

Imagining Wild America



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Wild America

John R. Knott

Ann Arbor

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*For the coming generation:
Josh, Dan, Jessica, Hannah, Eric,
Rose, Emma, Sophie*

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface xi

Abbreviations xv

Introduction i

1 🏠 John James Audubon and the Pursuit of Wildness 17

2 🏠 Henry David Thoreau and Wildness 49

3 🏠 Wilderness as Energy: John Muir's Sierra 83

4 🏠 Edward Abbey and the Romance of Wilderness 111

5 🏠 Into the Woods with Wendell Berry 133

6 🏠 Mary Oliver's Wild World 163

Conclusion 189

Notes 199

Index 225

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Preface

This book grew out of the experience of teaching a course on the literature of the American wilderness for over a decade, during a period when many courses in what has come to be known as literature and the environment were sprouting on American campuses. I came to such teaching, like many others, through a combination of recreational reading and recreation. In my case, the recreation took the form of canoe-tripping with my wife, Anne, mainly in the Temagami area of Ontario, some five hours north of Toronto. In the course of reading what I thought of as “nature writing” during such trips and subsequent stays in a cabin on a small island in Lake Temagami, I asked myself why many of the works I was reading were not taught, in my university at least, and concluded that I should try teaching them myself. At the time, I was completing a book on Protestant martyrdom, a continuation of previous research on nonconformist literature in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, and feeling that I needed a respite from years of working with Puritan texts. So I launched a course on wilderness literature, hoping that there would be a constituency for it, and have been teaching it ever since.

The reasons that led me to offer such a course and, in time, other courses on literature and the environment are no doubt complex, but they have a lot to do with my own experiences of wild places. Two such experiences stand out in my memory. A particularly formative one was an eighteen-day canoe trip in the mid-1980s down the Noatak River in northern Alaska, beginning in the foothills of the Brooks Range and ending at the village of Noatak, near where the river empties into the Chukchi Sea. Most of the country we passed through would qualify as wilderness by any

definition. We saw relatively little indication of human presence and abundant evidence of the animals whose territories we had entered, from the wolf den near our first campsite to the many tracks covering the gravelly beaches where we camped on our way down the river. We might have a fox come into our camp or caribou swim the river in front of our canoes. Caught up by the swift current, we swept past valleys that looked as though they could have been unexplored. From our campsites, once we were out of the mountains, we had long unobstructed vistas of tundra. When we ventured away from camp over the tussocky ground, perhaps in search of blueberries, we were wary of encountering a grizzly, the dominant presence in that landscape. My exposure to the backcountry of Alaska was brief, and superficial compared to that of many, but it gave me a powerful image of wilderness and a conviction about the value of such a place, even for those who will never see it.

My memories of the Temagami country of Ontario are more numerous, extending over more than twenty-five years, and I have developed a deep sense of connectedness with its Canadian shield landscape of granite shorelines, boreal forest, and clear cold water. One memory strikes me as particularly revealing. On one of our early trips in the area Anne and I were dropped by float plane with our canoe and supplies into the middle of beautiful, remote Florence Lake to begin a trip down the Lady Evelyn River. We paddled to an inviting sand beach to orient ourselves and begin to absorb our seemingly pristine setting. Before very long, as we were sinking into a feeling of solitude, we were surprised by a party of four canoes whose leader informed us that they had just taken the best campsite on the lake, on a point two hundred yards from where we were. It was one of many lessons in the fact that an area that epitomized the North Woods to us was in truth much used: by canoe campers; by loggers who cut up to the shoreline reserve in what we learned was crown forest; by the Bear Island Band of Anishnabai, who continue to hunt and trap in the area and to pursue such modern enterprises as building and maintaining places for summer visitors on the islands of Lake Temagami. We saved this particular occasion by paddling to the other end of the lake and finding a splendid high island where we spent the evening enjoying the profound



silence of the lake, broken only by the calls of loons and other night sounds. It did not prove difficult to find what we were looking for, even if others had found it before and shared it with us.

