Housing the Environmental Imagination

Housing the Environmental Imagination: Politics, Beauty, and Refuge in American Nature Writing

By

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For Polly, Daniel, Dylan:
the foundation and the windows of my imagination

“It is vain…to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live. Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow…The writing which consists with habitual sitting is mechanical, wooden, dull to read…”
“Most men appear never to have considered what a house is…”
—Thoreau

“Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the ideal place.
…that solid house of rock and wood…”
—Ed Abbey

”Chop wood. Make things. Play with your child. Share with your friends. Grow something. Moderate your wrath, moderate your anger, pacify your hatred. Build a cabin in the woods or a hut in the desert. Avoid the cities.”
—Ed Abbey

“The house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being.”
—Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

“…language is the house of Being.”
—Heidegger

“It is not down in any map; true places never are.”
—Melville

“The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths…”
—Bachelard

“Pardon me, if when I want
to tell the story of my life
it’s the land I talk about.”
—Neruda

“I am heaping the bones of the old mother
To build us a hold…”
“How do we dare to live
In so great and tameless a land? We dare; we are here.”
“It would be better for men/ To be few and live far apart.”
—Jeffers

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes.”
—Marcel Proust

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CHAPTER ONE

MODERNISM AND OUR DISCONTENTS: "A LANDSCAPE OF SCARY PLACES… A NATION OF SCARY PEOPLE"

In the introduction to *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, John Elder and Robert Finch make the case for the significance of literature, and nature related literature in particular:

> All literature, by illuminating the full nature of human existence, asks a single question: how shall we live? In our age that question has taken its most urgent form in relation to the natural environment. (28)

This question—"How shall we live?"—is, in essence, the foundation for this book. For that reason, I have chosen to look at a few major nature writers who committed their writing and their life to a place and to developing the notion of a sense of place. In addition to thinking about ways of living, this book will attempt to examine the process of establishing home, especially in a natural or wild setting, and engaging in an inseparably related writing process. Writing in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, it is John Elder again who touches on the theme of the process of finding and defining home. He comments that one of the central impulses of American nature poetry is to seek retreat, but a retreat that is also a return (707). This is my most pressing theme in this book: the journey of escape and rejection; the journey outward that leads back, to home.[1] As Dana Phillips documents in *The Truth of Ecology*, referencing Scheese and Fitch, the typical form in nature writing is a physical journey outward from civilization into nature/wilderness (with an accompanying inner journey) and then "the return to home both literal and figurative…which completes the narrative movement of most nature writing" (186). While it is true that the voyage from urban life to nature always must end somewhere—either by inhabiting a home in nature or by returning to the city—in the instances under examination in this book, there is no return to the city. What transpires is the building of home, an

inhabitation process, a commitment to a wild landscape, all of which are inescapably, inseparably connected to a writing project. This book is about journeys outward that are also about finding home, finding a voice, finding a way, finding a place.

In its broadest terms, this book charts our current and long-standing need for a meaningful life and examines the way this happens through the pursuit of meaningful space. A recently published, nonacademic web site serves as a measure of how current this issue is for many folks. *Hermitary* is dedicated to solitude, refuge, hermits, and silence. The subtitle expands on the purpose of the site: "resources and reflections on hermits and solitude." There is a link on the site that connects it with a popular alternative culture magazine, *Utne Reader*, which suggests the trendy and popular nature of the site and the topic:

> UTNE READER's MEDIA BLOG on HERMITARY…
> "Want to get away? Far away? Feel like disappearing for a time, even if only vicariously? Hermitary is a one-stop resource for your inner hermit. One of the most consistently wondrous sites on the internet." (Meng-hu)

There is, interestingly enough, an article on this site about Robinson Jeffers, who figures large in this present study. Therefore, more than a mere academic exercise, this book intends to connect with current sentiments and energies that are driving the imaginations as well as the choices of baby-boomers, environmentally oriented folks, down shifters, and others.

In addition, this book examines the profile of this journey, the patterns of living that constitute a commitment to place, and the binding and interwoven activity of writing in place, about place. The poetry and writing examined here confirm that the move to "refuge" is the beginning of a process that does not end. This journey has no final script, takes many forms, and is constantly under revision; in addition, it is not a journey to a romantic world elsewhere. The initial gesture may be one of rejection, a willful, sometimes destructive and reckless separation, along with an attraction to a sublime seduction portending seclusion, a fiery departure aimed at a dreamy relocation. For all of the stomping out the door, however, the writers discussed in these pages who reject "culture" and "civilization" stay purposely and intimately connected, through writing mostly, with that which they have supposedly rejected. Perhaps "rejected" is the wrong word; the relationship is more like an ongoing argument or conversation. There is a vital and vigorous contact, conversation, and connection with the world, the city, the culture in general, as a reformulation of home, nature, and existence is sought, found, and written about.

