter 1

Thoreau and the Self in the Present Moment

In the canon of American nature writing, the works of Henry David Thoreau stand as some of the earliest and most definitive texts of the literary genre. Considered by members of both the scholarly community and the general public to be “the patron saint” of American nature writing, Thoreau’s writing marks an obvious starting point for this thesis (Buell 115). More importantly, Thoreau’s many references to the present moment provide early examples of the complex relationships among my three primary subjects: nature writing, the present moment, and the self. Though Thoreau was certainly not the *first* nature writer to study these subjects and their relationships to one another, he scrutinized them to a degree unparalleled by most naturalists, scientists, and nature writers before him. Indeed, both his published and unpublished writing provide original insight on the relationship between the self and the natural world that later nature writers would replicate, complicate, and develop. Thus, the present moment, in its ability to foster both internal and external awareness plays a significant role in the lives of nature writers and their nature writing, beginning, in the context of this thesis, with Henry Thoreau.

I. Walking With Awareness

Perhaps nowhere in Thoreau’s nature writing is the link between nature and the present moment made more clear than in his 1852 essay “Walking.” For Thoreau himself, the essay represented a sort of revelation in his environmental thinking, scribbling atop a copy of the essay before reading it at one lecture, “I regard this as a sort of introduction to all that I might write hereafter” (Dean 1). Indeed, while the essay is characteristic of much of Thoreau’s work, meandering as it does among the topics of world history, aesthetics, and wildness, the essay

boldly proclaims the significance of the present moment— a subject not unfamiliar to nature writing, but one that was novel to Thoreau and his interpretation of nature. In the conclusion to “Walking,” Thoreau provides the reader with an overt declaration of the significance of the present moment, as if to signify to the reader the summative point of the essay: “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present” (204).

Clearly, by making such a bold claim, Thoreau wishes to ensure his readers recognize its significance. With this declaration, he insists that the present moment holds a privileged place among its temporal counterparts; the past and the future cannot offer what the present does, which is, in fact, life itself. As Thoreau suggests, we *live* in the present. We cannot afford *not* to live in the present moment because we cannot physically be alive in any other moment in time. Nor can we be alive to our senses (i.e. our awareness)— whether in terms of our internal senses or awareness of self (introspection) or external awareness of nature (extrospection); it is in the present moment that both processes take place. Thus, for Thoreau, the present provides an indispensable lens through which we can view the world; it provides us with the opportunity to live in the fullest sense of the word— both physically and mentally. For Thoreau, the present is the gateway to awareness.

According to Thoreau, a simple way for an individual to enter the present moment and inhabit it fully is by taking a walk. The physical act of walking encourages a person to slow both his physical and mental pace to the single *step* in front of him, thereby inducing him to recognize the single *moment* in front of him. Walking “surprises” a person into the present moment by virtue of its forward movement. As a person rounds a corner or moves forward down an unknown road, all things have the potential to be new, just as all things are new in the reality of the present. Of course, while this type of thinking may be *encouraged* by the act of walking, it is

not required. However, for the type of walking Thoreau refers to, it is. For Thoreau, walking should not merely be a leisure activity, but a solemn one— an activity that can be more precisely termed “sauntering,” which, according to Thoreau, takes its definition from the “idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages and asked charity, under pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre*,” to the Holy Land...” (180).² While there may not necessarily be a physical Holy Land that the walker must reach under Thoreau’s definition, there *is* a type of mental Holy Land that one *can* reach if he or she walks with mind and body rooted in the present. As a result, “the art of walking” can be a complex activity, but not so complex that only a few can truly participate in it. Indeed, rather than alienating readers from the type of walking Thoreau champions, he provides them with a set of conditions to meet before setting out on a walk, which might allow them to enter into the present moment:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends and never see them again, — if you have paid your debts and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk. (181)

While these conditions aren’t likely meant to be taken literally, they illustrate that one’s mind must be completely free for a walk to be taken in complete awareness. Without debts, affairs, or other people to occupy the mind, the walker may be rewarded with a greater opportunity to fully inhabit the present— to become aware of his external surroundings *in the moment*. Furthermore, while some may read Thoreau’s conditions as a way of overcomplicating the simple act of walking, it is the mere inclusion of them that suggests that Thoreau is aware of his audience. He is aware that his own type of individualized walking may *seem* unfamiliar to some, or indeed

2. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the origin of the word is more obscure, possibly derived from the Middle English word *auntre*— to adventure. Thoreau’s definition appears to come from a 1691 book called *Country Words*, which seems to have spread the “*a la Sainte Terre*” explanation as a false etymology.

even alienating, but rather than keeping his methods to himself, he invites the reader to try this type of walking on his or her own. While his words may *read* complicated to some, they are not intended to confuse. In short, to take a walk in a Thoreauvian sense is at once an art and an elaborate exercise in fostering awareness. While this “art” may require significant mental effort just like any other art form, it offers a number of rewards.

For Thoreau, the process of becoming more aware is valuable for primarily two reasons: spiritual wellness and self-cultivation. By increasing one’s perception and appreciation for the present moment in the external world and by entering into it with a clear mind, an individual can simultaneously develop a deeper internal awareness of himself as well as a greater external awareness of the natural world around him. It is the opportunity for deeper internal awareness that first motivates Thoreau to enter into the present moment. As Thoreau says, the more he has taken walks while inhabiting the present fully, he has found the walks to be therapeutic, providing him with unique benefits that he cannot obtain elsewhere:

I think I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least— and it is commonly more than that— sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements. (181)

Since his mind is unencumbered on these walks by thoughts of home, work, future, past, or any other “worldly engagement,” Thoreau’s “health and spirits” are rejuvenated. He gains a heightened awareness of his inner thoughts and feelings. Simultaneously, however, he takes pleasure in the woods, hills, and fields that he encounters. In other words, he takes notice of his natural surroundings. In taking a solitary walk, Thoreau’s inner self, his “spirits,” are soothed by his interaction with the external world of nature.

Expressing a similar sentiment later in the essay, Thoreau writes that often while walking, “the thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is,— I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses” (183). This passage similarly illustrates the twofold benefits of walking in complete awareness of the present. Through walking, the internal “I” is united with the external body. As Thoreau “returns to his senses,” he becomes more aware of both himself and his external surroundings. Thus, for Thoreau, inhabiting the present moment provides significant personal, psychological, and spiritual benefits. The process of entering into the present serves as a method for him to notice, explore, and engage with the external world, while simultaneously exploring the internal world of the self. It is important to note, however, that for Thoreau, it is the inner exploration of the self (i.e. the ego) that frequently motivates him to look outward.

