

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Historically, Americans have had extremely ambivalent feelings about their wilderness environment. These feelings have ranged from viewing the landscape as an earthly hell to experiencing it as a peaceful sanctuary. Changing ideas of wilderness have played a large part in shaping the notion of an American national character. Nature writers Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Annie Dillard look to the natural world for material for understanding themselves and a method for improving the relationship between Americans and the environment. They have contributed to the story of this national character by narrating their experiences with the American landscape and by acting as Jeremiads to the American people. For each of these Americans nature has provided a restorative energy that they have attempted to pass on to their readers. In this way nature has become a kind of therapy that these authors have offered to the nation as a cure for over-civilization and fragmentation. Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Annie Dillard have used the stories left for them by those whose experiences with America might provide clues to the riddle of America and what it represents. Through their common experience with the simplicity, restoration, and vision found in the American landscape, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard have sought and found a refuge and a tonic for citizens of the New World.

RAW MATERIALS:
AMERICAN NATIONAL NARRATIVE AND THE THERAPY OF NATURE

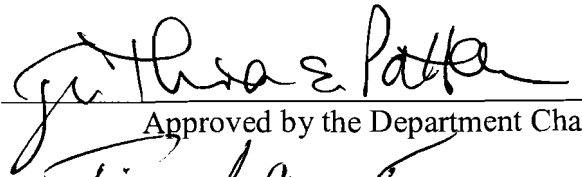
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Presented to
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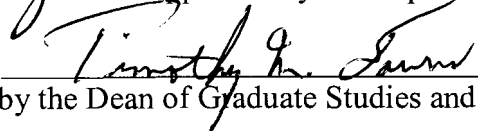
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[Prologue]

In his introduction to *Writing and America* Gavin Cologne-Brooks appeals to Wallace Stevens' poem "The Comedian as the Letter C" to illustrate the opposing views that Americans hold about their country. In the poem's opening lines Stevens claims that an American is "the intelligence of his soil"; he later reverses this to say, "his soil is man's intelligence" (qtd. in Cologne-Brooks 1). The idea that human ideas and emotions define the character of the nation, where the soil absorbs man's intelligence, is embodied by Terry Eagleton's assertion that "a nation is an act of the imagination" (qtd. in Glotfelty 8). The debate between this notion of national feeling and its opposite, in which the geography of the land gives its citizen his intelligence, barely scratches the surface of the paradoxes that arise when, as Cologne-Brooks has said, "American writing, which totals up into the idea of America, itself shaped by the physical geography of the land," is examined as a corpus, a national narrative (1). This project will examine, through the lens of ecocriticism, the nature writing contributions of American writers Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Annie Dillard toward a national narrative. Through their common experience with the simplicity, restoration, and vision found in the American landscape, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard have sought and found a refuge and a tonic for citizens of the New World.

The examination of ideas of landscape, in general, is the subject of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism considers the relationship between the environment and culture; it takes the environment as its discursive construct. Like the gender-consciousness of feminist criticism or the economic class awareness of Marxism, ecocriticism considers literary texts in a specific context of land in writing. The earth-centered approach of ecocriticism

looks at how nature is represented in a work, the way that metaphors of the land influence its treatment, and the role that the physical setting plays in the plot. Ecocritics work to bring an interdisciplinary perspective to their readings, considering the influence that history, social concerns, and science may have had in an author's writing. Scholars in the field of ecocriticism believe that asking questions about value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language help to bring out the author's position towards the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty says it this way: "All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). This echoes Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," and requires that literature be considered a part of the "immense global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (Glotfelty xix).

While it is possible to find examples of this interaction between the human and physical worlds in nearly any literary work, the nature writing tradition, which began with the "ancient literary tradition of the pastoral" and continued in the natural histories of Gilbert White and Charles Darwin, dominated the travel narratives of the early North American explorers. Such an approach has become more popular than ever in the twentieth century. The nature writing tradition is as broad and varied as are the writers of the narratives that make up its canon, and it is nearly impossible to accurately enumerate its themes. However, most nature writers have in common a belief in the energy and power of nature and its ability to affect humanity. Also, these authors are, in general, concerned with the preservation of the environment, for its own sake and for the sake of the interconnectedness that exists between it and the human world. The writers who are the subjects of this study are part of this tradition; they share the beliefs and concerns of

the majority of nature writers and lend themselves easily to the kinds of questions that interest ecocritics. Because they are a part of the American national narrative as well, their contributions to both collections of literature make them particularly relevant to any conversation about the connection between an American character and the landscape of America. Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard believe that understanding this interconnection of nature and humanity can lead to the wholeness and healthiness of American character.

America, the New World, is a nation of diverse geography, culture, philosophy, and history; it is a nation of “extraordinary uniformity and endless variety” that provides rich opportunities for ecocritical study (Cologne-Brooks 19). Within this endless variety a multitude of perspectives, informed by citizens’ individual histories, cultural understandings, and experiences with the land, exist and give rise to the question: What is America? Debate over the answer to this question and others have created contradictions about ideas and appropriate uses of America’s geography, culture, philosophy, and history. Conflict and contradiction are sometimes physical, such as the battle between the early settlers and the uncultivated land or between Kansas farmers and the 1930s dustbowl, but, more often, they are moral and emotional. Many of these struggles, beginning with the travel narratives of early North American explorers and continuing, to various degrees, through the experiences of people with diverse geographic, cultural, and philosophical perspectives, are collected in a sprawling, informal text: America’s national narrative. National narrative, a textual archive for “constructing imaginary relations to actual sociopolitical conditions to effect imagined communities called nation peoples,” contains the keys to America’s national character, the perceived mystique (Pease 3). It is

to this narrative that writers like Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard, who are interested in understanding “Americanness,” contribute their stories.

In his definition, Donald Pease suggests that the nationalistic, or patriotic, feeling that citizens attach to their identity as Americans resides in their imaginations and, thus, in their subjective, artistic expressions alone. Pease further defines the “concept” of Americanness as: “An image repertoire that could interconnect an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness)” (National 4). Pease describes how a writer, regardless of gender, is referred to as an American Adam, desires to explore ideas about what it means to be an American; such a writer must come to accept that any individual view of the “national scene” is necessarily informed by her individual, subjective experience with the American landscape and its people. Additionally, such a writer must consider what she believes the “national motive,” or moral paradigm, of the American nation ought to be and the way that it ought to be pursued. Writers who have added their stories to the national collection, such as Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard, are asserting their views about America's national scene and national motive.

This American urge to define a type of national self amid such diversity and contradiction has resulted in a simultaneous movement toward both unity and individuality that is reflected in the collected body of the nation's narratives. Cologne-Brooks puts it as follows:

Not only is the country driven by high, abstract ideals and therefore troubling dilemmas, but it also exudes this sense of being double or multiple in itself: a place of many in one, one in many. The land, the writing and the culture contain a

simultaneous pull toward unity and diversity, built as the latter two are on the contradictory ideals of individual freedom and social equality. (20)

In other words, because of the subjective nature of each individual American's view of the nation and the difficulty that is set up by the very notion of personal freedom within community, America has had a difficult time defining itself. The collection of stories that has become the narrative of America is, of course, represented by this diverse subjectivity. As a result, the narratives of particular people groups are granted more or less space and consequence. As many contemporary critics have argued, this renders study of the narrative, as a representative sample of Americanness, somewhat patchy and possibly unreliable. In other words, the voice of the nation has been forced to admit, as Walt Whitman said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself," there still remains something to be gleaned from the accumulation of its story-telling (*Leaves* 85).

Most anyone who approaches the subject of America, to explore its contents and pass judgment on what, to them, is its correct interpretation, must do so with a profound respect for the nation's constantly shifting personality. As Cologne-Brooks observes:

Over the past five centuries, America has been literally written and rewritten into existence from within and beyond its boundaries. The writings of and about the country are a palimpsest in which texts do not so much erase the predecessors as rewrite, distort, develop or annotate them to create the multi-layered readings of the nation. (2)

This notion demonstrates yet another contradiction that informs the essays that this study will explore. That is, while individual Americans believe that their errand into the

wilderness is valid, they cannot discount the experience of their neighbors, even if their separate edenic journeys are in conflict. Cologne-Brooks further notes:

Perhaps the clearest examples of conscious struggle between the conflicting ideals of embracing a democratic vision yet asserting one's individual struggle occur in the writing of those who see themselves, or are seen as [. . .] outside the historically constructed American norm. For to rebel, in a country where the individual's search for freedom and success is the official ideal, is paradoxically to operate within a predominant national myth. (5)

Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Annie Dillard, in their own times and methods, operate somewhat like rebels outside of the "predominant national myth." Their role, as nature writers and as American Adams contributing chapters to the American national narrative, is to situate themselves in the land and to convey the importance of their particular errand.

Nature writers, in general, write out of concern for America, the geographical space that they share, and to the Americans whose narratives intersect with their own. Among them is twentieth-century writer John Steinbeck, who acknowledges that his ideas about America and Americans are "opinion, conjecture, and speculation." The works of these writers, Steinbeck writes, are "informed by America" and insist that the collective places that make up the landscape of America and the homes of Americans have created something "unique in the world: America" (7). Whitman's acceptance of the contradictory nature of his own Americanness did not prevent him from attempting to more closely define his relationship with the nation or to seek a balm for the injuries caused by such contradictions. Like Whitman's, Steinbeck's work endeavors to define

“Americanness.” His effort is important because he is careful to point out the multiple versions of what may be called America’s “national character”. He observes that America is made up of every conceivable combination of geography and climate, race and ethnicity and yet it is one nation united, “*E Pluribus Unum*” (13). Steinbeck defines this unity by asserting the presence of a common feeling that, although “we have denounced, scolded, celebrated, and lied about facets and bits and pieces of our own country and countrymen,” there is something inherently unique about this nation. This uniqueness is the very essence of the thin thread that binds the multitude of Americans into the unified body of the American national character (7).

Steinbeck, along with many other writers interested in the American national narrative, attributes the feeling that there is something unique about America to the diversity and beauty of the American landscape. In *America and Americans*, Steinbeck joins his text to photographs that capture the landscape of this New Eden, arguing that Americans capture their feelings about America in their texts and their photographs. Steinbeck juxtaposes images of the starkness of winter on the plains, the red beauty of the scorched desert earth, and the lush fullness of springtime in the mountains to demonstrate, alongside many other nature writers, the diversity of the American landscape, its scope and magnificence. This landscape is, for Steinbeck, the key to *E Pluribus Unum*. For Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard such a land is also a therapy for America's illnesses.

The uniqueness of the American landscape, however, has not always stimulated devotion like Steinbeck's. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash comments on the revolutionary nature of the attraction to wilderness demonstrated by

Steinbeck, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard: “Ancient biases against the wild are deeply rooted in human psychology [. . .] wilderness was the unknown, the disordered, the uncontrolled” (xi). Nash characterizes those who had the first non-native experiences of America as “Europeans who carried in their intellectual baggage concepts of wilderness shaped by the Old Testament and refined by the experiences of the European frontier of the Dark and Middle Ages” (xii). These Europeans shaped the perspective of the first European settlers in America. Nash explains this great American paradox: “Wilderness has evolved from an earthly hell to a peaceful sanctuary where happy visitors can join John Muir and John Denver in drawing near to Divinity” (xii). This amusing characterization illustrates the subjective nature of a national narrative that accepts, as portions of America's does, the influence of landscape on national character. An understanding of what it is to be American is, therefore, dependent on an individual's motive for embarking on the voyage of understanding self in nature. Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard, through their retreats into the natural world, have come to understand that they are motivated by an belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and the non-human world.

