

must acknowledge Molly Mullin: she is my inadvertent muse. And for nurturing my interest in the thoughtful life many years ago, and for continuing to send me lists of all the birds he has seen (602 species at last count), I'd like to thank Jim Edwards, a genuine intellectual and a philosopher in the best sense of the word.

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## Preface: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America

*"Think like a mountain": the task promises to be a bit  
tricky for some.*

Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*

We assume that the truth about nature is straightforward. Many of us still believe that ecologists can meet our need for a better understanding of natural processes simply by thinking "like a mountain," as Aldo Leopold once urged them and all of us to do. "Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf," Leopold wrote. "Only the ineducable tyro can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves, or the fact that mountains have a secret opinion about them."<sup>1</sup> Inspirational they may be, but these words understate the difficulty of the thinking we need to do. Luc Ferry is right to suggest that the task Leopold sets us "promises to be a bit tricky," since even the best-educated among us fall short of rocklike objectivity and "can fail to sense the presence or absence of wolves." When it comes to environmental matters, all of us are going to seem like tyros if we measure ourselves by the alpine, inhuman standards of objectivity and sensitivity that Leopold postulates.

In recent decades, increasing numbers of ecologists have realized that knowledge of nature of the sort imagined by Leopold is impossible to acquire, and have suggested that our vision of ecology, and our ideas about and attitudes toward nature, need to be much humbler and a lot more supple than they are. Unfortunately, the humility and suppleness that we need to cultivate seem to be ruled out by the cultural presumptions that shape our thoughts about nature. In the United States, these presumptions give rise to a peculiar contradiction: some of those who still believe that this is nature's nation also believe that humans are alienated from the natural world by virtue of their enculturation, if not simply because of the bare fact of

consciousness. The two beliefs are incompatible: Americans cannot be natural and alien at the same time. And so round and round the mountain we go, trying to sense the presence of wolves and read the mountain's thoughts, yet secretly afraid we won't be able to do either.

We aren't alone, however, in our confused thinking about nature. Many less parochial conceptions of it, widely credited both in the United States and elsewhere, are also too pat, too vague, and more or less contradictory. For example, ecological research has shown that the ideas that nature seeks to establish balance and harmony and that everything in nature is interconnected are no better than platitudes. Ideas like these are belied by the natural world's tendency to chaos, competition, and continual evolution. Nonetheless, thoughtful and sensitive people, including many American environmentalists and Deep Ecologists, as well as Greens in other countries, still cherish the ideas of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness, and believe that the science of ecology has verified their truth.

Over the course of this book I will address misconceptions of and about both nature and ecology in a number of different contexts, though most often in the context of American literature and literary study. I focus on some attitudes toward nature long regarded as foundational to American culture, attitudes which can be traced back to Emerson and Thoreau, and still more distantly, to Crèvecoeur and Jefferson. My concern, however, is not with the development of these attitudes historically; in fact, I ignore Crèvecoeur and Jefferson altogether. And I have only a few things to say about Emerson and Thoreau, and say them more or less coincidentally, in connection with recent scholarly attempts to provide a genealogy for American nature writing that is rooted in transcendentalist thought. I am going to consider these attempts under the rubric of "ecocriticism," though I think this neologism is just as troublesome as it is helpful. Thus far it has been used to designate "a practice which is necessary," considering the growing importance of environmental issues, and yet "not accurate or coherent," as one British ecocritic has put it.<sup>2</sup>

While I have taken into account a number of issues and have covered a lot of ground in *The Truth of Ecology*, this book isn't meant to be a survey in the usual sense of the term. It doesn't pretend to be exhaustive, for one thing, and it is frankly argumentative for another; nor is it concerned to focus attention on and help create a canon of environmental literature. While writing it, I found myself less interested in establishing lines of descent and zones of influence, and more interested in calling things of that sort into question, especially as they have come to be regarded in ecocriticism. I also found myself concerned less with determining the true historical provenance of American attitudes toward nature than with the issue of whether these attitudes have shaped and continue to shape our thoughts about nature for good or for ill. By "our thoughts" I mean the thoughts of Americans in general, of American writers and critics, especially ecocritics, in particular, and of anyone else who might be interested in the motley interactions of nature and culture in relation to environmentalism.

To put the point another way, though much of the subject matter of *The Truth of Ecology* is American, its perspective is cosmopolitan and comparative, and it refuses to take the value of canons and canyons for granted, no matter how grand they may seem. While strictly speaking this book may be neither very cosmopolitan nor especially comparative, given its almost exclusive focus on American texts, in writing it I pursued a deliberate strategy of estrangement by adopting something like the distanced or comparatist's perspective described by Ursula Heise in her contribution to a recent forum on ecocriticism.<sup>3</sup> I also found myself relying (though not exclusively) on the insights of non-American critics, literary theorists, and philosophers at key junctures in my arguments, insights that on the whole tend to be more skeptical than otherwise. I believe that a skeptical approach to the culture of nature in America is both fully warranted and long overdue (skepticism about nature itself we have had already and in overabundance). As the environmental historian Richard White has noted, "Americans are constantly discovering nature, and through it, or so they think, themselves. But what they discover and how they discover it are hardly simple matters."<sup>4</sup>

*The Truth of Ecology* attempts to rediscover, to complicate, and hence to redefine ecocriticism, where despite the relative newness of the field, or perhaps precisely because of it, some creaky old traditions have found refuge and are giving off an odor of moldy fig, which is not the sort of green ambience ecocriticism ought to have. The first generation of ecocritics has embraced a curatorial model of literary scholarship and has spurned literary theory, apparently without having reaped the benefits of its close acquaintance. This has made ecocriticism seem overly devotional, and hostile to the intellect at times. And though the field has been described as an interdisciplinary one, ecocriticism has been lamentably under-informed by science studies, philosophy of science, environmental history, and ecology, subjects ecocritics cannot afford to ignore for reasons that should be obvious.

So far most of ecocriticism's efforts at being interdisciplinary have been limited to troping on a vocabulary borrowed from ecology, a limitation which is perhaps only to be expected given the traditional and quite belletristic conception of literature held by many ecocritics. It seems to me that to be interdisciplinary is to be plunged into the kind of uncertainty that calls traditional approaches like belletrism into question and creates a crisis, as Roland Barthes suggested some years ago, when the term first became fashionable. He wrote: "The *interdisciplinarity* which is today held up as a prime value in research cannot be accomplished by the simple confrontation of specialist branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins *effectively* (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down."<sup>5</sup>

With Barthes's observation in mind, I've argued in the first two thirds of this book that a satisfactory account of literature's relation to nature and culture can only be offered from a theoretically adventurous and conscientiously interdisciplinary perspective. In its last third, I've provided some examples of what ecocriticism writ-

ten from such a hard-won perspective might be like. In order to adequately address the most complex issues in ecocriticism, or rather in order to complicate the issues ecocritics face to the degree I think is needful, I must first review the history and current state of play in several fields of inquiry, principally ecology, science studies, and ecocriticism itself, with brief forays along the way into recondite subjects like evolutionary and cognitive theory, the history and philosophy of science, pragmatism, neopragmatism, semiotics, cultural studies, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, though with regard to the last items on this list I tread as lightly as I can to avoid setting off alarms and spending too much time lingering over ploughed ground. The need, as I see it, to broach all these topics means that the possibilities and pitfalls of thinking about nature and culture, in a space carved out (or more likely, left open) between disciplines not necessarily compatible with one another, is a central issue of this book.

Ambiguous spaces—desert wastes, barren shores, howling wildernesses—are said to inspire revelations, but interpreting revelations requires us to be as circumspect as possible, even if that means retreating behind closed doors so that we can mull things over in deep abstraction and giving free reign to our powers of doubt. It is interesting to learn, for example, that issues raised by its tendency to fall back on prophetic or literary means of suasion have been recurrent in the history of ecology, where an over-reliance on analogy and metaphor has posed an obstacle to the advance of theory and research. That it must struggle with rhetorical issues would seem to link ecology's misfortunes with troubles of a sort familiar to students of the humanities. They may feel tempted—and have been—to assert that improving our representations of nature and understanding the nature of representation are two aspects of a single philosophical enterprise, and that ecology is therefore on its way to being something literary and literature on its way to being something ecological (it just needs to be given a nudge in the right direction). To make these assertions is to indulge in lazy thinking: in many respects, the vagaries of ecological research and theory and those of literary and cultural studies are not in the least homologous, and it is important to recognize this dissimilarity. If we do, we will have to disagree with the British ecocritic Jonathan Bate when he writes, "Locked in the prison-house of language, dwelling in the *logos* not the *oikos*, we know only the text, not the land. Unless, that is, we could come to understand that every piece of land is itself a text with its own syntax and signifying potential."<sup>6</sup> In point of fact, ecology offers no support whatsoever for the view, very tempting to a literary critic, that "every piece of land is itself a text." Our motto, when it comes to judging these matters, should be Nietzsche's: "Seeing things as similar and making them the same is the mark of weak eyes."<sup>7</sup>

However skeptical this book may be about the importance of questions having to do with the vitality of our representations, questions that a number of ecocritics have thought it essential to ask, by no means does it embrace the proposition that nature is socially constructed because our knowledge is solely representational

(and hence mostly unreliable). However attractive it may be when put to use polemically and deftly applied, which is a lot easier to do in some contexts than in others, as dogma the proposition that nature is socially constructed seems to me either nonsensical (patently false when applied broadly and by rote) or trivial (sometimes true, but in a sense which should prompt us to ask, "But so what?"). I think it is precisely as dogma that the theory of social construction has tended to function most of the time, except of course for those occasions when it has functioned merely as a fount of jargon.

I feel supported in my thoughts on this subject by the philosopher Ian Hacking, who writes, "Social construction has in many contexts been a truly liberating idea, but that which on first hearing has liberated some has made all too many others smug, comfortable, and trendy in ways that have become merely orthodox. The phrase has become code." Doctrinaire social constructionist arguments, Hacking says, are "dull—in both senses of that word, boring and blunted." They reduce the idea of social construction to "a dead metaphor."<sup>8</sup> One can see the potential for orthodoxy, dullness, and dead metaphor, and for triviality, too, in the carefully qualified statement that David Bloor makes about mathematics in his 1976 book *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, an important theoretical source for many social constructionists with an interest in science: "Such a statement sounds very odd, but if mathematics is about number and its relations and if these are social creations and conventions then, indeed, mathematics is about something social. In an indirect sense it therefore is 'about' society."<sup>9</sup> Not only does this sound odd, it also sounds empty.

Despite my lack of faith in the doctrine of social construction as a positive program for the understanding and interpretation of, say, mathematics, I do think that the doctrine can be useful polemically. There are brands of social construction that, if draughts of them are taken in the right measure and somewhat watered down, can help prevent and may even cure certain kinds of naiveté: some versions of realism, for example, though not all versions of it, and certainly not all versions of scientific realism, as devotees of strict social construction have claimed. Its embrace of (a version of) scientific realism notwithstanding, if this book expresses a single conviction most ardently, it is that the success of our efforts to discover whatever we can about the ecological character of the natural world does not hinge on the right representation of nature. And this means that satisfying our desire to value the natural world differently and more dearly than we do need not be thought to depend on the success of forms of representation that are both accurate and artful, and hence realistic in the literary sense of the term, *as opposed to* the scientific.

That satisfying our desire to value the natural world is so dependent has been one of the most frequent claims made to date by ecocritics. It assumes the ability of literature, in particular so-called nature writing, to go science one better by representing nature both with precision and with no sacrifice of literary quality, thereby heightening our perception of the natural world aesthetically while moving us to

greater environmental awareness and involvement, perhaps even revolutionizing our culture in the process. This claim about realism is being made by many ecocritics from what already can be described as an orthodox point of view (never mind all the talk of revolution), and it is based in large part on mistaken ideas about the antirealistic character of literary theory, for which a number of ecocritics have expressed considerable scorn. It is also based on mistaken ideas about ecology, which doesn't offer the support for their faith in realism that these ecocritics have assumed it does. In large part, their mistaken faith in realism results from their having taken popular ecological assumptions for granted. The environmental historian William Cronon writes: "Popular concern about the environment often implicitly appeals to a kind of naïve realism for its intellectual foundation, more or less assuming that we can pretty easily recognize nature when we see it and thereby make uncomplicated choices between natural things, which are good, and unnatural things, which are bad."<sup>10</sup> If the history of ecology teaches us anything, it teaches us that nature isn't so easily recognized.

In order to prepare for the trek across the larger cultural and philosophical landscapes this book traverses, I need to describe those landscapes and the theoretical gear that exploring them requires. Yet despite the metaphor I've just used, I should emphasize, before moving on to the debriefing conducted in chapter one, that I don't think the interdisciplinary study of nature, culture, and literature—or, in short, ecocriticism—will become convincingly theoretical simply by carrying a heavier toolbox, and by training itself to use the tools in that box in the approved manner and more ergonomically. Theories may or may not be like tools. To the extent that they are, their efficacy when we use them to perform the interpretive tasks for which they are designed may be less interesting than their usefulness when we need something handy to jimmy open a stuck concept or break up the hardpan of fixed opinion. I take it that this is why Nietzsche urged us to philosophize with a hammer.