The fact that such a recognizable pattern exists—i.e., rejection and re-establishment—makes some critics nervous. Today, there is a cynical alert mechanism that is always on "ready" to deny any action or idea a claim to freshness or, dare I say, originality. Because there is a recognizable pattern in these works, it is stated that "nature writing is socially and culturally constructed" (Philips 186). Some of these directions in critical theory threaten to undermine, hijack, and unnecessarily politicize the retreat to nature, and these directions must be addressed. Brooke Libby, for instance, opposes the nature writing tradition and wonders aloud "Can we save nature from the cultural construction and absorption of self?" (252). This dissolution of the concept of the individual is seen as research progress, and it unfolds shaped by its own historical moment and political weight, for its own ends. This judgment of constructedness puts the critic in full control and relieves him or her from reading with the writer, from assessing the particular motivations and creativity associated with an individual example. Constructed activity is assumed to be mindless absorption in powers of which the writer or sojourner is unaware.[2] If everything is constructed, or received, or repeated (`a la *The Matrix*) everything needs to be contested, deconstructed, revealed, and reformulated (except the act of revelation and re-formulation). It is a critical approach frequently associated with contempt for capitalism and other Western cultural trends. Constructed reality is a reality one feels little respect for; whatever is constructed is totally a human creation with layers and a history that can be unpacked by the theorist. Sometimes the story is illuminating; mostly, it is a story of power and deception heroically revealed. And, of course, after the unwanted construction is done away with or exposed, one needs to ask, "What happens next?" Terry Eagleton has some trenchant observations on this approach:

> The point of this judicious importation of structuralist concepts is to keep literary criticism in a job. It has been evident for some time that it is a little short on ideas…blind both to new theories and to the implications of its own. …[Sturcturalism] promises to put the whole literary academic enterprise on a firmer footing, thus permitting it to surmount the so-called "crisis in the humanities." It provides a new answer to the question: "What is it that we are teaching/studying?" (*Literary Theory* 107)

We don't want yet another interpretation of *King Lear* says Eagleton. Instead, structuralism offers us the ability to take a step back from interpretative commentary and ask questions about "the whole system of codes, genres, and conventions by which we identify and interpret literary works in the first place" (*LT* 107). And the fog begins. Apparently we are

looking for more serious work to do since "Structuralism is a way of refurbishing the literary institution, providing it with a *raison d'etre* more respectable and compelling than gush about sunsets" (*LT* 207). My argument will be that this approach is an extension of crisis not salvation from it, and as I will explore, this may just be the point. Also, a word of caution at this point: gushing at sunsets is embraced by this book as an essential need for humans and worthy of study.

The recognition of structure doesn't mean, however, that there is negative, devious artifice or that we must abandon gushing about sunsets. While it is true that much behavior in society is thoughtless repetitious action driven by powerful socio-historical forces, all instances of pattern do not immediately indicate mechanically produced, colonizing, social reproduction needing disruption theorists/activists. Knowing the pagan connections between the passing of the winter solstice and the celebration of Christmas may make the date more interesting, but it need not negate nor diminish the holiday for those who practice it today. It is interesting to know such contextual and historical origins of things, but it is not the "gotcha" hoped for by some in this field of study. The existence of blind, repetitive behavior discovered in one venue does not allow for extrapolation of condemnation of all pattern everywhere: this, of course, is the assumption driving new historicism, post-structuralism, and the other and various postmodern approaches. There is the belief that, once all is exposed as contrived, we can get on with building a real society with proper social and power relations.[3] However, animals migrate, butterflies, wildebeests, birds, whales all perform migratory patterns associated with food and mating. Do such repeated patterns diminish the desire, dreams, effort, nobility and travail of these animals or the beauty and majesty of their journeys? Indeed not. The same is true for the human search for intimate, meaningful space and a home in the wild.