Early settlers in the New World, bent on conquest and prosperity, however, saw, in the American landscape, a savage jungle. Their view was what Eagleton calls “a nation of the mind” (8). In the early seventeenth century, William Bradford praised God for having saved the settlers from the “hideous and desolate wilderness” of the Cape Cod environment and from the barbarous natives, beginning what would become a tradition of wariness of wilderness shaped by Old Testament notions (62). In the 1670s, Roger Clap, a New England settler, decided to write the story of early hardships in the “unsubdued

wilderness” (351) of America and Michael Wigglesworth wrote poetry about the New World as a “waste and howling wilderness, / Where none inhabited / But hellish fiends, and brutish men / That Devil’s worshipped” (83). At the end of the century, Cotton Mather claimed that God’s people were civilizing the “devil’s territory” from the “sorrows of a wilderness” (77). In the case of these New World settlers’ association of wilderness with danger and evil, nature is a dystopian jungle, or what Bradford’s contemporaries called a “Wilderness tradition,” where good can occur only by God’s grace and by physical exertion (Nash 24).

While, in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards still saw the American landscape as “the land that we have to travel through [. . .] a wilderness that we must go over in the way,” he initiated a shift toward viewing nature as the “resemblance of spiritual beauties” to begin with his search for true religious experience that might point to God (575). With Edwards, nature became a spiritual metaphor. The Platonic notion of the earth as merely one metaphysical step removed from the absolute enabled the preacher and writer to take a more arcadian view of his natural surroundings. Edwards was able, according to Nash, to “derive spiritual joy from, and even perceive beauty in, natural objects such as clouds, flowers, and fields” (39). This perspective was culturally inscribed by the re-flowering of American Romanticism, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which followed the Enlightenment. As European scientists began revealing newly discovered facts about the geography and physics of the world, appreciation for its divine majesty increased. In turn, natural phenomena, such as mountains and rivers, began to be seen as beautiful and as revealing divine handiwork. Nash argues, “from the feeling that uncivilized regions bespoke God’s influence rather

than Satan's, it was just a step to perceiving a beauty and grandeur in wild scenery comparable to that of God" (45).

From this new perspective, books with titles, such as *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, and *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*, began to appear (Nash 45). With the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, the notion of natural beauty and divine creation was codified. Because Romanticism implies "an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious," the American landscape became the paramount example of sublimity according to the predominant Romantic sensibility. Europeans began to make the trip across the sea to experience the New World "with its abundance of pathless forests and savages" (Nash 49). In addition, American writers of the period, who had not faced the hardships of the pioneer experience, began to write about the uniqueness of the American landscape. William Byrd, one of the first to write favorably about wilderness in his *History of the Dividing Line*, reports on "this great Wilderness" and on having slept outdoors to enjoy the "pleasure in that natural kind of Lodging" (48, 192). Likewise, botanist William Bartram expressed his delight in the New Eden as follows: "I enjoyed a view inexpressibly magnificent and comprehensive. [. . .] My imagination thus wholly engaged in the contemplation of this magnificent landscape. [. . .] I was almost insensible [. . .] of a new species of Rhododendron" (212).

In this way, the New Eden became a source of artistic inspiration. Since the nation's inception it was assumed that America's "primary task was the justification of its newly won freedom," a justification partly rooted in its natural environment (Nash 67). In the very diversity, wildness, solitariness, and mystery of the American landscape

Americans possessed something that was distinctly not of the Old World and they seized upon this distinction. In a letter home to a friend in Massachusetts, Abigail Adams wrote, “Do you know that European birds have not half the melody of ours? Nor is their fruit half so sweet, nor their flowers half so fragrant” (qtd. in Rahv 52). Additionally, because it was beginning to be widely believed that God spoke most clearly through the most unspoiled of wildernesses, America gained a great moral advantage over Europe. As a result, centuries after Mather, a naturalist like John Muir would see a beautiful natural environment in need of preservation:

How little we know of ourselves, of our profoundest attractions and repulsions, our spiritual affinities! How interesting does man become considered in his relations to the spirit of this Rock and Water! How insignificant does every atom of our world become amid the influences of those beings unseen, spiritual, angelic mountaineers that so throng these pure mansions of crystal foam and purple granite. (23)

Despite a new, national self-confidence, the New Eden was fragmented. The natives were understandably unwelcoming, diseases were devastating to native and non-native populations, and the settlers were not necessarily friendly with one another. Amongst all of this seeming chaos, however, the American garden flourished. To illustrate, Steinbeck argues: “We built America and the process made us Americans [. . .] a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness” (13). It has not always been so: “In the beginning, we crept, scuttled, escaped, were driven out of safe and settled corners of the earth to the fringes of a strange and hostile wilderness, a nameless and hostile continent” (Steinbeck 13). Finally, the democratizing factor between man and

the land was, at least in the case of white Americans, the land. Each settler had to develop a relationship with the land in order to protect his family and his future. Land became a coveted thing and agriculture began to attempt to strike a balance with the supposed ferocity of the American wilderness. Families banded together to protect their homes, communities rallied to defend themselves, and states formed to protect their borders. Nash expresses it this way: "Wilderness is the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give civilization identity and meaning" (xi). The colonizers that had looked at the land with eyes of conquest developed, through physical necessity and an intellectual appreciation for the sublimity of the America landscape, a new subjectivity that sought a saving union with the land; in turn, Americans' acceptance of wilderness as an ally in terms of its necessity to the struggle for survival gave identity and meaning to their Americanness. It is from this white, European heritage that Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard's feelings toward nature descend.

In regards to landscape, these nature writers have adopted an errand, not of conquest, but of relationship. Pease argues:

The composite result of the interaction of these images was the mythological entity -- Nature's Nation -- whose citizens believed [. . .] that the ruling assumptions of the national compact (Liberty, Equality, Social Justice) could be understood as indistinguishable from the sovereign creative power of nature. (4)

This pursuit is undeniably present in Thoreau's retreat to Walden to "transact some private business with the fewest obstacles" and in his hope that America, unlike Rome, will find its way to "see with clearer eyes" (12, 2). It is evident in Whitman's rapport with

Timber Creek and in *Song of Myself*, his Jeremiad to the American people. Dillard's careful attention to the minutiae of Tinker Creek and her determination to "stalk the gaps" also serves as an eloquent exhortation for the return to a realization of the interconnectedness between human beings and the environment, which is necessary to her vision of self-fulfillment (268).

In the section titled *Walden*, I examine Henry David Thoreau's deep concern about the condition of New England in the nineteenth century. He fears that his neighbors are living a "fool's life," acting as machines and "laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (3). He shrinks from their excess and turns to what he calls the things "necessary of life [. . .] Food, Shelter, Clothing and Fuel" (7). At Walden, his nature retreat, he discovers the things that are essential, deliberate, and fundamental to life. Thoreau's therapy for New England's ills is the "road of simplicity" that can be found only in nature (59). In nature, life is not "frittered away by detail"; rather, it is engaged in the task of meeting basic needs and in fronting "only the essential facts of life" (59). Thoreau suggests that men are "part and parcel of nature"; both the lack of outward pressures of society and the forced increase in self-reliance provided by the natural world are the cure for death at the hands of the world's excess.

Walt Whitman was plagued by the need to understand the notions of freedom and comradeship and how they applied to Americans. After the national division of the Civil War, Whitman retreated to Timber Creek for physical and spiritual healing. He characterized his experience with the Creek as "going through the soul as well as going through the world" (qtd. in Ginsberg 27). Whitman discovered there, in nature, the images that he needed to understand his own Americanness and to spread his message to

the nation. The section on Whitman at Timber Creek explores the lessons that Whitman learned about the nature of freedom and comradeship from the great oaks and the yellow poplars.

Like Whitman and Thoreau, Annie Dillard also takes nature as her text. Dillard chooses Tinker Creek as her place for retreat from a twentieth-century America that chooses to "step aside from the cracks" (268). Section four, *Tinker Creek*, considers Dillard's scientific examination of the minute details of nature alongside her spiritual exploration of what it means to "stalk the gaps" (268). For Dillard, nature is the key to unlocking the paradoxes she finds in herself, in America, and in God. In the end, she discovers that, while some paradoxes may not be resolved, there is a healing that comes from achieving the vision that nature's "pervading obscurity" makes possible (19). The freedom that results from this individual vision creates the space necessary for the creation of a new society of moral responsibility.

For these American writers, nature has played a significant role in the construction of our national narratives, transforming the nation's identity and ideologies to become the animating spirit behind what can be called the American character. While Steinbeck qualifies his narrative as "opinions, unashamed and individual," his work, alongside that of Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard, acts as what Eagleton calls the "myth making mechanism" that sustains national narrative and gives voice to the imaginations of citizens (8). Nature writers like these pursue facts, metaphors, patterns, feelings, and self-awareness by means of both physical and imaginative investigation. Steinbeck claims that nature provided him with an awareness that was entirely dependent on his experience with America and the emotions and thoughts that it stimulated within him. His

writing was a “clumsy attempt to unlock the wordlessness,” to relive and pass on the locked secret of his awareness of what it is to be American (Covici xii).

To this end, the nature essay, as a piece of the larger narrative of America, attempts to locate a particular writer in her individual experience with the contradictions that plague the American consciousness. In many cases, including those of Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard, the writer then leaves the noise and distraction of society to seek the therapeutic effect of the silence and solitude of nature. In nature the writer is better able to concentrate on unraveling the tangled strands of Americanness. At this place of retreat, be it Walden, Timber Creek, or Tinker Creek, each American Adam can reflect on her experience and make decisions about the errand that she would advocate for her fellow citizens. The result is the nature essay, a jeremiad from each particular writer to the comrades who share his plight. As Pascal Covici explains, American nature writing is an attempt to create a “language of awareness” that can carry the message of Americanness in all its various conceptions (xiii).

Writers who have tuned their relationship with nature to “unlock the wordlessness” of their feelings of nationalism believe that an intimate relationship exists between man and the land and that such a relationship is more powerfully eloquent than any other they have experienced. For them, the shaping of the American identity has been most fundamentally informed by its writing and its landscape. America’s national narrative has been characterized, and elementally conveyed, by nature writers who have “often embraced the contradictions inherent in the American myths of freedom and equality, unity and diversity, patriotism and individualism” (Cologne-Brooks 4). Whitman, Thoreau, and Dillard believe that the natural world facilitates the therapeutic

healing of these contradictions by eliminating the factors that require an outward focus on society and its concerns. Whitman, Thoreau, and Dillard, as they relate their experiences in their respective nature retreats, re-tell America's story. These nature writers left behind, for a time, the arrested growth of the country to seek the therapy of nature. They emerged restored and with a better understanding and acceptance of the contradictory nature of their individual identities and of their individual sense of Americanness to share with this nation's people.

Walden

Following the Panic of 1837, which closed banks and caused factory shut-downs across the country, America experienced a misery and sense of dislocation that exceeded even that of the Great Depression (Brown 2). When Andrew Jackson became President in 1829, he quickly expressed his disdain of the National Bank system, which he believed to be corrupt, dangerous, and unconstitutional. In 1832 Jackson vetoed a bill that would renew the Bank's charter, which was due to expire in 1836. This caused a series of wild speculations in imported foreign goods and the creation of huge amounts of paper money. During the first three weeks of April 1837, 250 business houses failed in New York as a result of the massive crash of the National Bank system, due to its inability to make good on its loans. Bankruptcy broke out across the nation, people sacrificed valuable merchandise and land everywhere, the government went into debt, trade ceased, and the confidence of the American people, toward both government and business, was seriously damaged.