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# I

## Expostulations and Replies

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.*

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!  
He, too, is no mean preacher:  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.*

*William Wordsworth,  
"Expostulation and Reply"*

## *The World, the Text, and the Ecocritic*

Because American ecocriticism, as a movement, is only about a dozen years old, generalizations about it are hard to make and still harder to validate.<sup>1</sup> So I want to begin, not by describing the principles and practices of ecocriticism in any detail (in fact, that is something I want to delay, especially as regards the practices, until chapter four), but by looking at what seems to be, for many of its adherents, ecocriticism's moment of origin, which is threefold in its implications. This moment takes the form of an epiphany: of a discovery, or a renewal, of faith in all things green, just as the bewildered ecocritic emerges from the vale of all things black and white. The ecocritic's epiphany seems to make the newly enlightened student of literature and culture feel a lot better, at least for a moment, but it is actually an ambivalent experience and soon gives rise to a corrosive negativity. As interpreted by those who claim to have had it—and to judge from the evidence presented so far—the ecocritic's epiphany can be summed up by the propositions (1) that nature, which is refreshingly simple, is good; and (2) that culture, which is tiresomely convoluted, is bad; or (3) at least not so good as nature. And insofar as the ecocritic's epiphany inspires such thoughts, its implications are largely reactionary. This becomes increasingly clear as soon as one begins to view ecocriticism's moment of origin in its broader cultural and intellectual context (as I will do, more or less systematically, in the second half of this chapter).

The following passage, which I quote from Frank Stewart's book *A Natural History of Nature Writing*, can stand as a fair example of the more or less embittered way in which ecocritics interpret their epiphanies and begin their new careers as academic Jeremiahs and John Muirs:

On a morning several summers ago, as I glanced up from researching the postmodern poets and critics, through the narrow window above my head I saw that the brightening dawn had made my reading lamp unnecessary. A pale mist hung like a veil over the deep meadow outside, and the violet morning colors were tinting the ends of the long grasses.

Unlike Zarathustra, the author of this passage does not emerge at dawn after a restful, strength-restoring sleep. This nascent ecocritic has been up early wrestling with abstruse, difficult texts, and once he has seen the light of day and the Wordsworthian "light of things," these "postmodern" texts will figure not as part of the solution, nor as part of the problem, but quite simply as *the* problem he must resolve or, in a concession of defeat, push to one side. Only then can he answer the beckoning call of morning mists and tinted grasses, having decided that "literary theorists and academics" tend to "distance the humanities and the literary arts from the natural world outside their offices," something he no longer wishes to do.<sup>2</sup>

Not that resisting the temptation to theorize is going to be as simple a matter as getting up and walking outdoors into the sunshine: the coils of culture, ecocritics like to remind themselves, are not to be shuffled off with an easy shrug. As Stewart puts it, "What we always see when we look at nature is our own eyes looking back at us, filtering and altering what we choose to perceive, what we emphasize or ignore, what questions we ask and pursue."<sup>3</sup> Thus the ecocritic's epiphany initiates a process of reflection (of an implicitly and ironically theoretical character), which seems to give the pursuit of the ecocritical vision a certain moral and philosophical grandeur.

A crisis of conscience and of consciousness similar to Stewart's is described in many of the ecocritical essays and monographs published since the late 1980s. This suggests that for ecocritics, invoking their epiphanies has become a ritual by means of which they can display their professional bona fides and, at the same time, register their critical opinions not only of literature and culture but of the academy, too. Quite possibly this ritual has become a signature feature setting ecocriticism apart as a minor genre all its own; much that calls itself ecocriticism may strike outsiders as having more in common with the personal essay than with literary and cultural criticism as currently practiced in the academy, and for the good reason that escape from academic constraints is one of ecocriticism's central themes. For instance, the ecocritic Patrick Murphy writes: "One day, while I was attending a seminar on Menippéan satire, the whole literary-criticism game became transparently irrelevant to events in the world." It was many years, he says, before his realization of the

irrelevancy of "the whole literary-criticism game" got cashed out in the form of ecocriticism.<sup>4</sup> Another ecocritic, SueEllen Campbell, reports feeling pulled in different directions by her attraction to theory on the one hand, and to narratives of wilderness adventure and nature writing on the other. She claims to have reconciled the two kinds of texts by pursuing a vigorous program of reading—and an equally vigorous program of backcountry hiking in the Colorado Rockies.<sup>5</sup>

That the ritual invocation of the moment of epiphany is centrally important to ecocriticism is also borne out by the work of Lawrence Buell, who since the publication of his book *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 has emerged as a de facto spokesman for the movement. Like Stewart and many others, Buell argues that engrained mental habits and the forces of institutional inertia must be overcome before an ecocritic can kick free of the shackles of academic training and university life. Otherwise the longed-for epiphany may not occur, or when it does occur, it may have a decidedly bookish flavor—as it does when, describing a dawning of insight similar to the one described in the passage from Stewart's book that I quoted above, yet different from it in distinctive ways, Buell writes:

The grove of second-growth white pines that sway at this moment of writing, with their blue-yellow-green five-needle clusters above spiky circles of atrophied lower limbs, along a brown needle-strewn ridge of shale forty feet from my computer screen—this grove can be found in the pages of American literature also, but it is not the woods imagined by American criticism.<sup>6</sup>

As this passage illustrates, odd wrinkles tend to creep into the fabric of the quintessential ecocritical experience, which isn't as decisive as ecocritics would like it to be. Here we are not confronted with a (relatively) clear-cut distinction between text and world—between postmodern poetry and criticism lit by electric lamplight, and pale mist and grasses illuminated by the morning sun. Instead, Buell presents us with a scenario in which an exemplary grove of white pines does not stand juxtaposed with and in indictment of the diminished and diminishing world of words, but is said to be in two places at once: forty feet from a computer screen, and "in the pages of American literature," where literary critics have ignored it, culpably so.

Several pages earlier, anticipating the charge of negligence he is about to lodge against his fellow critics, Buell writes: "When an author undertakes to imagine someone else's imagination of a tree while sitting, Bartleby-like, in a cubicle with no view, small wonder if the tree seems to be nothing more than a textual function and one comes to doubt that the author could have fancied otherwise."<sup>7</sup> Well, small wonder indeed, or so it seems to me, since this view of the tree, which in this case is without doubt a purely imaginary entity ("someone else's imagination of a tree"), is an eminently commonsensical one. The scenario Buell has sketched, both here and in the first passage I quoted, is much less scandalous than he seems to think it is, if it is scandalous at all.

I suspect that what really concerns Buell and his fellow ecocritics is the architecture and the interior design of the contemporary academy, where many of the rooms afford their tenants impoverished views of the extramural world. Ecocriticism has been eager to redirect its gaze toward this world, and understandably so. But its practitioners have been hasty in formulating their arguments about what it takes to shift the focus of our gaze, both individually and collectively, especially where the specifics of literary criticism and literary theory are concerned. The questions we need to ask of them, and of ecocriticism as a movement, with regard to those specifics, are these: We know you told us that it's a window, but isn't that actually a looking glass hanging there on your wall? Couldn't that explain why, when you try to look through it, what you see are your own eyes looking back at you, just as one of you (Stewart) has admitted?

To get a sense of the difficulties ecocritics will have when they try to answer these questions, it will help if we return to Buell's description of the vista he enjoys (as one of the lucky few) from his workstation. As I've suggested, the epiphany of the second-growth white pines is an odd one: in it, the pines figure as guidebook-perfect exemplars of their species. This is an impressive feat, given the vagaries of a pine tree's life in the open air and given the appearance of these particular pines "at this moment of writing," just when an apt illustration of the point being pressed is needed. Rhetorically, these are very convenient and uncannily obliging pines, "with their blue-yellow-green five-needle clusters above spiky circles of atrophied lower limbs." Most uncanny of all, I think, is their dual citizenship as inhabitants of the "brown needle-strewn ridge of shale" and of the pages of American literature. They are the ultimate screen saver for the writer eager to chastise his fellow critics, and fellow authors of criticism, for imagining that trees can serve literature only in the guise of textual functions.

Yet textual functions, in the form of words or phrases postulating an imaginary object, describing an imaginary setting, or suggesting a vaguely personified imaginary entity (such as the woods that we encounter in fairy tales), is surely what trees must be, and can only be, insofar as they figure "in the pages of American literature." It seems not so much naïve as occult to suppose otherwise. I wonder how we should regard trees that are *in literature* as something other than textual functions: I wonder what species of trees they might be, and by what right they will have acquired their unusual standing. Is Buell merely making a claim about the power of description or does he have something more iconic, or metaphorical and symbolic, in mind?

Given how his argument develops over the course of *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell seems to want there to be a relationship between trees in literature and trees in the world closer than a relationship of mere semblance would be, whether that semblance is descriptive, iconic, or metaphorical and symbolic. Such, at least, is the trend of his rhetoric, which throughout his book reveals an inchoate and perhaps not fully conscious desire for a literature of presence. This desire isn't nostalgic,

since in truth it is a desire for a literature the likes of which we've never seen before, however much it may have been intimated in the works of writers like Thoreau (whose admiration for white pines was unparalleled). If I follow Buell's arguments, this literature would be "environmental." It would evoke "the natural world through verbal surrogates," and would thereby attempt "to bond the reader to the world as well as to discourse." Most remarkably, it would enable the reader "to see as a seal might see."<sup>8</sup> But why environmental literature should be deputized to make the presence and reality of the natural world available to us by proxy, when that world lies waiting to be explored by bookworms and bold adventurers alike, is a question insufficiently mooted in *The Environmental Imagination*, and in ecocriticism generally speaking. Devoting our time and energy to the perusal of environmental literature would seem to be a roundabout way for us to secure a bond with the earth: it's as if we should spend our time poring over the personal ads, instead of striking up a conversation with the lonely heart next door.

In raising these questions about the status of trees and of the world in literature, questions about *mimesis* (and Buell does insist on using that term), I am broaching what has been a pivotal issue in American ecocriticism, one I would like to lay to rest, if I can, over the course of this book.<sup>9</sup> But first I should make my own position as clear as possible, since it is apt to be misunderstood: I am a sort of agnostic. I think we need to cure ecocriticism of its fundamentalist fixation on literal representation, and shift its focus away from the epistemological to the pragmatic. For a garden-variety pragmatist of the sort I think ecocritics ought to be, to assert the imaginary status of the things we find depicted in literature raises no issues of belief or of professional relevance. It's something we can do without positing anything controversial about either the world or the text, most especially the text, which if it is literary must be imaginative by definition and well-established convention. Otherwise the garden-variety pragmatist is perfectly happy to take the representational powers of language for granted, much in the same carefree way that the force of gravity is taken for granted. Not that the garden-variety pragmatist would deny that there are important questions to be asked about representation and gravity once we depart from the workaday realm of common sense: that's something we are compelled to do sometimes, if we happen to be literary critics, philosophers, physicists, or rocket scientists, who can't always be insouciant about such matters for professional reasons.

While lodging its complaints about the limitations of literary study, ecocriticism has regularly gone well beyond the realm of the plausible in its declarations about what literature can and ought to do. It needs to be reminded that the difficulty of making a case for mimetic representation is not solely a freakish by-product of the strange weather of recent academic debate over the latest theories: in certain quarters, mimetic representation has been regarded as a dubious idea all along. In a 1980 essay on the supposed "crisis of representation" in contemporary culture, Umberto Eco writes:

Even assuming that whoever speaks of it has a definition of representation (which is often not the case), if I rightly understand what they're saying—namely that we are unable to construct and exchange images of the world that are certainly apt to convey the form, if there is one, of this world—it seems to me that the definition of this crisis began with Parmenides, continued with Gorgias, caused Descartes no small amount of concern, made things awkward for everyone thanks to Berkeley and Hume, and so on, down to phenomenology. . . . Those who rediscover the crisis of representation today seem to have charmingly vague ideas about the continuity of this discussion.<sup>10</sup>

With the continuity Eco describes in mind, I think we are entitled to ask just how viable ecocriticism's rehabilitation of mimesis is likely to be. It may be possible to qualify the idea of representation-of-things-just-as-they-are so as to make it seem at least reasonable (as Eco argues). Then we might buy into the idea but at a steep discount, recognizing the relative efficacy of language in depicting some parts or even the whole of the world, in response to specific and clearly articulated needs—ordering lunch, for instance, or planning the launch of a mission to Mars. Should we choose to do this, however, we will have to gut the idea of mimesis of most of its content, consigning the strict sense of the term to the history of philosophy, which is where it belongs. As a result, mimesis will come to seem devoid of literary interest, and we will have gained nothing, except perhaps for a short-lived peace of mind and a meaningless rearrangement of our definitions.

I think this is precisely the quandary ecocriticism has put itself in with regard to mimesis, or the representation-of-things-just-as-they-are. Realistic depiction of the world, of the sort that we can credit as reasonable and uncontroversial, is one of literature's more pedestrian, least artful aspects. It comprises, for example, such basics of technique as description. Those who are sticklers for precision and conversant with the long traditions of literary theory and philosophy can see no good reason why we should use a highly contested and highly charged word like "mimesis" to talk about matter-of-fact depiction of the descriptive sort, since doing so raises hackles and inspires distrust. To these sticklers, the issue of mimesis simply does not seem to be a live one. And ironically enough, ecocritics do acknowledge that this is, in fact, a closed file whenever they describe ecocriticism as a revival of mimesis and a counterinsurgency. The romantic appeal of opening a closed file is difficult for others to see.

