

Conceptualizing Nature:  
New England Nature Writers

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of English

Union College  
June 2017

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines five New England nature writers and their works from three distinct historical literary periods—William Cullen Bryant’s poetry from the era before industrialism (up to 1830); Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Essays* (1841-1844) and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) from the Industrial Revolution (1830-1860); and finally Robert Frost’s poetry and Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House* (1929) from the modernist period (1920-1950). These writers are connected by a shared and intense love of nature; however, because they write during different moments in history, their approaches to and definitions of “nature” vary. This thesis engages with these writers and their times in light of the historical development of industrialism and how it has worked to undermine the importance of connecting with the natural world. Over the course of three chapters, this thesis traces the development of environmental thought among New England writers and takes account of how industrialism changes predominant attitudes about nature. Since each of these writers rejects certain cultural attitudes that prevail in their time, this thesis grapples with how and why they depart from the norm in terms of their thoughts about the natural world. In pre-industrial New England, Bryant is free to adopt a strong Romantic conception of nature—one that is largely absent of concerns about protecting or conserving the environment. His advocacy for a deep spiritual connection with nature clashes with the prevailing capitalist view of nature that would help industrialism to develop in New England. However, once the Industrial Revolution sweeps across New England, Emerson and Thoreau issue warnings about the dangers of industrialism severing humanity from the natural world. They rail against the institutions and customs of their times, arguing that those will contribute to a society-wide spiritual

rot. By the twentieth century, Beston and Frost have to grapple with being lovers of nature in a world that is irreversibly industrialized. Frost is pessimistic about humanity's ever-decreasing connection with the natural world, while Beston remains hopeful that we can engage meaningfully and spiritually with the environment even in modern times. These somewhat divergent views highlight the tensions of environmental thought in the modern, industrial world between the desire to live in harmony with the natural world and the bleak realities of modernity. Industrialism and its effects of alienating large swaths of our culture from engagement with the natural world have forced these authors to focus on how to protect New England environments and landscapes. This history of this grand conversation about nature delivers us into the present moment in which we must find a way to cope with global environmental crisis. Learning about the history of environmental thought and writing in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New England helps us to better understand contemporary environmental concerns and gives us the chance to move forward in the best manner possible.

## INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary world, urbanized and industrialized and technologized, have we lost our fundamental connections with nature that has sustained us for millennia? Harold Fromm seems to think so. In his 1978 article, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map,” he argues that in premodern times, human societies had a more comprehensive understanding of how our livelihood is entirely predicated on our environment, or more basically, the land—we require clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, healthy food to eat, and building resources for shelter. This understanding was often translated into spiritual and religious notions of nature as sacred, or at least as deserving of veneration and good care. Since the advent of industrialism during the nineteenth century and the exponential technological growth that came along with it, however, Fromm finds that in Western and industrialized cultures we have made the mistake of presuming that human technology is what sustains us. In doing so, we have forsaken our earlier conception of nature as providing for us and have consequently found obsolete the idea that we share a spiritual connection with nature or that it is deserving of our protection and stewardship. In short, Fromm argues, we have lost our once close connection with the natural world.

This false understanding of technology as the source of our sustenance as opposed to nature is one of the leading conceptual developments that have fostered behaviors toward the environment that have helped to exacerbate the global climate crisis we now face. Fromm spells this out, writing that modern humans “are rarely in a position to experience a connection between the commodity that fulfills their need and its natural

source” (Fromm 38). As this connection between that which sustains us and its source has been obscured, we have come to believe that we no longer need nature, and therefore do not need to care about its wellbeing. Fromm highlights this fallacy, comparing it to a group of “affluent teenagers who dump beer cans from their moving sportscar and then drive off” (ibid., 40). Like the teenagers who believe their waste has vanished when in fact it has not, Fromm argues, our modern industrial society engages behaviors that pollute and degrade the environment without realizing that the carbon we burn to drive our cars does not just vanish but in fact stays in our atmosphere, builds up with other greenhouse gases, and threatens the stability of our planet’s climate system. Because we have become so wrapped up in our technological abilities in the industrial age, we have lost sight of the full repercussions of our actions, and we wake up to find ourselves somehow embroiled in a global climate crisis.

The bright side is that there are certainly millions of people around the globe that see the threats to our global ecosystem and care enough to do something about it. There is today a strong and growing global environmentalist movement that seeks to reduce the effects of global climate change and increase the sustainability of our resource use to foster a rebound in the health of the global ecosystem. The existence of this global movement might seem to contradict Fromm’s analysis, but I argue that it only demonstrates that his purview of the situation is inherently a macro-level analysis of general civilizational trends, which allows for undercurrents that oppose the predominant cultural attitudes and behaviors. So, in spite of the fact that modern civilization, fully industrialized and technologized, has generally tended in the direction of exploiting nature for resources and failing to attach any spiritual significance to it, there have always

been individuals who strongly oppose that trend and argue in favor of maintaining or recreating a deep connection between the human and the natural. This thesis project is fundamentally concerned with those thinkers and writers who, in the face of industrial development, have promoted deep spiritual connectedness with nature and behaviors that reflect that conception of nature as sacred.

The specific group of writers under consideration in this project all come from New England. I've adopted this regional approach because New England has a specific industrial history that affects the ways in which the writers who come from the region write about nature. These writers share common cultural influences from their region—from Puritanism and Calvinism to individualism and the New England farm ethic—that shape their approach to nature in a common way. The core aim of this thesis is to consider this industrial and cultural history and to read from a historical and regional vantage point how these nature writers respond to industrialism. In light of Fromm's analysis, we should expect to find that industrial changes and advances from one era to another should change writers' conception of what nature is over time. William Cullen Bryant, the first writer featured in this thesis, has a particular Romantic and pre-industrial view of nature that is marked by an unsullied passion for nature and a near total absence of worry or concern about the health of the environment. This view is quite different from how Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who lived and wrote during the First Industrial Revolution, view nature as in danger or being degraded by industrial encroachment on the landscape, which inspires them to prescribe a deepening of our connection with it. This in turn is distinct from how Henry Beston and Robert Frost, modernists who lived in a world irreversibly industrialized, view nature

either as on the verge of becoming totally forsaken or as already there. In three chapters, this thesis will examine each of these writers in the context of their historical time period and the extent of industrial development for the sake of tracking how industrialism changes approaches to nature.

As Kate Soper notes in the introduction to her aptly titled 1995 book, *What is Nature?*, the very word “nature” can mean innumerable different things to different individuals from different cultural and historical contexts. Thus, there is no singular “nature” that all five of these New England nature writers are writing about; rather, each of them has a different understanding of what that word means and how it ought to be used. Because of this, one of the fundamental goals of this project is to approach an understanding of the unique ways in which each writer has in mind when they write “nature.” Nevertheless, it would be useful to proffer a basic and vague notion of what I mean when I write “nature,” since I will have to use that word a lot in writing about nature writers. Whether humans are included in the set of things that count as ‘nature’ is up for debate, among these five writers and among the linguistic community as a whole, but in this thesis. “Nature” certainly includes all that which is neither human nor made by human artifice. The term may include those human and human-derived things as well, and therefore simply refer to everything contained within the natural universe, but only in specific moments and in reference to one or more of the writers’ meaning nature in that sense.

To avoid the confusions inherent in that setup, I will frequently substitute for nature terms such as: *environment*, *ecosystem*, *land* or *landscape*, and *cosmos* or *natural universe*. These terms refer to specific portions of what may (or may not) be considered



to be included in the more total term of “nature.” “Environment” and “ecosystem” are similar terms, in that they both generally refer to spaces that are considered to be outside of the realm of humans and human-created things; specifically, however, “environment” refers to the more abstract concept of that kind of space as a space we can be in, while “ecosystem” more specifically refers to a space that constitutes a biotic community, such as a forest or a reef or a mountain. “Land” refers to parcels or the sum of parcels of the environment or ecosystem that humans consider to have a specific use or function, such as a farm or a park or a campus; “landscape” refers to the abstract notion of the land as an interpretable space for humans to live in. I use “cosmos” and “natural universe” rather interchangeably and to mean the sum total of all that exists in the universe that we live in, excepting anything that would be considered supernatural. These more specific terms will afford better precision than the more ambiguous term “nature” and will help understand in specific instances whether “nature” includes all things in the natural universe or just those things that are nonhuman, or some middle-ground in between.

The use of all these terms will help in my analysis to at least begin to pin down where each of the featured writers stand in regard to their definition of “nature.” As mentioned before, we would expect that writers from different historical periods—from different cultural, social, political, and economic contexts—to come to different conclusions about nature. The structure of this thesis reflects that hypothesis: I will analyze each writer or pair of writers in chronological sequence to best see how ideas about nature morph over time and are shaped by processes of cultural change. The three chapters, in order, will deal with William Cullen Bryant and pre-industrial New England; Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in the context of the First Industrial

Revolution; and Henry Beston and Robert Frost in the context of a fully industrialized and modern world, particularly World War I as a global industrial struggle. The purpose of linking up the writers with their time periods is to trace the historical development of industrialism in New England alongside the changing conceptions of nature to glean something about how the one affects the other. In this regard, this thesis will track the changes to humanity's connection with nature in light of Fromm's argument about the impact of industrialism on the common consciousness.

I begin with William Cullen Bryant, an all-too-often neglected Romantic poet from the earliest years of the American Republic. I focus specifically on his earliest poetry, written between 1811 and 1824, as that portion of his work best demonstrates the pre-industrial mode of approaching nature. There was no industrial or urban encroachment on the landscape, nor were there any worries about pollution, environmental degradation, ecosystem collapse, or global climate change. Thus, the poetry is free from any concern about the environment and instead focuses most of its energies on rhapsodizing nature. Bryant grew up in a time and place—early nineteenth century New England—in which liberal Protestant theology was the prevailing mode of engagement with the divine. This spiritual background, combined with his pure love of nature, led him to explore through his poetry some rather radical spirituality that predicated the wellbeing of an individual soul on a close and intense connection with nature. Bryant helps to illustrate the first portion of Fromm's argument, that in pre-industrial times humans were more apt to find a connection with nature. In this first chapter, I investigate precisely what that connection is, and more generally what nature is to Bryant and how he uses it in his poetry. This will set the stage for the industrial

changes soon to come and the changes to how we approach and interact with nature that go along with them.

The second chapter focuses on the two foremost Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. A collection of Emerson's essays and lectures are considered, as well as Thoreau's seminal book, *Walden* (1854). The height of both of their careers came in the 1840s, right at the time when New England was swept up in an Industrial Revolution. Both deeply philosophical men, Emerson and Thoreau were increasingly worried by the advances in industrialism, specifically the ways in which it threatened spiritual and intellectual decay. They found that the industrial modes of production—in those days, predominantly the factory system and the mills—too rigidly and artificially structured the lives of workers, and inspired a culture that valued efficient production solely for the sake of profit. Both men railed against the industrial capitalist social order, as they felt it discouraged independence, free thought, and most importantly, an authentic and deep connection with the cosmos. Their Transcendentalist philosophies were a response industrialism and presented a radical vision of how each individual soul could link up with what Emerson called the “Over-Soul,” the universal spirit of which each individual is merely one part. that was immanent throughout nature.

This chapter will adopt a different tenor than the first or the third, as the nature of Emerson and Thoreau's writing is different. Bryant's world was far more static than that of the Transcendentalists, and Beston and Frost write after the great transformations of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. But Emerson and Thoreau live and write at just the time when seemingly everything about New England society was changing. Industrialism was thus a massive disruption to the development of New England, at least in the sense

that its forces of change were so great that most all facets of life became refracted through the industrial lens. Emerson and Thoreau must therefore respond to these changes, and they spend a great deal of time laying out their philosophical arguments about the dangers of industrialism and the power of the individual to connect with the cosmos. Nature is a significant part of this philosophy—it is the very stuff that is divine to the Transcendentalists—but there is a lot of philosophical legwork to be done to come to that conclusion, and as a result much of the second chapter focuses on that legwork, and only then comes around to discuss how we as human souls can connect with nature.

The third chapter considers to modernists Henry Beston and his seminal work, *The Outermost House* (1928), in tension and conversation with Robert Frost and five of his most influential nature poems. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, both writers live in a world where turning back from industrialism is simply not feasible. Industrialism had, by then, spread from New England to all corners of the U.S. and indeed across the globe. The world order was predicated on the industrial strength of the nations that had the most of it. This is best illustrated in the struggle that was World War I, which very closely affect the lives of both Beston, who served as a volunteer paramedic in the French Army, and Frost, who was living in England at the outbreak of the war and who lost some close friends who went to fight. Their writing engages with the questions of what to do now that industrialism has taken over the world and is not going away. Frost laments all the changes that began in Emerson and Thoreau's time and were solidified by the time of his maturation. He yearns to go back to those times he believes to have been better, and being fully aware of the impossibility of that desire, he is left with nothing to do but to write poetry about loss and decay. Beston was perhaps bound to

this fate upon his return to the U.S. after the War, as he struggled to find anything meaningful in this too industrialized, too modern world. But during his year living alone on the Outer Beach of Cape Cod, as memorialized and recounted in *The Outermost House*, he finds that nature still speaks as forcefully in the twentieth century as it did to Bryant a century earlier. He discovers the healing power of nature, how maintaining a connection between one's individual soul and the spirit that breathes through all of nature can give meaning to life once again and help the individual to rise up above the bleakness of modern industrial society.

This chapter inherently deals with competing analyses of where industrialism has left us. Frost implicitly argues that the best of times has already passed and that there is no way to go back to it; Beston believes that nature can still and will always triumph over industrialism, that the experiences Bryant and Thoreau write about are still as attainable in the modern world as they were then. If the second chapter deals with the disruption brought on by industrialism, then this chapter deals with the aftermath of that disruption—Beston wants to bring us back on the course that Bryant originally charted, while Frost believes there is no course to get back to. These competing ideas of how we can proceed from a fully industrialized world necessarily rely on differing definitions of and approaches to nature. So in this third chapter, I analyze how the competing optimism and pessimism about our connection with nature leads to different conceptions of nature.

Perhaps the other most significant recurring theme among these chapters is the shifting spiritual approach to nature. Bryant began this development by defining his love of nature in spiritual terms, uniting religious and theological ideas with his conception of what nature is and how humans relate to it. Industrialism as a disruptive force presented a

significant challenge to the maintenance of a spiritual connection with nature, as Harold Fromm has pointed out (Fromm 40). The Transcendentalists responded to this challenge by doubling down on the spiritual engagement with nature that Bryant presented, going so far as to explicitly deify the natural universe. As industrial development continued to advance, and as modernism set in, the challenges to this spirituality increased likewise. Robert Frost comes out from the other side of this development, and his poetry, along with his personal life in general, is noticeably thin on spirituality. Henry Beston was heading down the same track, ready to give up all faith in finding salvation in modernity, until his experiences at Cape Cod reinvigorated his soul and encouraged him to continue the spiritual tradition (in his own, idiosyncratic way) of his literary forbears. The difference between Beston and Frost in this regard speaks to their greater differences as writers, which show how Frost has become so pessimistic about humanity's future while Beston finds the fortitude to remain optimistic and passionate about nature. Spirituality will thus play a key role throughout this thesis, as understanding the historical development of this naturalistic theology reflects the developments of both industrialism and approaches to nature more generally.

The very purpose of performing this historical survey of views on nature is that our present-day views are direct descendants of these forbears. In order to understand our approach to nature today, we must understand the inspirations and predecessors to that approach. Perhaps the most pressing reason we need understand the definition of and approach to nature is that we face a global environmental crisis that requires our immediate and careful action. To understand the totality of the crisis is not simply to understand the scientific facts of what is happening to our global ecosystem and what we

humans are doing to contribute to that. We need to go beyond the *what* question and ask ourselves the *why* question: Why do we treat our environment the way we do? What connections does humanity make with nature, and why? Where are we faltering, and how can we get back on track? The answers to these questions lie in our common cultural background—by striving to understand where industrialism came from, why it flourished, how it changed our views toward nature, and why we think and act the way we do today, we understand why global corporations continue to insist on burning fossil fuels, why governments around the globe drag their feet when it comes to dealing with this global crisis, why individuals want or do not want to alter their lifestyle to be more sustainable.

This thesis is about more than just environmentalism, however. It is about regionalism—I study New England nature writing because there is a commonality between writers from a century apart, linked not by their epoch but by their region. The same region features a culture that develops over time, but that in any time will point back to a shared origin. By accounting for the historical forces at play that move cultural attitudes in one way or another, we can understand more clearly why the writers who come out of this cultural context write about nature in the particular way they do. Thus, to understand New England nature writing requires knowing both nature writing and New England. Learning about this cultural heritage helps to make sense of contemporary actions—why New England is one of the regions of the U.S. that is more inclined to be environmentally conscious, why politicians at all levels in New England adopt the stances they do toward the environment, why activists say and do certain things, why individuals recycle or don't recycle, and so forth. To work at redressing our global crisis requires more than a simple list of prescribed actions to take; to live sustainably is to

radically transform our very lifestyles from our postmodern consumer culture to something more ecologically balanced and sustainable. People don't just up and change their lifestyles because experts tell them they must; there is emotional and cultural investment into how we live our lives, and to change that requires an understanding of where we as a people come from in order to get ourselves to where we want to be if we want to work at solving the problems we face in our time. Put simply, the environmental movement owes a lot to the conservation movement, which owes a lot to Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, who owes a lot to Robert Frost and his poetry, who both owe a lot to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, who owes a lot to his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in turn owes a lot to William Cullen Bryant. All these writers in turn owe a lot to the events in history that conspired to create New England and the culture that has inspired disparate people from distinct time periods to flock to the idea of 'nature' and, without ever fully understanding why, to love it. In short, if we are to understand ourselves, we must understand those who came before us and paved the way for the roads we now tread.



## Chapter 1: William Cullen Bryant's Pre-Industrial Nature Poetry

William Cullen Bryant was perhaps the first New Englander to be properly considered a nature poet. What I mean by this is that his poetry consistently deals with topics relating to nature. What this means, precisely, requires a thorough understanding of what nature means to Bryant, which itself requires a deep consideration of his nature poems. The fundamental questions, then, are: how does Bryant define nature, and how does nature function in his poetry? This chapter will address these questions in closely examining his poetry and considering his corpus in its historical and social contexts. His earliest poetry, written between 1811 and 1824, comes before the Industrial Revolution swept through New England and radically changed the way New Englanders understand and engage with the natural environment around them. This is significant, because his poetry is markedly pre-industrial and thus serves as a useful measuring stick to help analyze later, post-industrial nature writing and in turn to uncover how the changes brought on by industrialism affect nature writing.