For the people of America, the Panic of 1837 resulted in the failure of important food crops, widespread unemployment, and a general feeling of mistrust toward those who were making decisions about the country's future. Citizens whose ancestors had, only a century before, begun to cultivate an intense spirit of patriotism and identity for America as a nation, experienced a sense of dislocation and fear that they had never known. They questioned the wisdom of their leaders, the soundness of their governmental system, and the ability of capitalism to provide them with prosperity and stability. As a result, a few reformers were willing to face the uncertain consequences of seeking a new way of thinking about the nature of prosperity in America. They raised fundamental

questions about the organization of society. The most famous, a Boston minister named George Ripley, began a movement toward communal farming and manufacturing called Brook Farm. With Ripley in the lead, these reformers agreed in their diagnosis of America's disease: they blamed the excessive materialism, greed, and competition of the existing system for its dismal state. What the reformers were unable to agree upon was the therapy that ought to be prescribed for this disease.

Living in New England during this period, Henry David Thoreau joined this band of social experimenters to redeem the society that he perceived to be rapidly degenerating as a result of its undying faith in aggressive capitalism. Looking around New England, Thoreau professed a deep concern with the ideology of use and materialism that America was pursuing:

The nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such a unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. (*Walden* 60)

While many reformers sought the creation of a utopia by establishing associations and communities that relied upon socialist doctrines, Thoreau sought the solitude of Walden Pond to develop his own conception of America's cure. *Walden*, Thoreau's entry in the textual archive of America's national narrative, argues that the solution for the excesses of society and ecological destruction is simplicity: "Instead of three meals a day, if it be

necessary eat but one; instead of five hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion” (60). Additionally, Thoreau considers, in the context of his nature retreat, the original intent of America’s leaders, expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. His conclusion is that America has turned away from the wisdom of simply pursuing happiness and that the cure for the resulting disease, materialism, can be found in the example set by nature.

Thoreau believed that looking to nature could cure America’s excessive materialism. To this end, he re-wrote Thomas Jefferson’s Natural Laws to reflect the lessons of the natural world. Thoreau translates the declaration that mankind is endowed with certain inalienable rights, among them “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” to declare that he will pursue “a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust” with nature as his model (*Walden* 9). Thoreau’s intention, in the nineteenth century, reflects Thomas Jefferson’s claim:

I am savage enough to prefer the woods, the wilds, and the independence of Monticello, to all the brilliant pleasures of this gay capital. I shall therefore rejoin myself to my native country with new attachments, with exaggerated esteem for it’s advantages, for tho’ there is less wealth there, there is more freedom, more ease, and less misery. (48)

Like Jefferson, Thoreau believed that the pursuit of happiness and simplicity should take place in America’s rural retreats, “the woods” and “the wilds” and that it was there that America's cure could be found.

More than a century before Thoreau, Jefferson was also working toward what might be termed a therapy for America. He was as aware, in the eighteenth century, of

the difficult dualities at work in the nation as Thoreau would be in the nineteenth century. In addition to dividing his time between his rural plantation and the bustling capital city, Jefferson spent five years in France and was highly conscious of the elevated position that the arts held in Europe. He knew that the general feeling among white Americans was that, in order to escape being considered the unsophisticated, immature, and rebellious younger sibling, they ought to be working toward a similarly elevated cultural goal. At the same time, he understood that it was the wildness of the American landscape, the sublimity of its lack of European refinement, which made the new nation unique. Jefferson aimed his work, as a leader and early politician, toward the resolution of this paradox. In many ways, Jefferson was a man of two minds and personalities, working to bring together the disparate interests of the New World. French scholar Gilbert Chinard calls Jefferson “a double-track intellect, with two lines of thought running parallel without any apparent contradiction” (qtd. in Woodward 209). Perhaps it was this ability, to compartmentalize and consider independently the arguments on either side of a cultural or ideological issue, that made Jefferson the best man for the paramount role of drafting the Declaration of Independence.

This double-track ability of Jefferson's is present in his love dialog to Maria Cosway, *The Head and the Heart*. In his letter Jefferson demonstrates, in perfectly turned eighteenth-century prose, his ability to consider a subject in this dual-minded manner, “with both the tenderness of emotion and the subtlety of cool reason” (Woodward 215). In his Declaration, Jefferson brings both aspects of his intellect together to express what is, to him, the most important errand into this new land. Like Thoreau after him, Jefferson disagreed with popular thought, which held the possession of material goods, in this case

property rights, to be a good, even a natural, right of man. He ignored the similar theory of late seventeenth-century and Enlightenment thinkers, going so far as to advise Lafayette to leave the notion of property rights out of the French Declaration and to replace it with an avocation of the pursuit of happiness. According to Jefferson scholar Liu Zuochang, “Jefferson put the pursuit of happiness above all other things, regarding property and even government merely as a means of realizing the happiness of men” (295). Like Thoreau, what Jefferson held to be the highest good was the human being and his quality of life. The question of how this good ought to be pursued consumed most of Jefferson’s life and writings. Jefferson’s conclusion, which Thoreau would see exemplified in nature and claim as the cure for the American malady of his time, was that the happiness of men must be secured through the “betterment of the condition of men” and in the acquisition of knowledge (Zuochang 296).

Like Thoreau, Jefferson perceived that the betterment of a man’s living condition was a precondition of his ability to find happiness. Although Jefferson held, as Thoreau would after him, that “that government is best which governs least,” he felt that an appropriate role of government was to enact measures that would secure proper living conditions for the people (*Civil* 1). Jefferson, who was shocked by the living conditions of the masses, strove to draw the attention of other influential men to the plight of the laborer:

Take every possible occasion for entering into the houses of the laborer, and especially at the moments of their repast; see what they eat, how they are clothed, whether they are obliged to work too hard, whether the government or their

landlord takes from them an unjust proportion of their labor; on what footing stands the property they call their own, their personal liberty, etc. (139)

His position was not that the playing field ought to be made equal by a radical redistribution of property. Rather, Jefferson proposed that the laws enacted by the government work to encourage the rich to amend their habits to eliminate excess and to consider the well-being of the nation as a whole. He stated that he could not accept “a few citizens, infested with the mania of rambling and gambling, to bring danger on the great mass in innocent and safe pursuits at home” (361). To this end, Jefferson proposed a plan of taxation that would enforce fiscal economy, taking the burden of taxation in the form of excise duties off the shoulders of the poor, and limit the taxation of goods to customs, shifting the financial responsibility to the rich who were the sole consumers of the luxury items subject to customs duties (Zuochang 298). Thoreau translated this same principle of for the individual to develop self-responsibility into nineteenth-century New England. Like Jefferson, he believed that the elaborately adorned houses and white kid gloves of the upper classes were a hindrance to the pursuit of happiness for all and that economy was nature’s prescription and America’s cure.

Thoreau would also go farther than Jefferson in his belief that, not only does the best government govern little, it “governs not at all” (*Civil* 1). However, like Jefferson, Thoreau understood the contradiction that Americans faced as they considered how best to act in regard to the natural world. He understood that, to better the self and in so doing heal the nation, certain basic necessities of life first had to be met for all, rich or poor. He counted among those necessities "Food, Shelter, Clothing and Fuel" (*Walden* 7). Thoreau knew that the only way to meet them was to use the resources that nature could provide.

Thoreau desired to remind his neighbors that it was possible to meet those needs simply, without excess. Thoreau lamented that his fellow New Englanders were so far from simplicity. Many were in debt, relying on others to provide them with food and shelter. According to Thoreau, they did not live in harmony with themselves, nature, or each other; instead, they had to deal with poverty, credit problems, and crime, "laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt" (*Walden* 3). Instead of trusting in "the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows," as Thoreau did, they relied on their problematic urban society and had "no time to be anything but a machine" (*Walking* 3, 95). Thoreau believed that the path to better lives lay in the example of nature as simplicity.

The New England reality did not correspond to the idealistic vision of the simplicity of the American garden, the Virgin Land, held by Thoreau, and by Jefferson before him. Thoreau envisioned the West as a wilderness "whose glance no civilization can endure," in which the American Adam would "live on the marrow of koodoos devoured raw" (*Walking* 96). Instead he found himself in the midst of a culture dependent on the prices of foreign markets, courting the coming age of industrialization, consumed by the desire for large houses and fancy clothes, hopelessly enslaved to a life of labor, and seemingly dedicated to the slow destruction of the environment. More than a century before, Jefferson had condemned the ramblers and gamblers who were destroying the living conditions of the greater part of the fledgling American society; in 1854, with the publication of *Walden*, Thoreau refused to pretend not to recognize the same element of material greed at work in America and the negative effect it was having on the general happiness of the nation.

While Jefferson appealed to the government and its laws to effect change, Thoreau turned directly to his neighbors. As Jefferson intended his Declaration and later reforms to speak his errand to the American people, Thoreau's response to New England's excesses was to record his experience at Walden Pond in a narrative that would "say something" to Americans "about your outward condition or circumstances in this world [. . .] what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not" (2). In his narrative, he explained that clothing ought to "first, retain the vital, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness" (13). Beyond those concerns it ought not take any of man's time or resources. Shelters ought to be constructed with "Yankee shrewdness" and economy, to meet the basic needs of warmth and cover (18). Food ought to be obtained from what was raised on American land, the "land of rye and Indian corn," and not from grains imported from "distant and fluctuating markets" (41). According to Thoreau, the paradoxes created by the need to obtain these necessities and the conflicting need to preserve the environment could be resolved through economy.

The future of the American wilderness deeply concerned Thoreau. He watched as people trampled forests in the name of agriculture and the coming wave of industrialization. He was aware that Nature was being sorely exploited for the purpose of international trade. "For many years," he claimed, "I was self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms [. . .] surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths [. . .]keeping them open" (*Walden* 11). Thoreau encouraged all men to assert themselves as protectors of the environment, not only for the protection of Nature's intrinsic worth, but also because he knew that "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" (*Walking*

95). He recognized that all men rely upon Nature for their livelihood and reminded his readers that “men plough and sail for it. From the forests and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind” (*Walking* 94). If Nature were to become extinct, man would be without sustenance of any kind and the idea of Jefferson’s America would go unrealized. After all, not only does the Wilderness provide man with food, it also yields timber for shelter, kindling for fuel, and roots and bark for cures.

Nature was the source, the pattern, for all that Thoreau held to be true. He believed that “there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright” (*Walking* 85). Thoreau asserts that Nature is the form that shows us how to live. The first lesson, he observed, ought to be that of “simplicity.” Simplicity for Thoreau meant giving attention to what is necessary and avoiding what is excessive. In response to those who questioned him about the purpose of his retreat to Walden Pond, Thoreau replied that it was to secure merely the things necessary for life, thus freeing himself to consider things that were of greater importance (*Walden* 7). He went to Walden to live simply, to discover the difference “between eating and drinking for strength and from mere gluttony” (*Walking* 96). If, like Thoreau at Walden Pond, Americans would abandon excess and work only to fulfill their own needs, as a nation they would be free to pursue happiness.