To some ecocritics, the focus that nature writing places on the self and its frequent quests for a better understanding of either the internal or external world (or both) is egotistical, calling into question the cultural value of the kind of introspection Thoreau engages in. Thoreau’s writing in particular has been criticized for its radical egocentrism, from both a social and ethical standpoint. His frequent solitude in nature as well as his constant exploration of the self suggest that Thoreau understood the self to be at the center of all human experience, even taking on a spiritual role. As ecocritic Alfred Tauber puts it, “Thoreau’s moral philosophy developed from a selfish perspective” (198). That is, Thoreau’s moral and ethical code centered almost entirely on his desire to find himself, “seemingly to the exclusion of serious attempts to integrate himself in the larger community” (198). According to Tauber, Thoreau’s quest for introspection dominates his life and writing, trickling into his experiences and descriptions of nature. But this perceived narcissism in Thoreau’s work has extended beyond his writing in the nineteenth century and

found its way into more general criticism of nature writing as a genre, particularly in regard to writers whose work bears striking similarities to Thoreau's, such as Dillard's. According to Dana Phillips and other ecocritics who maintain similar views, nature writing as a whole overemphasizes the importance of the self. In Phillips' words:

Nature writing is *too selfish*, by which I mean that it is too preoccupied with the self as the formative and essential element of experience, and overly concerned with the self, not as an ethically responsible entity and a citizen of the world, but as the locus of what passes for spiritual life in a secular culture. (195)

To Phillips, the personal journey that the nature writer often takes in his or her writing is a selfish one. The nature writer lends a spiritual quality to the self over the course of his or her internal/external explorations, causing the writer to indulge in his or her solipsistic tendencies. The writing then operates under the belief that the self *must* take center stage, while the actual experience portrayed in writing can be pushed aside. As Phillips suggests, nature writing takes on an egocentric attitude, leaving little to no room for nature itself to shape not only our spiritual lives but our experiences of the natural world as well.

While there is no doubt that Thoreau himself frequently takes center stage in his writing, to view Thoreau as solipsistic and his writing as either exclusively or even primarily "too occupied with the self" is to restrict Thoreau's intellectual work solely to the promotion of self-awareness and the process of introspection. While Thoreau is unequivocally committed to cultivating self-awareness via introspection, he simultaneously seeks to gain a better understanding of the world outside himself, thereby periodically shifting his work from an inner focus on the self to an outer focus on the natural world. As discussed, Thoreau's focus on these two subjects is rooted in the present moment. His own walks provide examples of his desire to

interact with the natural world while simultaneously examining his relationship with himself. Indeed, it is a stretch to call Thoreau's work selfless, since, he *is* committed to finding himself within his writing, but he also writes with the objective to understand both the natural and human world around him. In order to provide further evidence of how Thoreau's writing can be read not as a narcissistic catalogue of introspection, but as a method of cultivating a greater external awareness, it is best to turn to the most well known example of his nature writing: *Walden*.

II. Walden and the Decline of Selfishness

Thoreau addresses the topic of selfishness early in *Walden*, knowing full well that in writing a book about his personal experiment of living a solitary existence in the forest beside Walden Pond, his readers are inclined to ask why his book matters. On the very first page of the book, before the reader has a chance to dismiss Thoreau's experience as selfish, Thoreau attempts to explain that part of the reason he set down some of his experiences in writing is because *others* were curious to know about them, not because he wanted to include them: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers," he writes, "if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life..." (45). Here, Thoreau suggests that some of what he writes is written deliberately for others. Some neighbors asked what kinds of food he ate or whether or not he felt lonely during his time at the pond. Realizing that these are small parts of his larger work, however, Thoreau continues to explain the reasons why the majority of the book will focus so heavily on himself as the subject:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any

body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives. (46)

Thoreau suggests that while *Walden* may center on himself and his personal experiences, he does not consider it any more or less egotistical than any other book. The *I* functions as an honest reminder to the reader that the experiences described in the book are his, not to remind the reader that he is the most important part of the book. Moreover, though Thoreau explains that he is “confined to [the] theme” of himself “by the narrowness of [his] experience,” he is not referring only to the experience of living at the pond; instead, he refers to the experience of living as a person. All experience, Thoreau suggests, is valuable if it is first hand and recorded in sincerity. As a reader, Thoreau admires the writer who reports what is true to his own experiences, not what has been influenced by others.

Yet despite Thoreau's attempt to downplay the selfishness that readers may observe in *Walden*, there is a detectable sense of egotism throughout the beginning of the text, even in the passage above. For instance, though Thoreau smugly suggests that he knows no one else better than he knows himself, the skeptical reader may read this sentence as a cheap way of offsetting his “selfish” focus. (Of *course* we all know ourselves better than any other). This, however, fails to answer the question of why Thoreau insists on talking about himself and not the appearance of the pond or the animals in the woods around him. This is a matter that has not gone unnoticed by Thoreauvian scholars. As Lawrence Buell points out, “Thoreau's favorite pronoun, “I,” appears in the two opening chapters of *Walden* an average of 6.6 times per page (122). In contrast, the words “Walden,” “pond(s)” and the various nominal and adjectival form of “wild” appear once

every 1.8 pages for the first two chapters of the book (122). These numbers demonstrate that at the onset of the Walden project, Thoreau may indeed have been more interested in writing about himself than in writing about nature, either with the intention to share his experiences for the benefit of others or to revel in the experiences himself. Yet as Buell notes, this pattern of word use undergoes a gradual but significant change, accompanied, unsurprisingly, by a similar transition in the content of Thoreau's writing.

While the word "I" appears more frequently than the words "Walden," "pond," or "wild" near the beginning of the book, a near-inverse pattern can be observed by the book's end. In the final five chapters, the word "I" appears only 3.6 times per page, while the other words increase to 2.3 times per page for the final 10 chapters—roughly half of the book (122). The near-inverse relationship of these figures suggests that the focus of Thoreau's writing (at least, linguistically) shifts from the internal (the "I" in the beginning) to the external (the pond, wild, etc.) by the book's end. Buell characterizes this shift by saying that the discourse of *Walden* from roughly one quarter of the book onwards, "begins to give way to a more ruminative prose in which the speaker appears to be finding himself within his environment (122). Thus, while Thoreau begins the book with an inward, perhaps "selfish" focus to find himself, he begins to look less within himself and more outward for the spiritual and psychological wellbeing he seeks in both "Walking" and in *Walden*. The more time he spends in nature, focusing on what is presently around him, the more he finds himself in it. He moves intellectually away from self-absorption towards extrospection, all the while with an increased receptivity to his surroundings (122).

Exactly how Thoreau makes this transition can be seen in the development of his relationship with the present moment. In the book's fourth chapter, "Sounds," Thoreau explains how his life has become calmer since arriving at the pond. He now has far different experiences

than the toils he describes minutely in the book's first chapter, "Economy." In "Sounds" Thoreau writes of the days in which he does nothing but take in his natural surroundings:

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands... Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like the corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. (156-157)

This passage marks one instance of a significant shift taking place in Thoreau's inward "I" thinking near the beginning of *Walden* to the more external, nature-based thinking that pervades throughout the latter parts of the book. At this point in his experience at Walden, Thoreau finds it more useful or more enjoyable simply to bask in the "bloom of the present moment," without doing any physical labor *or* mental labor. He does not wish to find himself internally through the "work of the head," but instead chooses to sit quietly among the trees and listen to the animal sounds around him. In this way, in turning his focus outward to nature, he begins to grow "like the corn in the night" in terms of self-cultivation and/or spirituality. Indeed, he loses track of time in these moments of growth, indicating that his awareness does not extend beyond the current moment he inhabits. He does not think of what future work needs to be done in his cabin or what he observed at the pond the day before. He simply sits in his doorway and engages with the world just outside his cabin, thereby metaphorically representing his mental shift from the interior world of the mind (his home) to the exterior world of nature. Thus, it is through the

process of recognizing the present moment and inhabiting it fully that Thoreau expands his quest to understand the self from a purely inner endeavor to one that encompasses both internal and external awareness.