The poems I explore in this chapter illustrate Bryant's theoretical conception or definition of nature and how he considers it to impact the lives of human beings. "To a Waterfowl" (1818) considers the lessons that humans might learn from nature, but does so in a way that uniquely inverts the traditional conception of humankind as being privileged over nature. In "An Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," (1821) Bryant expounds his conception of the relationship between humanity and non-human nature, and offers an aesthetic and somewhat spiritual argument for the importance of experiencing what he defines as nature. "A Forest Hymn" (1824) is a more direct

consideration of the spiritual connection humans can find when immersed in nature; and “Thanatopsis” (1811/1821) presents a broader view of the true cosmic significance of humanity relative to everything else that is nature. In these poems, Bryant challenges traditional Western notions of humanity’s relationship with nature and incorporates a unique array of spiritual considerations to help articulate his conception of what nature is and how humans ought to engage with it.

In what follows, I consider each poem in this light with the ultimate goal of determining what nature is to Bryant and how he believes humanity should approach it and behave toward it. To accomplish this, however, it is first important to consider the historical context of this period of Bryant’s life and how that affects the literature he produces. In later chapters, this will help to compare Bryant to later New England writers who deal with similar subject matter and who might otherwise share Bryant’s Romantic inclination, but who ultimately articulate different views on nature, which, I argue, is due in part to the development of industrialism and how that profoundly affects our attitudes and behaviors toward nature. So before jumping into the poetry, I will offer a brief analysis of the pre-industrial situation of this early part of Bryant’s life and career.

#### *THE RUDE BUT GOOD OLD TIMES: PRE-INDUSTRIAL NEW ENGLAND*

In his 1851 poem, “The Planting of the Apple Tree,” Bryant says of himself, through the voice of some old man remembering him, “a poet of the land was he, / Born in the rude but good old times; / ‘Tis said he made some quaint old rhymes” (78-80). This is a perfectly apt summary of Bryant’s significance in the American canon—a nature poet, from a long-ago and less-advanced epoch and a man who wrote some neat, Romantic verse. While obviously far too simplistic, this brief biography can serve as a jumping off

point for a chapter dedicated to studying Bryant's nature poetry. The early years of Bryant's life, around the turn of the nineteenth century, certainly qualify for those rude but good old times the old man mentions—the first industrial mill in New England did not open until 1813, when an integrated cotton mill was constructed on the banks of Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts; even so, the new mill technology did not explode immediately and most of New England outside of seaport towns remained almost entirely agrarian (Easton 393; Weil 1336). The primary mode of production in these rural places was largely family- and community-oriented subsistence farming. So industrialization had not yet taken hold during Bryant's younger years, which orients his experiences with the environment in a distinctly pre-industrial way.

Though Bryant lived until 1878, dying at the age of 83, and experienced a great deal of industrial change, the four poems that I am concerned with here, written between 1811 and 1824, are markedly pre-industrial. The good old times in which Bryant writes these nature poems lacked much of the machinery and technology that today, as I've discussed in the introduction, interferes with so much of modern humanity's relationship with nature. The historical context out of which this poetry comes is one where human society still enjoys a more or less immediate relationship with nature. In other words, according to Harold Fromm's use of the term *immediate*, humans interact directly with the material means of their subsistence as they come out of the natural world, which are not, as now, mediated by industrial technologies that obscure the source of our livelihoods (Fromm 35). This close connection surfaces in Bryant's writing, in which he makes nature his primary focus and accepts humanity's subordination to and dependence upon nature. What Bryant's poetry markedly lacks is a sense of urgency or a lamentation

about a loss or weakening of this connection with nature. This is something that will come into play with the later writers, such as Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau and modernists Frost and Beston, that I consider in subsequent chapters of this project as industrialism progresses and threatens the worry-free (at least in this regard) quaint old rhymes that Bryant pens.

Bryant grew up in Cummington, Massachusetts, a small town nestled in the hills of the Berkshires built around these modes of life. During his rural youth, a young Bryant had splendid access to mountain and vale, pond and brook, forest and meadow. His frequent wanderings around this landscape allowed him to collect a broad and deep experience with that topic that he writes so lustily about (Peckham 4). Growing up in a rural, pre-industrial, primarily agrarian environment informed Bryant's sense of humans' relationship with nature, the fruits of which show up in his nature poetry. His writing is thus exemplary of the kind of pre-industrial, immediate human-nature relationship that Fromm argues we have since lost. He understands what modern society has largely failed to, according to Fromm, namely that it is not simply the the wit and artifice of humankind that produces the means of our livelihoods, but rather that nature—far greater than humanity—supplies the resources necessary, and that we are still very much beholden to it (Fromm 35).

*INVERTING the HUMANITY-NATURE DICHOTOMY: "TO a WATERFOWL"*

In "To a Waterfowl," Bryant makes the titular bird the object of his musing. The foundation of the content of this poem is that there are lessons to be learned from a solitary experience in nature, specifically, from a lone bird migrating south. In order for this poem to work, for the lesson to come across, the human speaker must subordinate

himself or herself in deference to the bird. The form of the poem is a direct address, hence the title, in which the speaker remains the subject and makes the waterfowl into the direct object. Grammatically, this keeps the speaker in the privileged position of subject and the waterfowl in the subordinate position of object. Christopher Manes, in his essay, “Nature and Silence,” posits that this construction is typical of Western literature, which traditionally tends to keep humans as the speaking subjects and make everything nonhuman the object. Manes argues that nonhuman nature is silent in Western cultures, and is often denied a voice in literature or other arts that it might have access to in other, animistic cultures. He writes that “the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes 15). This is a convention and cultural attitude that Bryant writes in line with, at least in terms of the way the poem is grammatically structured. However, while nature does not actively speak in this poem, it is clear that Bryant views it as possessing some capability of communicating wisdom and truth to us, if only we would just listen. This is a tension that is evident in Bryant’s thought process—on the one hand, his human subjectivity is still privileged, but on the other, he is actively self-aware of the failings of the human perspective and seeks to redress those by learning from nature.

In confronting this tradition and working somewhat against it, Bryant is challenging the dominant, normative attitude in the West that nature is something outside of humanity, subordinate to it, and that can therefore be dominated and exploited. Lynn White argues in his seminal 1968 article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” that Western Christianity had long sown the seeds for a general civilizational attitude of domination over nature. Specifically, he points to the creation story, in which

God grants humanity 'dominion' over the rest of the natural world, which Western culture has used as justification for an exploitative stance toward the environment (White 190). This attitude helps to explain Manes's point that Western literature continually places humanity over nature. Bryant inherits this cultural attitude through his Protestantism, and this might help to explain why he maintains the role of speaking subject in this poem, but his slight rebellion against this dominating attitude suggests the beginnings of a new approach to humanity's relationship with nature.

Closer to home, New England was in the midst of an economic and ecological shift that would have far-reaching effects on the way New Englanders approached the landscape around them and would eventually culminate in the Industrial Revolution. Carolyn Merchant calls the paradigm shift in the New England economy a "capitalist ecological revolution." By this she means that mode of production in inland New England fundamentally changed from a subsistence-oriented agrarian economy to an increasingly mercantile market economy (Merchant 2). As the hinterland in which Bryant grew up became more connected with seaport towns on the coast, farms that were formerly oriented toward subsistence increasingly adopted a profit-driven mercantile attitude (*ibid.*, 149). This change encouraged producers of commodities and goods to think about resources in terms of their market value. When it comes to natural resources, this means that considerations of their ecological value are forgotten. This lack of concern for the balance and health of the ecosystem stems from the Newtonian and later Enlightenment mode of thought that adopts a mechanistic view of nature. This view considers nature as something that can be mathematically and scientifically described, and therefore dominated by the human intellect (*ibid.*, 199). This notion of dominating

nature, of predicating the human need above the ecological, makes it easy to exploit the environment for human gain. In more conceptual terms, humanity and its needs are privileged relative to nature, which is only there to fuel humanity. Merchant argues that this way of thinking in colonial and later independent America “was legitimated by a set of symbols that placed cultured ... humans above wild nature” (ibid., 2). This ecological shift, combined with what White argues was a long-standing cultural attitude of domination over nature, helped to push New England society and its economy toward industrialization in the next generation. “To a Waterfowl” appears right in the middle of this shift and hints at Bryant’s rejection of these predominant attitudes in New England society.

To aid in his implicit critique of this Newtonian idea of nature as something that can be intellectually dominated, the speaker makes reference to another hypothetical human who makes the mistake of presuming knowledge, of asserting himself as a voice of authority in direct contradiction to the message that nature sends. The speaker states to the waterfowl, “Vainly the fowler’s eye / Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong” (5-6). The fowler, a man presumably trained in an empirical, scientific tradition, makes an error of conceit. He assumes that he knows more about birds than the bird itself, specifically that one is not supposed to fly alone at dusk, forsaking both the guiding influence of the flock and the navigational aide that daylight would provide. In doing so he misses out on the lesson that the speaker, humbled by nature rather than seeking to dominate it, is open to learning.

To glean important lessons from nature, the speaker asks questions, and importantly does not presume answers: “Seek’st thou the plashy brink / Of weedy lake, or

marge of river wide, / Or where the rocking billows rise and sink / On the chafed ocean-side?" (9-12). By remaining open, asking the bird questions, and simply observing nonhuman nature at work, the speaker comes to a revelation: "There is a Power whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast" (13-4). By asking questions, Bryant comes to learn that the bird has a certain trust in this "Power." This gets at a more transcendental understanding of the workings of nature that approach the kind of universal spirit that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau talk so much about (and that we will examine in greater detail in Chapter Two), one that is omnipresent throughout the natural universe and impels all matter to move according to the laws of nature.

The humility that is required for the speaker to take in the lesson that the bird offers is itself a lesson to other humans. Bryant illustrates the importance of listening to the environment and allowing it to impress knowledge on the human rather than having the human construct nature in his own terms. The speaker is able to draw a connection between the solitary bird and its own solitary self, committing to apply the wisdom of the bird in its own wanderings: "He who ... / Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight, / In the long way that I must tread alone, / Will lead my steps aright" (29-32). The important maxim to be gleaned from this closing stanza is that if one trusts her instincts and follows that "Power" that resides in all living things, she may find her way quite independent of the flock. Bryant stresses the importance of solitude away from the flock, particularly solitude in nature. This is a theme that comes up again in the next poem I consider, "An Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," and will recur throughout this thesis as a major theme of each of the writers included in this project. Bryant's reasoning



for this, as will be articulated more clearly in “Inscription,” is that one can’t always trust the crowd, but can always trust nature. This is another way that Bryant inverts the traditional human-nature dichotomy, arguing that nonhuman nature is better than humanity at offering guidance and salvation to the individual.

*HUMANITY and NATURE as SEPARATE REALMS: “INSCRIPTION”*

In “Inscription,” Bryant explores the relationship that humans and humanity have with nature. He casts human society and the natural environment as discrete realms or spheres and contrasts them on the basis of the happiness and fulfillment an individual can find in each. Along with the other poems I explore (and many that I do not), nature occupies a privileged position over humanity. For Bryant, the natural world is superior in *moral* terms—it is bereft of any of the quarrels that humans find themselves embroiled in. It simply hums along, energy and matter interacting according to the laws of nature, life and creation unfolding without the strife or vices of humankind, “a truth,” the speaker argues, “which needs / No school of long experience” (1-2). It is so plainly obvious that the human realm is insufficient for the individual to find full satisfaction because, the speaker argues, “the world,” by which I take him to mean this human realm, “Is full of guilt and misery, ... / ... sorrows [and] crimes” (2-4). So humanity is plagued with imperfections and vices that cause dissatisfaction and discontent, and nature is presented as the antidote to these ailments of society.

The impetus of this poem rests on a construction of nature as distinct and external to humanity. This construction is pivotal to understanding how Bryant defines nature, as there is a lot at stake when considering whether humanity is a part of nature or is separate from it. In this poem, Bryant argues for the latter, that humanity and nature are their own

discrete realms. Kate Soper's 1995 book, *What Is Nature?*, inquires after how Western language commonly defines nature, and in the first chapter she argues this discrimination between the natural and the cultural is endemic to the West. She argues that in common parlance, "'nature' refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity" (Soper 15). "Inscription" certainly operates with this construction of nature in mind, as "the haunts of Nature" (6) are clearly presented as distinct from, and even oppositional to, "the haunts of men" (10). Understanding this distinction that Bryant makes, it becomes clear that his definition of nature excludes human society. This speaks to his Romantic ideals of nature as benevolent and healing, which contrasts with his view of society as damaging to the individual. It helps, then, to keep society out of the definition of nature. The question remains open whether nature can include the individual that is set apart from society; this question has no clear answer, as Bryant's notion of the individual seems separate from both nature and humanity. Further examination of this poem and how it constructs the individual in relation to both society and nature is required to answer this question, so I will set it aside and come back to it.

In response to the truth that human society can be deleterious to the individual, Bryant writes "Inscription" as an invitation—the speaker is trying to entice an unsatisfied reader to step out of the imperfect human realm and into the natural realm, to "enter this wild wood / And view the haunts of Nature" (5-6). The sadness that every individual inevitably feels can be so easily remedied by the woods, which "are still the abodes of gladness" (15). Bryant makes this case with his typical, mellifluous Romantic language—he mentions how "the thick roof / Of green and stirring branches is alive / And musical with birds;" (14-6) there is a squirrel who, "with raised paws and form erect, /

Chirps merrily” (19-20); “even the green trees,” he goes on, “partake the deep contentment” (23-4). Bryant paints nature as alive and happy, benign and sublime. The extensive imagery employed in this section of the poem almost overwhelms the reader of the “Inscription” by mentioning many creatures and things in the woods and how they all, by nature of their connection, are contented and at peace. Indeed, all of nature—animate creatures, inanimate flora, even “the mossy rocks themselves” (28), inanimate and inorganic—exudes happiness. It is here, in the titular “wood,” where the jaded and disillusioned (and perhaps even misanthropic) individual might find reprieve from those “haunts of men” (10) and find sublime, transcendent contentment.

The core argument of this poem is that nature can provide respite from the problems of humankind. Bryant presents human society as a negative and nonhuman nature as a positive, the one to be escaped in favor of the other. In doing so, he makes clear his thoughts on the triangular relationships among the self, society, and nature—it is beneficial and perhaps even necessary for the individual to, at least from time to time, retire from the human world and immerse himself or herself in the nonhuman realm of nature. Bryant presents a choice between these realms, and he sees this choice as being clear and easy to make—humanity is riddled with ills, nature is immaculate and happy; it’s obvious which realm one would rather inhabit. This Romantic notion is rather facile; the poem never treats what happens when the individual must leave the wood.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Bryant makes a compelling case to the individual that nature is, in terms of goodness and happiness, the superior realm to human society.

There is something in this conception of the individual’s relation to nature that

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<sup>1</sup> This theme comes back up in Robert Frost’s “Birches,” in which the speaker longs to climb a birch to get away from earth for a time, but makes reference to coming back down and re-entering the human world. There will be more on this when I discuss Frost’s poetry in Chapter Three.

strikingly resembles the principle of interconnectedness that the late twentieth-century movement of deep ecology expounds. Bryant understands the psychological significance—indeed, necessity—of maintaining a strong connection between the self and the environment that exists around it. This aspect of the poem anticipates Neil Evernden's argument in his essay, "Beyond Ecology," that it is important for the individual to develop a strong relationship with the environment in which it exists, of which it is a part (Evernden 101-2). Taking Bryant's advice, retiring from humanity awhile and immersing oneself in nature, one can realize Evernden's prescription and come to see, as Paul Shepard does, "the self [as] ennobled and extended ... as part of the landscape and the ecosystem, because the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves" (Shepard 2). Shepard's view suggests that the self finds its ultimate fulfillment by understanding and feeling connection with the rest of the cosmos, and this is certainly what Bryant is getting at in "Inscription." This point serves as an important facet of Bryant's theory of nature—the self needs to be alone with nature, get in touch with nature, to find that fulfillment and ease of mind that the addressee lacks at the beginning of the poem.

This notion seems to controvert somewhat the earlier distinction between nature and humanity with which I argued "Inscription" operates. If we consider that Bryant constructs the individual as distinct from the society it finds itself in—in the same way he constructs humanity as distinct from the natural world in which it is embedded—then perhaps some sense can be made of this seeming contradiction. Perhaps the individual is a third discrete category, distinct from both nature and society, or perhaps the individual is both, able to transcend the distinction between nature and culture. If so, then this is a clue as to why Bryant values individuality as key to being able to connect with nature—as

I've just shown in the previous paragraph, he values connectedness with nature, but this poem clearly sets humanity as distinct from nature. The individual, then, is the only thing that can bridge this gap, being able to connect both with human society and nature, but never both at the same time. If this were true, then the only way for the individual to connect with nature is to, as the speaker of the "Inscription" argues, leave society behind and experience nature alone. Thus, this poem defines nature as a distinct realm from human society, but one of immense importance as it offers a healing power that cannot be found anywhere else. This is why nature is so important to Bryant generally, and as we will see in the next two poems, he even begins to add a spiritual significance to this natural realm.

*NATURE and the DIVINE: "A FOREST HYMN"*

In "A Forest Hymn," Bryant expands upon the notions presented in "Inscription" of nature being a place of respite as well as an antidote to the ills of society, however this poem takes on a more overtly spiritual and religious tenor. Bryant explores a naturalistic spirituality which holds that nature is a more proper place to connect with the divine than humanly constructed spaces like houses of worship, and furthermore is perhaps the very divine stuff with which we ought to connect. As the title indicates, the poem takes the form of a hymn to a being addressed as "Father" (23). The poem does not suggest a straightforward worship of this God *per se*, but is rather fundamentally about the relationship that humanity has with this deity. In the first section, before the hymn formally begins, the speaker laments how humans have strayed in their worship. The very first line, "The groves were God's first temples," signals the direction of this poem, namely that only by being present in nature can humans begin to fully comprehend and

celebrate the divine (1). It is through human artifice—since “man learned / To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave, / And spread the roof above” (1-3)—that religious adoration and worship has long since been refracted. The speaker laments this trend and inquires, “why / Should we ... neglect / God’s ancient sanctuaries, and adore / ... under roofs / That our frail hands have raised?” (16-20). Bryant shows his skepticism toward human-constructed spaces as houses of worship, and insists that it is in nature that we find spiritual relief.