Perhaps the root of Thoreau’s idea that happiness may be obtained through simplicity can be found, again, in Jefferson. The importance of humanity’s inherent right to pursue happiness is the cornerstone of Jefferson’s America. Zuochang asserts that Jefferson believed “that happiness consisted in more than a comfortable life, because being different from beasts, men demanded something beyond mere physical comforts”

(298). In addition to physical betterment, Jefferson advocated spiritual benefit. What Thoreau would call Wisdom and re-education, was, for Jefferson, found in the acquisition of knowledge. He promoted the sciences and the arts, calling the attention of the government to “the value of science to a republican people, the security it gives to liberty, by enlightening the minds of its citizens; the protection it affords against foreign power; [. . .] in short, its identification with power, morals, order, and happiness” (476). He also sent books and journals to friends that they might be made aware of innovations and discoveries taking place around the world. Jefferson held education to be universally important to the pursuit of happiness, stating:

I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man. [. . .] And I do hope that, in the present spirit of extending to the great mass of mankind the blessing of instruction, I see a prospect of great advancement in the happiness of the human race; and that this may proceed to an indefinite, although not to an infinite degree. (476).

Although he did not feel as strongly as Thoreau that education must take place in nature, Jefferson did understand that people must have time away from the worries of meeting basic needs to study the sciences and arts. He dedicated much of his own leisure time to invention and is credited with having improved the moldboard of the plow as well as designing the iron blade (Zuochang 297). Just as Thoreau believed that the simplicity of the woods would cure Americans of materialism, it was Jefferson’s hope that these inventions would lessen the time that laborers were required to spend at their tasks, allowing them more time to pursue education.

Thoreau also echoes Jefferson in his insistence that the acquisition of knowledge requires leisure time. He argues, "I cannot but think that if we had more true wisdom [. . .] the pecuniary expense of getting an education would in great measure vanish" and, along with it, the need for a great many of the other excesses of life (*Walden* 32). To this requirement Thoreau adds his belief that education takes place most effectively in nature. In the woods, Thoreau encountered what was essential; he was re-educated about the lost art of "living deliberately" (*Walden* 59). For him the reward of independence was the opportunity "to front the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not yet lived" (*Walden* 59). This was the wisdom of the Chinese, Persian, Hindu, and Greek philosophers whom he revered: "live deep and suck all the marrow out of life [. . .] put to rout all that was not life [. . .] drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms" (*Walden* 59). Nature was the land of Thoreau's marrow; he knew that the Wild was the place to discover self, the place to "transact some private business with the fewest obstacles" (*Walden* 12). An independent person is free, not only to saunter in the woods, but also to practice magnanimity and truth. According to Thoreau, "if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged" (*Walden* 29). Thus, the independent person develops his individual talent and, when everyone has done so, the health of the environment and of America result.

As Jefferson appeals to the sciences and the arts to produce happiness, Thoreau insists that it is the love of Wisdom that enables any man to pursue happiness. He laments

that despite the vast, “recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and Bibles, which are accessible to all who know of them, there are the feeblest efforts any where made to become acquainted with them” (*Walden* 69). The pursuit of wisdom, he believes, involves the re-education of man regarding his place in the world, natural and civilized, and to an understanding of the basic necessities of life. This education can take place only through the fortification that Nature offers humanity in an environment of simplicity, devoid of the distractions of society and materialism; he claims that all men “require an infusion of hemlock-spruce or arbor-vitæ in our tea” (*Walking* 95). Listening to the sounds of rustling leaves or observing individual snowflakes is the ultimate source of education and the key to Thoreau’s sense of what it means to pursue happiness.

Having attained the freedom of leisure time to be in nature and made the retreat to a place of hemlock-spruce and rustling leaves, Thoreau believes that “all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike” (*Walden* 64). In the section of *Walden* he calls “Sounds”

Thoreau laments:

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and vents speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. [. . .] No method nor discipline can supercede the necessity of being ever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? (72)

Looking at what is to be seen is, for Thoreau, the greatest source of wisdom, the simplest of acts, and the ultimate pursuit of happiness. Rather than sending books to friends or creating more efficient tools, Thoreau promotes “contemplation and the forsaking of works” (73). He learns to forget the constraints of time, adopting the calm standard of the birds and flowers. He watches the sun shine on his possessions and listens to the free wind blow, observing:

So much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads, -- because they once stood in their midst. (74)

Thoreau compares this new vision of his man-made, common belongings to the forms from which they were patterned. This Platonic, Romantic notion illustrates that Thoreau felt, in nature, that he was a step closer to truth as he experienced the world as it was meant to be without the shadows of man’s art. He sums up his ideal of wisdom and happiness: “Instead of no path to the front-yard gate in the Great Snow, -- no gate – no front-yard, -- and no path to the civilized world!” (84).

According to Jefferson and Thoreau, Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were too preoccupied with front-yard gates and were “looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise” (*Walking* 80). In other words, America was in danger of going the way of the corrupt and materialistic British society from which it had escaped. Thoreau called nineteenth-century America, “with all its so called internal improvements,

[. . .] an unwieldy and overgrown establishment" (*Walden* 60). He believed that America had the potential to be what no other nation had been able to become. He compared America to Rome, arguing that Rome had the potential to be great but lost it by becoming infatuated with wealth and excess. He believed that the story of Romulus and Remus having been suckled by wolves was significant: it was this intimate association with nature that had empowered them to found Rome. Thoreau claims, "The founders of every State which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar source" (*Walking* 95). The cure for America, as a nation, was to avoid a fall similar to Rome's. Thoreau felt that this recovery would be assured only if its people could return to intimacy with the environment. It was imperative that Americans change their destructive ways and rediscover interconnectedness with the natural world if they were to preserve America as a great nation.

To cure itself of materialism and avoid another depression like that of 1837, America would have to learn to pursue happiness in the form of simplicity. Jefferson recognized the right to the pursuit of happiness as being inalienable to man. If men lived simple lives and took from Nature only what was needed, ecological preservation would result. A man's awareness of a simple lifestyle and the resulting protection that it would afford nature would create independence, or non-dependence, that Jefferson called "Liberty." Liberty, for Thoreau, was freedom from excessive materialism. Thoreau acknowledged that this idea was not new with him; rather, he knew that "philosophers" from time past who loved wisdom "so as to live according to its dictates" had found a life of freedom (*Walden* 9). Further, he claimed, "the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor" (*Walden* 9). Like Jefferson who said, "Nothing is ours

which another may deprive us of," Thoreau's was a pursuit of true Liberty: he would work to meet his basic needs and no more (*Life* 367). That having been done, he was free to pursue what he deemed valuable to happiness. The reward for such simplicity was the ability to "adventure on life now;" for Thoreau that adventure was a saunter through the woods in search of the sublime (*Walden* 9).

Thoreau was an American Jeremiah, using his narratives to warn his country against becoming "an unwieldy and overgrown establishment" (*Walden* 60). He wrote *Walden* to recall his countrymen to the ideal of Jeffersonian agrarianism and to a vision of America as a great nation. Thoreau believed that the cure for America's materialism could be found, through wisdom, in nature's therapy. Like Jefferson in his love for Monticello, Thoreau at Walden Pond found relief from "the whole cast-iron civilized life," and the opportunity to direct America back to the "the naked source-life of us all" (83). Above all, Thoreau's narratives sought to change the behavior of his countrymen, encouraging them to think about their lives and to strive for simplicity in their practices. In this way, Thoreau believed as Jefferson did and as nature writers for generations have: through the pursuit of happiness as it is demonstrated in nature, every individual, the natural environment, and the American nation would be preserved.

Timber Creek

Henry David Thoreau asserted that he believed Whitman to have “spoken more truth than any American or modern” that he knew (Thoreau 40). Like Thoreau, the purpose of Whitman’s truth-telling was the healing of the nation. While Thoreau concentrated his efforts toward understanding Americanness on examining Jefferson’s agrarian ideals and what it meant to pursue happiness, Whitman was keenly interested in what it meant to be a “comrade” in the struggle for freedom. Like Thoreau, in a turbulent time he turned to the natural world for an example of right living, and often explored his notions of liberty and comradeship in the context of the natural world at Timber Creek. At the Creek he sought a therapy that would cure the ills of modern existence, particularly from the after effects of the Civil War. Taking his lead from Thoreau, Whitman found in nature the images and lessons he needed to understand his American identity; the yellow poplars on Timber Creek were “almost emotional, palpably artistic, heroic; so innocent and harmless, yet so savage” and they taught Whitman the lesson of Americanness and the lesson of wellness (*Specimen* 89).

In an anonymous review of his own work, Whitman asserted his desire to produce non-artificial poetry that would be truly representative of his nation. Whitman presented himself as “an American [. . .] disorderly, fleshly and sensual” (Woodress 2). The effects of his poems are the “effects of the original eye or arm, or the actual atmosphere, or tree, or bird” (23). Like the medical practices of the period, his poetry sought both “phenomenal and material explanations” of illness and its potential cures (American 2). Whitman’s version of “mad-doctoring” was to tell the truth, to celebrate nature and the “body electric” (*Leaves* 70). He attempted to cure his comrades and his country from the

effects of war, and the struggle between individuality and community, by celebrating himself and the “natural propensities” that he believed to be universally American (Woodress 24). While Whitman’s poetry clearly points to a certain amount of hubris, it also illustrates his great affection for America and his desire to honor it, even in its most difficult moments of conflict, with absolute honesty.

In his poetry and prose he reports on the war from the homes, the battlefield, and the hospitals of the American people with an honesty that is both absolute and jarring. Whitman referred to the Civil War as the “Real War” that would “never get in the books” (*Specimen* 78). According to critic Margot Fortunato Galt, Whitman’s reports “are filled with the roar of cannons, the flap of flags, the clank of men marching, the groans of the wounded and amputees” (151). The feeling of anticipation conveyed by the abrupt images of the opening section of Whitman’s poem, “Drum Taps,” gives a clear picture of the immense contribution to the idea of American democracy he felt the war represented:

To the drum-taps prompt,
 The young men falling in and arming,
 The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith’s
 hammer, tost aside with precipitation,)
 The lawyer leaving his office and arming, the judge leaving the court,
 The driver deserting his wagon in the street, jumping down, throwing
 the reigns abruptly down the horses’ backs,
 The salesman leaving the store, the boss, the book-keeper, porter, all leaving;
 Squads gather everywhere by common consent and arm. (*Leaves* 201)

For Whitman, the war effort was something that every American, mechanic, lawyer, farmer, or salesman, had to get behind. Despite differences of perspective, all of America was stirred by the prompting of the drum-tap. The idea of people from all walks of life gathering “by common consent and arm” embodied Whitman’s idea of American democracy. Whitman’s excitement about the idea of democracy and America’s excitement about the coming war continues in the ballad “Beat! Beat! Drums!”:

Beat! beat! drums – blow! bugles! blow

Through the windows – through doors – burst like a ruthless force,

Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,

Into the school where the scholar is studying;

Leave not the bridegroom quiet – no happiness must he have now with his bride,

Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,

So fierce you whirr and pound you drums – so shrill you bugles blow. (*Leaves*

203)

However, the “ruthless force” of the war had begun to “scatter the congregation” leaving neither happiness for the bridegroom, nor peace for the farmer. For Whitman, the feeling of anticipation had been joined and tempered by a growing sense that a terrible price would be exacted upon the warring nation. The reality of the American paradox, the conflict that must arise when individuals strive for freedom within a community, has inserted itself into the midst of the nation’s unanimous excitement, fragmenting it from the inside out. Whitman reflects this fragmentation in his prose pieces recorded on the Virginia battlefields. Here he conveys the reality, the fear, and the grime of the “Real War”:

During the whole of that time [twenty-seven hours of attack], everyone, from the Colonel down, was compelled to lie at full length on his back or belly in the mud, which was deep and tenacious. The surface of the ground, slightly elevated just south of them, served as a natural bulwark and protection against the Rebel batteries and sharpshooters, as long as the men lay in this manner. But the moment the men raised their heads or a limb, even if only a few inches – snap and s-s-st went the weapons of Secesh! (*Specimen 26*)

Images like this one, and those he collected in the hospitals, he felt would never be recorded in America's history books. These are images that left the nation, as a community fighting for the freedom of individuals, fragmented and in need of healing.