Though Thoreau may have merely attempted to offset his narcissism in the beginning of *Walden*, he truly succeeds in doing so the longer he lives at the pond, replacing many narcissistic comments with a care and attention to physical nature itself (Buell 118). For Thoreau, while nature increasingly becomes a purposeful form of self-education, it promotes a shift in his thinking as a nature writer from an internal “I” focus, to an external “nature” focus. As Buell describes, Thoreau’s forays into nature and awareness of his external surroundings came to represent a lifelong “process of continuously mapping the world and locating the self thereby” (116).

III. Polarity in Thoreau’s Journals

No analysis of Thoreau’s lifelong investigation of the self and its relationship to the natural world would be complete without addressing his journals. From 1837 to 1861 (nearly half of his life), Thoreau completed forty-seven manuscript volumes of a personal journal, documenting his daily excursions in nature, the passage of the seasons, and most importantly, the connections he observed between the external world and his internal mind (Cameron 3). In terms of their content, the journals differ little from “Walking” or *Walden*, as they contain similar meditations on the significance of the present moment, introspective revelations, and detailed descriptions of the landscapes Thoreau encounters. Yet the journals portray these common threads in Thoreau’s writing at what are perhaps their most personal, organic levels, partially due

to the assumption that Thoreau never intended for his journals to be published.³ Consequently, as Scott Slovic notes in his article “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology,” the journals provide us with “the sense throughout of Thoreau’s actual presence in the natural world, something we encounter only intermittently in the published works” (354). In texts such as “Walking” and *Walden*, it is difficult to discern between Thoreau’s lived experiences in nature and those he may have embellished for his publishers, readers, or for his own perceived literary value. But since the journals provide us with a relatively accurate account of what Thoreau observed and what he *thought* about during his daily observations, we receive Thoreau’s writing in its raw, unedited form.

Unsurprisingly, what we observe in this unpolished version of Thoreau’s nature writing, is a similar attempt on Thoreau’s part to understand himself, nature, and the relationship between the two subjects, which can be seen throughout “Walking” and *Walden*. However, in the journals, two opposing viewpoints are brought to the forefront of Thoreau’s thinking: 1) the view that the internal self and the external world share a harmonious, “correspondence” or connection with one another and 2) the recognition that the self and nature are *disconnected* from one another, occupying separate intellectual spheres (Slovic 21). Thoreauvian critics have long debated which viewpoint Thoreau seems to take more frequently, particularly as Thoreau himself ages. Yet a textual analysis of a handful of entries seems to suggest a similar trend observed by Buell in *Walden*: the more time Thoreau spends in nature, the more he embraces nature writing from an

3. I use the word “assumption” here since some scholars such as William Ellery Channing and even Ralph Waldo Emerson suggest that Thoreau may have actually intended for his journal to be published or to serve as intellectual fodder for future essays, lectures, or perhaps even a grand, all-encompassing project dedicated to the passage of the seasons. Regardless, it remains that Thoreau’s journal represents a raw example of his personal experiences in nature, which is the intended focus of this section.

ecological perspective, thereby removing hints of selfishness and a solipsistic ethos from his work.

In one early journal entry dated July 16, 1851, Thoreau writes what Alfred Tauber accurately describes as “an ode to the self” (197).⁴ Indeed, the passage seems to stand for Thoreau as both a celebration of himself and a guide to his never-ending quest to fully understand his own identity. Though the full entry contains several references to elements of nature such as butterflies, birds, and berries, it focuses almost exclusively on the self, culminating in a sort of ethical outline to the discovery of himself:

Let me go forever in search of myself— Never for a moment think that I have found myself...May I be to myself as one is to me whom I love— a dear & cherished object— what temple what fane what sacred place can there be but the innermost part of my being?...I thought I was grown up & become what I intended to be. But it is earliest spring with me. In relation to virtue & innocence the oldest man is in the beginning earliest spring & vernal season of life...I love and worship myself with a love which absorbs my love for the world.
(qtd. in Tauber 197)

With his repetition of ‘me,’ ‘myself,’ and ‘I,’ Thoreau’s self-centeredness practically leaps from the page. As he asks himself whether any temple or sacred place exists besides his “innermost” self, he seems to ignore the external world entirely. Indeed, as Thoreau says, the love he holds for himself “absorbs” his love for the world, thereby indicating that at this point in his journal he

4. For the first 12 years Thoreau kept journals, they served mostly as notebooks containing, as Damion Searls points out in his introduction to *The Journal, 1837-1861*, “quotations, mini essays, and poetry,” much of which Thoreau tore out for later use (13). As a result, many of the entries that survive from these first dozen years are fragments. Thoreau only began to consistently keep dated journal entries and preserving them in tact, rather than tearing out individual pages, around 1850. Thus, although Thoreau began journaling as early as 1837, most of what survives of his journals comes after 1850, which is why I consider this 1851 selection as an “early” entry.

places little value on extrospection, dedicating his writing in the journal to the process of introspection. Furthermore, Thoreau only looks to the natural world for its connection to himself. He likens himself and the beginning of his quest for identity to “earliest spring.” He sees himself *in* nature, not as a separate part of nature. In this entry, the ‘I’ clearly functions not as a mere placeholder as he intended it to be in *Walden*, but as the central lens through which all of his experiences are filtered.

This passage bears a stark contrast to many of Thoreau’s later entries, some of which contain merely a brief description about the weather or a list of the landforms, plants, or animals Thoreau observed on a particular day. As the journal continues, a marked shift can be observed in the tone, content, and structure of Thoreau’s entries, as demonstrated in these selections from May, 1852:

May 13. P.M.— To Walden in rain.

A May storm, yesterday and to-day; rather cold. The fields are green now, and the cows find good feed. All these expanding leaves and flower-buds are much more beautiful in the rain,— covered with clear drops. They have lost some of their beauty when I have shaken the drops off. They who do not walk in the woods in the rain never behold them in their freshest, most radiant and blooming beauty. (Thoreau and Searls 139)

May 14. Hastily reviewing this journal, I find the flowers to have appeared in this order since the 28th of April (perhaps *some note* in my journal has escaped me):—

Acer rubrum April 28 male; a female 30th; first date is perhaps early
enough for both

Populus grandidentata 29

Epigaea repens 30 (April 25, '51)

[Etc.—32 more plants recorded]

Birds since 28th April

Saw the first *Fringilla hyemalis* May 4.

Savannah sparrow May 1 or a day or two before.

Ground robin May 1

[Etc.—22 more....]

A *large* water-bug 29

Heard toad (dreaming) 30

Bull(?)frog (saw him) 30

(Thoreau and Searls 139)

Thoreau's ecological focus in these two entries is clearly visible in terms of both their organization and language. The collection of plants, birds, and animals that Thoreau encounters Linnaean in its taxonomic list form, suggesting Thoreau has begun to use his journal as an ecological notebook, at least alongside some of his more typical entries. Of course, Thoreau's presence does not disappear from the journal entirely. As in the May 13 entry, though Thoreau merely reports the weather, the relative temperature, and the growth of leaves, he cannot resist including himself in his writing, describing his role in shaking raindrops from leaves and buds. Even in this entry, however, it is easy to see how much more subtle Thoreau's presence is starting to become. The weather, the temperature, and the fields he observes precede the "beauty" he notices in the leaves and flower buds. Though Thoreau imbues nature with his subjective notion of beauty, he does not internalize it as a method of reflecting on himself. Instead of becoming introspective, he merely describes what he sees, indicating that he has

subtly begun to disconnect himself from nature. Collectively, his entries have begun to gesture towards extrospection in their descriptions not of internal revelations, but of external observations of plants, animals, and landscapes.