Perhaps the reason why he insists this is because out in nature one can observe and appreciate the “great miracle that still goes on,” continual and perennial creation (70). This sentiment leads into the core of the spiritual kernel of this poem—the omnipresence, indeed the immanence, of the divine. The speaker continues, “Thou art in the soft winds / That run along the summit of these trees / In music; ... / ... the barky trunks, the ground, / ... are all instinct with thee” (39-40, 43-4). This revelation that the divine spirit is present throughout nature cannot be had worshipping from inside even the greatest of man-made temples, but only out in nature, where “human pomp or pride / Report not” (35-6). This notion that spaces of human creation pale in comparison to spaces naturally created, then, calls into question the true significance of human accomplishment, in comparison to what the natural universe has to offer. The contrast that Bryant sets up to drive this point home is between the “mighty oak” (55) and a hypothetical European prince. The speaker declares, “not a prince / ... / E’er wore his crown as loftily as [the oak] / Wears the green coronal of leaves” (57, 59-60). Once again Bryant shows a diminished veneration for human achievement in contrast to the magnificence of nature.

So it follows that a crucial part of the spirituality of this poem is solitude. The speaker has argued that the individual was closer to the divine before human culture created artificial churches, and seriously downplays the importance of triumph and accomplishment in the human realm. Those that the speaker does admire are the “holy men who hid themselves / Deep in the woody wilderness, and gave / Their lives to thought and prayer,” (90-2) disagreeing with other “holy men / Who deemed it were not well to pass life thus” (95-6). But standing up against these voices and the pressures to bend to the will and influence of society, the speaker implores, “let me often to these solitudes / Retire” (97-8). As we have seen in Bryant’s other poetry, the solitary individual, “lone wandering, but not lost” (“Waterfowl” 16) is exalted; here we see that lone figure, solitary in nature, held up as an example of how best to live piously, with spiritual, not just epistemological, significance attached.

This poem, along with “To a Waterfowl,” reveals some of Bryant’s nuanced and idiosyncratic spirituality and his ideas about the immanence of the divine in nature. According to the most literal sense of the word spirit—from the Latin *spiro*, to breathe—there is something, Bryant asserts, that breathes through all of us, guides us, compels us to move. Perhaps this is what Bryant means when he writes in “To a Waterfowl,” that “there is a Power whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast” (13-4). This idea approaches pantheism and even the Transcendentalism that was budding in Boston at the time Bryant was writing (Gado 179). Albert McLean thinks that it is unclear whether Bryant’s “God of Nature” aligns with the liberal Protestantism typical of early nineteenth-century New England or tends more toward pantheism or deism (McLean 15). However, Frank Gado holds that Bryant was certainly moving away

from the strictures of Protestantism, writing that he “found release from dour Calvinism . . . in a religious concept of nature as the benign manifestation of an impersonal cosmic force” (Gado 179). Gado’s argument that Bryant was drifting toward a freer, more naturalistic theology seems more appealing than McLean’s contention that Bryant was partly staying within the bounds of conventional Protestantism—Bryant’s poetry is centered on nature, and even when considerations of the divine come into play, it is always refracted through the lens of nature. Surely McLean and Gado can agree, however, that Bryant is turning away from the rigidity of organized religion and opening himself up to a more primitive, naturalistic faith. Bryant is clearly spiritual in some way, and I argue that the focus of his spirituality is this “Power” that echos the enlightened deism of the previous century.

This unique spirituality that Bryant develops in this poem helps to understand what he thinks of and how he defines nature. It is more than just a ‘realm,’ as presented in “Inscription,” that can heal the individual’s socially inflicted wounds; indeed, it is a special and perhaps even sacred place, a place where connection with the cosmos and the divine can occur most fully. The heavy spiritual investment Bryant places on nature suggests that he is at least toying with the idea of nature as immanently divine in and of itself. The radical Transcendentalism that was only just beginning to bud in Boston and Cambridge certainly reached Bryant at some point, and his ideas indicate at least a level of interest in the new movement. Though he would not affiliate himself with the movement later in his life when it attained more currency, his Romantic rhapsodization and veneration of nature helped to lay the foundation for later generations of New Englanders, from Transcendentalists onward, to consider nature and the divine together.



*CONSIDERING DEATH to LEARN ABOUT LIFE: “THANATOPSIS”*

The final poem under consideration in this chapter, “Thanatopsis,” is actually the first of the four that Bryant wrote. As the title alludes,<sup>2</sup> the topic under consideration is death, particularly the spiritual and natural significance of death. The poem is, at its core, a lucid explanation of just what death is—the account is not intruded by religious notions of afterlife, but instead is a secular, stoic outlook that deals simply with the brute facts of death. The most salient truth to come out of the poem is that nature is immensely greater than humanity. This helps to illustrate Bryant’s conception of the totality of nature, within which humanity exists and forms but a miniscule portion of the great cosmos. In the poem, Bryant demonstrates this truth by taking the reader through what happens at and after death. Early on, when the speaker reaches out to the reader by saying, “when thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come like a blight / Over thy spirit, and ... / Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart,” it appears as though the reader’s morbid thoughts will be placated by a comforting voice reassuring that everything will be alright (8-10, 13). Indeed, the speaker urges the reader to “go forth, under the open sky, and list / To Nature’s teachings,” which might provide that kind of reassurance (14-5). But Bryant has no need for sugarcoating; he offers a blunt, sober account of death. “Lost each human trace,” the speaker puts it, “surrendering up / Thine individual being, shalt thou go / To mix for ever with the elements” (24-6). Bryant writes so casually about the loss of the body, the termination of the self, and of how the unforgiving and unfeeling earth subsumes the last traces of the physical manifestation of the individual. This depiction of death might come off as harsh, but to Bryant it is simply the plain truth. However, the

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<sup>2</sup> “Thanatopsis” derives from the Ancient Greek *θάνατος* (thanatos), meaning death or the personification of death, and *ᾠσις* (opsis), meaning view or sight; the whole word is taken to mean, “thinking about or contemplating death.”

wonderful thing is that you could not ask for a better ultimate fate, “nor couldst thou wish / Couch more magnificent” (32-3). The earth, “one mighty sepulchre,” (37) “the great tomb of man,” (45) is a beautiful, sublime abode for humanity. The speaker enumerates the “solemn decorations” (44) that adorn man’s final resting place—“hills / Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales / Stretching in pensive quietness between; / The venerable woods—rivers that move / In majesty” (37-41). Bryant argues that our death is nothing to be feared, but in fact that decomposition into the global ecosystem, which suggests a sublime and transcendent relationship with the rest of nature, is a glorious end. So the reassurance does come around after all, after recognition that it is earth—benign, beautiful, all-encompassing—that will swallow up all of humanity in the end and our ultimate fate is not gnashing of teeth or fiery inferno, but simply to be a part of the earth, “to be a brother to the insensible rock” (27).

This presents a slightly different view of nature than does “Inscription.” In that poem, nature and humanity are constructed as distinct realms, whereas in this moment in “Thanatopsis,” Bryant shows an understanding of how humanity is a part of nature, and a rather small and insignificant one at that. On the face of it, this seems contradictory—humanity cannot be both separate from and a part of nature simultaneously. But an important distinction is to be made in the consideration of these two poems, which is that in “Inscription,” the speaker makes a distinction between the conceptual terms of “nature” and “humanity,” whereas in “Thanatopsis,” humanity is considered the same as, or part of, nature in purely material terms. What Bryant is doing, then, is conceptualizing humanity as different from nature while simultaneously recognizing that humanity is nevertheless a physical portion of nature. This is what

allows him to contrast society from nature—as is helpful in “Inscription” for making the argument that we all ought to seek refuge and respite in nature—without denying the overall truth of humanity’s inherent embeddedness or rootedness in nature. While deep ecologists would like to elide the former distinction in favor of the latter conjunction, Bryant employs both to demonstrate the same ultimate truth, which is that our bodies are unremittingly connected to all the rest of what makes up nature, or the cosmos. Demonstrating this truth enables him to make the argument, in turn, that we ought to go out and experience nature, care for it, love it, until the day we die.

This treatment of life, and consequently, of death is highly reminiscent of Stoicism, particularly when the speaker declares that we all will “be resolved to earth again” (23). This seems to come almost directly out of Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*: “As generation is, so also death, a secret of nature’s wisdom: a mixture of elements, resolved into the same elements again” (*Meditations* II.5). The relevant features here of Aurelius’s Stoicism are a lucid acceptance of death as an inevitability, one that will meet all of us in the end, as well as the notion that when our individual beings cease, the remains of our bodies simply fall back into the flow of things in the cosmos. If Bryant does not take these ideas directly from the Stoics, then it is a splendid coincidence that they show up in his poetry with almost the exact same wording nearly two millennia apart. Regardless, it is clear that the thinking is the same, and this is key to the spirituality present in Bryant’s poetry. By understanding this connection that our bodies have with the rest of the cosmos, and by understanding death as nothing more than the cessation of conscious experience, Bryant reaches conclusions about what our connection with nature ought to be while we are

alive. He argues we ought to first accept the brute facts of nature—that it dominates us—and death—that we all will meet this fate one day—and then to love the natural environment for its sublime transcendence and to feel a spiritual union with it, the self being a component part of the cosmos.

The ultimate comfort in this blunt yet Romantic poem also comes from the fact that the individual, bound their fate to some day shuffle off this mortal coil, is not alone in this regard. Death is the great equalizer, the speaker argues, telling the reader, “thou shalt lie down / With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings, / The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good” (33-5). In the end, it matters not whether you were a ruler, a wealthy person, a noble, a thinker, a priest, or a beggar, a heathen, a peasant, a knave, a fool—we are all equal in the eyes of death, we all shall meet this fate. This suggests something powerful about both the weight of humanity and the relative importance of the individual. As Bryant has made clear in many other poems, nature is far greater than humanity and will swallow us all, even those of us who in life were among the mighty and powerful, without skipping a beat or even pausing to mourn. The lesson about the individual, then, is that we all bear the same connection to this enormous and all-encompassing nature. Our fate is to have our individuality stripped from us when our conscious experience simply ceases, and when our physical body decomposes and meshes in with the rest of the planet. It is then that we return to being in a state of communion with not only the rest of humanity but with the rest of nature.

All of this wisdom must come from somewhere. In the opening lines of “Thanatopsis,” Bryant tells of the intimate connection an individual might have with nature: “To him who in the love of Nature holds / Communion with her visible forms, she

speaks / A various language” (1-3). It is clear, from his poetry and biography, that Bryant is one such individual who loves nature, holds communion with “her,”<sup>3</sup> and can decipher her various languages. By going out and listening to nature, learning from nature, Bryant develops a spiritual connection that approaches worship of a God of Nature. His treatment of the topic of death through poetry (in)famously avoids any mention of eternal salvation, assumption into heaven or damnation to hell, St. Peter, pearly gates, or any other specifically religious notion. Instead, it is a materialistic assessment of the physical facts of death that focuses on the ultimate junction of the human self with the totality of nature. This flouting of religious custom indicates that Bryant is straying from the conventions of organized religions, at least when it comes to the topic of death.

This is perhaps why some scholars have read Bryant as teetering on the edge of heresy against the Christian faith. Howard Mumford Jones makes the argument that William Cullen Bryant’s Christianity is idiosyncratically distinct from other Fireside Poets like John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He argues that for Bryant, the modern Christian religion is really just a refraction of a more primeval and naturalistic faith (Jones 38). I agree with his reading that Bryant favors a more primitive theology, one that places the natural universe and whatever God of Nature may be behind it at the center rather than the specifically personal, Abrahamic God typical of Christian faiths. However, Jones goes astray when he claims that Bryant nearly veers into

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<sup>3</sup> I set the word her apart with quotations because the construction of gendering nature as feminine is something Bryant participates in but which I would like to avoid. This is a long-standing tradition in Western culture and language that Bryant continues in his poetry, but as the subfield of eco-feminism has shown, is a problematic one. My arguments about how Bryant—and later writers in later chapters—defines nature does not delve into this gendering aspect, though it is both an interesting and significant, and therefore worthwhile, consideration. Suffice it to say here, briefly, that Bryant feminizes nature and I do not, so any instances where I do so in this chapter are merely references to his conception and do not reflect my own.

Manichaeism and makes the hallmark of that faith—the struggle between light and dark, good and evil—a focus. Rather, the most radical of Bryant’s poetry tends more toward pantheism or even Transcendentalism in the way it treats nature as possessing a spirit that all life breathes. This, to me, is the more salient and historically significant aberration from the liberal Protestantism of the New England middle class in the early nineteenth century that Bryant grew up in. This is the spirituality that Bryant makes appeal to, as we saw earlier in “To a Waterfowl,” “A Forest Hymn,” and here again in “Thanatopsis.” In these poems he reveals a deep reverence, and perhaps even an implicit worship of, this God of Nature, as Bryant treads the littoral somewhere in the midst of liberal Unitarianism, enlightened deism, and Stoic agnosticism.

### *CONCLUSION*

This chapter has delved into Bryant’s spirituality, and the question remains as to what exactly he believes regarding the divine, what religious camp he belongs to, what spiritual label to apply to him. Bryant seems to be under sway of a variety of faiths, ranging from stern and traditional Calvinism to liberal and (self-professedly) rationalistic Unitarianism, from conventional Christian theology to Enlightenment-style deism, from Stoic-inspired agnosticism to pantheistic Transcendentalism. I don’t see Bryant as expounding any one of these modes of thought in particular, but rather I see him writing poetry that reflects a mind, intrigued by each belief system, that is toying with a mish-mash of all of them. The key to his presented belief system and spirituality lies in veneration for the natural world, solitude away from human society and immersion in the nonhuman environment, and a deep understanding of the self’s place in the grand cosmos.

Bryant's thinking is influenced by these various liberal faith traditions, and his poetry suggests a spiritual author who is tempted by—but does not fully commit to—more radical views but tempered by convention. For instance, his poetry often indicates a desire to go back to an earlier, more naturalistic spirituality, and this sometimes hints at animism, pantheism, and Transcendentalism, but his overt references to a seemingly personal God in poems like “A Forest Hymn” suggest that he would rather “restore the primitive Christianity,” as Holifield Brooks suggests Unitarianism sets out to do (Brooks 197). Bryant appeals to an omnipresent, transcendent deity of nature that is somewhere between Unitarian theology and the Transcendentalist spirituality that would come to greater prominence in later decades. But his frequent attendance of a variety of Christian churches throughout his life, his publicly expressed Unitarianism, and some moments in his poetry that make reference to a personal God obviate a neat explication of his belief system. I argue that his poetry exposes the tensions in his thought process between naturalistic spirituality and organized, revealed religion. It does not quite matter, I think, that his belief system resists a label; a salient and enduring message may still be derived from his poetry. This message is to love nature, to come to terms with the fact that it is far mightier than oneself, and to be humbled in its presence.

This deep investment in the veneration of nature certainly runs counter to the popular Newtonian and capitalist views of nature as domitable and controllable, and therefore profitable. This mainstream philosophy of nature made it possible for New England society, and later the rest of the U.S., to rapidly and heavily industrialize with wanton disregard for the health and balance of the ecosystem in the decades just after Bryant writes the poems I've examined. However, these effects had yet to significantly

alter the New England landscape, and as a result there is no expression of worry or dread in Bryant's poetry. Though New England is quickly hurtling towards the American version of the Industrial Revolution, when Bryant writes these early poems the vast majority of New England is still agrarian and the people maintain their direct connections with nature. Unlike the Transcendentalist writers, who use the threat of industrialization spoiling the natural landscape as part of their argument, Bryant's pitch to would-be lovers and worshippers of nature relies solely on spiritual and philosophical considerations. This is what marks Bryant as an explicitly pre-industrial nature writer. As we shall see in the next chapter, the mainstream of New England thought continues on the industrial capitalist route, opting to exploit nature and natural resources for profit and gain, rather than the spiritual route that Bryant prescribes, which underscores the fact that nature dominates us and not the other way around.



## Chapter 2: The Transcendentalist Response to the Industrial Revolution

As the First Industrial Revolution of the United States was taking hold and rapidly transforming the socio-economic and environmental landscape of the nation, a radical spiritual and environmentally conscious movement, Transcendentalism, developed in New England as a response in part to such dramatic changes. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the foremost figurehead of the movement, expounds the principles of Transcendentalism through innumerable lectures as well as two published volumes of essays. His close friend and protégé, Henry David Thoreau, takes Emerson's philosophy and applies it by living alone for two years on a plot of land next to Walden Pond in their hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. In this chapter, I explore how Transcendentalism as a radical spirituality and philosophy emerged out of previous liberal theologies that were exacerbated by the significant changes brought on by industrialization. To do this, I consider Emerson's belief system as presented in his essays and lectures as well as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which I read as an application of Emerson's ideals.

As I discussed in the last chapter, William Cullen Bryant's poetry reveals internal tensions between the mainstream Protestant religion of New England and more radical, heretical spiritualities. He had the luxury of not having to choose—he could dabble with some concepts borrowed from animistic and pantheistic traditions while still coming back to liberal Protestantism when he wanted to. The development of the First Industrial Revolution in New England rocked the social, economic, political, and philosophical order. As a result, I argue, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—two men cut from the same nature-loving, romantic cloth as Bryant—were in a position to need to

respond to these changes with a new philosophical approach. This ideological shift takes a sharply critical view of the influences of social and cultural institutions, arguing that social pressures to conform violate the individual's drive for self-determination and therefore complete fulfillment of their ambitions. In turn, this leads to an exaltation of the self, solitary and separate from society. As I discussed in the first chapter, human society or culture is constructed as separate from nature, thus this rejection of conformity within society leads to an emphasis on solitude in nature. Though there is a sharp divide between nature and culture, the individual belongs to both, and can therefore transcend that divide by bringing the solitary human self into nature as key to a transcendental experience of the self as one with the cosmos. The buds present in Bryant's poetry—that society has too many ills for the individual to find happiness and contentment, and that one should therefore immerse oneself in the natural world in order to do so—blossom among the Transcendentalists who resolve the tensions that Bryant had dealt with by opting for the radical approach sketched out above.

#### *INDUSTRIALISM TAKES HOLD*

The explosion of industrial development in New England cut to the very core of the social fabric of the region, introducing drastic change to all facets of life. From means of production to labor to settlement patterns to the markets, the period between roughly 1830 and the Civil War was marked by upheaval of old ways and introduction of new ones. The pressures brought on by these major shifts forced the people of New England to adjust their lifestyles and modes of thought, either to get on board the new industrial bandwagon or to stake out a critical position. Later in this chapter, I will look at how the Transcendentalists respond to these changes by generally opposing the new socio-

economic direction, critiquing the social forces that made it possible, and supplanting it with their own unique philosophy about how to live the best life. First, however, it will be useful to spell out what that new direction is.