In his writing Whitman considered his experience of the war (as with nearly everything else) to be representative of that of the nation. In *Specimen Days*, Whitman admits that there were two days, of all the war, that he could never forget. He says, "Those were the day following the news, in New York and Brooklyn, of that first Bull Run defeat, and the day of Abraham Lincoln's death" (26). He adds that, on those days, his mother would make the usual meals, but that "not a mouthful was eaten" and almost nothing was said; they spent the days passing the paper back and forth between them (26). This silence at home, while no less disturbing, stands in stark contrast to the roaring and clanking of Whitman's battlefield images and is a good illustration of the conflictedness of the nation. What had begun as a glorious crusade of ideals had become a painful and bitter battle with the idea of America, a young nation, founded on the principles of freedom and justice, at its heart. Looking back, future generations would know that new buildings of fresh lumber and great railroads would be built at this

crossroad; however, the silence in the homes in the midst of the war must have been as deafening an illustration of America's confusion and conflict as the roaring in the fields.

Perhaps to escape the silence at home and in an attempt to resolve himself to the truth that any fight for freedom would involve death and fragmentation, between 1862 and 1864, Whitman nursed victims of the war in camp hospitals. Whitman describes the scene of his first day of hospital work:

Falmouth, Va., opposite Fredericksburgh, December 21, 1862.

Begin my visits among the camp hospitals in the army of the Potomac. Spend a good part of the day in a large brick mansion on the banks of the Rappahannock, used as a hospital since the battle – seems to have received only the worst cases.

Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart.

Several dead bodies lie near, each covered with its brown woolen blanket. [. . .] I went through the rooms, downstairs and up. Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, &c.

Also talked to three or four, who seem'd most susceptible to it, and needing it.

(Specimen 26)

Whitman uses the image of the amputated limbs to illustrate the fragmented state of the nation. This particular entry in his journal conveys, not only the horror of the war, but also his intense love for and dedication to the American people. This was the work that would occupy Whitman until the end of the war and that would temporarily damage his optimism and health; he walked through the hospitals and the camps, talking with the men, writing letters for those who could not, waiting with them for news of the war, and

acting as “sustainer of spirit and body” (*Specimen 78*). On what he estimates to be over six hundred visits to between 80,000 – 100,000 wounded, Whitman learned that the “worst cases” he had witnessed that first day were typical, recording his experiences with an impartiality that is absolute and that reflects for his reader the gruesomeness of his experience (*Specimen 78*).

Whitman makes himself a reflection of the nation's hurt by documenting, in more than forty pages in his journal, the damage caused by the conflicting ideologies at work in the Civil War. He describes “that many thread drama, with its sudden and strange surprises, its confounding of prophecies, its moments of despair, the dread of foreign interferences, the interminable campaigns, the bloody battles, [. . .] an unending, universal mourning-wail of women, parents, orphans – the marrow of the tragedy concentrating in those Army Hospitals” (*Specimen 81*). The very act of preserving the freedom that is so foundational to the idea of America had torn the country in two. Historian Edward Ayers, in his work *The Promise of the New South*, gives a poignant description of the American nation as it began the process of recovering from this “universal mourning-wail”:

The southern landscape of 1880 bore the signs of the preceding twenty years. Symmetrical rows of slave cabins had been knocked into a jumble of tenant shacks. Fields grew wild because it did not pay to farm them. Children came upon bones and rusting weapons when they played in the woods. Former slave owners and their sons decided which tenants would farm the best land and which tenants would have to move on. Confederate veterans at the courthouse or the general store bore empty sleeves and blank stares. Black people bitterly recalled the

broken promises of land from the Yankees and broken promises of help from their former masters and mistresses. Everyone labored under the burdens of the depression that had hobbled the 1870s. (3)

This description is a continuation of Whitman's portraits of individual soldiers in the hospitals on the battlefield. America as a national community was in need of healing just as desperately as its citizens.

After having "exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on" in the era of Reconstruction, and finding that "none of these finally satisfy or permanently wear," Whitman retreated to Timber Creek, New Jersey (*Specimen 82*). After being struck with paralysis in 1873 his intention was to restore his health and natural optimism through nature. According to Whitman nature "remains; to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the changes of seasons – the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night" (*Specimen 82*). At Timber Creek, Whitman became nature's comrade, and, as a result, became free, happy, and well.

In part two of "Song of Myself," Whitman reveals that he agrees with the Emersonian idea that there is no beginning or end, and so mankind must see, dance, love, and sing in the moment. The late poet and critic, Allen Ginsberg interprets Whitman's "carpe diem" to say, "you've got to look out through your own eyes, hear with your own ears, smell with your own nose, touch with your own touch, fingers, taste with your own tongue, and be satisfied" (7). Whitman's experience with nature reflects Ginsberg's assertions. The paragraphs from Timber Creek represent America's yearning for the "buoyant, panoramic, verbal views of the unique landscapes of the United States"

(Reynolds 171). This autobiographical work, *Specimen Days*, contains dedications to springs and brooks, descriptions of early summer, migrating birds, bumble-bees, cedar-apples, a July afternoon, locusts and katydids, the sky, the sea, colors, crows, and the lessons of the trees and the earth. Such are the tangible symbols of his spiritual awareness of America: "The emotional aspects and influences of Nature! [. . .] amid this wild, free scene, how healthy, how joyous, how clean and vigorous and sweet!" (*Specimen* 109). His convictions are illustrated in the landscape: "Nature remains, to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the changes of season -- the sun by day and the stars and heaven by night. We will begin from these convictions" (*Specimen* 82). These convictions echo those of Thoreau and Jefferson; in nature is found the simplicity of "the sun by day and heaven by night," and in the wisdom of the changing seasons, needed to pursue happiness. Whitman's evocation of the freedom of the "open air" also echos the very tenent of Americanness that had been damaged by the war. In this way he demonstrates to his comrades that the cure for their fragmented state could be found in the natural world around them.

In the early 1870s, while the nation was trying to reconstruct itself and Whitman was recovering at Timber Creek from the physical and psychological effects of the war, there was a renewed interest in the danger of unnecessary confinement. This interest had been resurrected by the advent of the sensation novel, in particular *Hard Cash*, by Charles Reade, which reported on the cruel treatment of patients in the asylums. Reade's plot included the discovery of elaborate instruments of restraint, kept behind locked asylum doors, and of patients being stripped naked and "mopped upon the flagstones" (Jones 162). In response to public fear and outrage, "asylum doctors" organized

themselves to give answer to the accusations leveled against them and their practices. The *Asylum Journal* asserted, "Insanity is purely a disease of the brain. [. . .] The physician is now the responsible guardian of the lunatic, and must ever remain so" (qtd. in Jones 155). As medical historian John Harley Warner has observed, to be a physician meant to give physic, or to issue prescriptions (qtd. in Pernick 1521). Unfortunately, in response to the movement to keep people out of asylums, doctors in the nineteenth century relied on therapies taken directly from science performed in the laboratory and prescribed medication for the purpose of stimulating the body's energy, "palliating symptoms" instead of curing diseases, and "restoring normal measurements of specific physiological functions" rather than restoring the body's natural balance (Pernick 1522).

Nature, however, was Whitman's physic. Like Thoreau he believed a cure for America could be found in nature. In addition to defying the very idea of confinement, Whitman was not interested in prescriptions that generated the illusion of outward normality. Rather, he sought complete healing from the "sad cases, old wounds, and incurable sicknesses" of the war (*Specimen* 76). On a perfect summer day at the Creek, Whitman sat in the shade of a large cherry tree, reflecting on his symbiotic relationship with nature. The sounds of the leaves and the bumble-bees nourish and lull him. He observes, "My health is somewhat better, and my spirit at peace" (*Specimen* 86). This relationship is echoed in "Song of Myself": in response to "Foreign Lands" who ask "for something to prove this puzzle the New World, / And to define America," Whitman offers his poems and orders, "Behold in them what you wanted" (*Song* 5). Nature as therapy, the "restorative power of the open air," can be accessed only by participation with it (*Specimen* 89).

This notion of nature is Whitman's cradle that rocks endlessly, his reflection in the river, and the song of himself. At Timber Creek he sat for hours under trees, took long walks, listened to the songs of birds, and catalogued their types and numbers. Like Thoreau, Whitman recognized that a healing power existed in nature. He agreed with Thoreau that the path and gate to the civilized world were best left unexplored. Whitman drew energy from the natural world and gave that same energy back in a kind of "ontological interchange" that defined his concept of comradeship (Rueckert 118).

Ecocritic William Rueckert uses a metaphor from nature to characterize Whitman's relationship with America: "Poems come out of the poets, go up into the atmosphere to create a kind of poetic atmosphere, come down upon us in the form of poetic rain, nourish us and make us creative and then are recycled" (118). This image of the water cycle points to the elements of energy and creation present in Whitman's offerings of poetry. Whitman is not writing for personal catharsis; he is writing a jeremiad to warn America of the dangers of fragmentation in the post-war era. He is giving his poetic energy to his comrades in the same way that he gained energy from Timber Creek. The result is the creation of an atmosphere where healing can take place; America can be nourished, renewed, and prepared to start fresh, just as Whitman was nourished, renewed and refreshed at the Creek. Rueckert's is an apt description of Whitman's feeling of comradeship with nature and of the relationship that he desires to have with his fellow Americans. Similarly, Whitman authored a chapter, titled "Standard of the Natural Universe," in John Burrough's work, *Notes on Walt Whitman*. In this short treatise Whitman defines the reciprocity he believes exists between mankind and nature and

between Americans. He argues that the spirit of nature and the spirit of mankind are interconnected and cyclical:

I assert that every true work of art has arisen, primarily, out of its maker, apart from his talent of manipulation, being filled fuller than other men with this passionate affiliation and identity with Nature. Then I go a step further, and, without being an artist myself, I feel that every good artist of any age would join me in subordinating the most vaunted beauties of the best artificial productions, to the daily and hourly beauty of the shows and objects of outward Nature. I mean inclusively, the objects of Nature in their human relations. (38)

His relationship with the environment, Reynolds argues, defines his Americanness and embodies its cure, "the uniqueness and unparalleled beauty of the American landscape, the importance of celebrating what is American rather than feeling compelled to repeat European formulas, the importance of taking time out to get lost in nature" (171). As it was for Thoreau, for Whitman it is this concept of the healing properties of the American landscape and the importance of taking time to "get lost in nature" that he tries to convey and persuade his American comrades to accept.

Whitman finds restoration in the young, strong arms of the oaks whose branches serve as pull-up bars, and in the sun that bathes his nude flesh. Here, by the creek and its neighboring fields, he feels his soul "calm'd and expanded beyond description" and "sap and virtue welling up out of the ground and tingling through me from crown to toe, like health's wine" (*Specimen 93*, 98). In turn, he invites the readers of "Song of Myself" to participate in and draw strength from his own awareness of America: "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems. / You shall possess the good

of the earth and the sun" (25). Later he urges, "If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your hand on my hip, / And in due time you shall repay the same service to me" (70). The trees and the fields, the sun and the birds, the bumble-bees and even the mud are his comrades. Nature gives him its strength and he, in turn, gives its energy back to the world in his textual landscape, "Song of Myself," his vision of America.