Of course, over the 24-year period that Thoreau kept a journal, moments of introspection and extrospection can be found in both his early and late entries. Nonetheless, the general shift that Thoreau makes from an egocentric, internal focus, to an ecocentric, external focus, which Buell observes in *Walden*, can similarly be seen in the journals. As ecocritic William Howarth explains, in the mid 1850s “the journal had become more external and comprehensive, taking in a larger image of the world lying around [Thoreau]. No longer [was it] just an autobiographical mirror” (qtd. in Slovic 25).⁵ The empirical approach that Thoreau seems to develop in his nature writing challenges the claims of critics such as Phillips, Tauber, and Deemer who focus on the egotistical aspects of Thoreau’s work, as well as other examples of nature writing. The journals provide us with another opportunity to see that although Thoreau writes at first from an egotistical standpoint, he begins to embrace a more ecological perspective as his projects go on. Thus, the self-centeredness observed by Phillips, Tauber, and Deemer suggests a limited understanding of Thoreau’s work, with the journals demonstrating Thoreau’s successful pursuit of both a heightened internal and external awareness.

As “Walking,” *Walden*, and the journals show, the extent to which Thoreau values the processes of introspection and extrospection, as well as the present moment, appears to change over time. Opportunities to see this shift in his writing abound, but perhaps it is best summarized in a May 1851 journal entry, in which Thoreau states, “I love nature partly because she is not

5. Most scholars who observe this shift in Thoreau’s writing (Buell, Howarth, Slovic, and Judy Schaaf Anhorn) date it somewhere between 1850 and 1855. Though the exact date of an observable transition from an internal to external focus is debatable, my point here is that the trend can be observed at all.

man, but a retreat from him” (qtd. in Slovic 354). As *Walden* and his journals suggest, Thoreau loves nature for its own sake— for its occupation of an ecological niche separate from man. But this is only *part* of the reason he is attracted to the natural world. He also cherishes nature as a place of retreat— a place where he can fully engage in introspection, while simultaneously cultivating a heightened awareness of the natural world and inhabiting the present moment fully.

Chapter 2

Annie Dillard and The Art of Seeing

While Thoreau's literary influence on the nature writing genre can easily be observed in the work of 19th and 20th century nature writers, Annie Dillard's 1974 book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* stands as a near continuation of Thoreau's work, albeit 100 years after the publication of *Walden*. Now a widely anthologized book itself, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* has become well known among academic scholars as well as the general public for its intertextual fragments, recurring image motifs, and creative prose (Buell 237). The book bears a striking resemblance to *Walden* and to Thoreau's other writings in content, structure, its portrayal of the present moment, and the nature writer's struggle to understand the self in relation to the natural world.

In *Tinker Creek*, Dillard explores the present moment as a method of procuring a heightened ecological awareness, akin to Thoreau's exploration of the concept in its ability to bring about introspection. For Dillard, the present is a complex way of seeing, observing, focusing, and interacting directly with nature. To inhabit the present fully is to engage not just in the sense of sight, but all of the five senses collectively. Yet unlike Thoreau, Dillard's heightened sensorial experiences are fueled less by a desire for internal self-cultivation and more by a desire to know and to see the external world—to become such a well trained practitioner of the present moment that nothing can escape her notice. Thus, where Thoreau's attraction to the present moment lies in its ability to first promote introspection (though later cultivating an awareness of the external), Dillard's attraction to the concept lies in its ability to promote primarily extrospection. In this chapter, I analyze Dillard's portrayal of the present moment as compared to Thoreau's, while returning to the concepts of walking, the introspection/extrospection binary,

and literary selfishness in order to demonstrate how Dillard's prose exemplifies the nature writer's perspectival shift from egocentrism to ecocentrism.

I. Stationary Observation and the Senses

Just as the act of walking plays a significant role in Thoreau's work, so too does it play a key function in *Tinker Creek*. Within the first chapter of the book, the reader gains a sense of Dillard's daily routine near her home in Virginia. Every day she ventures out, walking along the banks of Tinker Creek, upstream to the rock quarry near her house, or anywhere nearby, since, as she says, "any walk will do; it all looks good" (5). Over time, Dillard finds that the more she walks, the more she begins to observe, especially in regard to animals. On one occasion, during a walk near the water, Dillard realizes how she has become more adept at spotting frogs:

A couple of summers ago I was walking along the edge of the island to see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs...As I walked along the grassy edge of the island, I got better and better at seeing frogs both in and out of the water. I learned to recognize, slowing down, the difference in texture of the light reflected from mud bank, water, grass, or frog. (7)

Dillard's walks encourage her to view her surroundings through an extrospective lens. Rather than simply walking along the edge of the island to "see what she can see," she learns to slow down, to look more deliberately at the landscape, thereby noticing not only the frogs at the edge of the water, but the differences in how the light looks when reflected by ground, water, plant, or animal. In this sense, this type of leisurely, observant walking is similar to Thoreau's "art of walking" in that it fosters a heightened external awareness. Noticeably, however, Dillard's account of her walk contains no reference to the kind of introspection that Thoreau values during

his walks. Instead, Dillard places more emphasis on what is going on around her rather than what is going on within her mind.

As the passage continues, the difference between Dillard's and Thoreau's appreciation for the present moment is made even clearer. As Dillard takes notice of the light and its reflections on natural objects, she creeps closer and closer to the frog: "He [the frog] didn't jump; I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island's winter killed grass, lost, dumbstruck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away" (7). Though Thoreau's writing frequently contains similar, detailed close-ups of nature, Dillard's heightened awareness and easing into the present moment does not come during the *walks* she takes, but during the *pauses* she takes while on her walks. In these pauses, her senses literally slow her to a stop until she is nearly face to face with a feature not of her internal mind, but of external reality. It is in stillness, not movement, that her mind calms and she is able to gain a greater sense of the observable universe. Thus, though Dillard and Thoreau both appreciate walking as a method by which one can enter the present, for Dillard, it is not the physical act of walking that allows for greater awareness, but the act of stopping and making use of the senses while on a walk.

Yet as the book continues, Dillard's stationary observations become more complex. As Dillard is stilled into the present moment again and again, she begins to hone her skills as an observer, deepening her relationship with the present moment. In the book's eleventh chapter, "Stalking," Dillard recounts her experiences learning to spot muskrats in Tinker Creek. As with frogs, Dillard learns that observing muskrats requires a kind of slowing down— a patience in both body and mind:

I found out the hard way that waiting is better than pursuing; now I usually sit on a narrow pedestrian bridge at a spot where the creek is shallow and wide. I sit alone and

alert, but stilled in a special way, waiting and watching for a change in the water, for the tremulous ripples rising in intensity that signal the appearance of a living muskrat from the underwater entrance to its den. (189)

At this point in her project, Dillard's nature walks have turned into seated observation sessions. Instead of crossing the pedestrian bridge across the creek, she takes it as her bench and watches the water patiently, waiting for a muskrat to appear as she has learned it will, by making distinct ripples on the creek's surface. On these occasions, she feels "stilled in a special way," suggesting that she has begun to feel, like Thoreau, the internal, calming effects of the present moment, while simultaneously delighting in the ability to see physical nature in all of its entirety. It is in her physical and mental stillness that Dillard becomes truly aware of her ecological surroundings, all while remaining firmly rooted in the present.