By 1830, New England was on the brink of falling into a Malthusian trap. Two centuries after the first European settlement of the region, New England's mediocre soil and limited available land—much of it hilly and mountainous, not suitable for profitable, long-term farmland—clashed with an ever-growing population that induced a crunch. As Diana Muir explains in her history of the New England landscape, *Reflections in Bullough's Pond* (2000), that the land could support around forty persons per square mile on farming alone; as per 1820 U.S. Census data, all of southern New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island), as well as most of the lower, arable land in the three northern states had exceeded that capacity (Muir 50-54). Available land was running low, but population continued to grow; something had to give. Muir describes the dilemma of the generation of men coming of age around this time, writing that “the choice was poverty in a long-settled town, or poverty on a hardscrabble hill farm” (ibid., 55). One other way out of this trap was to generate wealth without needing land to do so; in other words, to produce sellable goods quickly and cheaply. This paradigm shift in production forms the foundational theory behind the Industrial Revolution.

One of the greatest instigating factors of change during the period of industrialization was the rapid transformation of transportation. Before 1830, inland towns and villages had poor connections with larger market towns on the coast and the markets those ports had access to. However, a wave of transportation improvements increased regional connectivity between the farms of inland New England and the

markets on the coasts and abroad. The first set of improvements focused on roads—the roads that linked farm and village were town-maintained, so a broad network of roads connecting towns and farmland across the region simply did not exist. State governments, as well as private corporations, redressed this when they began building and maintaining straight, gravel-paved turnpikes in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Muir 111). In addition to roads, a system of canals emerged, making the falling rivers and streams of New England navigable. Canals served as cheap and easy rights-of-way connecting coastal commercial centers with the major rivers of the region, particularly the Merrimack and Connecticut (*ibid.*, 112). The most significant and impactful of the new transportation technologies, however, was the railroad. New England's first, running dozen miles between Boston and West Newton, Massachusetts, opened in 1834, and by 1841 the line had been extended to Albany, which opened up the port of Boston to the West (*ibid.*, 113).

These new avenues for the transport of both goods and commuters had residual effects on the mode of production among inland farmers. Whereas they previously geared their production toward subsistence and local needs, new and cheap opportunities to transport crops to faraway and foreign markets encouraged farmers to plant what was profitable (*ibid.*, 115). This shift in farming technique is indicative of a change in philosophy—no longer was the Yankee farmer's work determined by immediate need, whether their own need or that of the nearest settlement, but rather by the capitalist marketplace. So the industrialization of transportation networks had a wide-ranging effect on the thought process of New England farmers, encouraging them to take advantage of new technologies and opportunities for profit. This change in farming practices was a

precursor, on a smaller scale, of the dramatic changes that the entire labor market underwent as New England moved away from farming as the main form of production and into manufacturing.

The most enduring change in the social order of antebellum New England was the move from the farm to the factory. Manufacturing quickly became the dominant mode of economic production—by 1841, less than a third of Massachusetts laborers worked on farms, while as much as half the employed population found themselves in mills and factories, making textiles, paper, shoes, and guns (Muir 136). This shift in the labor market drew families from farming villages into ever-growing coastal and riverside cities. The departure from a mode of life centered around the landscape and into man-made urban spaces of brick and mortar caused a significant shock to the environmental consciousness of New Englanders, some of whom did not take so kindly to the loss of a direct connection with the natural world.

David Zonderman captures the multitudinous reactions to the increased presence of industry in his book, *Aspirations and Anxieties* (1992). As the title suggests, Zonderman argues that the advent of industrialized mill and factory work simultaneously captured the imaginations of those who sought to use mechanization to their advantage and worried those who found such work monotonous and unfulfilling, as well as those who lamented the encroachment of industrial development on the natural landscape. Zonderman points out that some New Englanders were enthralled with the human accomplishment of the mill, whose advanced technology and grand presence complemented the aesthetic value of the falling river. Some workers, he explains, “saw the river as both the basic source of industrial power and a force of great natural beauty”

(Zonderman 66). Others, however, found the imposing gravitas of industrial edifices to be scars on the landscape, “an intrusive force in the surrounding environment. The mills were something to escape from; nature was a refuge to run towards” (ibid., 70). Here, Zonderman makes reference to those more ecologically inclined who saw the expansion of factories and mills to be an unwelcome incursion onto their land. Ultimately, he argues, the sum total of experiences among workers and capitalists alike was a mixed bag of feelings of opportunity for new production and wealth as well as of possibility for destruction and alienation (ibid., 6).

The negative strain of these mixed reactions is aligned with the sentiments that Emerson and Thoreau capture in their social criticism of increased industrialization. Consider the history of the founding of Lowell, Massachusetts, New England and America’s first major industrial center. Before its incorporation as a city in 1836, the small settlement on the right bank of the Merrimack River at the 32-foot Pawtucket Falls was called East Chelmsford, a village of the town of Chelmsford. As mill technology advanced and the need for greater sources of power increased, the Boston Manufacturing Company—the foremost industrial capitalist corporation in New England—began buying the land around Pawtucket Falls with dreams of developing an industrial powerhouse. By 1836, Lowell had undergone a significant transformation—including intense manipulation of the natural landscape in the forms of dams, canals, locks, and mill ponds—from a sparsely settled farming community to a bustling industrial city. Lowell’s quick metamorphosis is a microcosm of the rapid changes that tore through southern New England and later would spill over into more northern reaches. The sometimes jarring changes brought unto the New England landscape did not sit well with those, like

Emerson and Thoreau, that greatly valued a more direct connection with nature as well as the environmental and ecological aesthetic of the virgin landscape.

The most basic critique of industrialization is that the capitalists who push the development of industrial means of production forsake considerations of the health of the ecosystem or the aesthetic beauty of the environment. Diana Muir captures this sentiment in pointing out that “industrialization enables wealthy entrepreneurs to live in warm, comfortable homes in nice neighborhoods while somewhere else forests are clear-cut and hillsides gouged out for coal” (Muir 97). This poignant critique of the narrow vision of industrial capitalism surfaces in both Emerson and Thoreau’s writings, as we shall see, and forms the backbone of their spiritual and ideological opposition to industrialism as well as their naturalistic philosophy of Transcendentalism that they stake out in response.

#### *TRANSCENDENTALISM EMERGES*

At the very same time that this industrial development swept up all of New England in significant socio-economic transformation, a sea change was underway in the philosophy and theology, the so-called “flowering” of New England letters. The most polemic and yet most enduring of the new philosophies to spring up, and the focus of this chapter, is Transcendentalism. A unique movement that was equal parts theology, philosophy, and art (mostly literature), Transcendentalism was both an extension of the liberal tendencies of previous generations as well as a radical negation of many of the fundamentals of New England society. Rod Horton and Herbert Edwards (1952) describe the most essential characteristics of the Transcendental movement—“the triumph of feeling and intuition over reason, the exaltation of the individual over society, the impatience at any kind of restraint or bondage to custom, the new and thrilling delight in

nature” (112). This definition encapsulates what the movement was all about—a religious revolt against the forces of institution that its proponents argued was taking away from a true, transcendent spiritual experience of the divine; a cultural revolt against the restrictions that society places on the individual; a philosophical revolt against rationalism and the notion that the material universe can be fully understood in purely empirical and scientific terms without spiritual engagement; and most significantly, a passionate love for nature and an intense desire to protect the environment from industrial expansion and destruction.

If we are to take Ralph Waldo Emerson to be the fountainhead of Transcendentalism, then his personal history serves as a good parallel to the development of the movement out of its ideological and theological forebears. Emerson’s spirituality, like the movement he is associated with, began from within the folds of Unitarianism; he matriculated from Harvard in 1821 and would soon thereafter return to the University’s Divinity School, then a breeding ground for the Unitarian ministry, and later would serve as a pastor at Boston’s Second Church (Unitarian). Emerson resigned his post there in 1832, and from the ministry altogether in 1840, dissatisfied with how, as Paul Boller writes, “the Unitarian consensus which educated and established people in the Boston area found comfortable and satisfying had lost its emotional appeal for thoughtful and sensitive young people” (Boller xx). He craved something even more liberal than arguably the most liberal of American sects, some spiritual environment that did not impede his experience of the divine with customs, tradition, utterances, or any sort of humanly contrived veneration that detracts from that experience.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Unitarianism as a liberal theology attempts to



restore an earlier and, supposedly, truer Christianity that is more in touch with the naturalistic<sup>4</sup> side of faith in God. Transcendentalism emerged as an extension of this impulse, one that not only emphasizes but makes a central feature this focus on nature. Part of Emerson's dissatisfaction with Unitarianism is that its practitioners were holding fast to the notions of revealed religion<sup>1</sup> and the customs and ceremonies that accompany them (Grodzins 54). Whereas William Cullen Bryant was content to accept Unitarianism while dabbling with more naturalistic and pantheistic ideas on the side, Emerson could no longer tolerate the impediments that organized religion presented and made the radical move that Bryant never did. Consider the following excerpt from Emerson's essay "Nature" (1844), in contrast with Bryant's poem, "A Forest Hymn" (1824):

The fall of snowflakes in a still air, preserving to each crystal its perfect form; the blowing of sleet over a wide sheet of water, and over plains, the waving rye-field, the mimic waving of acres of houstonia, whose innumerable florets white and ripple before the eye; the reflections of trees and flowers in glassy lakes; the musical steaming odorous south wind, which converts all trees to windharps; the crackling and spurting hemlock in the flames; or of pine logs, which yield glory to the walls and faces in the sitting-room—these are the music and pictures of the most ancient religion. (383)

Emerson's appeal to a more primeval worship echoes Bryant's naturalistic manifesto, in which he declares, "the groves were God's first temples. ... / Fit shrine for humble worshipper to hold / Communion with his Maker" ("A Forest Hymn" 1, 33-34). Both writers here express their attraction to an eco-centric form of worship and even theology, but they diverge when it comes to fully committing to this naturalistic faith. In a fashion typical of Unitarians, Bryant maintains some of the adjuncts of organized religion,

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<sup>4</sup> By "naturalistic" in terms of religious faith, I mean facets of faith that emerge solely from direct interaction with the natural universe, as opposed to supernatural occurrences—which I denote with the phrase "revealed religion"—such as divine revelation, intervention, or inspiration. This distinction is informed by Grodzins's discussion of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, as cited in a parenthetical above.

particularly in this poem in the form of an outright appeal to a God, the Father. Emerson, on the other hand, breaks free from those impediments. He explains at the beginning of “Nature” that, “at the gates of the forest, ... the knapsack of custom falls off [the surprised man of the world’s] back with the first steps he makes into these precincts. Here is sanctity which shames our religion” (381). Emerson, following the naturalistic impulse to its fruition, is here sloughing off the shamed religion—its organization, hierarchy, customs, traditions, and so forth—in favor of a purely natural theology.

Emerson’s focus on nature as central to spiritual experience entails a theology that considers the natural universe to be divine, to contain a transcendent soul. Boller explicates this view, writing that “nature for Emerson was the externalization of the soul, mind precipitated, the incarnation of a thought, the plantations of God” (Boller 67-68). Emerson expounds this view—that the whole of nature is one unified soul and that our own souls or consciousnesses are fragmented impressions of that whole—in his essay, “The Over-Soul.” He writes that we are all part of “that Unity, that Over soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other ... We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole ... to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One” (“Over-Soul” 189-190). Emerson takes Unitarianism and the environmentally conscious impulses that had inspired Bryant to the extreme here, arguing for an intimate and deeply spiritual connection between the individual being and all the rest of nature. This kind of pantheistic spirituality, “the belief that the natural world [is] a projection and symbol of Universal Spirit,” Boller argues, is the calling card of a Transcendentalist (Boller 67).

The Transcendentalist focus on the individual soul as part and particle of the

greater, unified whole and the veneration of that whole leads to a unique connection between the worshipper and the worshipped. Emerson explicates this at the end of “The Over-Soul,” declaring, “I am born into the great, the universal mind. I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect” (“Over-Soul” 210). Transcendentalism, then, hails nature as perfect and views the “I” as an imperfect part of nature. An understanding of this connection leads right into environmentalism, the ideology that promotes respect for and protection of the environment, in that it recognizes human fault in degrading nature and seeks to restore the global ecosystem to a healthier state. In response to industrial capitalism’s perceived “simultaneous degradation of nature and people,” Transcendentalists, Lance Newman argues, “hoped to pastoralize an increasingly urban and instrumental society and to completely change its ways of thinking and living by restoring its connection to what they saw as the divinely ordained laws of nature” (Newman 172). The Transcendentalists viewed much of the industrial development I recounted in the previous section with skepticism at best and outright opposition at worst regarding the intrusion on and destruction of the natural environment.

These scruples about both organized religion and industrial capitalism feed into the Transcendentalists’ broader critique of human society more generally. As I explore in greater detail in the next two sections, both Emerson and Thoreau feel that society and its artificial customs get in the way of individual fulfillment. They express in their writings what Dean Grodzins claims was a hallmark of the Transcendentalist social criticism, which held that “most people were capable of spiritual improvement but that religious, social, and cultural obstacles block their progress” (Grodzins 59). This is an essential thesis of Transcendentalism—that society more often than not gets in the way of

transcendent spiritual experience. Therefore, they argue, the individual ought, at least sometimes, to reject society and to turn to solitude in nature instead to find fulfillment. Note, again, how these ideas are reverberations of those embedded within Bryant's poetry taken to their extreme. While Bryant frequently expressed a desire to critique the vicissitudes of society and to exalt the solitary individual, he never fully baked that notion into a comprehensive spirituality or theology in the way that the Transcendentalists have done. It is the calling card, therefore, of Transcendentalism as a radical movement that responds uniquely to the forces at play as New England underwent the transformations brought on by the First Industrial Revolution.

In his lecture, "The Transcendentalist" (1842), Emerson lays out his sketch of the archetype of the movement, an idealized persona that he readily admits is unattainable but nevertheless insists is approachable. The basic characteristics of the Transcendentalist is to follow one's nature, one's genius—terms which I will explicate further in the next sections—by ignoring the pressures of society and instead becoming attuned to the workings of nature to find the right path. Emerson writes that people that strive for these principles "are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society; they incline to shut themselves in their chamber in the house, to live in the country rather than in the town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude" ("Transcendentalist" 5). If ever there were an individual who came closest to living in this manner, it is surely Emerson's close friend and protégé, Henry David Thoreau. The latter's 26-month excursion into the woods at Walden Pond is the putting into practice of the philosophy of the former. As I detail in the next two sections of this chapter, Emerson sketches out a philosophy that decries many of the

conventions and pressures of society and exalts the individual, and Thoreau carries out this flouting of social forces in search of the transcendent experience in nature that Emerson argues the individual will find.

### *SOCIAL CRITICISM*

An integral component to the individualistic and environmentally conscious spirit of Transcendentalist thought is a skeptical view of social institutions. This resentment of institution originates from the theological and religious split between the more radical Transcendentalists and the Unitarianism they drifted from, but this kind of thinking easily spreads to all other kinds of social institutions, including the state, the academy, the industrial capitalist economy, down to even the subtler notion of vocation. Emerson and Thoreau both openly question in their writings the legitimacy and influence of these socially constructed institutions. Both broadly argue that they more often than not impede the individual's ability to find spiritual and personal fulfillment by exerting centripetal forces compelling him or her to conform. In response to the perceived or constructed divide between nature and culture, Emerson and Thoreau echo Bryant's argument that nature is better for the individual to find fulfillment and self-realization. While Bryant merely gestures towards this in his poetry, Emerson and Thoreau more explicitly develop a detailed critique of their contemporary society to illustrate why nature is preferable. This critique of society is crucial to Emerson and Thoreau's more widely disseminated arguments in favor of individualism and self-reliance in nature. So, a critical understanding of their social criticism is key to dealing with and responding to Transcendental self-reliance.

The first institution with which Ralph Waldo Emerson found himself dissatisfied

was the church. A large part of Emerson's separatist spirit with regards to Unitarianism had to do with specific theological differences regarding the divine, but another major motivating factor was his disgust with the centripetal tendency toward conformity of thought within a sect. He writes in "Self-Reliance" (1841) that this conformity "loses your time and blurs the impression of your character" ("Self-Reliance" 38). By consigning to one particular church, you accept the doctrines of that church, and therefore harbor the same general views and beliefs as everyone else in that church. He drives this point home, writing, "if I know your sect I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word?" (39). His critique here is of the inability to think freely and openly, and to express these free thoughts, from within an institutional environment that enforces conformity. Emerson's individualistic impulses and his drive to feel transcendence between the self and the over-soul compel him to resent these forces.

Indeed, Albert von Frank notes that Emerson had lost significant faith in social institutions and associations (von Frank 125). Emerson felt as though Christianity had devolved to what he termed "historical Christianity," (ibid., 125) a mere exercise in the rote restatement of articles of faith that was severely lacking in the way of spiritual inspiration. He was unimpressed with ministers' inability to connect with the deep issues he craved to explore and resented the paralysis he felt amid institutional religion.

Emerson's disregard for organized thought naturally extends to education. In much the same way as he viewed organized religion as stifling free spiritual expression, he felt that the education system of his day suppressed creativity and instead rewarded

mere skill with rhetoric and memorization. He expresses his disillusionment with academia in writing, “among the multitude of scholars and authors we feel no hallowing presence; we are sensible of a knack and skill rather than of inspiration; ... their talent is some exaggerated faculty, some overgrown member” (“Over-Soul” 204). Emerson shows no inclination to unconditionally respect an educated man, since the very educational system itself that confers legitimacy fails to inspire those men of letters in any meaningful, creative sense. For this reason he writes that “what we do not call education is more precious than that which we call so” (“Spiritual Laws” 94). Instead of formal education, Emerson values individuality, creativity, authenticity and spontaneity. These qualities sum up the approach that Henry David Thoreau takes to education and wisdom.