Both experiences have influenced my teaching and the writing of this book. The first belongs to an American tradition of valuing and wanting to experience what we have come to understand as wilderness. Much of the watershed of the Noatak River, like various other areas of Alaska, can serve as an image of the possibility of wilderness, understood as a place at best lightly inhabited by humans. Perhaps the best example is the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the endpoint for my course on wilderness literature since I began offering it. The fierce political battle over whether the coastal plain should be opened up to drilling for oil, which has continued at varying levels of intensity since the refuge was established in 1980 and has made this our most visible and symbolic example of wilderness, illustrates another American tradition—valuing natural areas primarily for the resources that can be extracted from them for human use. At a time when the idea of wilderness is under political attack from one direction and under intellectual attack from another, it is important to make a case for its continuing value, and one of the best ways to do this is to study writers who have enlarged its meaning and explored its implications in seeking to understand and represent their own experience.

If a place such as the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge illustrates an ideal—an intact ecosystem with rich biological diversity and light human use (chiefly by the indigenous Gwich'n people, who pursue their traditional occupation of hunting the migrating caribou)—the Temagami area can stand for a more familiar reality, a landscape where nature and culture are complexly interrelated and the human presence is insistent. Most are likelier to experience the latter than the former, finding whatever wildness they encounter in an urban environment or in semi-rural settings close to home. It is also important to recognize that wildness does not have to be associated with places that could be defined as wilderness, that it persists in us and in the largely domesticated spheres in which we live, that in fact wildness and domesticity are interwoven. Many of the same writers who have had the

most revealing things to say about the idea and the experience of wilderness are our best guides to the idea of wildness, a more supple and capacious term and one that continues to become more suggestive. This book and the course from which it evolved reflect my sense that both are worth attention.

Abbreviations

- AP* Mary Oliver, *American Primitive* (Boston: Little Brown, 1983)
- AR* Edward Abbey, *Abbey's Road* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979)
- BP* Mary Oliver, *Blue Pastures* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995)
- BW* Edward Abbey, *Beyond the Wall* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1984)
- Conf.* Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994)
- CP* Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984)
- DR* Edward Abbey, *Down the River* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982)
- DS* Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: Ballantine, 1968)
- HE* Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987)
- HL* Mary Oliver, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990)
- JH* Edward Abbey, *The Journey Home* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977)
- LC* Mary Oliver, *The Leaf and the Cloud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2000)
- LLH* Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1969)
- MFS* John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: Viking, 1987)
- MW* Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972)
- NSP* Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

Abbreviations

- OB** John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1831–39)
- OL** Edward Abbey, *One Life at a Time* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988)
- UW** Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991)
- WP** Mary Oliver, *White Pine* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994)
- WW** Mary Oliver, *West Wind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997)



Introduction

John Muir's exuberant descriptions of the "fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness" that he found in his explorations of the Sierra Nevada mountains of California popularized an ideal that has shaped American thinking about the value of wilderness and the importance of preserving it. They reflect a revolution in sensibility influenced by English romantic writers and American transcendentalists, most notably Henry David Thoreau, by which wilderness came to be seen as desirable, even as a manifestation of the sublime. William Bradford's famous characterization of the Cape Cod found by the settlers who arrived on the Mayflower as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men," reflects a much older sense of wilderness, going back to the desert wildernesses of the Old Testament, as an inhospitable and dangerous place.¹ In his story "Young Goodman Brown" Nathaniel Hawthorne captured the Puritan sensibility in which the dark forest, the wilderness of the early settlers, became a frightening and disorienting place of evil, haunted by demonic Indians and the devil himself. By the time Muir wrote, in the later nineteenth century, the appeal of wilderness as a distinctive feature of the American landscape was firmly established. Muir could see the Sierra as a "range of light" and a vibrant, pure, "divine wilderness" ordered and given life by a benevolent God. If Muir's particular religion of nature is no longer so likely to be shared, he nonetheless remains a cultural icon, widely quoted

and celebrated as the prophet of wilderness preservation and the first president of the Sierra Club. His writing, along with that of such other famous defenders of wilderness as Thoreau and Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey, can be found in the *Trailside Reader* of the Sierra Club, a pocket-sized book of inspirational reading for backpackers.² Reading Muir and others who have meditated on the meaning of wild places has become a part of the American experience of wildness.