A friend of mine is a falconer, and when I lived in the mountains in Arizona, he pointed out all the hawks and falcons that live and thrive there. Although I had lived there for many years, I hadn't noticed before, but suddenly, for me, the sky, fence lines, and telephone poles were full of kestrels, peregrines, red-tails, sharp-shinned and cooper hawks. My perceptual habits now always included a sweep of the sky and a close look at the top of piñon pines and ponderosa pines. I guess we might say my vision, now equipped with a pattern of activity, was "constructed" by that falconer, but this hardly seems like the right phrase. We might instead say that my vision was enlarged or enriched. Since the appreciation and noting of hawks emerged as pattern in my experience introduced by someone else, should we consider this perceptual habit suspect or "artificial"? I was

influenced but certainly not diminished. Ever on guard against being trapped, suckered or seduced, critics, such as William Cronon, feel that the attraction to nature in general is a structure or a "discourse" in culture, a manufactured, scripted, program, or episteme. The impact of such an observation is to remove notions of originality, uniqueness, or special experience, and this diminishes if not changes our sense of this attraction to and experience of nature. Cronon states, for example, that if one goes "back 250 years" one does not "find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for 'the wilderness experience'" (70). In addition, the sense is that once a pattern is established (watching hawks for instance or going into the wilderness to encounter the wild) then nothing good can come from it. We then need theorists to hover, ponder, deconstruct, reveal, expose and interrogate such disturbing and apparently unconscious acts of unthoughtful participation.

All influences should not be a cause of anxiety or alarm. Over the last three decades, however, critics have been quite clear in the way they characterize influences on perception and ideas. They have been obsessed with the notion that context and influences are pervasive, sinister and seductively political. William Cronon, for instance, is convinced that nature appreciation was something that only emerged in the 19th century and became a pursuit of the rich and privileged. This observation quickly morphs into the problem I am trying to clarify here. He reveals his agenda with his rhetorical choices by categorizing nature lovers as "elite tourists": he claims, "One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer, hiring guides and other backcountry residents…employees and servants of the rich" (78). Cronon also attempts to associate Thoreau with this historical trend. The overall goal here is to render the unique individual, and the perceptions, curiosities, imagination, and thoughts of the individual—foundations of the much-maligned Enlightenment—impotent by seeing these as part of larger forces that render claims to uniqueness quaint at best. As we shall see, this has largely been a Marxist project (although sometimes a green and zen focus) and has been a staple in literary criticism for years now. It has been mostly relegated to the rarefied rooms of evening graduate courses and dense essays, but, of late, it is bubbling to the surface in popular culture as well. In a recent opinion piece on an similar issue in current political discourse, George Will identifies this issue in the current resurgence of the heretofore out of favor collectivist sentiment:

> The project is to dilute the concept of individualism, thereby refuting respect for the individual's zone of sovereignty. The regulatory state, liberalism's instrument, constantly tries to contract that zone — for the

> individual's own good, it says…. Such an agenda's premise is that individualism is a chimera, that any individual's achievements should be considered entirely derivative from society, so the achievements need not be treated as belonging to the individual…. The collectivist agenda is antithetical to America's premise, which is: Government—including such public goods as roads, schools and police—is instituted to facilitate *individual* striving, a.k.a. the pursuit of happiness. (Will)

For Marxist critics, the individual is a cultural production of a selfish and exploitive capitalism. In the following pages, although acknowledging the pleasures and the necessities of social and collective energies, I will resist the claim regarding the illusion and subsequent diminishment of the individual by arguing that this reading is willfully narrow, ideologically distorting, and ultimately disingenuous. For years, when I was concerned all was listing to the right, I was an avid reader and teacher of books like *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, *It Did Happen Here*, *Democracy for the Few*, *People's History*, and magazines like *The Nation*. I used texts from historians and political scientists like Zinn and Parenti. Now, the populist vertigo swings in another direction, it seems. I have discovered that I am pulling back from ideological commitments and demands to align oneself on one or the other side of the so-called debate; I reject the headlong plunge that insists that one be in the tank one way or another. This present study is testimony to a more independent trajectory. As Mark Van Proyen will expand upon below, I'm exploring in these pages the possibilities of achieving a physically and "psychically self-sufficient moment of…isolation from an insane world…overdetermined by…the rote groupthinks which are bred from an endless and irresolvable contest of cultural politics" (Van Proyen). The fact is that, as with our political discourse, our intellectual discourse lacks balance and grace. We do live with others, and we owe our relations with others thoughtful consideration and respect, but we also do have a unique individual life that deserves more than current sublimation tactics allow. In truth, the critique of the individual is a red herring because a larger agenda is at stake.