In the chapter of *Walden* titled, “Reading,” Thoreau discusses at length his purview of the general state of readership, scholarship, and wisdom among society broadly. He finds that most people—even those highly regarded men of letters that Emerson is so skeptical of—are engaged in a lowly consumption of books. He offers this incisive assessment of Concord culture: “our reading, our conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins” (*Walden* 408). Thoreau shares with Emerson an intense dissatisfaction with the narrow scope of common education, and in its place calls for an entirely new approach to learning and reading. “It is time we had uncommon schools,” he declares, “that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women” (409). He regrets the lack of originality or inspiration in the learning of his time, and like Emerson has little respect for accomplishments that academics proffer as impressive or intellectually worthy. In place of the existing, disappointing academy, Thoreau proposes “that villages were [fashioned

into] universities. ... [The village] should be the patron of the fine arts” (409-10). Here we get a glimpse of his ideology on how institutions ought to work—he has a faith in the ability of a collective of individuals to achieve something grand and worthwhile, the problem being that institutions too often have the wrong vision and get in their own way. “To act collectively,” he insists, “is according to the spirit of our institutions; and I am confident that, as our circumstances are more flourishing, ... New England can hire all the wise men in the world to come teach her, ... and not be provincial at all” (410). Thoreau possesses a basic faith in at least the concept of collective action, and offers here an attainable undertaking on the part of Concord and New England, to determine to read and learn, to develop wisdom, intellect, and art to the highest degree. The reason this vision does not come to fruition is because the general public lacks the will to do so and the ability to use institutional forces for liberal learning rather than reinforcement of tradition.

Beyond explicitly institutional forces, the Transcendentalists critique the forces of the subtler socio-economic institution of industrial capitalism. Both Emerson and Thoreau find the increasingly commercialized society of New England encouraged individuals to attach too much significance to material wealth and the notion that scientific and technological progress necessarily leads to social progress. Emerson counters the latter, declaring, “society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other” (“Self-Reliance” 62). While New England was surely making progress in the way of material wealth and technological advancement, Emerson argues, it is receding in the way of individual spiritual fulfillment. This recession, he claims, comes from the nature of industrialism, which is driven by a desire to constantly make



processes easier and encourages the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. He argues that we misapply our efforts in always trying to make our lives a little bit easier; using the example of the development of electromagnetic technology to make food production easier, he writes, “it is a symbol of our modern endeavors—of our condensation and acceleration of objects,” by which he means technological advance, “but nothing is gained: nature cannot be cheated” (“Nature” 400). Emerson’s argument here is not that scientific progress does nothing to improve our material well-being; rather, he makes the case that for everything we gain from industrialization we lose something equally valuable in focusing so much of our lives on that project and not nearly enough on spiritual progress.

Thoreau extends this criticism that we spend too much time concerning ourselves with industrial improvements to the entire United States, saying, “the nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, ... is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense” (*Walden* 395). As Shawn Chandler Bingham explains, Thoreau is critical of the way the industrial capitalism pervades through all facets of our way of life to the point where it subsumes us and begins to control the very rhythms of our lives. Of the industrial advent of rigid schedules based around the clock tower, he writes, “little is to be expected of that day ... to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within, ... instead of factory bells” (*Walden* 393). Bingham notes that Thoreau is critical of the way the forces of industrialism structure our lives for us and gear it toward almost mindless production, which takes away from our ability to

focus on ourselves and our spiritual health (Bingham 37). This approaches Emerson's analysis that we recede spiritually as much as we advance industrially. We have ended up living, Bingham writes, under "an economic system that infringed on individual freedom and often enslaved the individual conscience by instilling anxiety, alienation, and despair" (Bingham 38). To the Transcendentalists, industrial capitalism is another social institution that impedes upon the individual's well-being by occupying too much of our conscience and misdirecting our efforts, resulting in spiritual rot.

All of this opposition to social institutions is a varied way of arguing that society—or, at the very least, mid-nineteenth-century, industrialized New England society—impinges upon the individual, most importantly in regard to how one ought to live one's life. Social custom and establishment employ centripetal forces toward conformity, especially in an industrial society, in which all are encouraged to produce something economically valuable as their vocation. But Emerson and Thoreau resent this and radically oppose any social attitude or compulsion that would put the individual off his or her pre-ordained and unique path through life. Emerson describes the "common experience ... that the man fits himself as well as he can to the customary details of that work or trade he falls into. ... Then he is a part of the machine he moves; the man is lost" ("Spiritual Laws" 101). This falling into a role prescribed by society, fitting oneself to one's occupation rather than the other way around, is to Emerson a great affront to his Transcendentalist sensibilities regarding individual empowerment. He declares, in the face of this common experience, that "each man has his own vocation. ... He has faculties silently inviting him thither to endless exertion. ... He inclines to do something which is easy to him and good when it is done, but which no other man can do. ... Every

man has this call of the power to do some[thing] unique, and no man has any other call” (“Spiritual Laws” 100-101). Emerson’s vision of vocation is such that nobody should bend themselves to do work that so many others do, but should rather follow their instinct, what Emerson and Thoreau call “Genius,” and do what is proper to their individual nature.

The very idea behind Thoreau’s excursion to Walden Pond was to follow his Genius and see where it took him. He writes in conclusion about his experience that one who were to live the way Emerson argues we ought to, “would have found himself often enough ‘in formal opposition’ to what are deemed ‘the most sacred laws of society,’ through obedience to yet more sacred laws ... It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being” (*Walden* 579). Thoreau’s conclusion is an affirmation of Emerson’s philosophy, stating that it is far better and more fulfilling for the individual to follow their own nature, the beat of their own drummer. As I explore in the next section, this resistance against social pressures in favor of following one’s calling forms the backbone of the Transcendentalist take on the exaltation of the self above the rest of society, particularly the solitary self alone in nature. For how critical Emerson and Thoreau are of society and its institutions, it is important to note that they are not mere misanthropes, but rather two men who had lofty visions of what individuals could do collectively, if only they could band together in a meaningful and fulfilling way. Indeed, Bingham points out that “rather than a disinterest in society, Thoreau harbored a disappointment with it” as a result of how easily most give in to associating with others according to conformist conventions (Bingham 88). Bingham continues, “Thoreau did

not want less society; he wanted a society in which people associated in a more authentic manner” (ibid., 88). His vision was that if everyone acted according to their own Genius, then we could associate in meaningful ways that do not alienate the individual from him or herself. In order to drive this point home, Thoreau goes to the woods to live the life prescribed in Emerson’s philosophy to show his neighbors how sublime true living can be.

### *CELEBRATION of the SELF*

Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” is held up as the ultimate Transcendentalist expression of the faith and trust in the self. In response to the problems Emerson has raised with society, institutions, and pressures to conform, he offers an alternative course of action for the individual disillusioned with these social forces that emphasizes reliance on the self, not just for subsistence but for spiritual as well as vocational fulfillment. Emerson holds strongly to the idea that each individual has their own nature, and that nature prescribes a unique *cursus honorum* that would employ all their best traits and skills to the best ends. “Self-Reliance” is a call for each to listen to their own nature, follow their instinct, and in doing so be their best possible self. Importantly, this requires a conscientious and headstrong flouting of the social conventions he critiques as inhibiting and limiting. But to Emerson the flack that one might endure for ignoring social pressures is worth what is gained from standing confidently individual from the rest.

The somewhat pantheistic or panpsychic tendencies of Emerson’s Transcendentalist spirituality plays a significant role in understanding and carving out the individual’s place in the cosmos. As noted earlier, Emerson believes that each individual

consciousness is simply a particle of the greater cosmos, a singular reflection or refraction of the all-encompassing over-soul. In this way, Nature<sup>5</sup> has preordained a constitution of being for each individual that we ought to listen to and follow for best results. He admonishes, “trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you” (“Self-Reliance” 33). On the surface of it, this command might seem like it is putting the individual in a deterministic box, saying that their fate has already been sorted out and that they have no choice but to follow it. But I find the sentiment behind it to be liberating—not from determinism but from the corrupted and co-opted forces of society that attempt to steer us away from our calling. Emerson is bidding us to follow ourselves and to do that which is natural to us; in this way his call is to ignore the forces that would have you work against your own better judgment and instead do that which is most fitting to our own selves.

This emphatic uplifting of the self above society echoes one of the consistent themes in Bryant’s poetry that held the lone individual in higher regard to the corruptions of society. The ways in which Bryant celebrates the individual stem from Romantic notions of the solitary self in nature, which is a generalistic take on the self-society dichotomy in the sense that it could be applied to any kind of society at any time. Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliance, however, is both more radical and more particular. Mary Kupiec Cayton offers an analysis of the origins of Emerson’s philosophy, which she writes is “in response to the urbanization of his native New England and its development of a commercial culture” (Cayton 221-222). She argues that his Self-Reliance develops directly in response to the industrial, commercial, and consumerist

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<sup>5</sup> This capitalized “Nature” is a term of art for Emerson, by which he means the whole of the natural universe, which he holds to be a divine, omnipresent soul.

tendencies of mid-nineteenth-century New England culture that offended both his nonconformist streak and his imperative that the individual maintain a strong connection with nature. Bryant certainly felt and wrote with these same impulses, but again he never needed to respond to industrialism in the same way Emerson did, and so the latter's philosophy is more forceful, adamant, and cautionary, and in turn less Romantic.

So the crux of the self-reliance argument is to conform to one's own self and not to society; Emerson writes, "self-reliance is [conformity's] aversion. ... Whoso would be a man would be a nonconformist" ("Self-Reliance" 35). He admits, however, that this is not easy: "For nonconformity the world whips you with displeasure" (40). Emerson is not interested in painting self-reliance as a simple change of lifestyle, easy to carry out and not to be met with derision and spite. Lawrence Buell points out that "self-reliance was not a plateau on which Emerson supposed anyone could securely live. It was a goal, a model, a call—to himself as well as others" (Buell 78-79). It is an ideal, and, much like his formulation of how the true Transcendentalist lives, one that is perhaps impossible to attain yet nevertheless approachable. The easy route for an individual in industrial New England would be to conform; the slightly harder route would be to reject society wholly and live hermetically in ignorance to society's influence. "But the great man," Emerson writes, "is he who can in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" ("Self-Reliance" 38). So the challenge for the individual who would live to Emerson's ideal of self-reliance would not be to live without society, for Emerson does not argue for that as a viable or even desirable lifestyle. Rather, the challenge is to reconcile one's nonconformist tendencies and severe criticisms of society and its pressures with the admitted necessity of living among society; or, to live

according to one's own nature yet still in the midst of the centripetal forces of society.

Emerson's self-reliance offers a solid blueprint for the individual disillusioned with society to live a fulfilling life; it functions as a set of principles to abide by in order to achieve the fullest realization of the self. Henry David Thoreau receives these principles and generally agrees with the impulse to flout social convention in favor of the self's own calling. He writes in his conclusion to *Walden*, "if a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears" (*Walden* 581). This expression of self-empowerment above the crowd as well as the very setup of his experiment at Walden Pond reflect Emerson's ideals of providing for one's own self and structuring one's life according to the calling—the genius—within oneself. However, in *Walden* Thoreau seeks to go beyond a simple set of principles for the self and wants to approach a deeper philosophical understanding of the construction of the self its relationship with the rest of nature.

The essay "Self-Reliance" is fundamentally a declamation of, and the answer to, the *how* question of life—how ought I to live my life? In the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," Thoreau scrupulously accounts his *how*, describing the particulars of his personal expenditures, the construction of his house, how he subsists, and how his life is structured. This chapter details the *how* of Thoreau's life at Walden, showing his adoption of many of Emerson's principles. It is perhaps the most boring and least passionate chapter of the book, for Thoreau seems not to be so concerned with the brute facts of subsistence, the *how*, but more with the *what*—what, at its irreducible core, is life? In the "What I Lived For" section of *Walden*'s second chapter, Thoreau famously addresses his quest for the answer to the *what* question, writing,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach. ... I did not wish to live what was not life. ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike as to put to rout all that was not life, ... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (394).

The stated goal of the *Walden* project, here, is to strip bare all of the externalities of life to find what it truly is. The impulse behind this thesis-like statement—which gets borne out later in the text as Thoreau dives deeper into what he finds wrong with contemporary society and the usual ways of living life—is that the increasingly industrial and commercial society New England was developing introduced so many new aspects to life that were extraneous and distracting to the true core of living. In going to Walden, Thoreau elaborates on why he finds industrial living so wrong, and finds in nature his alternative life that allows him to fulfill the self and recognize its true place in the cosmos.

The common thread in all of Thoreau's critiques of industrialized, modernized living is that it gears all facets of our lives towards commercial productivity and wealth generation, and in doing so divorces us from earnest and wholesome living. For example, the factory system structured workers' time around production, and every other portion of their lives had to be adjusted around that rigid schedule. Regarding the passing of hours and of days, Thoreau sets himself apart from his contemporaries, writing, "my days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock" (412). At Walden, Thoreau lets slip the rigid schedule of industrialized life—one of those adjuncts that Thoreau finds occludes true living—which clashes with customary expectations of productivity. Indeed, Joel Porte argues that "Thoreau's idea of Paradise is a solitude where, like the poet, he can loaf and



invite his soul isolated from the cares and confusions of the modern world” (Porte 148). It is in the act of getting away from ‘all that was not life’ that was all too present in industrial living where Thoreau finds the fulfillment of his own self. “This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt;” he writes, proving true Emerson’s analysis that the individual who flouts social convention is met with derision, “but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting” (*Walden* 412). This turn is key to Thoreau’s core message about solitude and the self—society prescribes a way of living that is taken to be optimal, but one must resist these influences and find one’s own way, which importantly for Thoreau means following nature’s prescriptions and not society’s. Jane Bennett argues that for Thoreau “nature is a vital part of the quest to cut [him]self loose” from social pressures and pursue his own path (Bennett 304). Thoreau shares with Bryant the impulse to turn to nature for resolution of internal turmoil as well as conflict with society, but whereas Bryant ultimately turned to life among the New York intelligentsia, Thoreau was pushed by the affronts to true living that industrialism presented into his radical experiment at Walden.

The conclusions Thoreau draws from living as close to wild nature as possible for two years at Walden Pond provide an answer to his initial *what* question of life. He finds that the best living to be had is that which is lacking in material appurtenances in favor of establishing a healthy, sublime, transcendent relationship between the individual soul and the whole universe. He writes that “it is life near the bone where it is sweetest,” by which he means that living in material poverty best allows us as individuals to cultivate this deep connection with nature that he exalts (*Walden* 584). In this way, Thoreau’s conclusions about what life is, or at least ought to be, echoes Emerson’s thesis at the

beginning of “The Transcendentalist,” that there are two kinds of thinkers, materialists and idealists, the latter of whom might also be called Transcendentalists for their focus on consciousness as the foundation of knowledge rather than physical, material facts. Thoreau promotes the lessening of material possessions in favor of heightening our idealistic connection with nature. He claims, “if I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me” (583). The material conditions of one’s life are insignificant—you could be exorbitantly wealthy or live in abject poverty, you could be a mighty human or a lowly spider, but regardless, if you maintain a solid connection between your own consciousness, your own soul, and the over-soul of the natural universe then you will find sublimity.

In an important way, however, Thoreau also inverts Emerson’s materialist-idealist binary by stressing the significance of our bodies’ physical oneness with the rest of nature. He famously quips, “if you have built castles in the air—” by castles in the air he means lofty notions grounded in ideas rather than materials—“your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them” (580). The foundations, here, are the material connection with the cosmos. In “Solitude,” Thoreau makes a nod to this notion of physical oneness, asking rhetorically, “shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (432). Thoreau, here, is going beyond Emerson’s idealism by recognizing the duality of the individual’s connection with nature—he believes, as does Emerson, that our individual souls are reflections of and particles of the great over-soul, but unlike Emerson he equally stresses that our bodies are also merely the stuff of nature rearranged into human form for a brief

time. Mark Ford notes Thoreau's dualistic approach to individuality in nature, writing that "solitude, rather than offering a stable grounding of experience in a single autobiographical discourse, is constructed by Thoreau as a means of connecting with the world through multiple, metamorphic selves" (Ford 205). Solitude, then, is for Thoreau a vehicle for developing the fullest understanding of the individual self, both in terms of what it is in and of itself and what it is in relation to all that it is not, namely the rest of nature.

### *CONCLUSION*

The Transcendentalist philosophy that Emerson and Thoreau developed roughly between 1835 and 1855 responds to the dramatic changes brought on by the First Industrial Revolution with a radical critique of industrial capitalism and social institutions, accompanied in turn by an exaltation of the solitary individual in nature. The Transcendentalists combined this social criticism with a radical, heretical spirituality—influenced by Unitarianism, out of which it grew—that borrows from panpsychist and pantheistic traditions in emphasizing the connectedness and oneness of all things and beings in the natural universe. This feeling of oneness with the rest of the cosmos inspires an intense and deep connection with nature and a strong desire to protect it in the face of industrial expansion. Hence, Transcendentalism is the next step beyond the spirituality that Bryant puts forth in his earlier poetry, in the sense that it takes the kernels of pantheism, deep ecology, and environmental awareness that we explored in detail in Chapter One and fuses them into a coherent and holistic philosophy. I find that this happened as a reaction to industrialism that forced Emerson and Thoreau to take more radical stances where Bryant, unaffected by industrialism when writing his early

poetry, can remain complacently ambivalent and ambiguous.

If a radical spirituality lies at the heart of Transcendentalism, then the blood that beats through it is, at least in Emerson and Thoreau's writings, a social consciousness that calls for a dramatic shift in the developing status quo of industrial capitalism. Some of their most powerful admonitions have to do with rejecting the materialistic and commercialized culture that was growing out of industrial capitalist consumerism. Thoreau tells us to "simplify, simplify," and encourages us to live with "a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose" (*Walden* 395). It is one of the most significant and lasting conclusions to come from *Walden* that we must live our lives with efficiency and minimize consumption as much as possible. Emerson constantly argues in favor of the individual resisting and refusing social pressures to partake of the industrial economy and instead encourages us to follow our own unique vocations. These Transcendentalist imperatives seek to change the course of New England's social development away from an industrialism that threatens the natural landscape and the health of the regional ecosystem and that alienates and subdues individuals' consciousnesses and toward a radically libertarian, anti-materialist, anti-consumerist, environmentally conscious society.

The sweeping changes Emerson and Thoreau prescribed never came to bear, however, largely as a result of the broad gulf between their philosophy and mainstream thought. Though Emerson was revered in his time as one of young America's preeminent thinkers and scholars, Lawrence Buell notes that his often unconventional philosophy led to him developing a "reputation for dangerous (or exciting) radicalism" (Buell 34). As for Thoreau, he himself was well aware of how far outside conventional thought he resided.

He remarks in his “Conclusion” to *Walden*, “I delight ... not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by” (*Walden* 584). He, as well as Emerson, had a reputation as no more than an antinomian radical; it should be unsurprising that most New Englanders failed to embrace his prescriptions for simple, anti-materialist living.