For all the popular fascination with wilderness, which increased dramatically in the later twentieth century, “wilderness” has in recent years become a contested and hence problematic term. Wilderness has long seemed an alien concept to Native Americans, a European import that served white culture as a way of signaling the strangeness of a natural world that indigenous peoples found familiar and sustaining, in fact regarded as home. More recently, Third World critics have attacked the notion of wilderness as an embodiment of a peculiarly American set of attitudes symbolized by a national park ideal that they see as inappropriate for countries in which intense human pressures on available land make preservation seem a luxury.³ In India and Brazil, for example, critics have advocated “social ecology,” a theory of conservation based upon preserving the living patterns of indigenous peoples, in opposition to the emphasis of conservation biologists upon preserving biological diversity.

Another important critique of the idea of wilderness, more relevant to my concerns in this book, has come from environmental historians and others who profess support for preserving wild areas but object to what they see as a pervasive habit of opposing nature and culture and consequently neglecting the role of humans in shaping and continuing to live with the natural world. I am thinking particularly of William Cronon’s influential “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” and other essays in the collection he edited, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). Michael Pollan’s *Second Nature* (1991) contributed to the reconsideration of the contemporary American attraction to wilderness, which he sees as supported by a “wilderness ethic” deriving ultimately from Thoreau and Muir and “a



romantic, pantheistic idea of nature that we invented in the first place.”⁴ Recent books by Susan G. Davis on the version of “nature” presented by Sea World and by Jennifer Price on such phenomena as the vogue of the plastic pink flamingo and the greening of television offer revealing commentaries on the ways in which we invent versions of nature that serve our various purposes.⁵

Those who have emphasized the constructedness of American views of wilderness and of nature more generally have focused on the consequences of what Price characterizes as patrolling the boundary between “Nature and non-Nature” and regarding nature as something “Out There.”⁶ They object to a tendency to remove humans from the natural environment and idealize a pristine nature, observing that the landscapes that European settlers found were shaped by millennia of human occupation.⁷ Such critiques have led to a more complex understanding of how culturally inflected notions of wilderness and of nature have shaped attitudes toward the natural world. They offer a healthy corrective to some of the excesses of what Cronon calls “the ideology of wilderness” and make it difficult to ignore the historical and cultural contexts of American attitudes toward wilderness. Yet arguments against an “ideology of wilderness” or a “wilderness ethic” have the effect of discrediting any use of the term “wilderness,” as do related arguments against subscribing to the “myth” of wilderness (or a pristine nature), often equated with the “myth” of Eden. Arguments of this sort frequently exaggerate the degree of human alteration of American landscapes prior to European settlement, which was significant in some places but in others minimal or nonexistent.⁸

Such arguments also tend to posit a monolithic community of advocates of wilderness preservation and to attribute to this community the ideal of a pristine, static nature removed from human influence. In fact, one finds a spectrum of beliefs among environmentalists about how possible and desirable it is to think about wilderness apart from past and future human presence. Many accept contemporary biological thinking about the dynamism of ecosystems and recognize the interdependency of nature and culture. The backlash against arguments of the sort made by Cronon has been motivated partly by political concerns of those engaged in

ongoing battles for wilderness preservation and other forms of environmental protection. Biologist Michael Soulé has complained that the “social siege of nature” undermines efforts to resist a physical assault being carried out by “bulldozers, chainsaws, plows, and livestock.”⁹ A more fundamental criticism is that the preoccupation with cultural and historical perspectives ignores the biological reality of what Soulé would see as a variable “living nature” that it is inappropriate to think of as ever having been “virgin,” since it was never static. Gary Snyder recognizes that wilderness is “in one sense a cultural construct” but faults critics for lacking “the awareness that wilderness is the locus of big rich ecosystems and is thus (among other things) a living place for beings who can survive in no other sort of habitat.”¹⁰

My concern here is with the implications of the attack on the idea of wilderness and of a preoccupation with the projection of cultural attitudes in our understanding of the natural world for a body of literature in which wild nature is seen as a source of value. If the imaginative response to wilderness is simply a reflection of the influence of the romantic sublime and the myth of the vanishing frontier and a “flight from history,” as Cronon seems to suggest, how does one make a case for reading Thoreau—or Edward Abbey, to take a more contemporary example? If value is located primarily in an awareness of history and of the demands of living in a highly developed society, how are we to regard a literature that finds meaning and personal restoration through close observation of the natural world?