Later in the same chapter, Dillard expounds on her external observations, saying in regard to stalking, "Instead of going rigid, I go calm. I center down wherever I am; I find a balance and repose. I retreat—not inside myself, but outside myself, so that I am a tissue of senses" (203). Dillard uses the stillness that she gains in the present not to engage in intense introspection, but to extend herself outward. She retreats "not inside myself, but outside myself," where she finds another kind of solace—the solace of nature's sights, sounds, textures, colors, and occurrences. By making herself "a tissue of the senses," she opens herself to the natural world, allowing it to act on her as much as she can act on it. She recognizes her separation from nature but also seeks to become a more active participant in it. As she gathers as much empirical evidence of nature as possible via the senses, she recognizes just how different from nature she is, thereby encouraging her to become more aware of the natural phenomena happening around her.

Yet the act of becoming so attuned to observable nature can potentially be distressing. As Dana Phillips suggests, “for each of us actually to become ‘a tissue of the senses’ might be an extraordinary feat, one that would greatly intensify the pleasure we take in daily life; but it also would overwhelm us with information for which we have no use, leaving us helpless” (189). Here, Phillips points out a crucial difference between Dillard’s appreciation of the present as a time for extrospection and Thoreau’s appreciation of the present as a time for introspection. As Phillips suggests, with all the external stimulation that an extension outwards permits, it’s possible to experience sensory overload, thus bringing into question the value of extrospection as Dillard participates in it. Yet for Dillard, the kind of information that might be gleaned from being “a tissue of the senses” is not useless at all; it is precisely the opposite that Dillard finds useless. That is, for Dillard, the natural world actually brings about a heightened awareness of both her ecological surroundings and her internal self. While Phillips argues that an abundance of sensorial information can render us “helpless,” Dillard suggests, as I will demonstrate in the following two sections, that it is in fact a hyperawareness of the self that removes us from the present moment, thereby rendering us helpless, which is, to Dillard, the tragedy of becoming *unaware*. For Dillard, though an understanding of the self is crucial to one’s understanding of his or her place in the world, the internal can occasionally get in the way, blocking one’s ability to see the world as it is.

II. The Complexities of Seeing

As Dillard investigates the relationship between internal consciousness and the external world throughout *Tinker Creek*, she offers a number of examples to explain how the two are closely related. Her explanations center on the concept of seeing, which refers to both the

process of making detailed, visual observations, as well as inner observations of the mind (i.e. consciousness). As Patricia Ward writes in a brief article about *Tinker Creek* and Dillard's 1977 book *Holy the Firm*, "[Dillard]... deals with the process of her own consciousness as she moves between observation and poetic vision... To see is to perceive connections between everything in the world and is thus a metaphoric act" (Slovic 77). Seeing for Dillard refers to both physical and metaphorical vision—the process not only of external observation, but internal observation as well. Seeing is synonymous with understanding, referring at once to both an understanding of the tangible, external world, and the intangible, metaphorical world of the self.

For Dillard, the complexities of seeing do not stop here. As Dillard investigates the significance of the present moment in her writing, she builds on the concept of seeing, explaining that while seeing may allow for an opportunity to observe nature and the self closely, the act of seeing, particularly as it pertains to nature, is accompanied by a process of verbalization. The sorting of information—the record that Dillard keeps of what she sees—takes place internally, with words:

Seeing is of course very much a matter of verbalization...I have to say the words, describe what I'm seeing. If Tinker Mountain erupted, I'd be likely to notice. But if I want to notice the lesser cataclysms of valley life, I have to maintain in my head a running description of the present... When I see this way, I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head. (33)

By maintaining a conscious, verbal, internal description of what's happening around her, Dillard finds it easier to get the most out of her nature excursions. She can physically see more by verbalizing her external observations— by keeping a mental record of what she sees while

overturning logs and stones. But she can also metaphorically “see” more as she reflects on how these physical observations impact her psychologically. Dillard explains the two processes of seeing with yet another metaphor:

The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking with and without a camera. When I walk with a camera I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer. (33)

When walking with a camera, Dillard physically observes whatever is contained in the shot. She studies physical nature empirically with a keen eye for observation, often through the lens of verbalization. When walking without a camera, Dillard’s “own shutter opens” and the external is internalized *beyond* the point of mere verbalization. The light of the moment becomes a part of her as she ponders how the moment reflects her own psychological state. This second type of seeing causes her to become “an unscrupulous observer,” which is to say, the point at which Dillard’s external observations become more subjective than objective. In other words, her observations begin to take on metaphorical meanings that relate to her own present state of consciousness.

Thus, much like Thoreau, Dillard’s appreciation of the present moment fosters both internal and external awareness, though for Dillard the internal is less crucial to her understanding of nature than the external. Dillard’s introspection is rooted in the process of extrospection, meaning that she hopes to use introspection as a tool less to understand herself and more to understand nature; seeing comes first; introspection comes second. Dillard’s stated goal as a nature writer is to “see what the specialist sees,” and like any good scientist, naturalist, or

specialist, Dillard's most valuable observations are made objectively (18). Subjectivity and the self block her efforts to achieve a greater ecological awareness. As Dillard admits, "I can't go out and try to see this way [objectively, with a camera]. I'll fail, I'll go mad. All I can do is try to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble that keeps me from seeing just as surely as a newspaper dangled before my eyes" (34). To see as purely as she wishes, Dillard must prevent herself from observing the world through the lens of the internal self, instead observing it simply as it is.

III. Getting in Her Own Way: Dillard's Self-Consciousness

In wrestling with the dichotomy between accurate, external observation and subjective, internal observation, Dillard explains that the self hinders her ability to make objective observations within the present moment. To demonstrate this, Dillard divides her own consciousness into two categories: 1) consciousness and 2) self-consciousness. For Dillard, consciousness can be understood as a synonym for awareness, whereas self-consciousness can be understood as a hyperawareness of the self that actually causes her to become *unaware*. In Dillard's words:

Consciousness itself does not hinder living in the present. In fact, it is only to a heightened awareness that the great door to the present opens at all... Self-consciousness, however, does hinder the experience of the present. It is the one instrument that unplugs all the rest. So long as I lose myself in a tree, say, I can scent its leafy breath or estimate its board feet of lumber...But the second I become aware of myself at any of these

activities— looking over my own shoulder, as it were— the tree vanishes, uprooted from the spot and flung out of sight as if it had never grown. (82)⁶

Thus, consciousness allows for a heightened sensorial experience of the natural world. It is only through consciousness (awareness) that nature can be experienced at all. In contrast, *self*-consciousness, or an awareness of the self, actually distracts from the present moment. The work of seeing, observing objectively, and experiencing a natural object such as a tree, vanishes the instant that the self makes its presence known. For Dillard, this ultimately culminates in a loss for the individual. When the mind shifts its focus from the outside inward, it loses its ability to “scent” a tree’s “leafy breath” or obtain a true understanding of the tree’s size. Dillard cannot maintain her heightened awareness of the natural world while also maintaining self-awareness. As Scott Slovic observes, “it is attentiveness to the present self which Dillard finds obstructive to mystical consciousness” (65). In other words, the self obstructs the “mystical” or heightened awareness of the natural world that Dillard constantly seeks to cultivate.