In addition to some classic class warfare, Cronon makes use of the new social movements as well by adding another set of unsettling and sinister motivations associated with landscape, beauty, and open space:

> The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity. (78)

The tabloids have increased readership by suggesting every kind of plot, rumor, and sensational headline. Of late, certain critical energies, as well, never grow tired of uncovering and exposing the plot of the sinister "ruling class" malevolently veiled behind every formidable forest grove, desert expanse, or well-maintained front lawn. Such reductionistic readings do not inspire or compel. While true that there are examples of arrogant, John Wayne-like characters in our westerns and other narratives, certainly, it is nonetheless possible to imagine a personal sojourn into natural surroundings to seek healing or retreat from a frenzied world without assuming this individual is a testosterone-puffed cartoon character. Notions of the individual may be complex, but to abandon, dissolve, and universally dismiss concepts like beauty and the individual show a failure of nerve and a penchant for doubt all of which outweighs a willingness to build, listen, discuss, clarify, hope, suspend judgment, and assume the best not the worst. In Cronon's description above, one could have as easily applauded these narratives for observing and reacting to the excesses and challenges of modernism. Ed Abbey, for instance, took this issue on in *The Brave Cowboy*, a novel Kirk Douglass made into the movie *Lonely Are the Brave*. Abbey used the western cowboy figure as a vehicle to discuss power issues and anarchism.

Uncovering the alleged seductive machinations of Western culture is a constant aim of this approach. Critics seem to discover "new" accusations all at once and repeat these positions in a viral fashion.[4] For instance, similar to Cronon's complaint, other critics jumped on insisting on seeing the move to isolation, solitude, and individualism as part of a "`male wilderness romance'" (Armbruster 8). On the other hand, as Lawrence Buell illustrates, to the extent that the person seeking refuge also "remains always in dialogue…with the community one rejects," this is deemed a more community oriented and, therefore, an approved activity (*The Environmental Imagination* 49). The irony here, of course, is that every writer in this field (even those so called masculine wilderness writers) is writing to a community: this feature—community— constitutes the act of writing! If these writers were the misanthropic *isolatoes* (to use Melville's term) they are made out to be, I doubt if they'd work so hard at publishing. Bottom line: There is a lot of silly nit-picking, and worse, in today's ecocritical discourse. Simon Estok recently addressed this concern in an *ISLE* article, beginning with quoting a piece I wrote a while ago: "Theorizing within this space—one that Peter Quigley has called a `dangerous space'—has become a bit of a risky business, one that potentially threatens the peace of the ecocritical community" (Estok 203). Although many moved to the "country" (i.e. the study of nature literature)

because of abiding interests but also to gravitate away from the internecine wars in critical studies, things have gotten crowded, and campers are factionalizing and becoming rigidly ensconced. Unhappily, we must return to this topic in a short bit.

In the late 60s, a friend and I were hitchhiking up the California coast through the Big Sur region. As luck would have it, a local fellow pulled up in his VW bus headed in the same direction as we were: San Francisco. We soon discovered that heavy rains had saturated this redwood watershed and caused a mudslide that blocked the Pacific Coast Highway. Consequently, the local resident dropped us off at his cliff-side cabin and headed back south to see friends. This was my first overwhelming, intoxicating, transporting experience of place; that is, my first overwhelmingly pleasant experience. These were heady and halcyon days when all accidents, side trips, and detours were viewed as fortuitous, designed, portending new horizons and possibilities for growth and self-discovery. Being young and possessing little reference to a lifetime of contextual experience, I guess this assumption has a certain truth to it. In sum, when we are young, everything is new and exciting.

Until this moment, my sense of space/place had been defined by the spectacles of modernist America: Disneyland, LA urban sprawl, Sav-On Drugs (although the Friday night drive for chocolate-chip ice cream cones at Sav-On with my dad persists as one of the best memories of my young years), huge, block-cubed, department stores, endless strip malls running alongside congested streets, multi-lane freeways, sprawling suburbia, clear-cutting of orange groves, smog-filled, hazy afternoons.[5] I watched over the fence in my backyard as the trees were plowed and the Riverside Freeway (91) was laid in. One Sunday I hopped the fence and walked out to cleared land and looked up and down at a long black ribbon of asphalt that went to the horizon in both directions. Ferlinghetti spoke for a generation when he characterized the developing scene in California and other growing cities as a careening trajectory towards

> …freeways fifty lanes wide
> on a concrete continent
> spaced with bland billboards
> illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness… (67)