Thoreau was not the only mid-century New Englander to try to radically reimagine nineteenth-century living. Four years before he began his excursion at Walden, in 1841, a group of Transcendentalists began a project in utopian communitarian living at an abandoned dairy farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, called Brook Farm. Nathaniel Hawthorne, an early member of the group who would shortly leave the community and thereafter critique its ultimate failure, described the purpose of Brook Farmers as trying to restore their consciousness, solving the mind-body problem, by looking back to Eden to try to reconstruct a prelapsarian oneness between our human bodies and the nature we inhabit (Francis 86). Like Thoreau, Brook Farm rejected materialism and commercialism, abolishing notions of personal property in favor of communal ownership of production. The ideology of Brook Farm is thus more Marxist than Thoreau or Emerson’s, but it nevertheless shares their tendencies toward idealism and rejection of industrialized, commercialized society. The community collapsed in 1847, the same year Thoreau left Walden to live his many other lives, partly as a result of a smallpox outbreak but also because of financial troubles due to their inability to sustainably turn a profit. The ultimate failure of Brook Farm speaks to its own impracticality, but also to the broader issue of implementing Transcendentalist ideals into mainstream society. It was perhaps not feasible for New Englanders to slow down, much less outright turn away from, the

industrial growth they had already undergone by the 1840s, which calls into question the very practicality of Emerson and Thoreau's social ideologies.

This chapter has considered Transcendentalism as a response to industrialism. If we read industrialism as being a transitory moment for New England and the nation, signalling the transition from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial, from provincial backwater to global force, then Transcendentalism is an ideology that warns of the dangers of these changes. Harold Fromm has noted that since the West has undergone the processes of modernization, industrialization, and globalization, we have lost our *immediate* connection with nature (Fromm 40). Emerson and Thoreau can sense this loss—and in fact can already see it beginning to slip away—and their writing tries, like a man shaking his fist at a rising tide, to curb the changes brought on by industrialism. Unfortunately for them and for those who see the world like them, they failed. By the symbolic end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, World War I, the Industrial Revolution had taken its toll on our global ecosystem, and the visions of the Transcendentalists became all the more unrealizable. In the next chapter, I will explore in detail two responses to this harsh reality—I will look at how Robert Frost uses his poetry to lament the loss that Emerson and Thoreau warned against; on the other hand, I will examine how Henry Beston maintains his faith in modern humanity's ability to see what Thoreau saw at Walden and what he himself saw at Cape Cod and to turn our society around.

### Chapter 3: Looking Back, or Moving Forward, from the Modern World

By the time of World War I, the forces of industrialization and modernization had affected all aspects of civilization in New England in some way or another, bringing on long-lasting and indelible changes to how people lived. This was not specific to New England, however, as virtually all Western nations had at least begun to industrialize which heavily influenced global economic and geopolitical relations, culminating in the great, global, industrial struggle of World War I. The War stirred some negative reactions to the new ways in which industrial processes run so much of modern life, from the mass mechanization of warfare which devastated Western Europe's landscape and population to changes in land use and commercial production of goods for sale. This modern industrial world looked a lot like what Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau warned about, with major sectors of Western societies losing their close connection with the environment as mechanical and industrial processes continued to pull populations away from farms and into cities and new commuter suburbs. This was the New England where two nature writers, Robert Frost and Henry Beston, grew up. Both men possess an immense love for the landscape and a literary fascination with the environment around them. In this they share a common trait with the previous writers this thesis has examined such as William Cullen Bryant and Emerson and Thoreau. However, what makes Frost and Beston's lives and works distinct from those earlier writers is the unique perspective on nature that modern industrialism provides. The challenge for both writers is to reconcile, or not, their passion for nature in a modern world that seems to care little for environmental concerns.

Perhaps the most significant trait that links Frost and Beston together is their intense dissatisfaction with the attitudes and behaviors toward nature that their society exhibited after industrializing. They both fear that in turning the economic, political, and cultural focus to technology, machines, and industrial production and away from the landscape and the environment, their society would lose something of at least cultural and possibly even spiritual significance. This analysis of industrialization shares a lot in common with what the Transcendentalists were arguing for about half a century earlier—Emerson and Thoreau both warned that if society were to become too engulfed in the world of industrialism that it would lose a connection with nature that is important for human subsistence as well as spiritual balance. Indeed, the literary period that coincides with the new century and the new industrial world order, modernism, focuses a lot on themes of alienation from the self and the transcendent as well as disenchantment with technological advances. Both Frost and Beston share in this modernist disillusionment and are profoundly dissatisfied with the subordinate role nature plays in the new modern world.

Though they agree that something has gone wrong in modernity since the Industrial Revolution of the prior century, Frost and Beston disagree as to what exactly the problem is and how their society as a whole ought to work to fix it. As I will show in close readings of his poetry later in this chapter, one of the main thrusts of Robert Frost's poems is a lament for the way things have changed and in his eyes gotten worse. He is as much a regionalist as he is a naturalist or environmentalist, by which I mean he cares as much about the loss of particular and uniquely New England cultural landscapes as he does environmental degradation and destruction more generally. In particular, the



practices of family farming and homesteading that were dominant in most of New England outside the major urban centers up until the middle of the nineteenth century was on the wane during Frost's lifetime and he witnessed firsthand the slow decay of the old Yankee culture of New Hampshire and Vermont. In such poems as "Directive" and "A Brook in the City," Frost reveals his disappointment at the incursion of industrial urbanization and suburbanization onto a previously rural landscape, and his concern is as much about the diminishment of natural beauty and ecological sustainability as it is about the loss of the culture unique to that landscape.

Henry Beston, on the other hand, is more of an environmentalist in the sense that his worry lies more in society-wide loss of passion and interconnectedness with the natural world and New England just serves as his home, where he sees this loss occurring. Beston's passion for the environment is spiritually motivated, as his seminal book *The Outermost House* (1928) is often regarded as a spiritual awakening book and his experiences recounted in it as a quest to heal his broken spirit. Beston encountered firsthand the horrors of modern warfare volunteering as an ambulance driver in northern France during World War I. The brutality he saw weakened his faith in humanity, in modernity, and in the supposed vaunts of industrialism. He came away alienated from civilization and disgusted with the effects of industrialization on society, and sought refuge on the Outer Beach of Cape Cod, where for a little over a year he lived in solitude in a small dune shack on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Living alone in such a remote location allowed him to tap into the rhythms of nature and to reconnect with the environment in ways that living in a modern, industrial city would not otherwise afford. During his time on the Cape, Beston began to understand what it was that he felt had

gone wrong in the modern world and what was missing. He finds that society has gotten too wrapped up in human-constructed technology and as a result forget how deeply interdependent we are as a species on the natural environment around us. He believes that if we take the time to reconnect with our environment than we will find more spiritual fulfillment and create a newer and more connected world.

So although Frost and Beston share a deep dissatisfaction with the modern world, the reasons for that dissatisfaction are different. As a result, their desires are different, too. Frost wants to hold on to the ever waning culture of 'old' New England, while Beston wants to move forward by renewing the connection between society and environment. Because they have these different desires with regards to the environment, nature in their writing takes on different roles. For Frost, nature operates as a receptacle for human considerations, whereby natural objects serve to reflect human cares and concerns. This reflects Frost's interest in the landscape as a cultural heritage and his desire to preserve both the landscape and the culture that helps to construct it. For Beston, on the other hand, nature is more of a subject than humanity, as he sees nature as something greater than humanity with which we can connect and feel unified. This reflects his inclination to reject an anthropocentric view of the world in favor of seeing humans as just one part of a much greater and all interrelated, natural whole.

In this chapter I will begin by analyzing the similarities between Frost and Beston—how neither can find fulfillment in modernity and yearn for radical change—and then proceed by closely reading the way nature functions in their writing differently and how for each that function indicates their desires and wants. I intend to demonstrate through this analysis that Emerson and Thoreau were generally correct, at least in some

sense, in warning about both cultural and environmental degradation as a result of industrialization and that society would therefore find itself ungrounded and searching for meaning after severing formerly close ties with the environment. Frost and Beston prove, however, that modernity cannot stifle the naturalistic tendencies that are common to all humans and expressed themselves as Romanticism in Bryant's poetry and Transcendentalism in Emerson and Thoreau's writing.

*WHAT HAS MODERN INDUSTRIALISM DONE to NATURE?*

While I will show later in this chapter that Frost and Beston adopt different attitudes and therefore different behaviors towards nature, I would like to highlight here that they share the same starting point in considering what humanity has done to the environment since industrializing. They are both in agreement that human culture has drifted away from a close connection with nature and the environment in some significant way, something that inspires dread and lamentation in both writers. Both Frost and Beston find that the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization have done quite a lot to divorce individuals and society from humanity's roots in the natural world. In other words, those forces wedge new technologies into the human process of deriving sustenance from natural resources, obscuring the roots of that sustenance, which lie in nature, and making it seem like humanity no longer needs nature to sustain itself. In both writers' analyses, these processes and their attendant alienation from nature are active causes of much of the dissatisfaction and aimlessness that marks so much of modernity and modernism.

The Frost poems that I have chosen to focus on in this chapter all deal with, in some way or another, this notion of having fallen or lapsed from a previously more

wholesome state in which humanity maintains a solid connection with the natural world from which it springs. In “The Oven Bird,” Frost ruminates on “what to make of a diminished thing” (14), that thing perhaps being our diminished connectedness with nature in the modern world and the resulting sense of a lack of grounding or centering in the cosmos. “Nothing Gold Can Stay” is ostensibly about the progression of the lives of leaves—Frost finds the first golden blossoms of spring to be the most beautiful, the summer greens unable to match nature’s first flowering. This diminishing of beauty over time draws comparison to the fall of Adam and Eve—“leaf subsides to leaf, / So Eden sank to grief” (5-6). In “Birches,” Frost remembers his boyhood days as a swinger of birches and regrets that he cannot go back; this leads to an escapist mentality prompting him to declare, “I’d like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over” (49-50). “A Brook in the City” and “Directive” grapple with human settlement and the changes we make—or fail to make—on the landscape as we make our homes and expand our collective footprint. The brook in the city represents the last bastion of wilderness that our conurbations cannot overcome, though all the rest of wilderness was easily tamed, “the meadow grass could be cemented down / ... / The apple trees [could] be sent to hearth-stone flame” (9, 11). In “Directive” the “house that is no more a house” (5) but rather now “only a belilaced cellar hole, / Now slowly closing like a dent in dough” (46-7) is a metonym for the rising and falling of human civilization, at once intruding on nature only to be reclaimed once the humans vanish. This poem laments in its own coy, subtle way the fall of human culture, the “two village cultures [that] faded / Into each other” (34-5) and are now both lost. But the wisdom of the poem comes from the knowledge that the erasure of humankind from the landscape is

accompanied by a reclamation of the once domestic as wild anew, an insight that shows a profound understanding of the cyclical nature of these patterns of risings and fallings, comings and goings, advances and retreats.

Through this poetry, Frost continually expresses his often ambivalent feelings about the course of changes that humanity brings to the landscape. He recognizes our continued intrusion on wild nature and laments that “the highway dust is over all” (“Oven Bird” 10), our industrialization has taken over the land and changed it forever. He seeks return—to his boyhood so he can swing birches again, to nature’s golden first green, to the times when society was not so diminished and fallen but healthy and connected to the environment. In these poems and many more, he relates his regret at what has been forsaken and lost as well as his dread for the destruction that persists and shows no signs of stopping. It seems, after having determined that our too industrialized, too urbanized society has sacrificed so much in the name of progress and advancement, that the only thing left to ask “is what to make of a diminished thing” (14). This disposition to lament what has passed and to try to make sense of what is left, I contend, is the driving force behind Frost’s poetry—as I will explore in greater detail in the next two sections of this chapter, his task as a poet becomes what to make of what nature has become in the twentieth century and what we ought to do with it given what we have already done to it.

Beston’s *The Outermost House* tarts with many of the same assumptions about where humanity lies in relation to nature in the era of modernism and what sorts of diminishments the processes of industrialization and modernization have wrought on the environment. In the opening chapter, he relates his motivations for staying a year on the Cape rather than the originally planned fortnight, and he explains why he finds this

experience to be crucial for him on a spiritual level, given his origins in the modern urban world. He notes a significant lack within modern humanity for a sufficiently fulfilling connection with its roots in the environment. He writes, “the world today is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot” (10). This theme of the elemental recurs throughout the book and is perhaps the most powerful relief Beston finds living in outer nature. It is this lack of connection with the basic and elemental world, he believes, that does a great disservice to the spirit of the modern human. Individuals have lost their closeness with nature, and because Beston finds nature to be the repository for human spirituality, feelings of alienation in such an artificial world spring directly from society’s severance from the seat of its collective spiritual wellness.

This analysis lines up with Harold Fromm’s thesis in his essay, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence,” in which he argues that the industrialization and mechanization of many of the processes that provide us with our sustenance and make possible our modern lifestyles have cut us off from the actual sources of the materials necessary for our subsistence—nature, or to use Beston’s terminology, the “elemental” (*Outermost 2*) world. As science and technology advance, a religion that promote salvation in the next life over the meanness of this one, as Fromm argues is one of its most significant functions, seems to lose its appeal. This is because, he notes, our lives are made comfortable by industrial technologies and advances in medicine; and so our need for transcendence wanes (Fromm 38). Fromm thus seems to take Nietzsche for his word that God is dead in modern times, as we appear to have found our own salvation here on earth through industrialism. Why then, it must be asked, do so many modernist

and postmodernist writers (and artists of other media) harp on themes such as alienation and disillusionment? Perhaps, Beston finds, because we were wrong to assume that all the appurtenances that industrialism can offer us are no good substitute for the spiritual fulfillment that organized religion offered premodern humans, and that instead our salvation must come from a wholesome and close connection with our roots in the elemental world.

So Frost and Beston are in agreement that human society has lost something of intense spiritual significance since industrializing (and this analysis rings true with the warnings that Emerson and Thoreau were issuing at the beginning of the industrial period). While the spiritual significance of what has been lost is certainly up for debate, that something has been lost can be borne out through examination of the state of New England in the first half of the twentieth century, the time and place in which Frost and Beston write. Practically all of southern New England—Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut—had been consumed by industrialization and the expansion of urban and suburban spaces, to the point where the only attention paid to the landscape was how to improve transportation networks across increasingly broad swaths of land that collected suburban exurban commuters and directed them swiftly into the hub city of Boston. From the late 1880s right up to World War II, an enormous area including all of eastern Massachusetts and even intruding into northern Rhode Island and southern New Hampshire was wrapped into an expansive metropolitan area with a population rapidly approaching two million and its own planning committee that built a park-and-parkway system in a meager effort to retain a little green space amid a sprawling auto-centric transportation network (O’Connell 348). This radical transformation of a broad swath of

the New England landscape made necessary a reorientation toward a new incarnation of the same physical space. Such a reorientation would require reckoning with all that is new to the landscape as well as all that has been lost.

Though both Frost and Beston would later in life move to northern New England—Frost maintaining several homes in New Hampshire and Vermont and Beston taking up farming in Nobleboro, Maine—this industrialized and urbanized world was the New England in which they grew up. Frost was born in a nascent San Francisco in 1874, but spent most of his youth in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a red-brick industrial city that was built on the banks of the fast-moving Merrimack River, just downstream of the more famous mill city of Lowell (Gerber 1). Beston was born and raised in Quincy, a coastal city immediately south of Boston that first made its way clamming on the shores of Quincy Bay, later digging its wealth from the earth in the form of granite, and eventually as a commuter suburb. Growing up in this urbanized New England marks both Frost and Beston as distinct from any of the earlier writers I've studied in this thesis, since only they were raised in an entirely modern world, which no doubt affects their fundamental assumptions about the world and the environment.

This urban world resembled very little the bucolic white village—replete with a town green at the center, small family farms around the edges, and rolling, forested hills at the periphery—that represented Old New England in the modern consciousness (Conforti 221). Joseph Conforti, in his book *Imagining New England* (2001), writes of how this Old New England was somewhat falsified as a retrospective longing for a simpler and meaner life but one lived closer to nature. Though this construction is grounded as much in illusion as in fact (and Robert Frost's persona and status as a



cultural icon is problematically tied up in this illusion), the very existence of this yearning for a more rural and naturalistic way of living is evidence of a shift in the way New Englanders of the early twentieth century viewed their shifting landscape. They looked at the new auto-roads and commuter suburbs and thought, comfortable as this life may be, there is something greater and more meaningful to be found in this (perhaps falsely constructed) bucolic idyll of Old New England. It is perhaps this very tendency that inspired Beston and Frost to move away from this sullied southern New England and chase up north that which the forces of modernity are driving away more and more with each passing year.

A greater source of disillusionment with the modern world and its hyper-advanced technology was the great global struggle of World War I. The trench warfare that prevailed focused on attrition of both technological power and manpower, treating the humans and industrial technologies that fed the war machine as equally expendable for the sake of victory. This consideration of what a human life is worth horrified the postwar generation, and this horror at the culmination of industrial and technological advances made its way into our literature. W.B. Yeats, in his seminal postwar poem “The Second Coming” (1919) famously compares our modernity to a falcon that, “turning and turning in the widening gyre / ... cannot hear the falconer” (1-2). The next line sums up his view of what has happened as a result of the quintessentially modern struggle of the Great War: “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (3). Though Americans were not as close to the war as Western Europeans, this strain of disillusionment with the direction of civilization certainly affected the American writers of the same generation. Indeed, in her book *The New Death: American Modernism and World War I* (2013), Pearl James

“identifies modern, mechanized, mass death as one of the signal preoccupations and structuring contexts of canonical American modernist writing” (2). She notes that the modernized methods of warfare, which considered the young men on the front lines as expendables, as though they were just resources, have had a profound, traumatizing effect on American writers in the postwar, modernist period. Beston and Frost ought, certainly, to be considered as among that crowd for whom the trauma of World War I infects their view of modernity and as a result their writings on our condition, not just because they were both of that generation but also because they both happened to have personal closeness to the war and the destruction it wrought.

Frost had been living in England for two years when war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914. As the monumental struggle that the war would quickly become cast a pall over the literary scene, Frost somewhat begrudgingly returned to the U.S. in early 1915, upset that his fledgling success in Britain would be cut short. More upsetting to him, however, was, as Philip Gerber explains, “the deathblow he knew the war would deliver to the recent flowering of English verse” (Gerber 9). By the end of the war, more than just the deathblow to what was becoming of English poetry, Frost endured the deaths of two of his closest friends, the young poets Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas (*ibid.*, 9). For Frost, the war interrupted his poetic stride and swallowed up some of the best and brightest of a generation of young Europeans who might otherwise have gone on to produce unfathomable art but instead were taken by the brutality of the Great War.