To make the assertions I've just made is to slight neither art nor the world, though it may suggest that literary criticism still needs to be brought to heel. Consider, by way of illustration of my argument, a case of "dual citizenship" that I think is parallel to the one described by Buell, even if in formulating it I have stacked the deck differently than he has, and even if I am dealing from the bottom of the deck, where things become more obviously fictional and where there are, perhaps, fewer trees. An expatriate American in Paris is an expatriate American in Paris, but if his

name happens to be "Jake Barnes," he won't need a visa, a passport, and a birth certificate in order to establish his true national identity. He won't have one, however rounded his character may seem to Hemingway's readers, because identities are things had only *in the world*, a place where the preposition at issue ("in") seems unproblematic. By the same token, I think it is obvious that trees can never be, as Buell insists they are, *in literature*, and least of all *in a novel*, however much they may be "in" it figuratively and even if it is true that because books are made from paper, and paper from pulpwood, trees are in our books (and thus make up the sort of content more suited to chemical than literary analysis).

To insist that trees must be present *in literature*, just because they happen to be mentioned and described or even celebrated there, seems hostile to the very possibility of imagination, which pays its dividends in the coin of figuration, not representation. And to persist in thinking that trees might somehow be present in literature after all, despite the strictures of recent literary theory (and at least two thousand years of philosophy), is uncritical and, worse, hostile to criticism. If we cannot be imaginative, and we cannot be critical, then our only alternative, a poor one, is to be cryptic. Or sentimental, in a Joyce Kilmer-like way: as the reader may have surmised, the poet and author of "Trees" is one of the shadowy figures lurking in the background of this discussion. Another of those shadowy figures is the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who drilled his students in the arbitrariness of the sign and thereby helped to found much of what is now thought of as literary theory. It's a nice coincidence that Saussure's key example of the arbitrariness of the sign just happens to be the French word for tree (*le arbre*).

The critic and theorist who has put Saussure's linguistics to the most interesting use may be Roland Barthes, who in his essay "Myth Today" explains the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign as follows: "Nothing compels the acoustic image *tree* 'naturally' to mean the concept *tree*: the sign, here, is unmotivated." And in a passage even more directly relevant to the present discussion, Barthes writes:

Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed . . . is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter.

Viewed in Barthes's terms, Buell's suggestion that trees can occur *in literature* as something more vital than textual functions must be regarded as an attempt to supply a motivation for literary trees other than a social one. To attempt something like this, Barthes says, is the essential technique of ideology. He writes: "The passage from the real," by which he means the socially real, "to the ideological is defined as that from an *anti-physis* to a *pseudo-physis*." The latter is precisely the hallucinatory



stuff that trees-in-literature would have to be made of (if, that is, they are not so to speak "made of" images, ideas, concepts, and the like, as I am arguing they must be). The logic of the passage from social reality to ideology (or to myth) is, Barthes says, tautological, as when one righteously insists, "A tree is a tree," and means by that to include the tree even "as expressed." "Tautology is a faint at the right moment, a saving aphasia, it is," Barthes writes, "the indignant 'representation' of the *rights* of reality over and above language," and it "testifies to a profound distrust of language."<sup>11</sup> Barthes's point isn't that a critic should have no distrust of language whatsoever, but rather that this distrust should not be so extreme as to make the critic impatient with and dismissive of the niceties of language, oral or written, in particular those niceties having to do with verbal reference to things in the world. The critic needs to bear in mind a point that Barthes makes in his essay on "The Death of the Author," a point consistent with the arguments about the representational function of language often made by pragmatists: "As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins."<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, only the kind of author who is also a critic and for whom writing truly never seems to end, so that it constitutes a sort of living death (here I speak advisedly), would spend time trying "to imagine someone else's imagination of a tree," to recall Buell's sketch of the critic's way of life. To spend time in this fashion already seems wasteful enough to those who think our turf ought to be literally turf, and who disapprove of the critic's lifestyle. This lifestyle dictates a daily return to the desk in much the same way that the vampire's ghoulish condition dictates a return, each dawn and for all eternity, to the coffin. I see no good reason to indict the odd-ball activity of criticism still further, on the additional grounds of its somehow being a slight to those splendid trees growing on that ridgeline over yonder—about which criticism probably has nothing pertinent to say, condemned as it is to approach to the world crabwise and confining itself to the shadows of print.

Confusing actual and fictional trees, or trying to conflate them (however rhetorically and provisionally), would seem to be a primitive error, both in the sense of its being the sort of error that perpetuates myth (or ideology) and in the sense that it occurs at a level of such fundamental philosophical importance as to lead anyone who makes it astray, sooner rather than later. In short, it is a critical error. To cite yet another observation made by Barthes, it overlooks the fact that while "the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field." It is "held in language," not "in the hand."<sup>13</sup>

Ecocriticism has been staunch in its refusal to view the text in this light. Buell insists that "to posit a disjunction between text and world is both an indispensable starting point for mature literary understanding and a move that tends to efface the world."<sup>14</sup> Frankly, I don't see how the second of these assertions follows at all from

the first: the world isn't so easily effaced, unless one has very little faith in it to begin with. I think asserting that the text somehow contains the world or some selected portion of it is "a move that tends to efface the world," portion and all, albeit only *imaginatively*, and not *really*.<sup>15</sup> I can see no reason why the ecocritic should be filled with a burning desire to save the text before the world: texts are disposable, whereas the world is not. And I can see every reason why the ecocritic needs to have a perspicuous sense of the difference between words and things, if only to keep from bumping into the latter unexpectedly. To approach either text or world without a sense of this difference is to attempt the view through the looking glass, and we all know what you are going to see when you attempt this view. That is why the ecocritic's epiphany is more self-revelatory than revelatory of the world: the world, that is, of both words and things.

### *The Pastoral Is Another Country*

*Cause I was born in the country*

*She thinks I'm easy to know*

*Richard Brown,*

*"James Alley Blues"*

What actually seems to be at issue in ecocriticism inspired by epiphanies about the paucity of the "postmodern" text, ecocriticism of the would-be realist variety, is something that the nature writer Barry Lopez has identified as the "interior landscape." In other words, the dynamic of such ecocriticism is, as I've already hinted, more personal than professional, since you don't have to be a geographer or an ecologist to develop what Lopez thinks of as a rich interior landscape. Though if you are neither of those things, it's going to be very difficult for you to grasp the subtleties that Lopez believes are crucially important. He writes: "I think of two landscapes—one outside the self, the other within. The external landscape is the one we see—not only the line and color of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution." The second landscape, Lopez argues, "is an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape." It "responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape; the shape of the individual is affected by land as it is by genes."<sup>16</sup>

I have no wish to deny the rich inner lives of those attracted either to ecocriticism or to nature writing like Lopez's. But I can think of no compelling reason to accept the premise that we must establish and maintain firm connections between our inner and outer worlds, which is to say, in the final analysis, connections of likeness between those worlds, with likeness understood or rather misunderstood as identity. Granted, forging such connections might enable us (and I emphasize, *might*) to

go a considerable distance toward ensuring that culture becomes more like nature, and hence less "bad," than it now seems to be, at least in the eyes of those observers who, rightly or wrongly, are disenchanted with the current status quo. But as humans, we just don't have the "kinds of minds" that would permit us to make our culture more "like" nature than it already is. As the philosopher Daniel Dennett has argued, "We must be very careful not to think of the inner environment of a Popperian creature" (a creature capable of formulating hypotheses about or, unhappy usage, "representations of" the "external" world) "as simply a replica of the outer world, with all the physical contingencies of that world reproduced. In such a miraculous toy world, the little hot stove in your head would be hot enough to actually burn the little finger in your head that you placed on it!" As with minds, so with texts, those prosthetic extensions of our minds in which we higher "informavores" offload all the stuff we would find it too cumbersome to carry around with us inside our heads, such as warnings about hot stoves, or information about trees and landscapes: about all those things which, taken in sum, add up to our environment.<sup>17</sup>

To be fair to Lopez, he doesn't say that the interior landscape corresponds to the exterior, but that the interior landscape should respond to, must be responsive to, the exterior. Does this not drive a wedge between his point and the point that I am making by citing Dennett? If so, it is the thinnest of wedges. How well it holds up depends on the construction one puts on Lopez's emphasis on "perceiving the relationships" in the exterior landscape.<sup>18</sup> What degree of abstraction is such a perception meant to have: is it a matter of theoretical insight, or is it more of a direct apprehension and reproduction in the mind of what Dennett calls "physical contingencies"? Just what kind of perception is it, exactly? This question, or one like it, has been important for ecocriticism, and not coincidentally ecocritics have found Lopez's ideas about landscape and narrative attractive.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, Lopez himself makes it very clear that he thinks of "perceiving the relationships" in a given landscape as a simple matter of apprehending its many physical contingencies and storing them inside one's head and heart. He writes:

If you walk up, say, a dry arroyo in the Sonoran Desert you will feel a mounding and rolling of sand and silt beneath your feet that is distinctive. You will anticipate the crumbling of the sedimentary earth in the arroyo bank as your hand reaches out, and in that tangible evidence you will sense a history of water in the region. Perhaps a black-throated sparrow lands in a paloverde bush—the resiliency of the twig under the bird, that precise shade of yellowish-green against the milk-blue sky, the fluttering whirl of the arriving sparrow, are what I mean by "the landscape."<sup>20</sup>

For Lopez, a landscape is something much more immediate and more discrete than the term usually implies: he focuses on the painter's individual brush strokes, as it were, rather than on the completed canvas. Thus his use of the word "land-

scape" seems to reverse its meaning as a term of art. "Landscape" usually implies thoroughgoing composition on the part of an observer, and as a rule, landscapes do not encompass tactile or auditory phenomena (like the feel of sand beneath one's feet or the flutter of a bird's wings), only visual ones (like the yellowish green of paloverde against the milk-blue sky). I think Lopez's use of the word "narrative" is equally eccentric. By "narrative," he seems to mean description: the depiction and perhaps even the reproduction in a text of the relationships, or in Dennett's phrase the physical contingencies, which make up an environment. And the word "narrative," like the word "landscape," also implies thoroughgoing composition on the part of an observer.

Narrative for Lopez is always best when delivered in oral form, but his treatment of storytelling also privileges description. "Landscape and Narrative," the essay from which I've been quoting, begins with Lopez's recollection of an evening he spent in Alaska's Brooks Range, listening to Nunamiut hunters telling stories about their experiences with wolverines. When the evening was over, Lopez stepped outside and into the landscape, which, he says, "seemed alive because of the stories. It was precisely these ochorous tones, this kind of willow, exactly this austerity that had informed the wolverine narratives." However, at the essay's conclusion, he does suggest a less factual, more imaginative model of narrative's power to engage us. "The interior landscape is a metaphorical representation of the exterior landscape," he writes; "the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives."<sup>21</sup> Obviously there is a tension, unresolved in his essay, between Lopez's treatment of narrative as a precise and authoritative means of representing "ochorous tones" and willow trees, and his treatment of it as a metaphorical means of representing a landscape that leaves space for paradox, irony, and contradiction. However, Lopez leans much more toward the former treatment than the latter—so much so that his use of the adjective "metaphorical" at the end of his essay may be specious.

But whether you plan to do so literally or metaphorically, in order to apprehend the landscape as Lopez characterizes it, you must be armed in advance with some theoretical insights, such as an understanding of the relationship between sedimentation and hydrological cycles. If you aren't provided with insights of that sort, it will be impossible for you to "sense a history of water in the region." Nor will you be able to "see" the region's geology, or "the record of its climate and evolution," without a fair amount of tuition in those difficult subjects. What needs to be remembered with regard to our perception of such things is that much of the evidence for what we now call geology and evolution lay scattered about the earth's surface in plain sight long before anyone was able to see it, and describe it, for what it was, which suggests that narratives come before apprehensions and descriptions, just as hypotheses come before representations and are methodologically distinct from them.

I realize that the assertion that narratives come before apprehensions and descriptions, and that hypotheses come before representations, will strike some read-

ers as a very bold assertion, since making it appears to open up a metaphysical abyss at our feet. But I intend the assertion more pragmatically than otherwise: I am not asserting philosophical priority, in other words, only a matter of fact—of “natural history,” you might say. Nor am I suggesting that narratives and hypotheses are somehow deterministic of apprehensions, descriptions, and representations solely by virtue of preceding them. The former come before the latter only in the sense that recipes and cookery come before a fine meal, yet don’t guarantee good things to eat.

The natural history writer Sue Hubbell confirms the humble view of our powers of apprehension, description, and representation that I am proposing here. She writes:

The bits and pieces of life are so numerous that we need to order and classify them before we can think about them. Our sort of brain cannot handle the world in the raw. We have to arrange all the bits into piles, and if there are too many piles we arrange those into clusters. Without ordering systems, which is what taxonomies are, we can’t think, live, or work with our world.<sup>22</sup>

Recipes and kitchenware, it seems to me, are also ordering systems that help us cope with a world presented to us “in the raw” and difficult to digest. Such is life on the uncertain borders where nature and culture meet.