Ecocritic Daniel Philippon explains Whitman's idea of comradeship in his examination of Whitman's relationship with nature. Philippon calls this relationship a "rapport" through which Whitman seeks, "not to represent nature as an inanimate object for aesthetic consumption, but to 're-present' the nonhuman world as an animate landscape" with which readers can participate (180). Only shortly before Whitman was presenting his poetry to Americans, Thoreau had told them that he believed in the ability of the natural world to re-educate man about wisdom, simplicity, and happiness. Similarly, Whitman addresses nature, asserting that he intends to "learn from thee, and dwell on thee -- receive, copy, print from thee" (*Specimen* 83). Like Thoreau, who learns to forget the constraints of time and adopts the calm standard of the birds and flowers, Whitman soon goes beyond copying and finds a kind of peaceful coexistence with nature. He is bathed and kissed by the beams of the sun and sits near the black birds as they sing (*Specimen* 85). Eventually, Thoreau joins himself to nature, embracing "contemplation and the forsaking of works" (*Walden* 73). Whitman, too, merges completely with his environment; he abandons himself to the drone of the bees, "indolently absorbing the scene" around him (*Specimen* 86). He says of the sea, "we have met and fused [. . .] we have really absorbed each other and understand each other" (*Specimen* 95). It is the cyclical nature of his giving to and receiving from the environment that Whitman mirrors

in his poetry to America. His message is that Americans must first be willing to re-experience each other and then be willing to extend the energy to re-create their relationship with one another. Whitman is calling on America to learn from him and to dwell on his poetry in the same way that he has learned from his time in nature. His assertion is that the result will be the healing of the war-torn nation.

In his essay, "Meeting the Tree of Life," contemporary writer John Tallmadge relates a similar Whitmanesque experience shared between him and a jack pine tree. Of this moment of merging he says:

I felt myself stretching and cracking open, and from behind the charred crust of my anger I felt winged words falling into the wind. [. . .] I realized that this was true teaching at last: the act of bearing witness, to own a truth you have lived beyond all pretense. [. . .] It had opened my eyes to the spiritual dimension of life, the network of love that sustains us through times of despair and empowers us to transmute suffering into wisdom. This world is unseen, like harmony in music [. . .] yet it determines the character of our lives. (7)

This is the nature of Whitman's rapport with Timber Creek; it prescribes for him the medicine that can heal the wounds of war, the "convulsiveness" of "the actual distraction, heat, smoke, and excitement of those times" (*Specimen 78*). As a jeremiad figure who has gleaned his wisdom from nature, Whitman is urging America to turn its suffering into wisdom in order that the character of the collective American life can resemble "harmony in music" rather than the blasts of cannons.

Whitman extends his rapport with nature to his fellow Americans, prescribing for them the same cure for "the wide and deep national agitation, strange analogies, different

combinations, a different sunlight, or absence of it" (*Specimen 65*). It is Whitman's hope that America, experiencing nature as he has, will be capable of reconstructing itself. His vision is for signs of a united nation, "shoved up against the signs of the old" (Ayers 3). Part 11 of "Song of Myself" illustrates his idea of what Ginsberg called an "America of comradely awareness" where all people acknowledge tenderness, gentleness, comradeship, and adhesiveness in the way that the woman behind the costly blinds acknowledges male bathers (9):

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
 Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
 Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
 She hides handsome and richly drest aft blinds of the window

Which of the young men does she like the best?
 Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
 You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
 The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them. (31-2)

The woman in the line does not only love the beautiful bathers, she loves as well the "homeliest of them"; she does not seem to be aware that he is in any way inferior to the others; to her he is beautiful because life is not about winning or losing, being the handsomest, or the most financially viable; hers is a democratic love. A comradely America, without the hierarchies or the self-consciousness of beauty or homeliness, would be this way. True democracy, the very idea over which the Civil war was waged, would free Americans from the concerns of conquest, physical appearance, and economics, allowing everyone to be seen and loved.

This democracy had been demonstrated to Whitman in his relationship with nature and, in part 17 of "Song of Myself," he extends and universalizes his American vision for all mankind:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original

with me,

If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing.

If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing.

If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is,

This is the common air that bathes the globe. (37)

In the poem's concluding lines Whitman draws upon the idea of the interconnectedness of the human and non-human worlds without which men "are nothing, or next to nothing." He contends that the idea of democracy is in the thoughts of all men and is present in the very "grass that grows." Both men and the environment require the water and air that "bathes the globe" for survival, just as they require the idea of democracy. In

this way, Whitman exhorts Americans to find these “thoughts of all men” within themselves and to take responsibility for the future that does not include “contemptible dreams,” but instead a freedom that teaches “straying from me [freedom], yet who can stray from me?” (65). The result is that Whitman's self-proclaimed position as the physician of America is very like the physic that nature has extended to Whitman: he represents in his lore the strong branch of oak for Americans to pull themselves up on, he is their road to awareness, and he is the medicine that can free them from the paralysis and division left in the wake of civil war. His version of Americanness is freedom from which no one can stray, though they are free to do so. At the same time, he sees himself in the metaphor of being: “I act as the tongue of you, / Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd” (65). Like his relationship with nature, the camaraderie amongst Americans must be ultimate and symbiotic; they must take energy in from each other and give that energy back out again.

Whitman’s personal declaration of independence, the energy he seeks to pass on, is a picture of colloquial idealism, an idealism of which he sees himself as a representative example. In his poem, “Walt Whitman,” he begins to enumerate the qualities of this greatness; they are not all heroic or pretty, but they all point to the liberated man, at ease with himself and at the center of the universe. He declares, “I am the man – I suffered – I was there” (qtd. Buchanan 77). For him, the key to greatness was the realization of perfect equality of men, “subject to the action of particular revolutions, and guided by the identity of particular leaders” (Buchanan 75). In Whitman’s construction, equality involved both the celebration of and the disintegration of the self; Americans needed to alter their everyday practices, which were designed to protect them

from injury or discomfort. The agony of the Civil War had caused Americans to retreat into individual shells that might protect them from the germs of ideological difference that had resulted in war. While doctors recommended that people bathe daily, use top sheets in hotels, restrain from kissing babies on the lips, and increase their personal space, Whitman advocated comradeship and closeness (Wilkie 1).

Whitman's young disciple, John Burroughs, asserts the organic nature of this doctrine. He says of the *Leaves of Grass* collection: its purpose is "just as Nature has; to nourish, to strengthen, to fortify, to tantalize, to provoke curiosity, to hint, to suggest, to lead on and on, and never stop and never satisfy" (94). Whitman desires his works to be the "pure method of Nature," asserting that it "includes not only the artist of the beautiful, but forestalls the preacher and the moralist by his synthesis and kosmical integrity" (95). Nature is indiscriminating; it is not concerned with social success, poetry, philosophy, or politics. Nature's concern is life, the beautiful and the grotesque, but above all comradeship and liberty. Burroughs criticizes the other "nature" poets of the nineteenth century for their concern with the unnatural things of the world; Whitman, he says, is the only true poet of nature because he seeks to follow nature rather than to master her. His goal is to replicate the apparent freedom of the natural world, to return to the true state of America – the principles of "Life, Love, and the Immortal Identity of the Soul" (96). In this sense, Whitman is a lyric poet of the beautiful; he catalogues the beauty of "the clear eye, the firm and limber step, the sweet breath, the loving lip, the magnetism of sex, the lofty and religious soul" (qtd. in Burroughs 97). This religious soul is met on the "open road" where everyone is free and everyone is equal. Whitman agrees with Thoreau: it is not behind the enclosing walls of an asylum that a divided nation may be healed; rather, it

is on the open road with no path to the civilized world and without the hierarchies that a civilized world embraces.

The natural environment of the open road "loosen'd" Whitman's tongue and taught him that "perhaps the greatest moral lesson anyhow from earth, rocks, animals, is that same lesson of inherency, of *what is*, without the least regard to what the looker on (the critic) supposes or says, or whether he likes or dislikes" (*Specimen 90*). In an 1879 letter to John Burroughs, Whitman said of himself (in the third person):

Through all that fluid, weird Nature, "so far and yet so near," he finds human relations, human respensions. In entire consistence with botany, geology, science, or what-not, he endures his very seas and woods with passion, more than the old hamadryads or tritons. His fields, his rocks, his trees, are not dead material, but living companions. (qtd. in Philippon 189)

In this passage Whitman states clearly his belief in the interconnectedness of all life. He calls upon America to be in "entire consistence" with the environment, arguing, like Thoreau, that making the natural world a "living companion" will lead to comradeship among them. As it was for Thoreau, nature is Whitman's example of true democracy. It is the road, the physic, and the prescription that he urges America to choose and the cure that he offers to help it locate. This is his idea of a healthy America where no one is judged by color, wealth, or creed. According to John Steinbeck, America's democratic ideal "emerges as a function [. . .] of Americans' participation in the lives of other people and in their oceanic sense of involvement with all humanity" (Covici xvi). For Whitman, an America that could capture the solidarity of the drum-tap, and an understanding of interconnectedness, by accepting the healing offered by nature would be a true

democracy and would be truly free and well. Following in Thoreau's footsteps and consistent with the nature writing tradition, Whitman has constructed scaffolding upon which Americans can climb. He has used the energy and atmosphere that he experienced in the natural world to create a poetic rain that can nourish and renew a fragmented nation.

Tinker Creek

In the spirit of the nature writing tradition, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* traces a personal exploration of nature, spirituality, and self, bringing the ideas and concerns raised by Whitman and Thoreau into the twentieth century. The "celebration of savagery" that began with early nature writers came into its prime in the 1900s (Nash 151). By 1888, Theodore Roosevelt's *Boone and Crockett Club* and the beginning of the National Park movement demonstrated a rising frustration with the same "over-civilization" of Americans that troubled Thoreau (Nash 152). Dillard, whose critics have called her a "consummate American," echoes these concerns (Smith 2). Like Thoreau, she takes nature as her text, believing it to be the "inheritor of abstract qualities" such as truth, liberty, social justice, and equality (*Pilgrim* 2). Dillard sees in her Tinker Creek home the "tradition of democratic idealism" and uses it to create her own understanding of nature as therapy (McClintock 66). For Dillard, like Whitman and Thoreau, the interrogation of the particulars of the natural environment leads to self-restoration in the form of personal, subjective vision. Whitman wrote poetry to the American people to share his vision of comradeship and freedom; Thoreau expressed his vision of simplicity and independence in his retreat to Walden. In the twentieth century, amidst the prevailing philosophies of relativism and individualism, Dillard speaks to individual members of the American nation, inviting her readers to "stalk the gaps" to find vision for themselves. This vision, she believes, will allow Americans to break down the materialism of the over-civilized American nation. By following the example of ecological interconnectedness, Dillard asserts that America might return to a spirit of community and create a future for the nation that is moral and responsible.

Like Thoreau, Dillard is interested in creating time to be in nature. She positions herself in the larger context of national narrative as a feminized version of the American Adam, claiming Tinker Creek as her Virgin Land and the pursuit of vision as her particular “errand into the wilderness.” Her definition of Jefferson’s pursuit of happiness encompasses the simplicity of Thoreau and the energy of Whitman; it can be described as vision, or the freedom to see. In the opening chapter she admits that vision is something that must be learned and that, in her time on the creek, she has become “better and better at seeing” (5). She admits, “what I see and seem to understand about nature is merely one of the accidents of freedom” (201). Dillard knows that discovering sight involves letting go of all other concerns and she follows Thoreau as he pursues this simplicity. She also understands that attaining vision requires energy and, although she does not do pull-ups on oaks as Whitman did, she does spend long hours pursuing this vision.