The recent flourishing of critical writing about literature and the environment, commonly called ecocriticism, goes a long way toward answering questions about why we should read Thoreau, Abbey, and a great many others identified as belonging to a tradition of American nature writing. Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) has done more than any other single work to date to define and enlarge this tradition, provide theoretical bases for ecocriticism, and stake out critical categories.¹¹ The influential *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) and subsequent collections of critical essays have stimulated a lively debate about the meaning and viability of ecocriticism, while tracing its development as a critical



approach.¹² Along with an increasing number of monographs, they have extended the range of the field, bringing ecocritical perspectives to canonical texts and reviving neglected ones, in the process giving fresh attention to regional literature and the burgeoning genre of nonfiction writing about place. Some of the most recent ecocritical writing challenges the habit of thinking of nature as something separate from and opposed to culture. Kent Ryden, for example, breaks down the boundaries we tend to draw between these categories by showing how landscapes that he grew up thinking of as wild nature, along with other New England landscapes, were in fact shaped by past land-use practices and cultural attitudes. John Tallmadge challenges these boundaries in a different way by questioning the implicit “Edenic” ideal that he sees as guiding the practice of ecological restoration; he argues for appreciating and learning from the “flourishing hybrid community” of alien and native species that he finds in the urban landscapes of Cincinnati.¹³ An increasing interest in “urban nature” is one manifestation of ecocriticism’s growing inclusiveness.

My purpose in this book is to turn attention back to the efforts of some of our best writers to imagine wild America, stimulated by various kinds of encounters with the natural world. One of my aims is to rehabilitate a vigorous tradition of writing about wilderness and wildness—an important aspect of the larger tradition of American nature writing—and to argue the value of these terms. They continue to have resonance for many, from frontline activists for wilderness preservation to those seeking to experience something they think of as “wild” nature beyond the perimeters of the thoroughly domesticated landscapes in which most Americans live, whether in remote places or in patches of wild nature close at hand. And they continue to be useful lenses through which to examine the allure of the natural world for writers in this tradition and their efforts to represent their relationship with this world.

I have chosen to exemplify the tradition by the work of six writers representing different stages and dimensions of the American fascination with wilderness and wildness: John James Audubon, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver. Some of these choices, Thoreau and Muir in par-

ticular, seem inevitable for a project of this nature. Others, such as Abbey and Berry, reflect personal judgments about importance and influence. I represent the beginnings of the tradition with Audubon rather than with William Bartram and his famous *Travels* (1791) because Audubon's massive *Ornithological Biography* (1839) is still relatively unfamiliar and offers revealing glimpses of the frequently contradictory attitudes toward wilderness that one finds in early nineteenth-century America. The work of Oliver, the only poet in the group, shows the influence of the tradition I have described, particularly as this is embodied by Thoreau, but extends and redefines it in provocative and illuminating ways. Others might have been included: Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, A. R. Ammons, Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, to name a few. Those that I have chosen seem to me both exemplary and influential. All have considerable popular reputations. Collectively, they represent the evolution of ways of imagining wilderness and wildness in America.

The seminal influence of Thoreau's writing about his own experience of wild nature and the implications of wildness makes him the central figure in my gallery of writers. Muir devoured Thoreau's writing, absorbed his influence, and embraced wildness with an enthusiasm and a physicality that go beyond anything one can find in Thoreau himself. Abbey conducted a good-natured quarrel with him in "Down the River with Henry Thoreau" and found his own ways of adapting Thoreau's critique of conventional economic and cultural attitudes, in his anarchic individualism enacting a version of Thoreau's defense of "absolute freedom and wildness." Berry has declared his allegiance to the "way of Thoreau," which he understands as involving an attraction to nature as a source of enlightenment and restoration. His moralizing commentary on society, grounded in convictions about the importance of regarding nature as valuable for its own sake and as embodying values that can guide human action, has prompted comparisons with Thoreau.¹⁴ Oliver echoes Thoreau and imitates him in her habit of meditating on familiar places in a known landscape that she continually revisits in her walks. Thoreau's reflections on wilderness and wildness constitute only one strain in a complex body of writing, but this aspect of his work has been unusually consequential.