Growing up in southern California, I came of age driving these frenetic freeways that were spreading out in all directions. And to be honest, the experience of careening down these speed lanes is a complex set of recollected emotions, everything from a sense of accelerating progress (getting places; getting things done) to hair-raising terror. We are

simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the exhilaration of urban frenzy. The freeways, their speed, their near-death close calls keep our senses stimulated and jagged; but so does a root canal or electroshock. Those coming of age in the 60s grew up trying to craft a response to this sprawling, urban landscape. Never, however, had I experienced a "nestled" structure that didn't impose, a structure that seemed to be "sympathetic," an organic part of something larger, constructed from natural, unprocessed materials, covered in morning glory vines and filled with beams of sunlight, pooling on the worn wood flooring. Descending the wooden steps and over the wood plank walkway, the cabin appeared below as a humble and yet brilliant affair. Of course, the view of the Pacific sun melting into the horizon, its long, blazing trail of light surrounded by dark, engulfing, blue-black water, helped the overall sense of well-being and majesty. I can still feel the warmth of that sun beaming up from the ocean hundreds of feet below, lighting my face and bathing the wooden ceiling, walls, floor, and covered porch. Long before ever reading Wordsworth, I felt "something far more deeply interfused" in that scene "whose dwelling is the light of setting suns" (210). The fact that all of this was a generous gift of a stranger framed the context as well. Romantic? Sure. Part of me is embarrassed for such a retelling, noting the romantic features. The better part of my sense of this experience is linked forever in fidelity to the undeniable beauty and peace of that place.

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, makes a strong case for the idea that the house can reveal the "topography of our intimate being" (xxxvi), a place where we invest much of ourselves in identifying and communing with the surfaces, the corners, the light in the window, the views from the window out to the world and into ourselves. Since, as Bachelard goes on to say, "there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul" (xxxvii), we should take this discussion of houses seriously. "They are in us," Bachelard states, "as much as we are in them" (xxxvii). Bachelard argues against becoming "`beings whose towers have been destroyed'" (xxxvii). We must rediscover the intimacy of vital space and reclaim it; we must reclaim meaningful space located in a wild place. Therefore, in addition to discussing the journey to nature to rediscover home as mentioned above, **this book examines the importance of the house for writing and for placing oneself at the center of vital forces.**

Over the last few years, much has been written about sense of place, but no one has looked closely at those who have set up home in these places. There have been many collections published, studies written, and conferences held on the topic of sense of place. There have been books

such as *The Earth at Our Doorstep: Contemporary Writers Celebrate the Landscape of Home*; *At Home on the Earth: Becoming Native to Our Place*; *The Solace of Open Spaces*; "Horizontal Grandeur," and more. Few, if any, of the reflections in these books and articles discuss having a home in these landscapes where the poet or writer resides and makes a life. Even Linda Hogan's chapter "Dwellings," in *At Home on the Earth*, is about the nests and hives of birds and bees. I am interested in the importance of the house—in fact, the house, nature, and the writing project make an inseparable triad—for the writing project and for enhancing and reinforcing the values of the writer. **As will be detailed in these pages, the house is placed within the radical forces of nonhuman energy, and as a result, it acts as the exchange and a nexus bringing the human and the nonhuman together in the writing of the poet. The house of the poet and the writing exhibit the beauty that comes from the meeting and merging of these worlds of nature, writing, and culture.**

Context is important for the presence, perception, and presentation of beauty. It is a physical element of the experience, one that provides perspective and depth; it is also a psychological framework. A humble, mobile home or cabin in the New Hampshire woods will have significantly more charm than one in the revealing, unforgiving Arizona desert (although Abbey took on the desert as a much disabused treasure of beauty).[6] The desert scene, with its all-pervading brazen light, exposes the discarded engine blocks and rusting tricycles, whereas in New Hampshire, the maples, the oaks, and the underbrush keep all of this hidden as they embrace the otherwise unsightly prefab house and detritus. In *The Architecture of Country Houses*, the famous architect of nineteenth-century New England, Andrew Jackson Downing, agrees about this kind of context:

> If we analyze the charm of a large part of the rural cottages of England—the finest in the world—we shall find, that strip them of the wealth of flowing vines that adorn them, and their peculiar poetry and feeling have more than half departed. (48)