Dillard’s concept of vision is similar to Thoreau’s experience with sunlight. Thoreau watches the sun shine on his possessions and listens to “the free wind blow,” observing:

So much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads, -- because they once stood in their midst. (74)

Dillard’s expression is close, in its Platonic nature, to Thoreau’s:

These are morning matters, pictures you dream as the final wave heaves you up on the sand to the bright light and drying air. You remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens your skin; you stand; you leave the lighted shore in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing. (2)

Both attest to belief in the existence of the absolute: Thoreau calls it the “forms” that come to be transferred to familiar objects and Dillard refers to them as “pictures dream” before returning to the world of shadows. For both, the absolute is the perfect expression of what we see only “transferred”. Ultimately, we are left “remembering nothing” here on earth. Thoreau directly attributes his glimpse into the ultimate to the power of nature; perhaps because of her immersion in twentieth-century relativism, it takes Dillard a moment longer to do so. In the next paragraph she asserts, “Tinker Creek [. . .] holds me at anchor [. . .] facing the stream of light pouring down. It’s a good place to live; there’s a lot to think about. The Creeks [. . .] are an active mystery, fresh every minute” (2). Freedom, for Thoreau and Dillard, lies in an assertion of Romantic theory: the ability to pursue truth resides in moments of access to this power and mystery and to glimpses of the ultimate.

Despite the difficulty inherent in approaching the power and mystery of truth, Dillard claims her right to the liberty of vision by committing herself to the study of nature’s minutiae. She adopts what Michael Branch calls an “excursion format,” and engages the world as an observer with an attitude of contemplation (197). This strategy links her to both Thoreau and Whitman, both of whom walked in nature to experience its

power. Thoreau refers to walking as an art form understood by only a few geniuses (*Walking* 71). He goes on to describe the history of the art:

sauntering: which word is beautifully derived “from 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, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a Sainte-Terrer,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. (*Walking* 71)

In this way, walking through nature may be understood to be a pilgrimage whose goal is the experience of nature’s power for truth and restoration. Whitman further illuminates the remarkable powers that may be experienced while walking in the natural world by adding the qualities of purity and speech to its credit:

still sauntering on, to the spring under the willows – musical as soft clinking glasses – pouring a sizeable stream, thick as my neck, pure and clear, out from its vent where the bank arches over like a great brown shaggy eyebrow or mouth-roof – gurgling. Gurgling ceaselessly – meaning, saying something, of course (if one could only translate it) – always gurgling there, the whole year through.

(*Specimen* 83)

For her part, Dillard believes that, in nature:

If the day is fine, any walk will do; it all looks good. [. . .] You know you’re alive. You take huge steps, trying to feel the planet’s roundness arc between your feet. Kazantzakis says that when he was young he had a canary in a globe. When he freed the canary, it would perch on the globe and sing. All his life, wandering the earth, he felt as though he had a canary on top of his mind, singing. (3)

In other words, all that is required to uncover moments of access to the ultimate is a fine day and walk in nature. Dillard is not guaranteeing that every walk on a nice day will result in the discovery of truth; rather, the purpose of sauntering through nature is to experience the freedom of the canary walking on the globe, the freedom to experience the arc of the earth and the beauty of the environment's details, should truth reveal itself as well, so much the better.

In addition to walking along the edge of the creek, perching on rocks, and hiding for hours behind trees to catch glimpses of frogs, mantises, and spiders, Dillard reads case studies about the newly sighted, the theology of Thomas Merton, and the naturalist writings of Stewart Edward White. In all of these endeavors she seeks to "take a wider view" and to "look at the world as landscape;" she studies, under the guidance of those who have seen, the text of nature that she might find in it the key to seeing, "the pearl of great price" (Dillard 9, 33). Just as Jefferson believed that education would lead to happiness and Thoreau talked about becoming re-educated in the woods, Dillard's education is completed by observing the natural world herself and by reading other people's narratives about nature and vision.

Dillard recognizes that the education she gains through access to the narratives of others and through vision is subjective and imperfect. She views herself as peering through a "keyhole" and seeing with only "thirty percent of the light that comes from the sun" and she knows that this is true for everyone (19). Returning again to the relativism of her postmodern world, Dillard lacks the sublime confidence that bolstered both Thoreau and Whitman in the nineteenth century. Her position is, however, similar to Thoreau's, as he tries to see his possessions through the sunlight, and to Whitman's, as he

traces his gradual acclimation to his creek environment. Even though Dillard trains to read nature's manuscript, her vision, like Tinker Creek, is "sometimes muddy, sometimes clear" and she sees "only tatters of clearness through a pervading obscurity" (Legler 243, Dillard 19). Dillard asserts that "the lover can see, and the knowledgeable," but does not attribute either quality to herself (18). She attempts to compensate for her lack of love and knowledge by acting as a microscope under which all of nature comes under intense observation. Falling leaves, cottontail rabbits, and a goldfinch on a flower help her to complete the enormous task of learning to see nature truly. She records her efforts with scholarly precision in writing that gives "detailed attention to the land itself" (Cologne-Brooks 222).

According to David Lavery, Dillard uses her ability to catalogue the natural world of Tinker Creek to produce reflections of the "illuminated manuscript" of nature (258, 261). Dillard herself claims that, when she walks in nature without a camera, her "own shutter opens" and the "moment's light prints on [her] own silver gut" (31). When she sees in this way she is an "unscrupulous observer;" vision gives itself up to her; the act of seeing becomes the act of experiencing (31). She offers an example of this type of seeing: sitting on the sycamore log bridge one evening, she watches fish in the creek and one by one they approach the surface and "flash! The sun shot out from its silver side" (31). She cannot catch this vision when she tries; it draws her vision "just as it disappeared" and imprinted itself on the film of her subconscious to be remembered and contemplated later (31). This vision allows her to consider the truth that she experiences in nature in contrast to the materialism presented to her in society.

Awareness, however, stands in the way of her vision, causing her to experience only shadows. The fact that “nature conceals with a grand nonchalance” and that the “secret of seeing [. . .] may be found, it may not be sought” hinders the task of recording and reflecting the truth in nature (Dillard 16, 33). Perhaps because nature is one step closer to the Platonic form, or because, as Dillard says, “It could be that God has not absconded but spread [. . .] to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle [. . .] that we can feel only blindly of its hem,” it is terribly difficult to see truly or purely the truth that is in nature without the interference of awareness (7). Dillard defines awareness as the baggage that culture has taught her to carry. For example, as she strokes a puppy in the parking lot of a filling station, she watches the sun play on the slopes of the mountains. Suddenly she is “more alive than all the world” and she thinks, “This is it [. . .] this is it, right now” (78). This awareness of the vision ends it; she feels as though “I drew scales over my eyes between me and the mountain and gloved my hand between me and the puppy” (79).

Dillard has trouble escaping the awareness of twentieth-century American materialism, which demands that she work to acquire the product she seeks. As she strokes the puppy, her awareness of having achieved her goal and earned her prize ends the experience. She knows that nearly everyone in modern America is well versed in the art of “faking it” and is pulling herself back to her “original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least *where* it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can’t learn why” (12). Her goal is that of Thoreau: to spend as little time as possible doing what is necessary and meeting basic needs so that the rest of her time may be spent ignoring awareness. She continues to go into nature to put herself

in the path of vision. Dillard's desire is to experience, as objectively as possible, the simplicity of nature's example for living and to experience the therapy of interconnectedness (Dillard 11). She declares her allegiance to this method of pursuing truth and vision by exhorting her readers to "go up into the gaps" (269). "The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God," where "inexplicable moments" are experienced (269). Dillard calls upon her readers to "stalk the gaps" in order to understand a perspective that is "other" than that which twentieth-century culture has taught them and to join the effort to preserve the interconnected web that holds nature and humanity together.

Dillard believes nature to be the best retreat from the American ideology of material gain at all costs. Like Thoreau, she believes that the natural world contains the "mystery of continuous creation and all that providence implies" (3). Dillard calls it her "oracle," and knows that it is only in nature that humanity can become better at seeing the world clearly and learn to recognize "unwrapped gifts and free surprises" (5, 15). For this reason, she is concerned about the preservation of the environment and keeps careful record of all that she sees. Her observation of trees, butterflies, and muskrats is evidence that "the world is fairly studded with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand" (15). She asserts, "If you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get" (15). On the other hand, Americans who are so focused on material gain do not recognize a "chip of copper" when they see it (15). To Dillard, such a greedy, over-aware

citizen is “so malnourished and fatigued that he won’t stoop to pick up a penny,” and so misses out on vision (15).

Dillard takes the microcosm of Tinker Creek, “the world with all its stimulus and beauty,” as her gap (3). For her, Tinker Creek is to America what the center of a spider’s web is to Tinker Creek: “this hub [. . .] from which she bore lightly in every direction an invisible news,” a sort of snow-globe of the whole of the nation (51). She constructs a meta-narrative, her “invisible news,” that investigates the constant paradox between the beautiful and the grotesque that she sees in the environment of the creek. Her choice is consistent with America’s national narrative in that she believes the key to understanding God and herself may be found through this “errand into the wilderness” of the creek. Her narratives, like the nation’s, propose “a scene of emancipation, wherein a captive people [in this case, herself] liberated themselves from a tyrannical power [for Dillard, blindness and confusion]” (*National* 4). She takes advantage of what David Mazel has called the “epistemological space” granted her by environmental discourse and her own combination of scientific and transcendental sight to examine this small piece of God’s “back parts” in an attempt to cure America of its over-cultivation (27).

The “meteorological journey of the mind” that Dillard experiences at Tinker Creek examines large natural phenomena, such as clouds, sky, and trees; it also examines intricacy, such as the smallest of insects (*Pilgrim* 11). Because there is wealth to be discovered in all of the pennies God has strewn, she considers Floridian sharks alongside moth caterpillars and in every instance finds paradox: sharks are “grace tangled in a rapture with violence” and pine processionaries are, at the same time, brilliant road makers and enslaved to instincts that mandate them to death (8, 65). This paradoxical

relationship between beauty and cruelty is troubling to Dillard; she fears the mindlessness of insects and desires to resolve the shadows into beauty. This desire is evident in her narrative's opening anecdote. The cat who visits her in the night purrs and stinks of "urine and blood"; it kneads her "as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother" (1). The cat himself is a paradox: he is comfortable -- purring, and playfully pummeling -- and he is brutal -- stinking of blood and sharpening his claws. For Dillard, the cat is transformed, perhaps by her half asleep and semi-aware state, into a creature whose paw prints leave her "painted with roses" (1). Her vision renders the potentially shadowy beautiful. However, even as she accepts what might have been a disturbing experience as a beautiful one, she acknowledges that the question of paradox still exists. She asks, "What blood is this, and what roses?" and asserts that the question has several possible answers that deal with everything from birth to murder (1). Dillard ends the passage with a list of words that speak to her confusion: "mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence" (2). As she watches the mating of the mantises, whose ritual involves copulation and the simultaneous destruction of the male, the powers of creation and destruction that are so linked in nature fascinate Dillard. In much the same way that Whitman was willing to tell the story of America after the Civil War with absolute honesty, Dillard is willing to see wealth and take pleasure even in the disturbing images that her vision brings to her.