Beston had even closer experience of the war, volunteering in the French military as an ambulance driver, taking wounded soldiers from the battlefields to the hospitals behind the lines. For three years, he witnessed the atrocities wrought upon the young

Frenchmen and experienced firsthand the mechanized mass death of which Pearl James writes (Paul 113). Beston was shaken by the horrors he saw in northern France—the way the architects of the war machines in Western nations used their industrial power and technological advances with seeming disregard for the humanity of those on the front lines for the sake of a little land here and a score settled there. These memories would continue haunt him for several years after returning home; it would not be until he was able to find solace in the elemental world of Cape Cod and respite in outer nature that he could begin to overcome the trauma and find a new center that could hold.

For Beston, as well as for Frost, that center was a life lived close to the environment, a deep understanding of humanity's connection with nature and how far society has drifted from it with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. At this point, they come into line with Fromm's notion that the newfound obsolescence of nature in modernity is misguided and only serves to alienate us further from our natural roots. If this sounds familiar, it is precisely what Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau warned would happen if we forsook the environment and our closeness to the landscape in favor of mechanized subsistence and the profits and comforts afforded us by industrial capitalism. Emerson and Thoreau, as I explored in the previous chapter, took this admonition and developed a sharp, cohesive, and holistic social criticism that warned about alienation from the self, from society, and from nature. Neither Frost nor Beston takes the time to explicate a social criticism in their nature writing, however. They seem to accept, by default (given their regional identity and the subject matter of their writing), the basic tenets of the Transcendentalist social critique and spend less time reaffirming those notions in favor of focusing more on how society, in a now fully industrialized and

modernized society, can go back to nature and find grounding again.

Indeed, this focus reconnecting with the environment is what sets Frost and Beston apart from their modernist peers such as the poets Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats, and the fiction writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, among many others. While these headliners of the modernist canon focus on, in Sherman Paul's analysis, "Civilization and Culture, from the perspective of dispossession, in regard to what they felt was lost in the swift current of modern history" (Paul 112), Frost and Beston turn their focus to nature instead. Rather than addressing the laundry list of problems with modernity through examination of cultural or civilizational failings, they tend instead to fight against the industrial current that Fromm identifies as pulling humanity away from its roots in the earth and work towards returning to a more whole and fulfilled state of being, one that is conscious of the human's place in the global ecosystem and cognizant of living in healthy partnership with the rest of life and the rest of the natural world. Exactly what those ideas mean is where Frost and Beston begin to diverge.

#### *WHAT to MAKE of NATURE?*

Frost may rightly be called a "nature" poet, and Beston is certainly a nature writer (excepting his early career as an editor and fairy tale writer). This does not signify much beyond pointing out that nature is one of the principle focuses or features of Frost's and Beston's respective writings. A deeper and more thorough examination of their writing must then focus not on the fact that nature defines so much of their works but rather on how it functions in their writing, an insight that might help us to approach a deeper sense of what Frost and Beston make of nature in their own ways. As I've hinted at already,

nature functions differently in Frost's poetry than it does in Beston's creative nonfiction and I find that these divergent functions arise out of differing approaches to what nature is and what it means to each writer as individuals.

Frost uses nature as a mirror for human issues, whether they be the vicissitudes of farming in northern New England, the effects of the caprices of modernism on rural communities, or psychological states and emotions entirely interior to an individual. So nature is a sort of receptacle for the weight considerations of humanity, from the perspective of both the individual and the community. Beston's approach is less anthropocentric and less egocentric in favor of ecocentrism. Nature in *The Outermost House* is a realm and a force exterior to the self that the individual must connect with or else risk alienating the self from its natural roots. I do not draw these distinctions to make value judgments as to which approach is better. I merely point out the differences to highlight the multifarious ways in which individuals and communities can find connection and communion with nature, which may be especially a feature of the modern and postmodern world whose industrialization and mechanization of subsistence removes humans from nature in ways unlike ever before.

Before I get too far into marking out what separates Frost's from Beston's approach to nature, it is important to note that there is still at least one significant commonality. Both Frost and Beston show a thorough understanding of the entanglement of a community of people in particularly rural places with the landscape in which they make their living. Frost's poetry continually expresses his understanding of how landscape affects the people that live in it equally as much as the people's collective social imagination defines the landscape. "Directive" is a poem that probes this

entanglement and the processes both physical or geological and imaginative or psychological that go into forming a landscape. In analyzing an old, worn-down country road in Vermont, he addresses directly this duality of construction:

Besides the wear of iron wagon wheels  
 The ledges show lines ruled southeast-northwest  
 The chisel work of an enormous Glacier  
 Who braced his feet against the Arctic Pole.  
 You must not mind a certain coolness from him  
 Still said to haunt this side of Panther Mountain. (14-19)

The ruts carved by the wagon wheels show how active humanity is in the physical side of sculpting a landscape, while the reference to the Glacier (given the prominence of a proper noun by being capitalized, and in later lines personified) reminds us that nature does at least as much work as we do in that regard. The personification of the Glacier, and the attendant local myth about his haunting a certain side of a certain mountain, exposes the local imagination of the landscape as a crucial part of the construction of South Mountain north of Frost's longtime home in Ripton, Vermont.

John Elder, a Middlebury College-based ecocritic who keeps a home on the northern side of South Mountain nestled between it and its counterpart North (or Hogback) Mountain in Bristol, has a perspective as intimate as Frost's on this specific Vermont landscape. This perspective allows him to see exactly these forces of geological and anthropogenic change altering the physical landscape as well as the collective imagination of the people refracting the physical into a culturally-informed human experience of the land. From this perspective, he writes in his book *Reading the Mountains of Home* (1998), "[‘Directive’] both grows from and contributes to the landscape of Vermont, and ... its meaning includes the mountains and the families who have lived among them" (1). Elder points out how Frost's poetry is keenly conscious of

how the human experience of and imagination of a landscape directly contribute to its received cultural meaning. He is thus correct in noting that by writing about the mountains Frost only adds more to that meaning, and his writing about Frost's writing adds still more.<sup>6</sup>

While nature has a less anthropocentric function in Beston's *The Outermost House*, he nevertheless cannot escape—and makes no pretenses of escaping—the human influence on how he sees the landscape and seascape of the Outer Cape. While he grew up in a seaside town on the South Shore of Boston and had there “a New England boyhood of sea and shore” (quoted in Payne xxvii), he was nevertheless not native to Cape Cod, and when he began his year at his dune shack, the Fo'castle, he had quite a bit to learn about the way of life of Cape Codders. Daniel Payne describes Beston's process of learning how to live the Outer Cape; Beston had found that Cape Codders “were people who still lived by the rhythms of the natural world, the sun, the tides, the seasons—and Beston detected in this life a ‘joy of Nature’ that was not simply physical or aesthetic but spiritual” (Payne 133). This way of life came to Beston in sharp relief both of his suburban upbringing and his wartime experiences, a welcome change of pace that enchanted him and stirred his imagination. Indeed, much of what Beston would come to write about nature was heavily influenced by the locals, his connection with them being as important as his connection with elemental nature.

In his book he delights in detailing his close relationships with the people that surrounded him—the coastguardsmen who frequently stopped at the Fo'castle for

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<sup>6</sup> And my writing about Elder's writing about Frost's writing adds yet another layer of meaning. This self-awareness of layers of influence seems frivolous, but it is at least helpful in illustrating the point that humans continually imagine and re-imagine landscapes and the more layers of imagination added, the more complex our collective vision of the land becomes. This is the kind of change that occurs over time that “Directive” and *Reading the Mountains of Home* deal with so intimately.

chowder, coffee, and conversation; the villagers of Eastham and Orleans who sold him provisions and told him stories; the beachcombers whose behaviors after a wreck taught him the unique materialism of Cape Codders in the way they scavenge washed up wood, utensils, and trinkets. He readily admits the impression these people have had on his perception of wild nature; unlike Thoreau (from whom he always felt the need to distance himself [Sherman 113]), he “made no pretence of acting the conventional hermit. ... With my weekly trips to Orleans to buy fresh bread and butter, my frequent visits to the Overlook, and my conversations with the men on night patrol, a medieval anchorite would have probably regarded me as a dweller in the marketplace” (*Outermost* 94-5). These human relationships have a measurable impact on Beston’s consideration and vision of the nature local to the Outer Beach, and in this sense he shares with Frost a recognition of the indivisibility of the people from their landscape and vice versa, and he takes this into account when writing his take on the elemental world he lives in.

The very next sentences that follow the above quote, however, signals where Beston diverges from Frost. He writes:

It was not this touch with my fellows, however, which alone sustained me. Dwelling thus upon the dunes, I lived in the midst of an abundance of natural life which manifested itself every hour of the day, and from being thus surrounded, thus enclosed within a great whirl of what one may call the life force, I felt that I drew a secret and sustaining energy. (95)

Though the human influence is both real and significant (a facet of *Walden* that Thoreau forgets more than Beston does in his book), the more pertinent focus for Beston is on that which he experiences in outer nature. Beston then makes a move that Frost rarely does, leaving humanity behind and focusing on nature in and of itself, not as it relates to the self or to society. This move is what sets Beston more apart from the rest of the writers



that I examine in this project; from Bryant through the Transcendentalists and on down to Frost, the other New England nature writers focus on nature from an anthropocentric view that considers how nature can affect the individual or society. Beston's move away from anthropocentrism and toward ecocentrism is what sets his writing somewhat apart from these other writers. For instance, though he and Thoreau perform very similar experiments in living alone in nature, Beston's focus on the environment in and of itself rather than his personal experiences of it marks his book as quite distinct from *Walden*.

Beston's approach is ecocentric (or at least as ecocentric as any human writing experience can be) and probes the philosophical roots of what would later in the twentieth century burgeon into the deep ecology movement. Philosopher Eric Katz appraises deep ecology and its proponents as starting from a vantage point that pushes beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism. He assesses that,

In considering the intrinsic value of nonhuman life forms, in the process of identifying with nonhuman natural entities and systems, and in the development of policies of action that stress noninterference and the harmony of human life and nature, deep ecologists claim to transcend anthropocentrism and adopt a perspective of ecocentrism. (Katz 18)

According to Katz, the fundamental tenets of ecocentrism stress the equal value of all life, how humanity is indelibly embedded within the fabric of life on this planet, and that therefore we ought to strive to protect the health of the global ecosystem of which we are a part. These same tenets are visible in Beston's pattern of reckoning with nature and the way nature functions in his writing. As I explored in detail earlier in this chapter, Beston was very much a man of his generation—a young man made disillusioned with the course of human history by his war experiences seeking a new center, a new grounding to rest his spirit. Daniel Payne argues that in living in elemental nature, “Beston experienced an

epiphany, a dawning realization that the sense of order and vital meaning that he and many of his generation had been searching for was to be found not in human institutions but in the elemental and eternal rhythms of nature” (Payne xix). So nature for Beston is this new sense of order and it must therefore take center stage in his life; this requires an almost Copernican removal of humanity from the center of the universe, to be replaced with nature. This is what Beston’s ecocentric approach is about, and the basic principles of deep ecology that Katz outlines—respect for nonhuman life as equal to human life, a feeling of camaraderie and oneness with the rest of nature, and a harmony with the rhythms of nature—show up in his writing.

Before Aldo Leopold gave us a land ethic, Beston issues a call to respect the other component parts of life at least as equally as we respect our own human life. He famously writes, “we need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. ... They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth” (*Outermost* 25). Beston here expresses a kinship with animals—they are not below us, but they are also importantly not our ‘brethren,’ as a more Darwinian view might have it, humanity having grown out of the same stuff as other animals but having risen above them. No, they are other nations, collectives of selves moving throughout time and space just as we do, equal to us in that regard.

Beston sees what he calls the “life force” (95) animating all of life; what is signified by ‘life force’ is quite similar to what Emerson calls the ‘over soul.’ Beston develops a special interest in birds, Cape Cod boasting of a unique diversity of itinerant flocks, and he sees in them a collective spirit, a unity of selves that the natural rhythms of

the universe conjures somehow (he admits he does not know how). This collective spirit is mystical to him, and it is something he recognizes is ever present in nature and something that we, as sharers of life, might also share in. When he encounters a group of shore birds, he describes them as “an army. Some spirit of discipline and unity has passed over their countless little brains, waking in each flock a conscious sense of its collective self and giving each bird a sense of himself as a member of some migrant company” (20). From these observations, he is mystified by the ability of the individual to calmly and serenely submit to a call for unity and synchronicity. He writes, “my special interest is ... the instant and synchronous obedience of each speeding body to the new volition” (24). Beston’s thought here is, either overtly or covertly, influenced by the panpsychic tendencies of Transcendentalism, which he combines with the seeds of what would later become deep ecology to produce a literary and mystical understanding of the rhythms that beat within all life. By approaching this new and more mystical concept of animals, Beston dives deeper into a more general feeling of oneness with the natural universe. He greatly desires to feel the way the birds do, to follow nature’s course for himself, and to do so he must tap into the rhythms of nature.

Living atop a dune fifty feet above the waters of the Atlantic breaking on the shore, the most persistent and memorable rhythm is that of the ever breaking tide. Beston writes, “the rhythm of the waves beats in the sea like a pulse in living flesh. It is pure force, forever embodying itself in a succession of water shapes which vanish on its passing” (47-8). He recognizes in the waves the same thing he sees in the birds—a fundamental force of the universe pulsating, alive. This is the core of Beston’s view of nature—it is a perennially renewing force, the force of creation and of change, that always

seems to come back to itself like a circle. The cycle of this force, each beat of its eternal rhythm, is what Beston tunes into in his year on the Outer Cape.

Frost, too, is profoundly interested in cycles, the comings and goings of things both in nature and in humanity. His interest in this matter takes a different form in his writing, however, as he focuses far more on the human aspect of nature than Beston does. Beston looks at elemental nature as something like Emerson's transparent eyeball and tries to see it for what it is in and of itself, and sees that its rhythms reveal a unity of spirit. Frost looks at the northern New England landscape, indelibly caught up in the human web of understanding of it, and, as Nina Baym posits, "he does not find in nature a transcendental unity or an assurance of rebirth, but rather the grim laws of change and decay" (Baym 716). The cycles that Frost identifies are not the regular beatings of the waves or the coalescence of the individual birds into a unitary flock, but are rather the waxing and waning of human presence and the changes in the landscape that accompany those advances and retreats.

Frost's approach to his assessments of the various natural and built landscapes suggests a recognition of things lost to change over time and a lamentation that they have gone. "A Brook in the City" starts with an image that expresses a faint dread for things changing: "The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square / With the new city street it has to wear / A number in" (1-3). This scene, and the entire poem, deals with the expansion of human society. The farmhouse is increasingly an anachronism; before it had only to square itself with the land for the purposes of farming, but now it has to square itself with a city street and even gets assigned a street number. This is a little grating for Frost, and he imbues the farmhouse with the emotion 'averse,' as if averse to continued

human expansion and in particular to the forces of urbanization and suburbanization that sweep the old farming way of life aside more generally. This opening image is a representative illustration of how Frost imbues the objects he observes with his own emotions about changing times, in this instance lamenting the waxing of urbanism.

On the other hand, “Directive” is a bit of a lamentation for things waning, but rather than the old ways of life being swept aside to make way for the new, they are merely swept away and wild nature comes back to reclaim what it had lost. In this poem Frost provides his interpretation of the effects of the course of human history on the land; in this area of Vermont, the opening of the American West, combined with the Industrial Revolution in the early and middle portions of the nineteenth century, led to a gradual exodus from the harsh farmlands of Vermont for either industrial opportunities in the cities of southern New England or far better farming opportunities in the Heartland (Bell 450). The result is that farms and farmhouses were abandoned and nature was beginning to creep back into these formerly human spaces. As the speaker notes, “the only field / Now left’s no bigger than a harness gall” (39-40). The remnants of human settlement are almost haunted; the speaker tells the reader, “nor need you mind the serial ordeal / Of being watched from forty cellar holes / As if by eye pairs out of forty firkins” (20-22). This eerie sense of being watched by the remains of human culture is chilling; all that is happening now is nature reclaiming one of these former houses, “only a belilaced cellar hole / ... slowly closing like a dent in dough” (46-47). The land is closing in on the house, and as it does so it wipes it and its legacy away.

The difference between “A Brook in the City” and “Directive” is that the former laments the waxing of human settlement and culture while the latter laments its wane.

This would seem a contradiction; but what clears it up is that the focus in each poem is about the loss of the old farm life of northern New England. It is clear, then, that it does not matter to Frost whether it is the encroachment of the urban or of the natural that destroys this old life; what matters is that it is receding. Priscilla Paton examines in her book *Abandoned New England* (2003) the way various artists and writers portray old and vanished lifestyles in New England. She finds that “Frost could both tap nostalgia and portray rural desolation when the farm no longer functioned as the dominant and much idealized emblem of American goodness” (11). I concur with her analysis that what motivates the feelings of loss and regret in Frost’s poetry is not loss of nature but loss of a uniquely human interaction with nature, namely the old farming life of eighteenth and nineteenth century New England.

This focus on human loss rather than natural loss is indicative of how nature functions in Frost’s poetry. I began this section by asserting that Frost can rightly be called a nature poet, but this was something that he disagreed with, at least at one point in his life. He is credited as saying, “I am not a nature poet. There is almost always a person in my poems.” (quoted in Thompson, 2000) I maintain that one can be considered a nature writer without having to evacuate humanity or the human perspective in the writing, for otherwise we would have very little nature writing at all. But this is still a significant point to consider, as the omnipresence of humanity, the anthropocentrism of Frost’s reckoning with nature is what marks his brand of nature writing as distinct from Beston’s.

Take “Birches” for example: the title of the poem indicates its subject matter—the speaker is going to present an image of birches and say something insightful or, if we’re

lucky, even transcendental about this piece of nature. But the first lines show that the birches are not the subject at all but rather just the jumping off point; it is the speaker who is really the subject. He writes, “when I see birches bend to left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees, / I like to think some boy's been swinging them” (1-3). The birches signify something to the speaker that goes beyond the simple nature of the trees; they trigger a memory, a boyhood as a swinger of birches, and the poem goes on to expound what specific, anthropocentric meaning these trees have to him. Kent Ryden sees nature, in this poem, birches, serving as a vehicle for some insight or meaning that only a human could concoct. He finds that “‘Birches’ ... use[s] images and phenomena in the New England landscape ... to comment on aspects of human existence both heartening and sobering” (Ryden 298). This approach is not specific to “Birches” but is in fact common to Frost’s general mode of nature writing. Nature serves as a stimulant, certain images of nature or landscape provoking memories or analyses of either the individual self or of the course of human culture. Ryden concludes that “rarely does Frost present scenes of nature for their own sake; they always come to the reader filtered and mediated through some aspect of human presence, perception, and culture” (299). Ryden’s analysis here points to Frost’s anthropocentrism and how he uses objects in nature to express something significant about human concerns. This function of nature—to reflect human consideration and value—is palpably different from how it functions in Beston’s writing, in which it serves as a subject in and of itself and not just as a vehicle for human subjectivity.