Artifice? Indeed, if you must; but isn't all perception the result of contextual framing, previous experience, sociohistorical forces, intellectual modeling, and education? A question that drives my discussion in these pages is, "Is it possible today to also say that context is defined by nonpolitically affiliated feeling, by a pre-ideological sensual impact of materials and visual angles, in addition to the many other elements of history and biography that may add dimension?" Most critics in critical theory studies will say, "No." Because there is context and framing, this

does not make the experience sinister or less "real"; it simply means that there's more to think about. Much of this book will be focused on the power, and the politics, of an enriching environment, whether it is thought contrived/constructed or natural. This issue of contrivance and context, however, haunts current academic discourse challenging traditional sensibilities involving authenticity, believability, feeling, and sincerity. Although this book will refuse to get sucked down the endless rabbit hole of theoretical issues surrounding foundations of truth, beauty, taste, and the attendant paranoia, the issue will come up from time to time, and so I must set out a few things in these opening pages. I, therefore, need to beg the reader's indulgence for a few pages to engage this issue. Frankly, this book's focus on grounded-living-in-place, on "houses" which have "foundations," has been purposely chosen to confront the reflexive, corrosive, smugly ironic, and undermining nature of the theoretical trajectories which have dominated these discussions for decades now. Therefore, in the following pages, keep in mind that I largely imagine this exploration of "grounded living and writing" as a corrective to, but not a complete rejection of, the direction of current theoretical interests.

A few lines ago, I compared the "excitement" (i.e. noise, dirt, violence) of the city as something commensurate to a root canal, as though what is negative, unhealthy, and painful or degrading in our surroundings is obvious, agreed upon, and pre-determined. Current criticism, which has been so influenced by postmodern theory, insists that we ask the following question: "Why should we assume we all share the same judgment on the urban-built landscape not to mention nature?"

Relativity theorists insist that there is no basis for an undisputed claim for beauty or for ugliness. The Kantian claim for the "disinterested" aspect of the aesthetic experience is viewed with high suspicion and is rejected by current critical trajectories. Today's critical approach regarding the complications of defining beauty sees more at stake than quibbling about beauty as a means for clarifying or profiling the merits of differing positions. This new critical posture seeks an opening in the form of any intellectual difficulty or irregularity to incite definitional warfare. To what end? The end is, on face value, to assert that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder; more specifically, particularly the beholder's eyes that filter for a set of issues focused on political and oppositional themes: these are the constituting elements of sight, according to this critical perspective. The goal seems to be not characterized by a mild form of relativity, one that would discern differing senses of beauty from these sociopolitical points of view. The goal seems simply designed to disabuse one of the notion that beauty exists, to undo the generic concept, and to get folks to think about

sociopolitical categories only and always. The goal is to move from beauty to a prescriptive political agenda. I do not mean to deny the existence of difficulties and tensions in our collective context such as wars, emancipation, democracy, territorial expansion, civil rights, women's rights, bank failures, immigration issues, and other negative and challenging aspects of history when considering language and art (see Reiss). I do object to a thinking process that narrows the discussion of literature to only these topics and does so by some sketchy intellectual methods. This is a pattern clearly established by today's critical approaches.[7]

However, a wide-open agenda considers all these things and much more, including individual uniqueness and brilliance; including the successes, bright promise, and attractiveness of U.S. culture (not just an agenda of opposition); including the mystery and beauty of nature as well as architecture, science and technology, human innovation, initiators, inventors, the admirable aspects of the marketplace, of ambition, as well as its dangers: in other words, ***the full depth of unedited context***. The opening sentences of this first chapter referenced the introduction to *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* where John Elder and Robert Finch make the case for the significance of literature, and nature related literature in particular:

> All literature, by illuminating the full nature of human existence, asks a single question: how shall we live? In our age that question has taken its most urgent form in relation to the natural environment. (28)

Note the phrase "full nature of human existence." One does not edit history nor pre-shape context and still claim to be supporting, promoting, or teaching critical thinking. In shaping context, conservatives ignore the bad news and the unpleasant failures of Western history and focus on tradition, individual success, and duty, while liberals focus exclusively on a progressive agenda, a litany of failures and wrongs, labor movements, and other instances of mass and communal activities. Context includes the whole, broad-ranging sense and experience of life and history. This more inclusive view of context is terribly lacking in much of what passes for literary studies today. One shouldn't decide and edit context; one should open these doors wide. Give students a fair look at all of it; trust that they can decide for themselves. Assume they will change their minds as well.[8] A selected and agenda-driven context distorts the art object and, therefore, distorts and mishandles the story at the center of this book: the value of the experiences of living in the wild.