Tinker Creek, the microcosm of American ideals, is prone to this terrifying tendency towards paradox. Through most of the book the creek is Dillard's "anchor-hold" and is full of life and light, but on one night the creek takes on the mindlessness of the insects and drops "dumb dead" over rocks, becoming a "hideous parody of real natural life" (69). In this sinister moment she feels that the creek is not an anonymous

life form; it moves because it is pushed down the mountain by the force of gravity and, so, what she has loved becomes “senseless and horrifying,” a paradox itself (69). Some evenings later, when the creek is lit by a full moon, she is again unsure. She seems to sense that there is an inherent life and beauty in gravity and, possibly, in the “fixed world” of the insects. She re-images Tinker Creek, through the keyhole of her subjective vision, as the “Point of Relative Inaccessibility” where the “twin oceans of beauty and horror meet” (69). She realizes that this is equally true of the larger world outside of Tinker Creek. In America, the paradoxical forces of nobility and savagery, civilization and wilderness, necessity and excess meet and all things are “about to become” and “sure to become,” if Americans can relearn to see them that way.

Dillard resigns herself to the mystery of these paradoxes, claiming that she is “no scientist;” rather, she is a mystic, content to accept that the creek is subject to nature’s mystery: full of light one minute and darkness the next (Papa 106). Yet she finds meaning in the truth and freedom she experiences through vision and believes, like Whitman and Thoreau, that nature can bring these paradoxes closer together and can heal the gap between the dualities. She clings to the purpose of stalking the gaps, searching for aspects of herself, the natural world, and God that have not yet been considered and that may be healed by her vision of interconnectedness. She decides to be content with the “inexplicable moments” that the world offers. She accepts them as they are and is grateful that her needs are met. The result is that she embraces the fact that she cannot escape or ignore paradox. Like the circle of life and death, or the bloody paw prints of her tomcat, “extravagant gestures are the very stuff of creation” and must be accepted as such (9). Beauty and grace exist in the world alongside horror and grotesqueness whether or not

she sees them; the job of the seer or reader is to search for the gaps, to explore what is not obvious, to sit on creek banks and hide in bushes waiting for God to reveal the sheer expansiveness of his creation and to learn the lesson that that creation can teach. In this way Dillard is somewhat less idealistic than her predecessors. Thoreau and Whitman both believed that the absolute, the forms, could be accessed, at least momentarily, in nature and that this access had the potential, if it could be widely embraced, to perfect America as a nation. This is the end goal of their mission as jeremiads: Thoreau believed that all people could live simply and Whitman believed that all people could experience the comradeship of true democracy. For Dillard, however, the purpose of relating her experience with the natural world is to encourage Americans to experience the gaps, both the healing and the destructive nature of the universe. The purpose of her jeremiad is to bring America to the point of experiencing, first hand, a connection with its landscape.

Ultimately, in the face of all of this “pizzazz,” she sees her place as being to “assist God in the 'hallowing' of the things of creation” (94). Her knowledge of God's extravagant creativity, and of the abundance of life on earth, puts her in the same position as the Eskimo who berated the priest for telling him about God and sin. The Eskimo's knowledge made him responsible for his actions in the same way that Dillard's knowledge makes her responsible for her actions towards nature, at Tinker Creek and in America. She must at the very least apply her intelligence to making herself increasingly aware of the environment and its inhabitants. She must get her microscope down from the shelf, “spread a drop of duck pond on the glass slide, and try to look spring in the eye” (122). Hers is a “bucking faith” where “one hand grips and the other flails the air,” but it is a transforming faith that fills her with “tranquility and trembling” (269). Dillard

explores the illuminated manuscript of the American landscape, looking for vision, healing, and an understanding of truth that the twentieth century has lost sight of.

In her rambles on the creek, she has accumulated scientific facts, done the measurements, read the books, and studied the theories. In this way she is very like Thoreau and Whitman in their pursuit of first hand evidence of nature's power. This power, for them, lay in America's ability to understand that the energy and wisdom of the absolute could be found in their own landscape. From Dillard's mystical perspective, however, the power of nature lies in its ability to point Americans beyond their landscape; she believes that true healing will come from an experience with her Judeo Christian God. From this belief comes her strong sense that it would be wrong to "simply step aside from the cracks" (268). Rather, she sees God's world as being "wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright" and believes that she should be an active participant in it, with all of its paradox (268). This faith moves her to a place that is beyond post-modernity, where "quantum physics has done away with predictability" and "objective scientific observations are understood to be suspect" (Papa 105). She has faced the paradoxes these notions present and accepted that, while they are true, when they are placed beside her experience with vision and God they no longer matter. She knows that nature is unpredictable: it "conceals with a grand nonchalance" (16). Reflections on the creek teach Dillard this mystery: clouds in the Virginia sky, "invisible clouds pass among visible clouds [. . .] so a greater light extinguishes a lesser as though they didn't exist," reiterate to her that revelation is not in her power but is wholly the prerogative of God and nature (22). Her experience of

"walking upside-down in the sky" teaches her that the exact measurements and predictions of science should be held suspect:

The snow looks light and the sky dark, but in fact the sky is lighter than the snow. Obviously the thing illuminated cannot be lighter than its illuminator. The classical demonstration of this point involves simply laying a mirror flat on the snow so that it reflects in its surface the sky, and comparing by sight this value to that of the snow. This is all very well, even conclusive, *but the illusion persists*. The dark is overhead and the light is at my feet; I'm walking upside-down in the sky. (43; emphasis mine).

Natural observation is more powerful to Dillard than scientific results of experiments; her mystical sensibility appreciates the mystery of creation more than it does objective explanation. What matters to Annie Dillard is "meaning, fidelity to some purpose, and coherence" of vision (Smith 3). In this way, she believes America's road back to Tom Sawyer's world of optimism and imagination may be found.

Dillard finds coherence in her resolve to accept herself, the environment, and God as they are: full of paradox and yet capable of providing moments of extreme truth, beauty, and provision. She characterizes the paradox:

In addition to the wave breast of thanksgiving, in which the wave breast is waved before the Lord, there is another voluntary offering performed at the same time. In addition to the wave breast of thanksgiving, there is the heave shoulder. The wave breast is waved at the altar of the Lord; the

heave shoulder is heaved [. . .] This heave is a violent, desperate way of catching God's attention. (264)

She knows that neither gesture can be "whole without the other," and that in nature she makes both and is sounded, as a bell, by some great power (271).

American essayist Kathleen Norris, in her memoir *The Cloister Walk*, explains the position of the twentieth-century poet as she is sounded by a power greater than herself: "Poets understand that they do not know what they mean, and that this is the source of their strength" (10). Like Dillard, Norris recognizes that she must be able to declare "what I do not see I do not know" and to accept that as a "mark, even a cornerstone, of a poet's faith" (11). Dillard's response is to place herself in nature where, if her timing is right and she can catch the attention of God, she can move beyond the place where she has "reached the limits of our language, and knowing" and allow her senses, or vision, and the offerings of nature to "know" for her (Norris 11). Norris explains:

In contending with words, poets come to know their power, much the way monastics do in prayer and *lectio*. We experience words as steeped in mystery, forces beyond our intellectual grasp. In the late twentieth century, when speculative knowledge and the technologies it has spawned reign supreme, poets remain dependent on a different form of knowledge, perhaps akin to what Hildegard termed seeing, hearing, and knowing simultaneously. (11)

Dillard calls this kind of knowledge "awareness" and in it she finds the truth that she needs to escape the materialism of American society and to accept the paradoxes of the natural world as "steeped in mystery." At last, she can "wail the right question," "choir the proper praise," and continue to experience nature's therapy (9).

In another passage, Norris describes the plight of contemporary American Benedictine monastics as they face the dilemma of accepting novices who have no concept of communal living (21). She reflects on the "great tensions that have always existed in the monastic imperative -- between structure and freedom, diversity and unity, openness to the world and retreat from it," concluding that "differences between individuals will either be absorbed when the community gathers to act as one, or these communal activities become battlegrounds" (21). In their nature narratives, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard examine these paradoxes as they see them working in the greater national community. They conclude, like Norris, that the only solutions are either a national, communal move to change the direction of the country, or constant, internal battles. These nature writers reflect on the overgrown, over-mobile, and over-consuming American society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like the prophet Jeremiah who said, "Stop wearing out your shoes" (2:25), these American Adams advocate a return to the wilderness that is the foundation of America's unique national character and that can offer the nation a balm for its fragmentation due, at least in part, to its over-civilization. Reflecting on the words of Jeremiah, Kathleen Norris asserts, "A prophet's task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day" (34).

Thoreau, Whitman, and Dillard are prophets of this type; they, like Jeremiah, are a "necessary other, a reminder and reproach" (Norris 38). Henry David Thoreau placed himself on the margins of nineteenth-century New England society, arguing that its excessive materialism had already led them to a nation-wide financial crisis and that it

would eventually lead to massive ecological destruction. Thoreau appealed to the agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson's Natural Laws, particularly the pursuit of happiness, to advocate America's return to simplicity. Together, Thoreau and Jefferson argue that man is happiest when his basic needs are met and he is free to pursue education. Thoreau takes the argument one step farther, asserting that both the means for meeting these needs and the pattern for re-education can be found in the natural world. Similarly, after his experiences with the victims of the Civil War, Walt Whitman sought out the therapy of the natural world. Defying the medical profession's movement towards confinement and placebo prescriptions, Whitman claims nature as his physician and the "restorative power of the open air" as his prescription (*Specimen* 89). He draws energy from the natural world and attempts, through his poetry, to pass that energy on to his "comrades," the American nation. On the open road Whitman meets nature and, through his rapport with her, attempts to heal a nation torn apart by war.

Annie Dillard's proclamation of those things she holds to be self-evident is as complicated and wrought with paradox as is the world that it seeks to represent. The narrative that she contributes to the American story offers her subjective vision of a piece of the nation in the form of scientific cataloging and mystic reminiscing. Gavin Cologne-Brooks describes *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as "organic, growing and molded by [. . .] the rhetorical and ideological construction of America and Americanness" (2). Dillard herself, in her introduction to *Modern American Memoirs*, acknowledges the organic nature of national narrative:

It is impossible to imagine the writers in this disparate volume as a single, composite American of any heritage or gender, who appears in a family, grows up

somewhere, and somehow watches, learns, falls in love, works, and perhaps has children and grandchildren. The writer celebrates, as Charles Wright did in a poem, “all the various things that lock our wrists to the past.” (xii)

She recognizes contradictions in herself, her environment, and her God; her ability to reconcile herself to an acceptance of all three preserves her own narrative and America's national narrative, allowing for the realization of a future that is both moral and compassionate. In this way she concurs with Thoreau and Whitman who also believed that America could experience healing: Thoreau argued that a return to simplicity and to the wisdom demonstrated by the natural world would be the arbor-vitæ that could return to America the ideals of individual freedom and communal responsibility. Similarly, Whitman asserted that the lessons of nature and acceptance of its prescriptions could restore the interconnectedness between Americans and the non-human world.

In a 1975 letter to Eleanor B. Wymard, Dillard claimed, “Art is my interest, mysticism my message, Christian mysticism” (qtd. in Slovic 63). The object of her message is embodied in Tinker Creek:

The creeks – Tinker and Carvin’s – are an active mystery, fresh every minute.

Theirs is the mystery of creation and all that continuous providence implies: The uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection. (3)

In this way Dillard, along with others who have contributed to America's national narrative, strives to answer Jeremiah's lament, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" (8:22). Norris calls prophets "the carriers of hope through disastrous

times" and, just as Jeremiah hoped for a people made holy by "doing what is right and just in the land" (33:15), the nature writers' response is one of ultimate hope for America. (45). Nature is America's balm, its physician, and in it lies the nation's hope.

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