For these reasons, and more, our relationship to landscape is not and cannot be a determinate one, as Lopez seems to be saying it is. “The shape of the individual” may be “affected by land,” but not in anything like the way it is affected by genes. A landscape is either conjectural, an educated guess about the lay of the land, or it is an artifact that has been shaped by human hands, possibly for millennia (so environmental history teaches us). It isn’t “a gestalt that can impress itself on the mind or text” in a “fundamental and binding way,” as Buell, who is paraphrasing Lopez, insists that it is.<sup>23</sup>

The “interior landscape” thus seems to be a dubious idea, so very dubious as to force us to acknowledge that “the environmental imagination” should not be understood as a faithful copyist of natural relationships. The phrase “the environmental imagination” if it belongs to anyone belongs to Buell, who first used it as the title for his 1995 book. Yet he rarely uses it, to employ a dicey preposition, *in* his book. There the preferred terminology seems to be “environmental representation,” which seems to me to be a much less suggestive phrase and an altogether unsatisfactory idea. And I’m not alone in my sense of its limitations and of the unlikelihood of completing the agenda it sets for ecocriticism: Eric Smith, for example, has pointed out that ecocriticism tends to take “the distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’” for granted. The inevitable result, he argues, is that any given answer to “the question of ‘what the land means’ carries only as much weight as the person arguing for it.” The interpretations generated by most attempts to answer this question are the

fruits, Smith adds, of a commitment to dichotomies like subject versus object and society versus nature, and these are “remarkably homogenous classifications for the amazing variety of entities and relationships in the universe.”<sup>24</sup>

If we don’t have the “kinds of minds” enabling us to make copies of and represent “the amazing variety” of our environment fulsomely, it is very unlikely that the kinds of texts we create are going to be any more representational than our minds are. Our minds and our texts are less than fully representational as a matter of practical necessity because we couldn’t do anything worthwhile with them if they weren’t. “The environment contains an embarrassment of riches,” Dennett writes, “much more information than even a cognitive angel could use. Perceptual mechanisms designed to ignore most of the flux of stimuli concentrate on the most useful, most reliable information.”<sup>25</sup> Most of this information will be visual, rather than auditory or olfactory (because of the way our sense organs are structured, because of the way they interface with or bypass the centers of consciousness in the brain, and because smells and sounds are of very low fidelity compared to sights). And most of this information will never find its way into our words: the verbal is not (merely) a handmaiden to the visual.

Ecocriticism, which has tended to take its cues from nature writers like Lopez, wants our sense of things, and our expression of that sense, to be more synthetic than it is, and even synesthetic. But our sense of things is, and will remain, analytic—ineluctably so, and not because of intellectual fashions that make too much of abstraction. Ecocritics who complain that representation has gotten a bad rap in recent decades are every bit as guilty of abstraction as those they chastise for being overly theoretical. They simply prefer a different variety of abstraction, and a more redoubtable one, which they hope will prove impermeable to further analysis. In other words, they want ideas to have the status of facts: they want the world to be in the text.<sup>26</sup>

Ecocritics who want the world to be in the text often describe environmental literature as a kind of writing, in the narrow sense of *inscription*, which bears little of the freight associated with traditional genres and forms. Their description of environmental literature implies that the category must be all but exhausted by so-called nature writing, of which Lopez’s work is a leading example, and which ecocritics are inclined to interpret as if it were veritably a form of writing degree zero, as indeed it often tries to be. Thus ecocriticism’s fretting about the otherwise unremarkable circumstance described by Buell, who points out that “writing and reading are acts usually performed indoors, unachievable without long shifts of attention from the natural environment.”<sup>27</sup> Personally, I find it hard to see why this should be viewed as anything other than a simple matter of practicality: writers and readers do need to seek shelter from cold winds and damp airs, and to concentrate on their texts, when they write and read.

Yet many ecocritics seem to feel that something culpable is going on here, particularly where the scene of reading is concerned. “It is easy to persuade oneself on the

basis of the average critical discussion," Buell complains, "that the literary naturescape exists for its formal or symbolic or ideological properties rather than as a place of literal reference or as an object of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake." And so it is; but are "its formal or symbolic or ideological properties" not the things that make a "naturescape" literary, as opposed to literal, in the first place? Description is not and need not be the same thing as documentation. The scandal that alarms ecocritics of the realist stripe only arises if one assumes that the fictional dimension of literature—of all literature, even the nonfictional, paradoxical as this may seem—is somehow the source of its faults. Only then will one seek to treat literature as no more than a kind of writing, and writing as no more than a form of bookkeeping. Only then will one seek to reign in what Buell refers to, scathingly, as "the power of imagination, textuality, and culture over the malleable, plastic world that it bends to its will," all of which he opposes to "thick description of the external world."<sup>28</sup> But without "the power of imagination, textuality, and culture" to enrich it, thick description may form only a hard crust of verbiage with little of literary or cultural interest at its center. It may be virtuous, yes, but it's also likely to be boring.

Because it needs to stave off the threat of boredom, propping up discredited theories of representation is only one of the strategies ecocriticism has adopted to offset what it sees as the problematic status of textual functions, and to compensate for the formal, symbolic, and ideological properties of works of literature, or all those things that damage literature's truthfulness. If the postmodernist poets and critics, not to mention the postmodernist novelists, playwrights, and journalists, along with their ugly cousins the poststructuralists and deconstructionists, are to blame for the constriction of the current academic and cultural purview, then the obvious thing to do is to find a reasonable alternative to their arcane complexities and sneaky sophistries. For many ecocritics, one of the oldest varieties of literary expression, the pastoral, has seemed to provide this reasonable alternative, not only as object of study but also as mode of scholarship. Buell, for example, suggests that his book, "in focusing on art's capacity to image and to remythify the natural environment, is itself a kind of pastoral project," and other ecocritics have made similar claims.<sup>29</sup> For the most part, however, ecocritics have used the word "pastoral" very broadly to mean "having to do with nature," while ignoring or dismissing as irrelevant its less convenient and more literary implications.<sup>30</sup>

That one might invoke a category like the pastoral without simultaneously activating its rules and imperatives, and without buying in to some, at least, of the theories elucidating its rules and imperatives, seems improbable, since these are the very things that make the pastoral a distinct category in the first place. Those who argue that ecocriticism should focus on the pastoral, and that it ought to be a version of pastoral in its own right, too, also must downplay the fact that the pastoral seems to be an ideologically compromised form because of its deployment, especially in British literature, in service of class and imperial or metropolitan interests. In varying degrees, ecocritics are of course aware of the pastoral's checkered past, and

hence of what would seem to be its diminished capacity at present. It is possible, however, that American ecocritics are less savvy than others when it comes to sensing just how problematic the pastoral is, considering the relatively minor role played by the pastoral in American culture, both as literary mode and as an alternative way of thinking about the development and preservation of land. And hence they resist arguments that challenge both the pastoral's worthiness and the possibility of its revival in something other than a watered-down and compromised form.

Given the pastoral's historical tendency to transmogrify and to splinter into different versions, many of which seem incompatible with each other because they serve radically different interests and purposes, I doubt whether ecocriticism will find the pastoral congenial over the long haul. Ecocriticism is impatient with versions—impatient, that is, with texts not tied discretely to referents of fairly specific latitude and longitude, like the white pines of New England or the arroyos of the Sonoran Desert. Buell suggests, however, that at the very least a case can be made for pastoral's "adaptability for ecocentric purposes" and for its capacity to be pressed into service "as something more than ideological theater," and this suggestion would seem to be a reasonable one. That it is so commodious is one reason pastoral is defined as a mode rather than as a genre: it can assume more than one form, and serve more than one master. However, Buell also suggests, much more problematically, that pastoral has the capacity "to register actual physical environments as against idealized abstractions of those," and to make this claim is to argue on behalf of a pastoral that has had its imaginative arc flattened out.<sup>31</sup> (Unless, of course, it is merely an attempt to give the generically and formally ambiguous texts of the nature-writing tradition a more distinguished label than the one they now bear, which seems to be only a list of ingredients—albeit a short one.)

To make the claim that pastoral can "register actual physical environments" is also to argue in the face of the best theories we have about pastoral, all of which stress the pastoral's tendency to treat physical environments idealistically and idyllically, and to wholly transform them imaginatively, too, if that suits its purposes. The most widely known of those theories is adumbrated in William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, which emphasizes pastoral's status as a "puzzling form" owing to its mutability. The pastoral, Empson argues, can twist itself into such unlikely shapes as the proletarian novel and *Alice in Wonderland*, in which shepherds and their flocks are few and far between, and where "idealized abstractions" are rampant. What makes this contortion and imaginative license possible is something Empson calls "the pastoral process," a process of "putting the complex into the simple."<sup>32</sup>

Applying this definition of the pastoral process to ecocriticism itself is helpful: the urge to do an end run around contemporary literary theory and culture seems to have found an outlet in attempts to put "the complex into the simple" and to restore our sense of the positive achievements and undiluted pleasures of the literary text. But Empson's definition of the pastoral process is distinctly unhelpful when one attempts to apply it directly to the objects of ecocritical interest: texts that engage, or

which are purported to engage, the natural world imaginatively. And this is true whether the engagement of those texts with the natural world is described in terms of their containing propositions meant to be representational, or in terms of their containing propositions meant to be merely speculative and hypothetical. In either case, but especially in the former, "putting the complex into the simple" is bound to fail, not only because we aren't cognitive angels, as Dennett has pointed out, but also for reasons having to do with the character of the natural world. One of the limitations of the pastoral, quite apart from its tendency to project the preoccupations of a certain social class or a particular empire upon a countryside or a territory imagined as blank—its tendency, as it were, to citify the countryside and to colonize the territory—is the pastoral's tendency to assume that the countryside and the territory are much *simpler* places than the city or metropolis, when in fact they aren't.

Leo Marx addresses the assumption of exurban simplicity—the assumption that the country is easy to know—in his discussion of the "pastoral impulse," which is, he writes, "a desire, in the face of the growing power and complexity of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek out the basis for a simpler, more satisfying mode of life in a realm 'closer,' as we say, to nature."<sup>33</sup> The quotation marks that Marx has placed around the word "closer" are telling: the pastoral impulse may lead us astray, away from the dangerous city and into the perhaps still more dangerous countryside.<sup>34</sup>

I think Marx is right to express misgivings about the pastoral impulse. Given what we know about the natural environment—given, that is, its inordinate complexity, about which we don't know nearly enough—the pastoral impulse will surely lead us astray. The assumption behind the pastoral impulse or process, and not the impulse or process itself, is what we must regard as faulty. If anything, the city is the simpler place environmentally or, rather, ecologically, in light of the fact (the historical fact) of its having been made over into a greener and more pleasant space, and therefore a more "pastoral" one, or so we might argue. The city has been cleared of its native flora and fauna and drained of standing water to get rid of the effluvia and pesky bugs that make country living difficult to survive. It also has been plotted in a rational, easy-to-comprehend grid, then replanted in exotic shrubbery, grasses, and flowers, and then stocked with pigeons for retirees to feed and dogs for children to pet. Because the countryside has not been groomed quite in the same way and to the same exhaustive degree, to go into the countryside is to go *up* the scale of complexity, not *down*, despite the bright lights, noisy uproar, tall buildings, convoluted traffic patterns, and rich human mosaic of the contemporary city—all those things addressed by street smarts. It follows that the pastoral process is one in which ecocritics (and environmentalists) ought not to engage if they want to assert the importance of understanding the untamed natural world.<sup>35</sup>

The upshot of all this may be that ecocriticism should be *more* antirepresentational than other forms of criticism, not *less*, and perhaps more antipastoral and antihumanist as well. That is, it should be neutral with regard to representation, the

pastoral, and humanism, since those things, far from being elements of its purview, should be part of the domain it surveys critically. After all, to assume that literature can put nature right again—in the world, in texts, and in our hearts and minds—begs all of the questions ecocriticism has volunteered to try and answer. I think ecocriticism ought to cultivate an attitude of wary impartiality, which should be the best way to avoid what Buell calls the "environmentalist's dilemma of having to come to terms with actual natural environments while participating in the institutions of a technological culture that insulates one from the natural environment and splits one's allegiances." This is a dilemma that Buell says the pastoral "anticipates," and I agree, because I think it's a dilemma that by anticipating the pastoral first helps to create, then sustains and exacerbates.<sup>36</sup> The pastoral does this when it buys wholesale the distinction between natural environments and "the institutions of a technological culture," a distinction ecocriticism thinks it must overcome by making those institutions (beginning with literature) somehow more natural than, at present, they are.

To phrase the point I have been making in more theoretical terms, the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple is a process of troping. It is, moreover, an extremely reductive process, however imaginative it might seem, if it is true that the essential trope of pastoral is metonymy.<sup>37</sup> As Paul Alpers argues, "Metonymy is a trope we associate with prose narrative and particularly with the realistic novel. But it is also appropriate to pastoral, in which . . . the ethos of cultivated sensibility produces a rhetoric of discretely apprehended pleasures."<sup>38</sup> A good example of a metonymy that has been serving a pastoral function in the text of ecocriticism might be the use of the term "landscape," as devotees of discretely apprehended pleasures like Lopez use it, to mean "environment." Landscapes are more easily apprehended than the environments in which they are situated in space, for the simple reason that environments are not spaces but hyperspaces. Of course, to refer to environments is also to avail oneself of a trope (a synecdoche, perhaps, since the whole is made to stand for all of its parts), but we have got to call environments *something*, even if properly speaking "they" aren't "things" at all and therefore should not be referred to as if "they" were. As for landscapes, I very much doubt whether we can make sense of them in the piecemeal fashion that Lopez advocates. Some tropes serve us better than others, and I'm forced to concur with Flaubert's sardonic dismissal, in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, of landscapes on canvas as "always so much spinach." Landscapes in words, it seems to me, are monocultural and monotone—and full of spinach—in just the same way. They also lack the complexity and biodiversity that make natural landscapes compelling, and thus they inspire a false confidence in fusty categories like the pastoral.