I have coupled wilderness and wildness when in fact “wildness” is a richer and more inclusive term. Wildness can be found in suburbia as well as in wilderness areas and can be seen as a property of body or mind.¹⁵ Jack Turner has observed that “since wilderness is a place, and wildness a quality,” we can ask how wild a “wilderness” or the experience of that wilderness is.¹⁶ It makes sense to talk about degrees of wildness.¹⁷ The term “wildness” has not attracted the kind of criticism that “wilderness” has, largely because the notion of wildness is more flexible and allows for the interaction of humans with the natural world.¹⁸ Criticism of the term “wilderness” often focuses on definitions of the sort included in the federal Wilderness Act of 1964, with their implication that it is possible to preserve natural areas in something close to a pristine state by excluding any lasting human presence.

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation.¹⁹

Wildness can be found in areas that could not be said to be “untrammelled” (unfettered) or “primeval,” if any place can be said to be free of human influence when humans have altered the earth’s climate, compromised the quality of its air, and precipitated the widespread movement of plant and animal species into bioregions to which they are not native. When Thoreau made his famous declaration, “In Wildness is the preservation of the world,” he was thinking among other things of the wildness he discovered in his forays in the settled country around Concord, as well as in the wilderness of the Maine woods.²⁰ Such wildness, nowhere more apparent to him than in the “impervious” swamps he sought out in the familiar landscapes of his daily walks, possessed a vitality that he found both nourishing and a stimulus to unconventional thought

and behavior. Wildness was “tonic” for Thoreau and, in varying ways, for the other writers whose works I discuss. All of these writers reveal an attraction to the idea of wilderness, some more than others, but for all of them but Thoreau’s predecessor Audubon wildness is a more fundamental and pervasive ideal. For them the experience of wild nature, intimately and acutely observed, can be enlightening and liberating.²¹

I will argue that the tradition of writing about wilderness and wildness in America is in some respects, and especially for some writers, a visionary tradition that embraces values consciously understood to be ahistorical, values that cannot be accounted for simply by appeals to cultural evolution. Such writing frequently aspires to a sense of timelessness that depends on disengagement from a world of social habits and constraints and immersion in a natural order seen as prior to and more enduring than the human one. Writers in this tradition may see this natural order as having a mythic dimension and oppose its truth to that of history, as Thoreau does in his reflections on the quickly fading colors of the trout that he and his companions catch in his first venture into the Maine woods: “I could understand better, for this, the truth of mythology, the fables of Proteus, and all those beautiful sea-monsters—how all history, indeed put to a terrestrial use, is mere history; but put to a celestial, is mythology always.”²² Thoreau instinctively looked to classical mythology in his effort to understand a transcendent, “celestial” beauty that he saw as emblematic of primitive nature. Gary Snyder opposes a more generalized sense of myth to history in describing the initial European experience of the American West: “There is an almost invisible line that a person of the invading culture could walk across: out of history and into a perpetual present, a way attuned to the slower and steadier processes of nature. The possibility of passage into that myth-time world had been all but forgotten in Europe.”²³ What appeals to Snyder is the possibility of reentering this “myth-time” world, whereas Thoreau is struck by how quickly the trout’s beauty fades when it is out of the water and on its way to the frying pan—when it enters human history, so to speak. Both appeal to myth, however, to distinguish a natural order that they see as existing outside of what we think of as human history.



Whether or not they see themselves as pursuing a truth that they associate with myth, the writers with whom I am concerned find satisfaction in the intimate knowledge of particular natural environments and the cycles that govern life in them. They value a sense of living in a present that they associate with the natural world, a condition of being that depends upon shutting out the preoccupations of everyday life and developing a heightened alertness to natural phenomena. Achieving this condition can involve an effort to quiet the “noise” of language and experience the “silence” of nonhuman nature, as it does in different ways for Berry and Oliver. This effort assumes the importance and the revelatory power—and the fundamental mysteriousness—of the natural order and also a resilience that enables this order to resist and eventually outlast the various forms of human order that we may impose upon it.