This is not to say, however, that to inhabit the present requires a rejection of the self or a refusal to acknowledge the benefits of the mind; in fact, trying *not* to use the mind can be detrimental to entering the present moment for Dillard. Rather than turning off one’s mind— turning away from the internal self— in order to fully observe his or her surroundings, one’s consciousness is to be used as a tool to heighten external awareness. Thus, although Dillard is often frustrated with the intrusion of the self in her observations, she embraces the mind as a tool for cultivating awareness. As Dillard puts it:

6. It is worth noting that this passage comes from *Tinker Creek*’s sixth chapter, aptly titled “The Present,” which is partially why I chose to analyze Dillard’s *Tinker Creek* for this project. Though metaphorical definitions and explanations of the present can be found throughout the chapter, I have chosen to focus on Dillard’s explanation of the self in the present because of its obvious relationship to this project as a whole.

The world's spiritual geniuses seem to discover universally that the mind's muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash, cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness. Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights, you look along it, mildly acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance. (35)

The internal work of the mind is not to be ignored or put aside, but allowed to flow subtly "in the dim channels of consciousness." Dillard does not advocate for the "damming" of the internal mind, but for a deliberate use of it, albeit through a mild acknowledgment of its presence and a subsequent "gazing beyond" towards reality. She uses the mind to look beyond the self as ego, and focuses her gaze on tangible nature, or as she refers to it, "the realm of the real." Thus, the mind and the self play a crucial but subtle role in observing nature. Dillard does not want to allow the mind or her own self-consciousness to hinder her ability to see, but she still must use the mind to bring about awareness.

Of course, not all critics agree that Dillard's self-consciousness plays only a subtle role in her solitary nature excursions. Like Thoreau, Dillard's work has been criticized for its heavy reliance on the self as the medium through which her ideas about nature are communicated. Though Dillard herself has admitted that the scope of *Tinker Creek* may appear selfish due to its "willingness to say 'I' and 'me,'" she maintains that the "I" is simply used as a placeholder, or as she puts it, the "I" in *Tinker Creek*, "used the first person as a point of view only, a hand-held camera directed outwards" (282).⁷ Again, the focus of Dillard's nature writing is designed to

7. This explanation can be found in Dillard's afterword to *Tinker Creek* written in 1999, which is included in the edition that I have cited throughout the thesis.

radiate outwards rather than inwards. However, despite Dillard's claim to the function of the word "I" in the book, some critics argue that her efforts to preserve the "I" as a placeholder fails.

Dana Phillips argues that whenever Dillard expounds upon some part of nature that she has just learned about or observed, the focus of her writing is not, in fact, on the external world as it appears to be, but on her internal self. "Time after time," Phillips argues, "Dillard terminates her excursions with lyric outpourings, which have less to do with Tinker Creek and its environs than with her own state of mind" (198). To Phillips, the heightened awareness that Dillard captures in her writing is not a reflection of her interests in observing the natural world, but in observing her own *thoughts* about the natural world. Critic Charles Deemer agrees, referring to *Tinker Creek* as "a meteorological journal of an egomaniac" (qtd. in Slovic 67). Deemer takes issue with Dillard's observations, which, according to him "are typically described in overstatement reaching towards hysteria" (67). For Deemer, Dillard's ego dominates the book, suggesting that it is not a fascination or understanding of nature that motivates Dillard to record such exhaustive descriptions of the natural world, but a fascination with herself.

These criticisms challenge Dillard's devotion to maintaining an accurate, objective description of nature as she encounters it, asserting that although Dillard attempts to remove the self from her observations, she fails to do so convincingly. However, I believe that these two critics fail to see how Dillard's observations, while rooted in introspection, ultimately center on the process of extrospection as she rids herself of her own self-consciousness, thereby cultivating a greater awareness of the natural world. Evidence for Dillard's successful transcendence of self-consciousness can be found in numerous sections of *Tinker Creek*, notably in her portrayal of animals. After stalking muskrats, Dillard claims:

[My] own self-awareness had disappeared... I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly... Other people invariably suffer from a self-consciousness that prevents their stalking well. It used to bother me, too. I just could not bear to lose so much dignity that I would completely alter my whole way of being for a muskrat. (200-201)

Without self-consciousness, Dillard can move freely within the natural world, which is how she is finally able to observe the elusive muskrat so closely that she can hear his chewing and see his toenails (198). Because she has learned to “alter [her] whole way of being,” when making natural observations, she can observe the world without the hindrance of any egocentric lens. She has successfully removed her own self-consciousness from the process of seeing—losing “so much dignity” that she has become less like a human and more like a muskrat, which for Dillard, represents a triumph in her quest to generate extrospection.

My reading of *Tinker Creek* reveals the stronger emphasis that Dillard places on external observation than other nature writers before her, particularly Thoreau. As demonstrated in the last chapter, though Thoreau avoids the worldview of a solipsist, much of what he sees in nature is, in fact, filtered through the self. Unlike Dillard, Thoreau embraces self-consciousness. Indeed, Slovic accurately describes Thoreau’s writing when saying, in reference to Thoreau’s journals “He can never look only at himself or only at nature, but must always employ a kind of double vision, a way of seeing which acknowledges the subtle, vital unity of the self and the world” (25). While Dillard too acknowledges a kind of unity of the self and the natural world, she avoids imbuing the natural world with her internal observations *when she wishes to*. It is inaccurate to say that Dillard focuses *only* on making objective observations and avoids the process of self-cultivation altogether. Indeed, numerous critics assert that Dillard’s *Tinker Creek* is much like

Thoreau's *Walden* in that she spends more time in her book in search of herself than in search of nature (Welty 1). However, my point here is that unlike Thoreau, Dillard prioritizes her external observations over the internal; throughout *Tinker Creek* she learns to avoid self-consciousness in order to observe nature more closely and accurately, thus allowing her to achieve a heightened ecological awareness, all while rooted firmly in the present moment.

Chapter 3

McKibben's Global Ecological Awareness

Thus far, this thesis has examined definitive examples of nature writing in the 19th and 20th centuries. As I continue to move forward in the history of nature writing, I now shift my discussion to the 21st century and to author and environmentalist Bill McKibben, whose nature writing centers almost entirely on the cultivation of ecological awareness. Since the publication of his first book *The End of Nature* in 1989, McKibben has emerged as “the literary face of popular American environmentalism,” particularly after the turn of the century, writing primarily on the topics of climate change, ecological economics, and genetic engineering (White 1). Due in large part to the accessible, journalistic writing style of his books *Enough* (2003), *Deep Economy* (2007), and his *New York Times* bestseller *earth* (2010), McKibben has won favor with the American public for his exposés of current environmental issues, while simultaneously carving a niche for himself in the canon of American nature writing. Additionally, since founding the grassroots climate change organization 350.org in 2007, McKibben has grown into a recognizable leader of global environmentalism.

McKibben's place in the landscape of American nature writing differs greatly from that of Thoreau or Dillard, namely in terms of his role as a devoted activist. Yet, while McKibben's popularity, literary style, and environmental activism bear subtle resemblances to the life and work of Thoreau and Dillard, the content of McKibben's writing and the underlying questions it seeks to answer continue many of the trends found in earlier nature writing. This chapter analyzes the ways in which McKibben's 21st century nature writing both continues and breaks away from these trends, particularly in regard to the appreciation of the present moment, the dichotomy of internal/external awareness in our attempts to interact with nature, and the potential

selfishness of the nature writer. As I argue, McKibben's work reflects a concern for the welfare of the entire planet. His writing, unlike Thoreau's or Dillard's, analyzes nature as a whole, not as a place for him and him alone to become acquainted both with himself and the natural world. For McKibben, though nature *can* be a place to cultivate internal awareness (and indeed he does occasionally embark on the search for his own identity in his writing) he continuously looks farther and farther *outward* in nature, rather than inward. Thus, within the context of this thesis, McKibben's work represents an overt display of a selfless approach to nature writing in opposition to the selfishness that Phillips and others observe within the genre.