When I say that environments are hyperspaces, I have in mind the definition of the term "niche" preferred by contemporary ecologists: the niche is not an address, they like to say, but a profession. In other words, they try to correct for the mistaken impression one might get of the ecological niche owing to the spatial connotations of

the term "niche" in its original discursive context, which was architecture. An ecological niche is a multidimensional hypervolume, and not all of its dimensions are spatial: likewise, an environment.<sup>39</sup> In other words, relationships of contiguity, of mere juxtaposition in physical space (metonymic relationships, we can call them), may constitute a landscape without constituting an environment, which is an inestimably richer concept though not, for all its richness, a failsafe mechanism of ecocritical discourse. That discourse has yet to develop tropes enabling it to come to terms with the fractured (and fractal) realities of nature.

Having said the things I have just said, I have introduced several concepts and a term, "hyperspace," which will allow me to move on and explore the issue of postmodernism. As we've seen, ecocritics have characterized postmodernism as the philosophy espoused by the opposition and hence as something to be scorned. A case, I think, of sibling rivalry, since postmodernism and contemporary pastoralism appear to be two expressions of the same set of assumptions, more alike than their superficial differences would lead one to believe.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Truth of Ecology in a Hyperreal World*

*The truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind!*

*William James, Pragmatism*

Near the end of his classic essay "Travels in Hyperreality," Umberto Eco describes a visit he once paid to the San Diego Zoo. The zoo, Eco realizes, is a lofty undertaking, a living natural history museum famous for its wild animal habitats designed with ecological rectitude in mind. Yet the zoo is also a theme park, and hence a place where poignant forms of duplicity are on display. Its split personality prompts Eco to comment, "Of all existing zoos, this is unquestionably the one where the animal is most respected. But it is not clear whether this respect is meant to convince the animal or the human." The ambiguity of the zoo's intentions was underscored for Eco at the time of his visit by the behavior of one of its inmates, a brown bear known not by the scientific name *Ursus arctos horribilis* but by a less daunting given name, which was Chester. The bear's behavior, like its name, had been modified: whenever one of his handlers tossed him a cookie, Chester would wave a friendly forepaw at passersby. Reflecting on Chester's winsome behavior and affable demeanor in his 1975 essay, Eco writes: "This docility arouses some suspicions. Where does the truth of ecology lie?"<sup>41</sup> I believe that Eco's question is still waiting for a good answer over twenty-five years later, and it seems to me that it's likely to have to wait even longer, since its final word can mean more than one thing. I'd like to think, moreover, that the double meaning of "lie" is not a spurious trace of the translator's art: I'd like to think that it is intentional, and that Eco is asking both where

the truth of ecology is located, and whether it isn't subject to domestication of the sort that leads to distortion and falsification.

Thanks to Chester and to the equally theatrical antics of a few of his fellow inmates, Eco's visit to the zoo did nothing to disperse the atmosphere of hyperreality through which he made his way during his American travels. In fact, it heightened that atmosphere, since given its undeniably alive yet tame animals, its natural yet manmade habitats, and its allegiance to both science and the entertainment industry—to exact knowledge, and to all the emotions aroused, but not clearly defined, by art—the zoo seemed to acknowledge the truth of ecology and yet, in good hyperrealistic fashion, it also seemed to make this truth into a lie, by dislocating and distorting it.<sup>42</sup> Thus the zoo was no exception to the pattern Eco discovered as he traveled back and forth across the United States.

In his essay, Eco suggests that America's avid pursuit of the real invariably gives rise to the hyperreal. The result of this strange dynamic is a national culture in which imitations, copies, and fakes are cherished and proliferate wildly, so much so that they become indistinguishable from the genuine article, the original. And this strange dynamic is at work, Eco discovered, even where one might expect it least. In zoos and in other wildlife parks like Marineland, the animals seem paradoxical because they are both authentic, placard-bearing members of their species and highly trained performers conditioned to interact with and imitate humans. This creates a situation in which "all is reality but aspires to appear sign."<sup>43</sup> The oddity of this situation is, of course, not limited to zoos, wildlife parks, and other tourist attractions. In fact, it typifies American culture as a whole, or so Eco argues. His essay is an exhaustive inventory of the hyperreal, and he makes it clear that hyperreality is much more than a form of poor taste endemic to the vacationlands of California and Florida. It is a full-blown cultural condition shared in equally by all Americans, not excluding literary critics. So no matter who or what you may be, you cannot escape hyperreality by wishing things were more authentic than they are. Hyperreality is too substantial to be dealt with that way, and it is epistemologically perverse, in that your wish for authenticity is one of its root causes.

The most peculiar thing about the hyperreal is that while it may not be genuine, it is real and forms a part of the actual fabric of things. This peculiarity is particularly frustrating with regard to a subject like ecology, an area in which the hyperreal has made still more inroads since Eco published his essay. To cite an apposite example, the San Diego Zoo recently featured a display of topiary rhinos in which the leafy pachyderms were portrayed as California surfers, a choice of stereotype inspired by and cross-marketed with a popular children's book. The display was, alas, only temporary, but those of us who failed to make it to San Diego to see "Rhinos Who Surf" in person didn't have to feel that we were missing something vital. We could do a little surfing of our own, visit the zoo's Web site, and have a look at the exhibit online. As we pondered the images of sportive rhinos and the associated text,

we had to concede that the implications of an exhibit like "Rhinos Who Surf" were difficult to sort out, as Eco realized years ago. Clearly the exhibit was pachyderm-positive, but its positive attitude toward the rhinos was purchased at the price of misrepresenting them, no doubt in order to make them more appealing to small children and parents than, truth be told, most large, slow-moving, leaf-munching herbivores are: in their natural state, rhinos can be as placid as horned cattle. Possibly the exhibit of topiary rhinos was intended to teach an important ecological lesson having to do with the food chain ("You are what you eat") allegorically, albeit paradoxically, by being rigorously literal-minded about it. Perhaps the green medium was the green message, but I doubt it: the exhibit didn't seem that clever.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake for us to think the San Diego Zoo's further ventures into popular entertainment and new media mean that it has abandoned, scaled back, or fatally compromised its educational, scientific, and conservationist missions. Its Web site also documents the zoo's ongoing involvement in efforts to restore to sustainable numbers a number of species currently on the brink of extinction.<sup>44</sup> Such efforts are controversial, however, and like "Rhinos Who Surf" they tend to produce mixed results. A few once-endangered species have benefited from our attempts at animal welfare and their numbers have rebounded, while others, despite years of captive breeding and habitat preservation guided by the best theories and the most sophisticated techniques of applied science, still hover at or near the vanishing point. Some of our efforts to save endangered species seem to have had the unintended consequence of adding to their already considerable burden of stress.

In light of mixed results like these, and in view of the mounting evidence generated by research in the field, ecologists now acknowledge that nature is extraordinarily complicated and that it is therefore much harder to figure out than they once believed it would be. In fact, complexity itself, once thought to guarantee ecological stability, is now seen as, well, more complex than that. The difficulty of understanding nature is compounded still further by the fact that while it may be thoroughly implicated in culture, as Eco suggests, the reverse is also true: culture is thoroughly implicated in nature. Whenever we try to figure out nature, we are also trying to figure out ourselves; and we are creatures capable of inventing surfing rhinoceros topiary while earnestly expending enormous amounts of money, time, and effort to restore the same species we once tried, and in a few cases are still trying, to obliterate—including, not coincidentally, the rhinoceros.

What to think, then, about what Eco calls "the truth of ecology"? As another pioneering explorer of hyperreality, Guy Debord, once put it, "Within a world *really on its head*, the true is a moment of the false."<sup>45</sup> Of course, if the radical point Debord makes is to be a self-consistent one, then it also must be the case that there are times when the false is a moment of the true. "But surely," we may be tempted to protest, "appealing to nature will help us to cut through this kind of guff. Surely the epistemological quandary we find ourselves in at junctures like these is merely the result

of the cultural confusion engendered by hyperreality or, to use the more widely circulated and, indeed, almost hackneyed term, by *postmodernism*?"

The impatience that this protest expresses is another of the feelings lurking behind Buell's arguments in *The Environmental Imagination*. The book's third chapter ends with a brief attack on hyperreality, both as idea and as phenomenon instanced in such recent developments as the computer technologies we take advantage of when we do things like visit the San Diego Zoo's Web site. Buell takes Jean Baudrillard to task for arguing, sensationally, that virtual reality generates "an entire ecology." No doubt this claim is hyperbolic, as Baudrillard's claims tend to be, but I don't see how it differs in kind from the claims ecocriticism has made about the potential richness of the interior landscape, be it psychological or textual. It is hard to see why the interior landscape is not equivalent to "an entire ecology" as well, especially given the fact that Baudrillard cashes out his idea in terms of a "sensorial mimetics and tactile mysticism," terms and concepts very similar if not identical to those many ecocritics and nature writers assume and like to use.<sup>46</sup> What is the interior landscape's saving grace? And what makes environmental literature innocent of the hubris expressed in and by virtual reality?

Buell's answers to these questions are that the interior landscape knows its place, and that environmental texts unlike hypertexts are more self-effacing and less self-important when it comes to representing the natural world, since they recognize the "comparative impotence" of literary realism. In short, the difference between hypertexts and environmental texts is only a difference of degree. Environmental literature takes the Goldilocks approach to mimesis: it is realistic, but not too realistic—only just realistic enough. Thus it avoids being "a way station on the path toward total technological control over reality." "Environmental literature in particular has to defer," Buell argues, "to the authority of external nonhuman reality as a criterion of accuracy and value."<sup>47</sup> It therefore speaks in a still, small voice; it is not writ large; it charts the scaled-down topography of the interior landscape, the modesty of which makes it more virtuous than virtual.<sup>48</sup>

But as Eco argues, deferring "to the authority of external nonhuman reality as a criterion of accuracy and value" is no safeguard against hyperreality, which is engendered by what he calls a "reconstructive neurosis." In other words, once you start appealing to reality, it's as if you can't help yourself. Precautionary measures not only are bound to fail, they are bound, like all repressive measures, to exacerbate the very condition they are designed to address. Eco writes: "The frantic desire for the Almost Real arises only as a neurotic reaction to the vacuum of memories; the Absolute Fake is offspring of the unhappy awareness of a present without depth." He might as well have said that the Absolute Fake is the offspring of a pastoral impulse. If America is both the site and subject of a new pastoral, as some ecocritics have argued, and "a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a 'real' copy of the reality being represented," as Eco argues, then in order for American literature's pastoral

representations to be recognized as its marks of authenticity, as ecocriticism would like them to be, the textual and the factual simply must be brought into greater accord. This, Eco says, is precisely where hyperreality lays its trap: "To speak of things that one wants to connote as real, those things must seem real. The 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake.' Absolute unreality is offered as real presence."<sup>49</sup> So protests against hyperreality, when couched in the form of complaints about its unreality, can be unwittingly contributory to it. Hyperreality is rubber, and it is glue: what you say about it bounces off, yet sticks to both it and you.

With this thought in mind, we are in a position to notice something we haven't noticed before about those white pines that, according to Buell, are "present" both outside his office window and in the pages of American literature. Like the topiary "Rhinos Who Surf," the white pines are problematic entities, in that they, too, seem to be hyperreal, and not despite but precisely because of their guidebook perfection. They are flawless, and their tractability "arouses some suspicions," as Eco says of Chester the bear's friendliness, because it is compulsory. *Must we say what we see?* Ecocriticism has thought that we must.<sup>50</sup> It wants to flatten out the arc of imagination horizontally, in order to bind the imagination more securely to nature as "criterion of accuracy and value," whereas postmodernists see this arc becoming steeper and steeper as the imagination is bound ever more securely to the vertical axis of culture.

The postmodern idea about nature is that nature is largely irrelevant to today's culture both on philosophical grounds (grounds articulated by poststructuralism and similar schools of thought) and as a matter of historical fact, despite our continued interest in nature as evidenced by all those zoos, parks, books, Web sites, documentaries, and essays in ecocriticism. Postmodernists like to dismiss nature by tossing off a world-weary apothegm, implying that either you savvy nature's irrelevancy immediately or you do not, and if you don't savvy it you won't get to be a postmodernist. To the uninitiated, postmodernist discourse seems to be wholly a matter of rhetoric and style. It seems, that is, to be wholly a matter of retailing anecdotes and making aphorisms couched in the Hegelian, Nietzschean, and Heideggerian rhetoric of negation, paradox, and wordplay, and not at all a matter of making closely reasoned arguments. The conclusion that this impression is an accurate one is difficult to avoid when we review the coroner's reports certifying the death of nature issued by a number of prominent theorists and critics of postmodernism since the 1970s.

Only a few of the more choice passages from these coroner's reports need to be cited here. The medical metaphor is appropriate, given Jean-Francois Lyotard's breakthrough diagnosis of postmodernity as a terminal "condition," especially where nature is concerned, and in more than one sense of the word "terminal." "Data banks," Lyotard writes, "are the Encyclopedia of tomorrow. They transcend the capacity of each of their users. They are 'nature' for postmodern man."<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard makes essentially the same point about the epoch-making significance of

computers as Lyotard does, but he makes that point more epigrammatically and portentously, as is his wont, and with a less gracious bedside manner. "Digitality," he intones, "is with us."<sup>52</sup> Linda Hutcheon's gloss of the magisterial judgments of writers like Lyotard and Baudrillard captures both the full sweep of their dismissal of nature and the paradox they imply. She writes: "Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees."<sup>53</sup> Her recycling of the cliché about money is exemplary: it is axiomatic that postmodernist irony thrives on the salvaging of hackneyed language and familiar imagery.