When I describe writing as aspiring to a sense of timelessness, I mean that it aspires to an awareness of freedom from the time by which we measure daily life, from the ticking of the clock that reminds us of obligations implicit in the society to which we belong. And, frequently, from the timescale of recent human history. Other conceptions of time can suggest different perspectives and other ways of thinking about how we experience time: the dreamtime of Australian aborigines, the river time of Abbey’s trip down the Colorado, the cyclical time measured by the seasonal changes that so deeply engaged Thoreau, the geological time that Muir observed in the shaping of Sierra landscapes by glaciers. Aldo Leopold effectively juxtaposes geological and human timescales in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), for example, in his rendering of the evolution of a Wisconsin marsh visited by sandhill cranes for millennia in “Marshland Elegy.” In the perspective that he establishes by showing the slow formation of the peat that creates a bog and by making the crane, with its origins in the Eocene, “the symbol of our untamable past,” the incursion of Europeans appears a very recent phenomenon. With deliberate casualness about dating events he describes a French trapper as appearing “one year not long ago” and the English as coming in their wagons “a century or two later.”²⁴ Recent history proves disproportionately damaging in Leopold’s story of the marsh, as we see settlers that follow the English attempting to drain

it for cultivation and unintentionally igniting smoldering peat fires that they cannot extinguish. The juxtaposition of this history with the ancient past of the marsh and the more ancient lineage of the cranes reinforces his fundamental argument that “the ultimate value of these marshes is wildness, and the crane is wildness incarnate.”²⁵ And the corollary that our sense of this wildness has nothing to do with familiar human timescales.

Seeking to understand and learn from natural orders does not have to mean ignoring human ones or the ways in which they condition our perceptions. Some of the writers I consider (Abbey, Berry, Oliver) are more sensitive than others to the limitations of language and to how it colors our seeing. All recognize ways in which landscapes are continually being transformed by human activity, even as they seek a dynamic in the natural world that is largely independent of this activity. Audubon, like other early naturalists, registered the losses he saw as settlement radically altered landscapes he had known in a wilder state, accepting these as the inevitable cost of progress while recording the unchanging rituals of bird behavior. Thoreau developed a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which European settlement had transformed and was continuing to transform landscapes around Concord, while looking for the “primitive nature” he valued most. Muir became a national leader in the fight for wilderness preservation, driven by concern over the increasing threats to the Sierra wilderness he knew intimately from years of exploration and study, yet he could minimize past human impacts in describing what he wanted to see as pure, dynamic wilderness manifesting a divine creative force. Assertions of the purity of wilderness were necessary to the rhetorical strategy he adopted in defending it. Abbey and Berry engage the historical forces they see as threatening their visions of the natural world, assuming the stances of satirist and prophet to attack abuses that they attribute to contemporary economic attitudes—primarily from development and “industrial tourism” for Abbey and from agribusiness and modern capitalism for Berry. Yet each shows a fascination with ruins, evidence of what Berry calls “the erasure of time” by which human marks on the landscape are slowly obliterated. This fascination reflects both confidence in the resilience of a



natural world in relation to which human works seem transient and a need to see their own experience in relation to past human interactions with a place. Oliver has shown a sensitivity to the “mutilations” of the green world by European settlers and to more recent alterations of her familiar pinewoods, although we see relatively little attention to human influences in the natural world that she explores and celebrates in most of her poetry.

In their different ways all of the writers that I consider offer visions of an ideal nature, some with more awareness of the limitations of such visions than others. Audubon in his early ramblings discovered landscapes that appeared to him Edenic in their variety and abundance. He shared the tendency of William Bartram and other early travelers to celebrate New World versions of the earthly paradise. Later, he would lament the loss of other, “almost uninhabited” landscapes such as the Ohio valley as he first knew it. Thoreau’s lost ideal was a “primitive” nature that he associated with the Native American predecessors of the farmers and villagers who had done so much to reconfigure the landscapes around Concord. Muir found his ideal nature in the Sierra range, seeing the terrain he explored in his early years in California as a wilderness still largely unspoiled although threatened by the incursions of miners and shepherders and by the beginnings of tourism.