On the relativity front, one might argue that plenty of folks "like" the noise, grit, and grime of city life. Even Ed Abbey—the opponent of the urban machine; the poet of open, arid, zen-empty desert space—talked positively about some of the seedier sections of Hoboken N.J. However, arguing for the appreciation of one kind of beauty over another, where the nuances of your beauty vs. arguments for mine, or where canyon lands vs. New Jersey waterfront bar rooms are articulated and compared, has been replaced by another kind of narrative which assumes there is no *there* there. Beauty, or a sense of place, is a veneer covering the issues of distribution of wealth, an illicit promotion of the individual, and other issues associated with material and social justice. This relativity is designed to open a pathway for discussing progressive and sociopolitical issues at every juncture.[9] The error here occurs when postmodern relativists take a helpful insight—i.e., truth can change, morph, be adjusted, be argued over, have differing manifestations—and then they never move on. They petulantly stay focused on that one aspect and thereby enter a uroboric loop. They also end up in a bit of a philosophical dead end: they assert that truth is constructed and biased; that is, except the truth that there is no unconstructed, unbiased truth! A Dionysian orgy of tearing apart and tearing down ensues. A recent article by Peter Wood in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* states that the "critical thinker who is deaf to culture's deeper appeals is impoverished in some profound ways. He is equipped to take everything apart but not to put anything together. We need more minds capable of moving at ease and grasping the whole" (Wood). To move on from this position is impossible because it is the end, it is one's *job*: permanent, unrelenting skeptic and gadfly, leveling every foe in the field. Thoughtful questioning can lapse into an obsessive, all or nothing, neurosis. Although healthy as a check against hubris and arbitrary authority in all fields (tongue out to all power that wants our unthoughtful, immediate acceptance and allegiance), if skepticism is taken too far and is an unrelenting end unto itself, one ends up in a paralyzing, corrosive, nihilist, realm of the absurd, looping endlessly on a draining, politically obsessed, hamster wheel. Haven't the French brought us to this smoky, self-absorbed alley bar once before? How far removed is the nihilism of postmodernism from some aspects of existentialism? And further, worse than a philosophical dead end, it is clear that this method is used to draw constant outlines of misdeeds associated with the current political and economic system. One might ask, using the lens of this book's focus, "What houses do such theories build?"

In summary, the deployment of relativism and the associated and unrelenting charges of a variety of injustices seem to be the petulant

rebellion of a teenager: if we can't have the world our way, this position seems to say, no one will have it their way either. Dana Philips, in *The Truth of Ecology*, has characterized this as a self-defeating and unproductive strategy. He summarizes my concerns by stating that constructivists, or radical relativists, "deploy this theory in so heavy-handed a fashion that they seem to be less interested in mounting a plausible critique…than in pursuing a Mutually Assured Destruction" (87). The impact of this on this present study revolves around a concern that the image of Thoreau building a cabin in the woods becomes an occasion for current theoretical practice to have a narrow and negative set of responses. It is not that these responses might not be written about or should not be written about; it is that so much gets left out as a result of an unrelieved focus in this area. This also raises questions about intellectual integrity, fairness, and, as mentioned already, critical thinking.

If the large, but unassociated, group of readings in this new field of Critical Theory has anything in common, it seems to be that the focus is on undoing the "Enlightenment project" and its associated economic structure, capitalism, both of which have assumed a pesky "social, cultural, and political rationality" (Ross xiv). This theoretical thrust and the associated readings have in word and deed lived out Andrew Ross's original program proposal: "everything is contestable; nothing is off limits; and no outcomes are guaranteed" (xv). Everything is questioned all the time, forever.[10] Too often, the goal seems not to lay a foundation or build or help make the current system better. The goal is to tear things apart. The May Day parade of articles in *Cultural Studies* is looking for a way to bring a disparate group of interests and issues under one banner of protest, because, as Ross laments, "there are no necessary links…between the interests of women and the interests of workers. These links have to be articulated" (xiv).[11]

Of course, although relativism is the key to the entrance into the discussion, there is a pattern to what gets questioned and to what end. Capitalism is the boogieman here,[12] and the project seems to be characterized by a fragmented, petulant but determined attack on the supposed inarguable assumption that "popular culture and the everyday life" are disagreeable affairs, "saturated as they are with the effects of commodification" (Ross, xv). Supposedly if one accepts this assumption, then the only help for this is critical theory. Seductive context is everywhere, and it remains a deluding, seductive soup unless theory can remove and uncover the ideological machinations of context, freeing the reader/student and lionizing the critic. Sounds much like the old Marxism, interpreting the historical moment for the masses.[13] A small voice of

discontent with this approach started asserting itself in the 80s with comments such as the following from Robert Scholes in *The Rise and Fall of English*. Moving forward "means giving up any claim to be revolutionary opponents of `the system.' We are in it and of it, and we had better admit this to ourselves and others, just to clear the air" (85).