Hutcheon may be guilty of trying to give an old saw new teeth, but it nevertheless seems to me that when she says nature "doesn't grow on trees," she sums up the postmodern consensus about the unnatural character of nature in today's world. To hardcore partisans of culture, certain gestures of affection for nature—tree hugging, for example—have begun to seem less than relevant, and even embarrassing. These partisans argue that nowadays everything belongs to culture, which explains why they dispense with nature summarily. From their certifiably postmodern point of view, nature is at best a remnant of what it used to be, and when culture looks at nature, it says, "Been there. Done that." As postmodernists tell the story, culture is very glib, even if it isn't very original.

Here, then, is the postmodernist scenario that ecocriticism finds objectionable: "When nature was still natural, it was analog, and we found its nuances difficult to capture. We had to hunt and gather or sow and reap, and we found nature hard to represent in anything other than schematic ways—myth and the pastoral mode, for instance—all of which were, like topiary, of disappointingly low definition. Now, thanks to the successes and excesses of modernity, nature is almost entirely a cultural phenomenon, and contemporary culture isn't at all analog. 'Digitality is with us.' All we have to do is point and click. We can forage electronically, not only for food and clothing when we 'go' home shopping but for data and imagery too. Tides and temperatures, storm fronts and stream flows, intimate views of wild animals, and of some which are not so wild, like the surfing rhinos, are captured by satellites, remote sensors, and Web cams, and made available to us instantaneously and at high resolution. Space is abolished. Time has become download time, measured not in hours, days, and seasons but in bauds and kilobytes. It follows that nature itself is no longer natural. We have conquered nature, even if our victory over it seems in many respects to be an object lesson in debilitating side effects like acid rain and global warming. Digitality, as Baudrillard calls it, is notorious for producing just that sort of irony: the archetypal form of digital technology, the computer, is a tidy little package of toxic compounds and heavy metals. So much for a sleek future brokered for us by our electronic brains! This is why there is a 'post' in 'postmodern.'"

One sign of the seductiveness of postmodernist discourse is that even its sharpest critics accept some of its least persuasive claims, especially if they happen to be claims about nature. For example, in a widely read 1984 essay, Fredric Jameson, whose critique of postmodernist thinking is among the most trenchant, wrote that



he was "tempted to speak" of a "new and historically original penetration of Nature" effected by what he called "the logic of late capitalism," or in a word postmodernism.<sup>54</sup> Of course anything penetrated by capitalism, early or late, is likely to be badly shopworn thereafter, an implication borne out by Jameson's subsequent statements regarding the fate of nature. In a 1991 book that massively expands upon the ideas he had expressed on the subject seven years earlier, he writes that postmodernism "is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." This last phrase should bring us up short: we have traveled a great distance in a very brief time if nature's condition can be downgraded from poor in 1984 to "gone for good" in 1991. Why, one wonders, does Jameson say "nature is gone for good"? He takes others to task for expressing apocalyptic sentiments of this sort when he complains about the "inverted millenarianism" of postmodernist discourse. How is his hyperbolic suggestion that "nature is gone for good" not an example of the "inverted millenarianism" he dislikes? He writes that "the other of our society" is "no longer Nature at all," "but something else which we must now identify," and this certainly *sounds* apocalyptic.<sup>55</sup>

I think Jameson would respond to the questions I have raised by arguing that his statements about nature are not apocalyptic at all but, to use a term he favors, "historicized," by which he would mean that his statements are historical *and then some*, or both factual and theoretical at once. So when he says nature is gone for good, he means that nature-as-anyone-who-is-steeped-in-Marxist-theory-might-view-it is gone for good, that nature as a resource to be exploited by whatever means of production are available is all but exhausted, or at the least, severely depleted.<sup>56</sup> Heavy industrial production on the grand scale of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is supposed to be winding down, at least in the west; thus Jameson favors a maximally sophisticated variety of Marxist analysis no longer attending so closely to the trade of gross commodities like sugar, wheat, coal, oil, iron ore, and the labor it takes to produce them. Neomarxist or postmarxist analysis à la Jameson will instead contemplate the less material and more refined, almost ethereal modes of production of multinational capital.

The new modes of production are primarily and splendidly electronic (or so Lyotard and Baudrillard once asked us to believe: we now have good reason, in the wake of the failed dot-com revolution, to suspect otherwise). Capitalism's boldest endeavors no longer involve the extraction of raw stuff from the earth, but endless recycling. However, it isn't the recycling of paper, plastic, glass, and other not-quite-consumables that interests venture capitalists, and is of concern to critics and theorists like Jameson, but the elliptical orbits of credit, debt, imagery, and information, the ever-returning flux of myriad simulations of what used to be called cash value. This flux now constitutes an entire economy, to paraphrase Baudrillard. As for use value, that once-cherished quality seems scarcely to exist anymore, and we are left to wonder what it was, exactly. Not that we ever really knew; as Jameson points out, use value "at once drops out of the picture on the opening page of *Capital*," so that

for Marx, "henceforth value as such and 'exchange value' are synonymous." All this happens despite the fact that, as Jameson puts it, capitalism has created conditions in which "the deep underlying materiality of things has finally risen dripping and convulsive into the light of day; and it is clear that culture itself is one of those things." Yet it is equally clear to Jameson that the material isn't what it used to be, and that "we have had to learn that culture today is a matter of media." Matters of media have a knack for seeming wonderfully immaterial, existing as they do as pure notations of exchange. In this new atmosphere of immaterialism, and as some students of the so-called postmodern sublime have suggested, "the sacred and the 'spiritual,' which would seem to have been ruled out of court with the triumph of capital, may have gotten a new lease on life after all."<sup>57</sup> Where there is no television, the people perish; but where is there no television?

To sum up, postmodernity is what one gets when modernity is forced to eat its own young. Or to put the point another way, postmodernity is what one gets when modernity, having run out of ideas and raw material, can no longer "make it new," as Ezra Pound urged it to do, and must recycle everything, including its ideas, imagery, and metaphors.<sup>58</sup> When the arc of the imagination becomes too steep, it collapses, and culture can be relied on no longer, at least not in the old familiar ways. Culture may be gone for good, too; we begin to feel as nostalgic for it as we already do for nature.

You might think that postmodernists and their critics, too, would be less droll and less aphoristic when they bring us this bad news. But they often intimate that the disappearance of nature is not really news at all, which may be the truest measure of their attitude toward it. They regard nature's disappearance as the predictable and necessary outcome of modernism, and as such, it isn't altogether undesirable. The disappearance of nature is the price we have to pay for culture, which remains the highest value for postmodernists, just as it was for the modernists, even if postmodernists acknowledge that culture has been vaporized (decentralized, deconstructed, and digitalized). In other words, postmodernists are modernist in their values, but forlornly so, because they feel a nagging sense of having overrun the teleology of their favorite ideas. This is why they treat the metropolis as the cultural equivalent of an endangered species, and are panicked by the prospect of its disappearance. The classic statement of this theme is Debord's: "Economic history, which developed entirely around the opposition between town and country, has arrived at a level of success which simultaneously annihilates both terms."<sup>59</sup> The annihilation of terms and erosion of distinctions is a central motif of the postmodernist lament.

For just this reason, it seems clear that postmodernism is incapable of telling a coherent story, much less generating a *theory*, about the disappearance of nature. It simply has to take nature's disappearance for granted. That is why its doyens like to tell the rest of us, "Of course we have gobbled nature up and destroyed it; you seem to have forgotten that's what culture is *for*." Not in the least bit concerned with nature, postmodernism is instead a theory about the increasing absence of high culture

in its traditional home in urban space, owing to its steady leakage into suburbia, exurbia, and the media, from whence culture sometimes returns in a form hard to assimilate with avant-garde modernist values. That another result of the steady leakage of high culture from the city center is the accelerated diminution of the natural world is, as postmodernism sees it, only a coincidence. It's an instance of what military strategists call collateral damage. One can be witty about it.

Obviously the claim that culture has subsumed nature, and may have eradicated it entirely, is unsupported by the available evidence and fails to take into account the actual state of the natural world today. Postmodernists make this claim anyway, in large part because they continue to try to understand nature using a Marxist model (however modified) in which nature and culture are opposed, and in which much of the evidence about nature is perforce obscured. Ecologically, Marxism is an inadequate model because not everything that humans consume can be counted as something they produce, as the environmental historian William Cronon argues:

What Marx labeled "relations of production" might in an ecological context better be seen as relations of *consumption*, since all human labor consumes ecosystemic energy flows in the process of performing physiological and mechanical work. This has the consequence of seriously undermining Marx's labor theory of value, in which commodities acquire their use value almost entirely from the human labor that workers contribute to their production.

Cronon's point is that what is called "production" is as much a matter of *taking* as it is of *making*. Production and consumption are therefore not two different moments of a dialectical process, but are interwoven with each other each and every step of the way. Cronon argues that schemes, like Marx's, which treat production and consumption separately and seek to describe all possible modes of production, do "violence to the diverse complexity of ecological (and historical) reality." "The phenomenon called capitalism," he suggests, is especially "hydra-headed."<sup>60</sup> Because they are unschooled in environmental history, many postmodernists, and their critics, too, conflate the cultural logic of late capitalism and its natural logic, making it difficult for them to assess capitalism's ecological impact and causing them to overlook the fact that, as the philosopher Michel Serres observes, "we receive gifts from the world and we inflict upon it damage that it returns to us in the form of new givens."<sup>61</sup>

Postmodernists also tend to rely on forms of reasoning based on the supposed primacy of representation in culture when they turn to consider the natural world, just as many ecocritics do. But relations of cause and effect cannot be reduced to relations of signifier and signified. Thus postmodernists fail to recognize that the efficacy of human designs for and intentions toward nature is sharply limited. This is precisely why coyotes have become common in the eastern United States, despite the volumes of discourse dedicated to establishing their status as varmints, and de-

spite decades of efforts to eradicate these creatures in their western homelands, where they have more than endured.<sup>62</sup> The New York state legislature can set aside Adirondack lands for a park, but the legislature cannot keep coyotes out of that park. Nor can the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ensure that the endangered whooping cranes, Florida panthers, red wolves, blackfooted ferrets, and green-backed cutthroat trout entrusted to it will survive, even if it preserves the habitats in which those creatures are known to have evolved, no matter what cultural resources it employs. Many endangered animals may be living in too diminished a gene pool to increase their populations effectively, and their habitats may be too fragmented to serve their needs. Even if every other factor works in their favor, these animals may have a run of bad luck as a result of harsh weather during their first breeding seasons back in the wild, in which case coyotes will be only too glad to scavenge the carcasses of the last survivors. When they do, it will be a sad day, but it won't be the end of nature. Coyotes have been playing the role of scavengers for millennia.

### *It's a Real World After All*

*Here they are. The soft eyes open.  
If they have lived in a wood  
It is a wood.*

*James Dickey,  
"The Heaven of Animals"*

In an intellectual and cultural atmosphere of hyperreality and in a natural environment like the troubled one I've just described, it isn't surprising that the concept of truth should seem to have suffered some grave damage, beyond repair, and to have become infected with falsity, so that some truths now seem to be lies. There is something missing, however, from the picture of hyperreality's relationship to postmodernism, and of the relationship of both to the natural world, that I have sketched thus far. When Eco asked his question about the whereabouts of ecology's truth in his 1975 essay, he did so in wonder and in a spirit of intellectual adventure. However distorted by hyperreality he thought it had become, he had not given up on ecology's truth altogether, as some postmodernists appear to have done. I think this is the case because of the fact that Eco, since he is not only a semiotician but a literary critic and a novelist, too, is not given to metaphysical turns of mind, as many postmodernists are, despite their belief in the end of philosophy. To his great credit, Eco always keeps his wit and his wits about him: he is an extremely subtle student of contemporary life.

Eco is also a funny sort of pragmatist.<sup>63</sup> There may not be any other kind, given William James's definition of the "radical pragmatist" as "a happy-go-lucky anar-

chistic sort of creature."<sup>64</sup> Like James, Eco realizes that the distinction between truths and untruths has never been quite so sound as we would like to believe: that "the truth" has been worshiped as a false idol. This means that it also may be possible to be a happy-go-lucky postmodernist, a creature of lively paradoxes, and to agree with Paul Feyerabend when he writes, "As regards the word 'truth' we can at this stage only say that it certainly has people in a tizzy, but has not achieved much else."<sup>65</sup> It is crucial to recognize that Feyerabend wrote these words as a skeptical philosopher of science, but as a great admirer of science nonetheless. As happy-go-lucky anarchistic sorts of creatures, we should understand that being in less of a tizzy about truth means treating the distinction between the true and the false as less than essential, yet still extremely important.