The imminent completion of Glen Canyon Dam shaped Abbey’s sense of the canyon itself as a doomed Eden, an allusion he used for rhetorical effect, when he made the trip down the Colorado River that he describes in *Desert Solitaire* (1968). Despite his concern with the advances of development and tourism, he continued to find in desert landscapes a “world beyond.” His ideal nature was a mysterious and ultimately unknowable world, the antithesis of the busy and circumscribed urban America from which he periodically retreated. Berry found his wilderness ideal in the Red River Gorge of Kentucky, marked by the passage of earlier human inhabitants but retaining enough of its original character, at least in places, to offer an experience of wilderness and to enable him to imagine the landscape as Daniel Boone might have known it. Forests, particularly a grove of large trees on his own farm to which he regularly retreats, serve Berry as a source of inspiration (espe-

cially for his “Sabbaths” series of poems) and an emblem of the kind of order and serenity he finds in the natural world. Oliver imagines the “green dazzling paradise” found by Meriwether Lewis as a lost ideal but for the most part finds the truth of the natural world in the local settings that she seeks out in her walks. These ordinary landscapes hold the promise of “earthly delights,” even the possibility of moments in which a transcendent reality becomes visible.

These writers reveal an extraordinary desire for an intimate connection with the natural settings that they explore and in some cases inhabit. The kinds of intimacy that they seek vary, but all depend upon a capacity to “pay attention,” as Oliver would put it. Paying attention implies approaching the natural world with an alertness and receptivity to the unexpected and the strange that make discovery possible. For most of these writers, it also implies an awareness of the difficulties of crossing over into the “other” world of nature. Berry enacts such a crossing in his poem “The Heron,” showing himself leaving behind the labor and anxiety of a summer of farming to carry his boat down through the morning fog to the river, where he goes “easy and silent” in a world in which he becomes aware of warblers flashing through the trees and finds himself observed by the heron in its stillness: “Suddenly I know I have passed across / to a shore where I do not live.”²⁶ Berry also knows that the river (the Kentucky) has changed, as a result of increased human use and abuse of the watershed, but in the poem he chooses to emphasize the continuities and the patience that he finds in the natural world, understood here as a world apart.

Intimacy with the natural world is often associated with a sense of wonder at the unexpected or the seemingly mysterious. Audubon frequently conveys such wonder upon coming across a bird he has been seeking; sometimes, as when he describes himself as enchanted with the scenery of the Mississippi or Ohio valleys, his responses seem to be shaped by the expectations of his audience for revelations of the marvelous. Thoreau reveals moments of wonder at the tumbling flight of a merlin or the pure, bright light of a spring morning. Muir can sustain a sense of wonder for pages of description of the pleasures of a “glorious Sierra day” of rambling through glacial landscapes and mountain meadows. With his delib-



erate abrasiveness and his frequent recourse to irony and sarcasm, Abbey might seem incapable of wonder, yet he can find the marvelous in the canyon of the Escalante and in moments when he yields to his sense of the silence and vastness of the desert. At such moments a perception of space appears to suspend his consciousness of time passing ("Light, space. Light and space without time").²⁷ Berry often associates wild nature with the unexpected. He can delight in the surprise of coming upon a quiet clearing or finding the floor of the woods covered with bluebells. In Oliver's poetry wonder takes the form of a capacity for amazement. She frequently shows herself "amazed" by unfolding natural dramas and describes herself as wanting to be able to say at the end: "all my life / I was a bride married to amazement."²⁸ Such amazement is her measure of truly living.

Wonder implies rapt attention by a passive observer: "[I] stood in my lonely body / amazed and full of attention."²⁹ Yet intimate contact with the natural world can also be energizing for the writers I describe. For one thing, it can lead to a charged sensuous awareness. Thoreau found himself restored by the wildness he found in the booming of the snipe and the smell of sedges in a marsh. Muir, clinging to the swaying top of a Douglas spruce in a Sierra windstorm, seems preternaturally sensitive to the effects of light on rippling trees, the mingled fragrances, and the symphonic music of the storm. The association of wild nature with health and vitality, apparent to some degree in all these writers, motivates explorations ranging from leisurely walks to rigorous explorations (in Maine, the Sierra, the deserts of the Southwest). A commitment to walking, usually understood as spiritual as well as physical exercise, links writers as disparate as Audubon and Oliver. Such walking, typically solitary, becomes a way of adapting oneself to nature's rhythms and experiencing its vitality.