I. A Shrinking Sphere

As with Thoreau and Dillard, walking plays a significant role in McKibben's writing. Yet, whereas walking (or pausing while on a walk) provides Thoreau and Dillard with opportunities to ground themselves in nature as well as the present moment, walking for McKibben yields a much different thought pattern. During part one of *The End of Nature* (incidentally titled, "The Present"), McKibben laments how his walks have changed from encounters with pristine wilderness to encounters with landscapes that are riddled with human intervention:

I like to walk in the outdoors not solely because the air is cleaner but because outdoors we venture into a sphere larger than ourselves...But now, out in the wild, the sunshine on one's shoulders is a reminder that man has cracked the ozone, that, thanks to us, the atmosphere absorbs where once it released. (77)

This passage summarizes the central claim of *The End of Nature*, which is that nature, so often thought of as a pristine, natural entity unspoiled by humans, no longer exists; nature as we

commonly think of it has come to an end. As McKibben argues, due to the extent of our carbon footprints (as well as our physical footprints), there is no longer a single place on the planet where man's presence cannot be detected in some way. As a result, McKibben says, "It's harder to go to the forest now, or to the mountains, or the ocean, or even to a patch of wildflowers and feel the same kind of wonderful smallness" (22).⁸

For McKibben, the sphere he wishes to enter when going on a walk is shrinking from one of immense proportions to something much more familiar; the sphere has shrunk to a size so small it can be perceived on a human scale, causing the natural world to become more human-like than nature-like—a quality that McKibben, as a writer intent on cultivating a heightened ecological awareness must confront. Though he wishes he could still bask in the "wonderful smallness" that being immersed in the natural world previously allowed, the natural world now seems as small as he is. Ecologically, mankind is everywhere, and the sphere "larger than ourselves" is shrinking, thus to achieve a heightened ecological awareness, McKibben *must* observe the natural world around him while taking into account the presence of the self and mankind as it is found in all parts of the natural world. To bask in his own previous "smallness" would be to deny his awareness of mankind's presence both in his own backyard and around the globe.

This is not to say that McKibben's exploration of nature focuses *only* on fostering a heightened ecological awareness, nor that he consistently seeks to keep the self and mankind apart from nature in his writing. Rather, part of McKibben's goal as a nature writer, much like Thoreau and Dillard, is to make sense of his own relationship with nature in an attempt to understand the personal benefits that that relationship has to offer. Similar to other nature writers,

8. This passage comes from McKibben's 2005 introduction to *The End of Nature*, which can be found at the beginning of the edition I have cited throughout the thesis.

McKibben includes personal anecdotes among his observations as a writer and naturalist.

However, unlike Thoreau or Dillard, McKibben's personal anecdotes are often surrounded by large-scale ecological observations. The writing of *The End of Nature* primarily centers on scientific data such as these:

- Mankind owns 1.2 billion head of cattle, not to mention a large number of camels, horses, pigs, sheep, and goats, and together they belch about 73 million metric tons of methane into the air each year, a 435 percent increase in the last century. (13-14)
- Spring on average comes *a week earlier* across the northern hemisphere than it did just two decades ago. (15)⁹
- The latest estimates predict that man's release *to date* [1989] of carbon dioxide and other gases will warm the atmosphere as little as 1 degree Fahrenheit or as much as 2.8. (39)

These data, occasionally accompanied by McKibben's personal anecdotes, suggest that McKibben's interests as a nature writer are twofold: 1) primarily to observe and understand the external world on a global scale and 2) secondarily to restore the self's ability to connect with nature. In much of McKibben's writings, these two goals frequently become intertwined. An example of this interconnectedness between his two major goals can be observed during an early passage in which McKibben describes his experience swimming in a local lake:

In the summer, my wife and I bike down to the lake nearly every afternoon for a swim. It is a dogleg Adirondack lake, with three beaver lodges, a blue heron, some otter, a family of mergansers, the occasional loon... But on weekends, more and more often, someone

9. This figure also comes from McKibben's 2005 introduction.

will bring a boat out for waterskiing, and make pass after pass up and down the lake. And then the whole experience changes, changes entirely. Instead of being able to forget everything but yourself, and even yourself except for the muscles and the skin, you must be alert, looking up every dozen strokes to see where the boat is, thinking about what you will do if it comes near. (41-42)

The inclusion of this anecdote suggests that while McKibben indeed focuses his nature writing on cultivating a greater ecological awareness, he simultaneously seeks to understand the individual's ability to connect with the self in the solitude of nature. As McKibben demonstrates, it is increasingly difficult to focus his awareness only on his natural surroundings due to the boat zipping up and down the lake. He can't "forget everything but himself," indicating that he wishes to develop a relationship with the natural world. However, McKibben continues by saying that he is frustrated by his inability to forget "even yourself except for the muscles and skin." This demonstrates that while McKibben wishes to foster a personal relationship with the natural world, he also wishes to become totally removed the self (except for the body) in order to increase his external awareness. Because of the presence of the boat, however, McKibben can think only of humans, and as a result, he is self-aware. This is the same type of self-consciousness that Dillard tries to rid herself of throughout *Tinker Creek*. Thus, although McKibben acknowledges nature's ability to foster a relationship with the inner self—to promote introspection—he wishes to surpasses this ability, placing greater emphasis on the ecological awareness that he struggles to grasp in his local lake.

Though this passage is of course a personal anecdote of McKibben's, it is not self-centered. Indeed, as a method of suggesting to readers the importance of connecting with the external world, particularly in a manner that extends *beyond* one's local surroundings, McKibben

describes his swim at the local lake using language that can be extrapolated to other, similar settings. There is hardly anything specific about McKibben's nameless Adirondack lake. This is no Walden Pond with its mysteriously clear blue water, nor is this Tinker Creek with its elusive muskrats and log bridges. It is simply "a dogleg Adirondack lake." It is home to beavers, herons, mersangers, and loons, all of which are creatures that abound in freshwater ecosystems throughout the world. Furthermore, McKibben refrains from describing the Adirondack lake through an introspective lens. He explains the animals he sees, the lake, and the boat, and briefly describes his frustrations trying to swim in the lake. This lack of specificity is not meant to distance McKibben from his own experiences, but to allow his readers to relate their experiences to his own. His readers can picture a familiar lake with familiar animals, a familiar boat, and a familiar frustration with the boat's presence. This passage demonstrates the interconnectedness between McKibben's goals to cultivate an awareness of nature on a global scale and to simultaneously elucidate the benefits of fostering a relationship between the self and nature.