Other distinctions, and not least of all the distinctions between reality and hyperreality, modernity and postmodernity, nature and culture, will need the same kind of treatment. In order to come to grips with this new breed of distinction we are going to need, among other things (like good luck), not the reinvigoration of time-honored categories like the pastoral or the realistic, but a greater sense of irreverence toward our own received ideas and a willingness to improvise—a willingness, as it were, to philosophize with a hammer. In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour addresses this need. He suggests that what makes the contemporary world particularly difficult to understand is the fact that in it, "all of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day." The evidence of this churning up of culture and nature is to be found, he says, all around us. In our daily newspapers, for instance, where we can read the latest stories about genetic engineering, AIDS, tropical deforestation, global warming, and so on. Reacting to a story about the hole in the ozone layer, Latour writes:

The same article mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions. A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyons suburbs, dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting. The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors—none of these is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story.

All of these incommensurable things might be described, and have been, either as cultural or as natural. Yet intentionally or unintentionally, human hands have refashioned even the most natural of them, so that they also seem intensely cultural. At the same time, many phenomena that seem fully cultural are bound up and run together with things and events in the natural world. The effect of this multiple causal heritage, shared by everything that we touch and everything that touches us, is the confounding of our basic categories. Things are too richly determined: our categories cannot cope. We live in a mongrel world, a world tinged with unreality but fatally real for all that. Latour puts the point this way: "The ozone hole is too so-

cial and too narrated to be truly natural; the strategy of industrial firms and heads of state is too full of chemical reactions to be reduced to power and interest; the discourse of the ecosphere is too real and too social to boil down to meaning effects."<sup>66</sup>

In his reflections on our current state of confusion, Latour doesn't say what his critics, who accuse him of being a postmodernist, as well as his admirers, who welcome him to the fold as a fellow postmodernist, might expect him to say. He doesn't say that "the ozone hole" is evidence of the fact that for the first time in our history, culture has supplanted nature altogether. Instead, he says that the power of technology to churn up culture and nature is nothing new; therefore, the contemporary world cannot be literally a postmodern one, and no one, or at least no one who wants to keep their wits about them, can be a dyed-in-the-wool postmodernist. Uncompromising postmodernism is impracticable, Latour argues, because its view of nature is both impoverished and impossible to maintain. Latour writes: "No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world." He adds that this explains "the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has not even started!"<sup>67</sup> By insisting on the absurdity of such claims, Latour does not mean to imply that he thinks the earth is flat and flying machines are only a silly pipedream. His point is that while the discovery that the earth is a sphere and the Apollo landings on the moon are real achievements of genuinely historic importance, they do not entail the total conquest and liquidation of nature by culture, contrary to what modernists, postmodernists, and antimodernists, too, may have thought.

Scientific discovery and technological achievement do not mark our final alienation from nature: they mark our ever-greater involvement in it. Once upon a time, Latour writes,

Nature seemed to be held in reserve, transcendent, inexhaustible, distant enough. But where are we to classify the ozone hole story, or global warming, or deforestation? Where are we to put these hybrids? Are they human? Human because they are our work. Are they natural? Natural because they are not our doing. Are they local or global? Both.

Postmodernist thought has a hard time accounting for the hybrid, monstrous phenomena created by contemporary environmental disasters and maladjustments, Latour argues, because it only juxtaposes the "three great resources of the modern critique—nature, society, and discourse—without ever trying to connect them."<sup>68</sup> Unlike most historians, critics, and philosophers, Latour resists epoch-making distinctions, like that between the premodern and the modern, or that between the modern and the postmodern. He also resists what Barthes calls "that inveterate emblematicism which has us turn every word into a watchword against its opposite (creativity versus intelligence, spontaneity versus reflection, truth versus appearance, etc.)."<sup>69</sup> Latour suggests that watchwords are something to watch out for, and that

epoch-making distinctions obscure as much as they reveal. More discerning diagnoses and subtler physicians are needed in the treatment of our contemporary condition, whatever name we choose to call it by.

Most postmodernists are, as Latour would point out, intellectuals of the literary sort, and the fact that some of the most noted of them (like Lyotard and Baudrillard) have been French philosophers, rather than mere *litterateurs*, doesn't alter the case at all, though it does deepen its peculiarity. But perhaps it also helps to explain why they seem content to deal in large abstractions and don't bother to expound a definition, much less a philosophy, of nature: they simply feel no need to do so. Their turf isn't natural but cultural, which means that they are content to take for granted much if not most of what culture has bequeathed them, and to define nature solely by means of example and by negation. Postmodernists point to the disappearance of nature, all those vanishing acres of rainforest and all that dissolving atmospheric ozone, and describe it as a triumph of culture, a triumph some of them seem, perversely, to relish.

As Latour suggests in his remarks about the inherent limitations of contemporary intellectual culture, the puzzle posed by postmodernism has its source in an unacknowledged indebtedness to the very traditional ways of thinking that postmodernism claims to overthrow, but in fact only reaffirms. Just as philosophy used to do, and no doubt in some precincts still does, postmodernism aspires to be a theory-in-general by virtue of achieving the equivalent of "the view from nowhere."<sup>70</sup> Its adherents represent themselves as intellectuals without portfolios, wandering the cultural landscape at large and speculating about it freely. Because they take a generic approach to things, they often rely in their books and essays on the house style of modern philosophy, which presumes to offer us the generic view of things par excellence. Postmodernism is rife with philosophical language despite its disavowal of both the argumentative procedures of philosophy and philosophy's habit of making truth-claims (or claims about the possibility of making truth-claims).<sup>71</sup> And using philosophical language leads postmodernists to make statements about the natural world more hyperbolic and more gnomic than need be.

Notoriously, "nature" is one of philosophy's least precise and most contested terms.<sup>72</sup> Philosophers working in the modern metaphysical tradition tend to treat "nature" like the other terms they use in their arguments, terms like "being," for example. When philosophers speak about nature, they are concerned not with the biosphere but with something else, and just what this something else might be, if it "be" anything at all, is hard to say. The result is that in philosophical jargon "nature" functions as a catchall term whose referent is a poor sort of *Lumpenphänomenon*: nature is everything that culture is not, and it gets treated (thought of and written about) as if it were nugatory, a trifle. And while nature may be everything that culture is not, this does not mean that nature is admitted to be "something," if I may borrow the word Eco uses to define "being."<sup>73</sup> To stipulate that nature is something, and not just something else (who knows what?), would be to concede more ground

to common sense than either philosophy of the modern, metaphysical kind or postmodernism is willing to give up.

From an environmental as well as an ecocritical point of view, to think that nature is merely a resource for humans or a backdrop for their activities is unsatisfactory. Thinking of nature this way tends to rule out in advance any form of argument that might with justification be called environmental or ecocritical. If the extreme forms of the postmodernist argument were correct, environmentalism and ecocriticism would have no proper subject matter. The problem with postmodernism, however, is not so much in its conclusions as in its initial assumptions, which insofar as nature is concerned are all hand-me-downs from the philosophical tradition. This is an amusing circumstance, since postmodernism is supposed to mark the abrogation of that tradition; but many postmodernists still belong to the same old unhappy tribe in which the *a priori* is worshiped as the reigning god, even if they suspect that the Great God A Priori has absconded.<sup>74</sup> Postmodernists are the kind of relativists who become relativists because they begin life as absolutists and grow unhappy when things don't work out as promised by tradition. As Richard Rorty has noted, with regard specifically to Lyotard, postmodernist "end-of-philosophy thinking sees the philosophical tradition as an extremely important failure."<sup>75</sup> If it seems to postmodernists that philosophical argument is inadequate and that nature has disappeared, it only seems that way because they once held unreasonably high hopes for the adequacy of philosophical argument and the resourcefulness of nature.

Postmodernists, Latour says, are "disappointed rationalists" who continue to accept modernism's "way of dividing up time." Postmodernists "feel that they come 'after' the moderns, but with the disagreeable sentiment that there is no more 'after.' 'No future': this is the slogan added to the moderns' motto 'No past.' What remains? Disconnected instants and groundless denunciations."<sup>76</sup> If Latour is right, postmodernists must lack a sense of mission. They must be discouraged by the tedium of discovering (*a posteriori*, of course) what the philosopher Max Black calls the "regularities and irregularities of experience," since they have no taste for the kind of work such discovery involves. They are disappointed to learn that there are "inexorable limits" placed on our desires, especially our intellectual desires, and specifically our hopes for language, since "no roads lead from grammar to metaphysics," as Black says.<sup>77</sup> The curious thing, and it is an enduring curiosity, is that anyone ever should have thought that there might be such roads. Baudrillard notes that "the objectivity of the fact does not check" what he calls the "vertigo of interpretation."<sup>78</sup> True enough: interpretation does tend to run wild and make one dizzy. But why should that count as an original, "postmodernist" observation? Or are we once again witnessing the ironic, "postmodern" refurbishing of a stale insight?

I agree with Latour that we can argue entirely on *a posteriori* and therefore not on philosophical grounds (relatively speaking, of course) that postmodernism offers us an inadequate account of the contemporary world. All we need to do is pick up a newspaper, as Latour says. Or we might try conducting one of the thought experi-

ments described in *We Have Never Been Modern*, where Latour argues that contemporary intellectuals need to come to terms with the fundamental continuity of human life throughout history and of "nature, society, and discourse." To help us grasp these continuities, Latour sketches the following scenario: "I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer. The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands." Having offered this image of himself with both ancient and contemporary tools in his hands, he then asks, "Would I be an ethnographic curiosity?" The answer is no, because electric drills and hammers aren't categorically different kinds of objects. Both are hand tools, as are tools involving so-called high technology—like computers, for that matter. By the same token, even things as apparently novel as the hole in the ozone layer are nothing new under the sun: the earth has a long history of global environmental maladjustments. As Latour says, "We have never really left the old anthropological matrix behind," and "it could not have been otherwise."<sup>79</sup> The old anthropological matrix is our necessary context, in which we evolved and will continue to evolve as a species, or not (in which case the coyotes will be happy to scavenge our remains). If there is an ethnographic curiosity to be explained with regard to the truth of ecology, presuming for the moment that there is such a thing, it is the frequent denial by humans of the continuity of their life in nature and on earth.<sup>80</sup>

To restore our sense of the richness of the anthropological matrix, and to jar us out of stale habits of thought by exposing and exploding them, Latour constructs puzzles like that of the hammer and the electric drill, and then he disassembles those puzzles in fresh, unexpected ways. He argues that "the intellectual culture in which we live does not know how to categorize" the "strange situations" produced by the interaction, combination, and recombination of nature and culture because they are simultaneously material, social, and linguistic, and our theories are poorly adapted to them. Our theories take no cognizance of what Latour likes to call "nature-culture." He writes: "The great masses of Nature and Society can be compared to the cooled-down continents of plate tectonics. If we want to understand their movement, we have to go down into those searing rifts where the magma erupts."<sup>81</sup>

Venturing into this uncertain space, where the *terra* is not yet *firma*, will mean giving up or at least loosening our grip on the "distinction between objective fact and something softer, squishier, and more dubious," as Rorty phrases it.<sup>82</sup> It also will mean becoming more comfortably doubtful, and being in less of a tizzy about truth. We will have to think differently and from a different perspective, one less coolly objective than the one we have been imagining. And we will have to heed John Dewey's observation about the way in which we acquire our knowledge:

Empirical facts indicate that not error but truth is the exception, the thing to be accounted for, and that the attainment of truth is the outcome of the development of complex and elaborate methods of searching, methods that while

congenial to some men in some respects, in many respects go against the human grain, so that they are adopted only after long discipline in a school of hard knocks.<sup>83</sup>

Soft, squishy, dubious, error-ridden, and hard-won knowledge is not solely the subject matter of cultural critics and philosophers like Latour, Rorty, and Dewey. Scientists, too, are intimately familiar with it, and so are artists. In fact, we all are familiar with that kind of knowledge (there isn't any other), even if we don't always like to admit it, especially not when our veracity, our accuracy, or our expertise is challenged.<sup>84</sup>

That knowledge should be soft, squishy, dubious, error-ridden, and hard-won reflects the fact that sometimes the "social construction of nature" (to recall that ill-considered phrase) is efficacious and sometimes it is not. This is the case both for ecological reasons and, more broadly, for reasons having to do with the fact that, as Eco has said, "there are lines of resistance." Some lines of resistance are ecological, but many are not, because they are physical or chemical or geological or broadly natural in some other respect, and needless to say lines of resistance can be social or cultural, too. Because there are lines of resistance, "being, even if it appears only as an effect of language" (a proposition that Eco, as a semiotician, is willing to entertain for technical reasons, which needn't concern us here), "is not an effect of language in the sense that language freely constructs it." Being, it must be remembered, really is something. Eco points out that however formless and in flux being may seem, it has a habit of refusing our terms:

Being says no to us in the same way a tortoise would say no if we asked it to fly. It is not that the tortoise realizes it *cannot* fly. It is the bird who flies; in its own way it knows it can fly and does not conceive of not being able to fly. The tortoise proceeds on its earthbound path, positively, and does not know the condition of not being a tortoise.<sup>85</sup>

The ability to tell a tortoise from a bird is a minimal requirement of environmental proficiency that most postmodernists and all ecocritics should be able to meet after a little study. There are no borderline cases, no creatures of either bird or tortoise kind presenting the careful student with anomalies of the sort literally embodied by ill-assorted creatures like the duck-billed platypus, the echidna, or the lungfish. Such being the case, we need not be unduly alarmed about the reliability of our knowledge of nature, and can try to move forward on our own earthbound path.