It can also be a form of liberation. Thoreau sees walking as releasing him from the influence of European civilization, as well as from the conventions of village life: "westward I go free."³⁰ In wild nature, "not yet subdued to man," he finds a stimulus to freedom of thought and imagination.³¹ The "freedom complete" that Muir experiences as he saunters through the high meadows of the Sierra,



focused on his sensations, has more to do with a sense of transcending normal human limitations in the rapturous contemplation of a nature understood as instinct with divinity. Abbey, a river rafter as well as a walker in the desert, finds release from what he regards as the petty tyrannies of ordinary life in taking to the river. The “primeval liberty” that he experiences when he sets out on the Colorado has to do with his sense of escaping into an elemental world where he can relish what he perceives from moment to moment. For Abbey, this is among other things a liberty to flout authority of all kinds. Wilderness functions for him as a refuge from the kinds of order society imposes. For Berry, freedom typically involves a release from anxiety into a calm and authority associated with the natural world, as in “The Peace of Wild Things”: “For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”³² Such grace absolves him not from sin but from worry about the future. A sense of freedom from the dullness of conventional life is implicit in Oliver’s description of herself as setting out each day “along / the green paths of the world.”³³ For her, as for Thoreau, the most alive is the wildest. In fact, the linkage between freedom and wildness that Thoreau establishes at the beginning of “Walking” (“I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness”) is one that all these writers make in one way or another.³⁴

By describing some of the motifs that connect the writers I discuss I do not mean to slight their differences or the fact that they reflect shifting cultural attitudes, with what we might regard as biases and omissions of various kinds. I hope that many of these differences and cultural shifts will become apparent in the chapters that follow. For example, Audubon’s desire for intimacy with the birds he pursues means something quite different from the sense of intimacy Oliver creates in her evocations of encounters with deer. With Audubon, the urge to possess is paramount. His object was to fix his subjects, with as much fidelity as he could manage, through the mastery of his art. To do this he first had to shoot them, common practice for naturalists of the time. The admiration Audubon reveals for the birds he first observes in order to record their behavior yields to a form of conquest, driven by his ambition to produce the definitive rendering of the birds of America. Discovering and



naming new species was another way of possessing them. Oliver, like Audubon, presents herself as an observer of nature's secrets. Yet she appears much less an intruder than Audubon, who always seems to be on the verge of disrupting the tranquillity of the scenes he observes; she is more an outsider yearning to share the instinctive life of creatures insofar as she can imagine this. Her concern is with preserving the memory of the intense moments in which she seems closest to connecting with them, as when the sight of a doe walking with her newborn fawn, "like a dream under the trees," prompts an overwhelming desire to begin life again and "to be utterly / wild."³⁵

Juxtaposing any of the writers I consider, even those with such apparent affinities as Thoreau and Muir, has the effect of throwing their differences into relief. As Barry Lopez observes in *Arctic Dreams* (1986), we all apprehend the land imperfectly, with perceptions colored by preconception and desire.³⁶ Inevitably, we all apprehend it differently. Yet I would argue that the writers I consider here, along with many others, constitute a vital and still developing tradition of writing about wildness (and wilderness) in America. Despite their often striking differences, they reveal important commonalities in their desire to perceive and experience wildness and in the ways in which they conceive it. All assume a value inherent in the natural world and find contact with it energizing and illuminating. They may cultivate a sense of timelessness, through a focus on living intensely in the present. They may try to achieve a feeling of harmony with nature, even ecstatic or visionary moments. Such writers inevitably reflect an array of cultural influences, but their writing draws its strength from their actual encounters with a natural world that they see as exerting its own powerful influence and from the strategies they have discovered for representing these encounters and their implications. We continue to read them for the uniqueness and force of the visions generated by their experience of a nature they perceive as wild.