The lack of specificity in McKibben's writing as a method of cultivating a global ecological awareness is an observation shared by historian Richard White, who explains that frequently McKibben "summons up places, not in their particularity—in fact, it would be hard to identify any particular place from many of McKibben's descriptions—but from their generic similarity to other beautiful places" (White 111). In this way, White argues, they serve as "launching pads for his arguments" (111). Unlike Thoreau or Dillard who write enthusiastically detailed accounts of the places they inhabit, McKibben allows his setting to serve as a stand in for other, similar places around the globe. As a result, McKibben's writing focuses less on the natural place itself *or* McKibben himself, instead focusing on how his nature experiences and the natural places he encounters fit within the context of global ecology. McKibben's own

experience at the Adirondack lake is meant to be impersonal, selfless, and grounded in a universal, relatable experience of the natural world, extending his own extrospection *beyond* his own lake and into all areas of the world where mankind's presence in nature can be seen or felt.

II. The Utility of the Present Moment and Self-Restraint

At the core of McKibben's writing is not only a call to increase environmental awareness across the globe but to change how we as humans impact our natural, external surroundings. This, for McKibben is where the significance of the present moment lies. It is only by maintaining an understanding of the present and an appreciation for "what is," that humans can recognize their role in shaping the world around them. Only after this realization takes place does change begin to occur, for it is only in the present that change can be made. In other words, McKibben values the present moment for its utility— its being the only moment in time when action takes place. As Richard White notes, this is reflected throughout McKibben's writing: "the discussion in [McKibben's books]...remains very much of the moment. McKibben culls his examples from recent newspapers and interviews. They emphasize the usable present: the local foods movement, sustainability, and the Internet" (118). Just as Thoreau and Dillard both value the present as a temporal tool to cultivate internal as well as external awareness, McKibben values it as a tool to increase external awareness on a global scale, which can lead to environmental action. McKibben seeks, in his writing, to elicit external environmental awareness not only for himself but also, and perhaps even more so, for his readers by providing them with scientific data, current events, and his personal anecdotes. He wishes to cultivate awareness of the planet's current environmental status, not only for himself but for his readers as well.

McKibben acknowledges, much like Thoreau and Dillard, that the significance of the present moment, particularly as it relates to the environment, can easily be forgotten. Without an appreciation for the present and its ability to connect humanity with the external world, we run the risk of taking the natural world for granted. In McKibben's words, "One reason we pay so little attention to the separate natural world around us is that it has always been there and we presumed it always would" (60). To McKibben, we forget about the present moment as it relates to the natural world because nature seems eternal; most of us hold the belief that nature will always appear to us in the future as it does today. However, as humans continue to threaten its physical existence or its existence as an ideological construct (nature as a pristine, natural setting unspoiled by man), the present moment becomes increasingly significant. In fact, it becomes dangerous for humans *not* to be aware of their external surroundings. To not be aware of environmental hazards threatens both the welfare of the environment and the welfare of humanity. As a result, McKibben argues, humans are left with a choice— a choice to either confront the present moment, increasing our levels of extrospection, or to continue living as we do, without realizing the impact we currently exert on the environment.

This choice that McKibben confronts relates in large part to the "selfishness" of nature writing previously discussed in chapters one and two which critics such as Phillips, Deemer, and Tauber attribute to the genre. For McKibben, nature writing provides an opportunity for the opposite of selfishness; it allows him to demonstrate the perils of selfishness as humans continue to live without regard to the current state of their external surroundings, which not only causes harm to the globe but to fellow humans. Thus, McKibben promotes in *The End of Nature* a shift in the way we think about each other and the natural world— a shift in acting selfishly to acting

selflessly. In an updated introduction to *The End of Nature* written in 2005, McKibben describes this process with a familiar scenario:

Imagine that you have hiked to the edge of a pond in the forest and stand there admiring the sunset. If you should happen to look down and see a Coke can that someone has tossed there in the rushes it will affect you differently than if you see a pile of deer droppings. And the reason, or at least one reason, is our intuitive understanding that the person who dropped the Coke can didn't need to, any more than we need to go on raising the temperature of the planet. We *are* different from the rest of the natural order, for the single reason that we possess the possibility of self-restraint, of choosing some other way.

(20)

Self-restraint rings clear as a pervading theme throughout *The End of Nature*. It is McKibben's solution to several of the environmental issues he faces in his own time, and it is with his writing that he aims to encourage others to exercise self-restraint as well. McKibben suggests to his readers that they cannot afford to live without taking the welfare of the external world into account. Since we don't "need" to litter, nor do we "need" to raise the temperature of the planet, it is simply a matter of choosing not to do so *now*, in the present. This echoes Thoreau's call in "Walking" for both a heightened internal and external awareness: "Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present."¹⁰ But for McKibben, the stakes are higher. Failing to recognize the utility of the present moment and/or to exercise self-restraint may result in global catastrophe, not merely the inability to understand ourselves.

In his writing, McKibben includes examples of how he has incorporated the concept of self-restraint in his own life. In the final chapter of *The End of Nature*, McKibben explains how

10. See page 5.

instead of taking long vacation trips in the car and fulfilling his passion for travel, he and his family ride bikes on the road near their house, and instead of building a wood-fired hot tub in his backyard, “we installed exciting new thermal-pane windows” (159). His motivations for making these sacrifices stem not from a desire to live less extravagantly, but from a perceived necessity to have a smaller, if not undetectable impact on the natural world. Hiking up a hill behind his house in Vermont, McKibben explains these sacrifices further:

From the top of the hill, if I stand on a certain ledge, I can see my house below... I can see my whole material life— the car, the bedroom, the chimney above the stove. I like that life, I like it enormously. But a choice seems unavoidable. Either that life down there changes, perhaps dramatically, or this life all around me up here changes—passes away.
(159)

This personal anecdote illustrates McKibben’s selflessness in attempting to minimize his impact on the environment. One could argue that the mere inclusion of this anecdote points to a kind of narcissism in McKibben’s writing, since he seems to advertise the “greening” of his own life, but as McKibben explains, his decision to live a more eco-friendly life does not stem from a desire to preserve his own world, but to preserve the natural world for generations to come. For better or worse, either his personal life must change, or the world around him on top of the hill will change. McKibben, having cultivated a global external awareness, chooses to change his own world, despite his fondness for the life he currently lives.

III. Conclusions: The Significance of Comparison

Compared to Thoreau and Dillard, McKibben stands out for his unique approach to writing in and about nature on a global scale. Unlike Thoreau and Dillard, the self, as it relates to

nature and the present moment, plays a smaller role in McKibben's writing; instead, it is a collective environmental consciousness that McKibben primarily seeks to develop, along with an appreciation for the present not as a tool to foster internal change, but to elicit action. External awareness is meant to bring about not only personal gain, but universal good. While this sentiment is shared in some ways by Thoreau and Dillard, it is McKibben who directly and deliberately instills this ethos in his writing.

Though the differences and similarities among the three nature writers analyzed here may seem subtle or insignificant, they demonstrate how the value of nature can be perceived differently across time and across literary styles. To consider nature a place of individual, internal solitude or an ideological construct we must preserve collectively for the sake of each other, ourselves, or both, reflects our shifting attitudes and relationships with nature and the self. Additionally, comparing these three writers provides insight into 1) how the human relationship to nature has changed over time, 2) how some contemporary writers portray the human/nature relationship now, and perhaps, if McKibben's work can be considered a representation of nature writing's future, 3) suggest what that relationship will look like in the work of nature writers to come. Undoubtedly, nature writers will continue to look both inward and outward in their attempts to understand and document the intricacies of the natural world, and as the genre of nature writing continues to expand, the extent to which the processes of introspection and extrospection overlap will remain to be seen.

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