This, however, is something ecocriticism has been slow to realize, which confirms that it has a lot more in common with postmodernism than it recognizes.<sup>86</sup> Like postmodernism, ecocriticism also assumes that we have become modern. The bulk of its efforts to trace the connections between culture and nature have been devoted to attempts to imagine what it must have been like in the good old days before

we were drawn into conflict with nature, conquered it, and then severed our connections with it, inaugurating modernity as “a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time.”<sup>87</sup> No wonder, then, that when they fight the good fight against postmodernism, ecocritics tend to backslide. Unless the proper discipline is maintained, such apostasy is probably inevitable. Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary enterprise, has had a hard time maintaining the proper discipline—a hard time remembering that, as Eco says, there are lines of resistance.

Consider what happens in SueEllen Campbell’s “The Land and Language of Desire,” one of the few essays to attempt a rapprochement between ecocriticism and postmodernism. Campbell argues that ecology (by which she means a form of environmentalism, specifically Deep Ecology) and contemporary literary and cultural theory are very much alike: “Old beliefs, old relations of power, old oppositions—ecology, like theory, would restructure them all.” Citing Gary Zukav’s New Age classic *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (a study of what are supposed to be the deeply significant connections between Zen Buddhism and quantum physics), Campbell adds: “Theory and ecology agree: our perceptions are always subjective and we are always involved.” Having established the idea of the theory-laden and relational character of our perceptions as a key principle, she applies it to the natural world:

A deer, for instance, has no being apart from things like the presence or absence of wolves, the kind of forage in its environment, the temperature and snowfall of any given winter, the other animals competing for the available food, the numbers of hunters with licenses, the bacteria in its intestines that either keep it healthy or make it sick. Theory and ecology agree that there’s no such thing as a self-enclosed, private piece of property, neither a deer nor a person nor a text nor a piece of land.<sup>88</sup>

This might seem like good intellectual doctrine to some, and the impulse behind it, the desire to see how things hold together in the natural world, is admirable. And yet Campbell’s view of deer is flawed. She encourages us to treat deer, real live ones, fur, antlers, and all, as functions of the environments they inhabit. And on her view, these environments, along with everything in them (wolves, forage, snowfall, hunters, bacteria), must be subject in their turn to the same processes of qualification that effectively eliminate deer from consideration as beings that really are something. Considered at a certain remove and a high level of generality, Campbell’s view may be persuasive as theory: as I pointed out earlier, environments are in fact entities that we have posited but have never observed in the wild, and never will. But deer aren’t like that, and Campbell’s view is nonsense as biology. No ecologist would agree with her that because they are caught up in ecological relationships larger than themselves, “there’s no such thing” as a deer, or a piece of land.

Campbell makes an error complementary to the one made by antitheoretical, realist ecocritics who argue that texts are like the world: she argues that the world is

like a text. She fails to recognize that deer are beings who can, in effect, say no even to ecology, and have said no to it more than once, on the many occasions when their behavior and population dynamics have failed to conform to ecological models. The view Campbell urges may be fine insofar as environments, which are merely supposititious, theoretical entities anyway, are concerned, but it isn’t a practical view to make of deer.<sup>89</sup> Fortunately for them, deer can mount some resistance to our perceptions of them, as well as to wolves, hunters, microbes, and bad weather. Deer like tortoises are inveterate refuseniks, positively so; and if they have lived in a wood, it is a wood.

### Loose Shoes

*The features of objects reached by scientific or reflective experiencing are important, but so are all the phenomena of magic, myth, politics, painting, and penitentiaries.*

John Dewey, *Nature and Experience*

Before we begin exploring nature-culture and the continuity of our lives in it, and before we begin probing “those searing rifts where the magma erupts” and the hard crusts of Nature and Society are first formed, it will behoove us to ponder a remark jotted down by Wittgenstein in one of his notebooks: “Philosophers use a language that is already deformed as by shoes that are too tight.”<sup>90</sup> With this remark in mind, the questions we need to ask first, in our efforts to become more comfortably full of doubt, might be these. Do we need to discard the tight shoes our philosophical and cultural heritage has forced us to wear? Do we need to coin terms not already misshapen by prior application to nature or culture—to one or the other, that is, but rarely if ever to both? Are we going to need to gear up differently than we have in the past, so that in our thinking we are prepared to cover more arduous because more ambiguous terrain—metaphorically speaking, of course?

Yes and no. Such questions make the proposition implied by Wittgenstein’s remark sound more dramatic than it really is. When Wittgenstein implies that we need a language not already deformed by its previous speakers, he isn’t suggesting that we need a *new language*. For ecocriticism, this new language might take the form of an ecological Esperanto, which in all likelihood would devolve very quickly into a meaningless ecobabble. All Wittgenstein, who thought Esperanto was disgusting, is suggesting is that we come to terms with our language differently, not that we find new terms.<sup>91</sup> He thinks we should tell ourselves new and different stories with, in, and about the language we already have.

Rorty, who as a philosopher is very much influenced by Wittgenstein, argues that in order to “keep faith with Darwin” we must “think of the word ‘language’ not as naming a thing with an intrinsic nature of its own, but as a way of abbreviat-

ing the kinds of complicated interactions with the rest of the universe which are unique to the higher anthropoids."<sup>92</sup> For ecocriticism, which certainly should try to keep faith with Darwin, this means that restoring the world does not have to mean restoring the word.

One of the new and different, and more Darwinian, stories told by ecocritics will have to be a tale about how odd some of our old stories were, a tale about how they constrained us to make assumptions by which we were too tightly bound. In another of his notebook jottings, Wittgenstein reacts to a snippet of this tale, one pertinent to the subject matter of this book:

It is very *remarkable* that we should be inclined to think of civilization—houses, trees, cars, etc.—as separating man from his origins, from what is lofty and eternal, etc. Our civilized environment, along with its trees and plants, strikes us then as though it were cheaply wrapped in cellophane and isolated from everything great, from God, as it were. This is a remarkable picture that intrudes on us.<sup>93</sup>

This "remarkable picture" is, I think, yet another version of pastoral. Wittgenstein described it in 1946 and, as Eco and Latour have demonstrated, it remains very much the picture on which we rely in most, if not all, of our thinking about environmental crisis and the intellectual tools we need to develop in order to cope with it. Most of those tools have been designed to punch through the cellophane and other cheap wrappings in which culture seems to us to have isolated itself from nature. We should consider Wittgenstein's suggestion that the cellophane is not really there, his suggestion that a picture, a *false* picture of our language and, by extension, of our culture, has held us captive.<sup>94</sup>

Philosophers and literary intellectuals are by no means the only ones among us who are susceptible to the seductions of this false picture of our world. Consider the environmental historian Donald Worster's outburst: "What is *truth*, what is *fact*, what is *health*, what is *beauty* in such a world? What can those words possibly mean? Total skepticism, total cynicism is the intellectual future offered by this industrial culture and its institutions."<sup>95</sup> Granted, I am quoting Worster's words here without regard to their context, but his despair seems overwrought. This makes it illustrative of my point, which is that we have no reason to assume that breaking the spell cast upon us by the picture Wittgenstein describes will be easy (as he knew only too well). Intellectually, breaking this spell involves a "refusal to draw a philosophically interesting line between nature and culture, language and fact, the universe of semiosis and some other universe," according to Rorty. Such a refusal becomes possible, he says, once "you stop thinking of knowledge as accurate representation, of getting the signs lined up in the right relations to the non-signs."<sup>96</sup>

I realize that Rorty makes our difficulty sound like a technical issue of concern only to intellectuals. While it's no secret that intellectuals often need recalibration, a

larger, more broadly cultural readjustment must be made as well, because Worster's despair is widely shared in the community at large. We therefore need to reconsider the tissue of our ideas not only about nature and culture, but also about what Latour would like us to call "nature-culture," and to recognize that "our ideas" is a phrase to be understood in the broadest sense: it must comprehend the high-minded, the lowdown, and everything in between, "all the phenomena," as Dewey puts it, "of magic, myth, politics, painting, and penitentiaries."

Encouraged by Dewey and others, I am persuaded that the truth of ecology must lie somewhere, if it lies anywhere at all, in nature-culture, a region where surprising monsters dwell. In order to adapt itself to the vagaries of nature-culture, ecocriticism needs to be more willing to hybridize than it has been: it needs to have a heart and a brain as well as arms and legs, and as many of each as possible, and it should not hesitate to borrow additional body parts here and there as the need arises. To approach nature, culture, and literature equipped in this makeshift way may seem anarchic, but as Feyerabend notes, "*anarchism*, while perhaps not the most attractive political philosophy, is certainly excellent medicine for *epistemology*." In my view, this is just the kind of medicine ecocriticism needs to take in order to avoid the "comparative impotence" (as Lawrence Buell phrases it) brought on by dosing itself with a watered-down brand of realism. It ought, in other words, to use whatever "rags of argument" (Feyerabend's phrase) seem most helpful, without trying to coordinate and unify them as an ensemble and without binding them all to a particular point of view, since particular points of view are likely to be fraught with the metaphysics and received ideas ecocriticism needs to avoid.<sup>97</sup>

A hybrid blend of theoretical and philosophical insight, awareness of scientific method, and a thorough acquaintance with the facts (who knows what they will turn out to be?) is necessary if we want to address nature-culture in tandem and as a singular phenomenon, as a two-for-one, while also addressing, as need be, nature and culture as two things not quite one in some important respects, which will have to be identified, of course. Then and only then can we hope to trace the connections between nature, society, and discourse that Latour characterizes as comprising the anthropological matrix of nature-culture, while also recognizing the disconnections that put us in jeopardy environmentally. And then and only then can we hope to determine the ways in which those connections are strong or in need of maintenance, if not actually broken.

Of course, exploring the matrix of nature-culture should raise several questions for ecocritics of a more particular import. These questions are: What is the truth of ecology, insofar as this truth is addressed by literature and art? and How well—how ably, how sensibly, how thoroughly—do literature and art address this truth? Both questions have usually been ruled out of court in literary and cultural studies, thanks to a widespread skepticism about and blasé attitude toward the natural world. I share with other ecocritics a negative feeling about this blasé attitude, and I understand their scorn for what sometimes seems to me, too, to be a cheap skepti-

cism. However, I think a more effective counter to cheap skepticism than the renewal of belief in the veracity of the text is a skepticism that does its fair share, earns its keep, and pays its way, while never lapsing into indifference. So I would like to add another question to the ecocritical agenda, a question inspired by Umberto Eco. Does the truth of ecology lie “in” literature and art? Of course, the word “lie” should have the same ambiguity when ecocritics use it that it had when Eco used it or its Italian cognate twenty-five years ago. And they ought not use the word “in” without bracing it between a pair of quotation marks.

By taking a more skeptical approach, ecocriticism might avoid the dilemma posed by the rejection of theory, on the one hand, as needless abstraction, and by theory’s rejection, on the other hand, of nature as a mere social construct or, still worse, as “gone for good.” Rejecting theory leaves ecocriticism without a rationale for supporting its own assertions and minus the tools required to develop such a rationale: it can’t get started. Meanwhile, the treatment of nature as something insubstantial by literary and cultural theorists bears us away from the shores where, despite all the things we’ve done to ruin them, we still must live.

I submit that the choice between theory and nature is a false one, since neither comes to us with its pristine character intact. Nature is not pristine for obvious reasons: we live in an age of overpopulation, hourly abuse of the natural world, and mass extinctions, and thus in an age of global environmental crisis. Theory is not pristine for the reasons cited by Joel Kovel, in his contribution to the notorious 1996 issue of the journal *Social Text* devoted to the “science wars” (about which I will have a few things to say in chapter three). If we can, for the moment, allow ourselves to conflate theory with postmodernism (not an unreasonable thing to do, if we put aside Latour’s objections to the latter term), then a remark Kovel makes in his essay can help us begin to discover a way to bring theory and nature together more fruitfully than either the most hidebound theory or the most earthbound ecocriticism have managed to do. Kovel writes: “What might be oxymoronically called classical postmodernism”—or theory—“is now as obsolete as the high modernism”—and here we might fill in the blank in a variety of ways—“it punctured. Given the gathering threat, the postmodern critique of foundationalism clearly has to be rethought.” He continues, “The postmodernist critique of science is true, and necessary, but also reductive insofar as it fails to recognize the material dimensions of the ecological crisis. And being reductive, it reveals its own false totalization, in this case, a crypto-idealization.”<sup>98</sup> One way to translate Kovel’s complaint about the false totalization or crypto-idealization of postmodernism is to put it into imperative form: postmodernism must be turned against itself. Its critical resources must be brought to bear on its own assumptions and presumptions. Or, in other words, theory itself must be subject to still more theory, and to some fact checking, too, the squishiness of the facts notwithstanding.

With these imperatives in mind, it’s time to disenchant ecocriticism. We can do that by deploying theoretical, philosophical, and scientific insights in the develop-

ment of a rationale for describing and interpreting the multifarious relations of culture and nature in the present day, as well as in the recent past. The difficult thing will be doing all this while avoiding the cryptic and totalizing tendencies, as well as the pastoral ones, that lead us astray, lest the deer start to look like less substantial beings to us than they once did, in olden days when we weren’t as sophisticated as we are now. Attempting to disenchant ecocriticism also will encourage us to acknowledge that the work we do needs to involve argument. It needs to involve both vigorous internal debate and the painstaking working out of new insights that might make ecocriticism’s argument more persuasive to outsiders and to insiders, too, than it has been thus far.