At the moment Ross wrote the article from which his quote was taken (1988), many on the left were grappling with the clear philosophical and historical collapse of Marxism. As a result, one sees Ross (and many others were doing the same thing) separating himself and the "new social movements" from Marxism, since ultimately Marxism shares, according to the new, anti-modernist theories, the same Enlightenment errors as the global capitalist energies Ross objects to. In addition, Marxism had suffered a theoretical and real world implosion in the 70s, 80s, and 90s and, therefore, was no longer a legitimate point of departure. Since a frontal assault on capitalism via socialism had failed, "these new movements have transformed the ***agenda of opposition"*** from marxist economic issues to a set of social issues that oppose an array of "institutions of oppression" (xiv, *my emphasis*). Again, my argument here isn't that such issues don't have a need to be addressed; my argument is concerned with the intellectual process that raises these within literary studies, and the fact that there is another agenda beyond these issues driving the criticism. Terry Eagleton has also noted that as the Paris political battle failed to win Marxist victories, the desire to break down the authority structure got repositioned in academia and focused on language studies and the text.[14] David Banash makes this connection between thwarted revolutionary politics of the 60s and academic disciplines:

> No doubt when Eagleton says that politics were taken off the streets he is referring largely to the failures of 1968. In this reading, poststructuralism is simply the defeated and impotent heir of the Situationists. For Eagleton, a committed Marxist, this is the great failure of both the Situationists and theory as a whole. While theory does provide a space for revolutionary desire, it also confines that desire. Would-be revolutionaries become the manipulators and bureaucrats of academic institutions because they cannot translate theory into an instrumental revolutionary force. As Eagleton puts it, left to the theorists "the power of capital" will remain "so drearily familiar" that those who espouse its critique or transformation only "succeeded in naturalizing it" (23). Given Eagleton's Marxist position, there is nothing surprising in his critique of poststructuralism's seeming inability to actualize political change. What is far more interesting is that Eagleton's position is repeated and developed even more strenuously by cultural critics with stronger allegiances to poststructuralism. In their book *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (1991), Steven Best and

> Douglas Kellner argue that the value of any theory is the possibility it offers to actualize "radical social transformation" (298). Like Eagleton, Best and Kellner argue that theory must develop an immediate relationship to practice or remain "just another specialized discourse" whose members accumulate cultural capital and theorize "just for the fun of it" (298).

The problem isn't the act of identifying certain problem areas in American culture; the problem comes when 1) these areas are the exclusive focus of study with a destructive, unproven end as the goal, and when 2) there is an educational insistence on seeing one's identity exclusively through one of these fragmented post/neo-Marxist lenses.[15] The plan consists of "dismantling reason's fictions" and then create a "postphilosophical culture…shuttling back and forth between criticism and construction" (Rapp).

And we have been here before. In *The Unusable Past* (1986), Russell Reising laments that there have been too many failed attempts to "define the `radical' or `oppositional' nature of American literature" or "in Bercovitch's case, its complicity." Unfortunately in the late 80s, according to Reising, critics had not yet yoked literature into service towards gaining a progressive political horizon; we had not fully and successfully placed literary concerns within an arena that allowed for "truly critical thinking on matters of political significance" (39). There has been throughout the 20th century and into the 21st a battle over the referential vs. the reflexive use of literature. More specifically, this battle has been about reading literature 1) to consider themes under the heading of "living life," the contemplation of language, or 2) to advance a political program. (For years the first person nature essay was spared in these battles), Many of these issues can be traced to the opening of the 20th century in Russia as well. As Russian Formalism emerged during the Revolution, it advanced a definition of literature as that which undoes the grip (defamiliarization) of our normal perceptions and language:

> Subverting the particular patterns of thought or perception imposed on reality by…ordinary language, by dominant ideological forms…literature is thus said to make such forms strange and, in so doing, to weaken their grip on the ways in which we perceive the world. (Bennett 24)

Here we may have a definition of literature as that which provokes critical thinking in any number of directions, making the common and the everyday worth another and more reflective look. Certainly, the move from urban life to the wilderness to build a house is a way to rethink (defamiliarize) prior living habits and values. However, the politics of the