This distinction between the role of nature in Frost and Beston’s works reveals a difference in how the two writers consider the relationship between human society and

nature. For Frost, nature is not separate from society but rather dictates how humans live and interact with each other and the world. This is not a one-way street, however, as he sees humanity as dictating how nature proceeds as much as nature dictates human life. Beston sees elemental nature as a more primeval—and therefore more fulfilling and satisfying—realm than what humanity has built up for itself over the millennia. He has a great desire to tap into the rhythms of the metronome of nature, and he finds modernity to be white noise that gets in our way. Here again we see Harold Fromm’s notion come into play that industrialization and mechanization mediates our relationship with nature, and Beston desires to transcend those forces and return to an *immediate* connection; to do so requires leaving society behind for a time. Frost is less escapist; he, too, finds modernity to alienate us too far from nature, but he does not want to forsake society in favor of nature. Rather, he seeks to recreate an earlier cultural connection with the landscape, or at least to hold on to what remains of that connection that is slipping away more and more with each passing season. These different impulses lead Frost and Beston to different conclusions as to how we should proceed from our present moment of modernity, industrialized and urbanized and increasingly threatening the wild and elemental nature.

*TO LOOK BACKWARD or to MOVE FORWARD?*

One of the stronger reasons as to why nature functions differently for Frost and Beston in their writing is simply because they want different things. Frost’s poetry reveals a yearning for an older New England, a farming way of life that is giving way to modern urban and suburban living. Beston’s *The Outermost House*, however, is more of a spiritual journey of awakening and of realization, the dawning of a new understanding of the universe and a newly revealed way forward. He seeks to progress beyond modernity,



not to go back to the past but to use the earlier and more naturalistic ways of life as models for how to go forward. It is this backward glance that Frost's poems often make that lends them their more somber and lamentary tone, while conversely Beston's rebirth on the Eastham dunes infuses his prose with a romantic joy of life that perhaps only Bryant could match.

I noted in the first section of this chapter that much of Frost's poetry examines landscapes, as reflected through the cultural lens of northern New England, from a perspective of what has been lost. "Birches" is about, among other themes, a lost boyhood; "A Brook in the City" is about a lost pastoral way of life replaced by an urban one; "Directive" is similarly about the decline of farming in New England but focuses on the lost human spaces that are not reclaimed by urbanization but rather by nature. These poems together offer insight into what it is that Frost is yearning for, and that is, put simply, to regain things lost.

In "Birches," the speaker starts with the image of bent birches, which inspires his imagination. "I like to think some boy's been swinging them" (3), he tells us, "but swinging doesn't bend them down to stay / As ice storms do" (4-5). He fancies himself to think of a boy enjoying nature as the romantic solitary individual found in Bryant's poetry, but he just as soon realizes he knows that image to be an illusion and chases it out with the real fact of the matter, a late winter ice storm. He nevertheless continues ruminating on his boyhood pastime because he cannot, or does not want to, let go of this more childish part of himself. Comparing himself to this imaginary boy, he remarks, "so was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be. / It's when I'm weary of considerations / And life is too much like a pathless wood" (41-44). These

lines are quite telling about Frost's deeper motivations—the modern times, and perhaps adulthood too, have gotten him down and so he wants to go back to when things were simpler and freer and therefore better.

The comparisons between the childhood-adulthood binary and the pastoral-urban binary are brought out even more in “A Brook in the City.” Frank Lentricchia, a prominent mid-century Frost scholar and critic, identifies in several of Frost's brook poems the brook as a poetic object that Frost employs to probe both the urbanized and the adult self. In describing how this works in Frost's poetry, Lentricchia writes, “the self, once free, integrated with its natural environment, and child-like, becomes in the urban setting repressed, civilized (read ‘unnatural’), and self-conscious” (Lentricchia 53). Thus the indefatigable energy, the “immortal force” (13) of the fast-running brook signifies, in Lentricchia's reading, youthful exuberance and vitality. The brook is thus distinct from other pieces of untamed nature; as the speaker explains, “the meadow grass could be cemented down / From growing under pavements of a town; / The apple trees be sent to hearth-stone flame;” (9-11) and yet the brook is not so easily dispatched of. Instead of getting rid of the brook, the city decides to divert its flow through culverts underground to be repurposed as a sewer drain. This action represents suppression of a thing that, though it had done nothing wrong “except forget to go in fear, perhaps,” (19) is nonetheless determined not to be worth much to urban society. Lentricchia reads this as an extended metaphor for the childish self, ever full of energy and never blunted by the fear brought on by the self-consciousness that marks adulthood, being repressed by the forces of civilization and its discontents. Yet, the speaker concludes in such a way that hints that this child-like energy continues to lurk in our adult selves, saying, “But I

wonder / If from its being kept forever under, / The thoughts may not have risen that so keep / This new-built city from both work and sleep” (21-24). So just as our childish versions of ourselves continue to lurk in the depths below our civilized adult selves, the brook, that last unconquerable piece of nature left in the city, and pastoralism more broadly continues to haunt our modern urban cityscapes.

“Directive” takes the brook and transforms it into something even more mystical and primeval. After a long and convoluted journey, the speaker, “a guide ... / Who only has at heart your getting lost,” (8-9) leads us to the culmination of the journey and the poem. He says, “your destination and your destiny’s / A brook that was the water of the house” (49-50). If we are to extend Lentricchia’s reading of how Frost uses the brook as a semiotic, the end of “Directive” takes on an even more immense significance. If the brook is the destination of our journey and the destiny of ourselves, then Frost seems to be telling us that it is that ‘immortal force,’ at once both childhood and the pastoral life, that is our salvation. Invoking images of the Holy Grail and the legends surrounding it (57-59), the speaker brings us to an almost religious conclusion, instructing us, “here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion” (61-62). To be whole, and to be beyond confusion after having lost ourselves, we must go, as the beginning of the poem impels us, “back out of all this now too much for us, / Back in a time made simple by the loss / Of detail” (1-3). This poem is one of Frost’s more spiritual and religious poems, and somewhat takes the form of a journey; yet, it has an entirely different tone than Beston’s spiritual journey prose. This is because Frost’s spiritual journey does not take us to someplace new. It confuses us, disorients us, and has us see things as we would never have before, but it makes our destiny a destination that is

old and fading and cannot really be restored to its original and more perfect form.

This diminished destiny is a unifying theme in Frost's poetry. I return now to the first point I made in analyzing Frost, that his poems deal in some way or another with the notion of a lapse or a falling. "Nothing Gold Can Stay," from its title to its contents, is a lesson on an unbending rule of nature, that things decay over time. Though things start out beautiful—"nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold" (1-2)—they cannot stay that way forever—"her early leaf's a flower; / But only so an hour" (3-4). Even in "Birches," the speaker's yearning to get away from his diminished adult life is tempered by the crushing yet inescapable reality of his ultimate inability to truly escape. Though he'd "like to get away from earth awhile," (48) he nevertheless wants to "then come back to it and begin over" (49). He even goes so far as to specifically wish not to get away and never come back: "May no fate willfully misunderstand me / And half grant what I wish and snatch me away / Not to return. Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better" (50-53). He does not want to get away forever, dreary as this world may be, because, as he comes around to admitting finally, there is nowhere else things could possibly go better. These lines point to the culmination of Frost's desires—he is dismayed at our modern condition and our urban mode of living and will make his distaste for them known; however, he ultimately accepts that there is no other way, that what we have is all that we have and he concludes that it's not likely to go better any other way. All that's left for Frost to do as a poet is to make like the oven bird and ruminate on "what to make of a diminished thing" ("Oven Bird" 14). Perhaps this is the dour fatalism of Calvinism creeping into Frost's thought process, perhaps this is the begrudging acceptance of the way things are, perhaps Frost has succumbed to the

immense and crushing weight of modernity that seems to now perennially stamp out all that Frost values in community and nature, or perhaps this is a byproduct of Frost's "lover's quarrel" ("The Lesson for Today" 161) with the world and with himself. Whatever it may be, it is inarguably a far different conclusion from what Beston comes to.

For Beston, nature is not the retainer of human troubles to be brought out but rather the great revealer of truth and our ultimate destiny. Nature is something to be in touch with, and something that we have lately fallen out of touch with. Beston does not look at this fact of the matter of the modern age and lament; he hears the elemental world calling us to reconnect with nature and tune back into its rhythms and cycles. Beston's book is replete with various invocations, calling his readers to attempt a renewed intimacy with nature. The best way to approach this is to pay attention to what Beston sees as the great pageant of the year. To open his chapter called "Midwinter," Beston writes, "a year indoors is a journey along a paper calendar; a year in outer nature is the accomplishment of a tremendous ritual" (*Outermost* 59). This cycle of the sun is deeply important to Beston, and he believes that some of the basest truths about humanity lie in this journey. But modern society, with its precise timepieces and omnipresent calendars and rigid work schedules, has fallen out of touch with this journey. This is unsettling to Beston because, he writes,

We lose a great deal, I think, when we lose this sense and feeling for the sun. When all has been said, the adventure of the sun is the great natural drama by which we live, and not to have joy in it and awe of it, not to share in it, is to close a dull door on nature's sustaining and poetic spirit. (59-60)

Here, he argues that losing touch with the cycles of the year causes us to lose touch with some integral part of our humanity. Beston finds that the roots of our modern problems

lie in closing off that door to nature and forsaking our connection to the cycles and rhythms of the cosmos. His vision for how to move forward deal with redressing these issues by reopening ourselves, as individuals and as a civilization, to nature.

One of Beston's most insightful chapters is "Night on the Great Beach." In it he expounds his thoughts on night, from which he finds we have unnaturally shielded ourselves as much as we have from the ritual of the sun. He opens by noting, "our fantastic civilization has fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature, and none more completely than with night" (168). With our incandescent bulbs we have driven out the darkness and extended the lighted hours through the night; in doing so, though, we have cut ourselves off from a sublime experience that Beston relearns in his outer and more primitive world. The conclusion he draws is similar to the one he draws about the pageant of the year. He issues a call to his readers:

Learn to reverence the night and to put away the vulgar fear of it, for, with the banishment of night from the experience of man, there vanishes as well a religious emotion, a poetic mood, which gives depth to the adventure of humanity. . . . For a moment of night we have a glimpse of ourselves and of our world islanded in its stream of stars—pilgrims of mortality, voyaging between horizons across eternal seas of space and time. Fugitive though the instant be, the spirit of man is, during it, ennobled by a genuine moment of emotional dignity, and poetry makes its own both the human spirit and experience. (176)

This passage is ostensibly about night, but the motivations behind it apply generally to Beston's conclusions about how we ought to reorient ourselves toward nature.

Connecting with the natural universe allows us to see ourselves more clearly and truly; humanity springs up from nature, after all, and so any truths we would want to learn about ourselves we would first have to learn in nature. This is how Beston accounts for the emergence of poetry out of the confluence of the human spirit and experience of the natural universe. When we forsake the latter the human spirit can only take us so far and

it should really come as no surprise to find ourselves lost. Beston's vision for the future is a humanity that is reintegrated into the fabric of nature; once we get there, he has an unerring faith that we will find ourselves and find the fulfillment that we have lacked since at least the start of the industrial age.

Beston is more than just a writer; he vaunts the importance of poetry to the very sustenance of our humanity and his ability through writing to convey the importance of a better abstract relationship with nature. But he recognizes that it is necessary to take action as well to ensure a greater integration with nature. His environmental consciousness goes beyond the poetic view of nature as fodder for his writing and wades in the waters of what would later congeal into an environmental activist movement. Daniel Payne offers insight into how *The Outermost House* functions in the mid-century transition from the older conservation movement—which was more focused on preserving swaths of land for our enjoyment of them and the protection and efficient use of resources so we could get more out of them—to the newer environmental movement that focused more on the overall health of global ecosystems than the human gains that might be made off nature (Payne 156-7). He argues that Beston was among the earliest of a succession of nature writers that helped to turn the public focus from conservation to environmental activism, a list that includes Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and later on Carolyn Merchant and Bill McKibben. Before any of them, Beston showed a concern for nonhuman nature, and not concern for what humans could get out of it, but concern for its health and wellbeing generally. He warns of

a new danger ... [that] now threatens the birds at sea. An irreducible residue of crude oil, called by refiners 'slop,' remains in stills after oil distillation, and this is pumped into southbound tankers and emptied far offshore. This wretched pollution floats over large areas, and the birds alight in it and get it on their

feathers. They inevitably die. ... But let us hope that all such pollution will presently end. (101-2)

Beston feels such remorse for these poor birds, and in one episode is so moved that he rescues a couple and brings them into the Fox castle to try to clean them off, feed them, and keep them warm. But they did not take well to his attempts to care for them, and he comes to a realization that it would be best that he leave them alone—"I let them go just as soon as I saw that I could not possibly help them and that Nature had best deal with the problem in her own way" (105). In this chapter Beston's ecocentrism comes to the fore as he shows dismay at anthropogenic environmental destruction and a genuine desire to help, but importantly he realizes that sometimes it is best to let nature take its course how it will. This approach to the environment would be refined and become more purpose-driven by the writers I mentioned above and the movement that began to swell around these ideals, and we can look to Beston as one of the earlier voices calling for greater care on the part of human civilization to take care of our environment.

This strain of environmental activism no doubt arises from Beston's overarching philosophy that humans ought to deepen our connections with nature and get back in touch with our natural roots. His vision for our future is thus more hopeful than Frost's; he believes that it is well within our grasp to regain our lost ties to the elemental world and if we can do that then we can, bit by bit, reorient our civilization toward a healthier relationship with nature. So in his conclusion to the book he offers his final thoughts on humanity and nature. Ultimately, Beston harps on our irrevocable unity with nature, writing, "creation is still going on, ... the creative forces are as great and active to-day as they have ever been, and tomorrow's morning will be as heroic as any of the world. So near is man to the creative pageant, so much a part is he of the endless and incredible



experiment” (220). Beston sees humanity as just one terminus of creative evolution, coequal with all the rest around the cosmos. From this, he concludes that to know humanity we must first know nature:

Whatever attitude to human existence you fashion for yourself, know that it is valid only if it be the shadow of an attitude to Nature. ... The ancient values of dignity, beauty, and poetry which sustain [the ritual of human life] are of Nature’s inspiration; they are born of the mystery and beauty of the world. Do no dishonour to the earth lest you dishonour the spirit of man. (221-2)

The ultimate truth that Beston draws from his year on the Outer Beach is that as humanity springs from nature, so too do our human values, and if our human values are maligned with natural values then we will encounter alienation and disillusionment and we will be lost. This is where he finds modern civilization mired, an assessment not so dissimilar from Frost’s. But whereas Frost yearns to go back and so can only grasp at what is left from older times and write poetry about that which has been lost, Beston comes to a newly energized faith in humanity whose deliverance and salvation have not yet been forfeited forever and can be regained if we progress forward and renew our connection with nature.

### *CONCLUSION*

Frost and Beston, arguably the two most prominent writers of nature from New England in the 20th century, represent and embody two different ways of dealing within perceived decline or decay of a certain societal value. In this case, that value is living a life close to nature. Frost’s way of dealing with the modern decline of old New England farm culture is to wish he could go back to it. Beston’s way of dealing with a lost spiritual connection with nature is to go out and find it again, and write about it to others so that they might be inspired to do the same. The very fact that their writing has to adopt

this orientation of dealing with a perceived loss speaks to the enormous scale of disruption that industrialism affected. Were Beston alive and writing in the 1820s instead of the 1920s, he may well have produced literature in the same vein as Bryant—celebratory of nature and replete with invocations to his readers to join in the Romantic experience of wild nature. But because of all that the forces of industrialism did to disrupt New England society's once close relationship with the environment, his writing is more urgent and has more to do with problem-solving than a simple, Romantic love of life in nature. Similarly, Frost is put into the position of having to lament the decline of the old rural culture he loved so much rather than being able to sing its praises during its pinnacle. In short, the modern industrial world forces the issue to nature writers, to which they cannot but respond.

Thus, any connection with nature that we might have in modern, industrial society must necessarily confront the problems of industrialism first before being able to engage with nature. This paradigm was beginning to shift as Emerson and Thoreau were writing, which has the effect of coloring their literature with admonition to resist total industrialization, and therefore prevents their writing from being more entirely about nature, as Bryant's is. This trend continues, and is only exacerbated, as industrialism continues to develop in New England and in the Western world more generally. Beston and Frost's literature is thus marred in some sense by being forced to write about nature in the context of the modern industrial world, as opposed to being able to write about nature in and of itself. Even the most ecocentric moments in *The Outermost House* are affected by Beston's keen awareness of the realities of the modern world. All this illustrates just how powerful and pervasive a force industrialism is and has been, as it

now affects every portion of our relationship with nature.

Frost's poetry is quite aware of this, and he accepts that industrialism is not going to relent and that he has no choice but to get over it. So his response is to hold on as much as he can to that which is slipping away in the modern period. Beston is less willing to just accept modernity for what it is. He possesses a strong and unwavering faith in our ability to break out of our present situation and reorient ourselves toward nature in an ecologically sustainable and spiritually fulfilling way. In spite of this great difference between them, Frost and Beston and the writing they produce serve as compelling evidence that industrialism and modernism are not enough to trample out the raw emotion of love of nature that in New England literature begins with Bryant and has continued unbroken and unsullied through the Transcendentalists, the modernists and up until the present day. Industrialism may distract many in society from nature, and may deteriorate our cultural connection with the environment, but it cannot kill the nature-loving spirit that dwells—and often lays dormant—within each of us. Thus, I am sure that there will always be literature that compels humanity to engage with nature on a spiritual level. As long as that holds true, there will always be hope of overcoming the challenges of the modern, industrial world and finally re-creating an Eden on earth.

## CONCLUSION

Studying and comparing different New England writers' approaches to nature across historical periods has offered insight into how industrialism affects how we view and behave towards nature. William Cullen Bryant felt no obstruction between himself and the natural world, and thus his Romantic poetry is effulgent with praise and reverence for nature in and of itself. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had to respond to the onset of industrialism, which they felt disrupts the human's connection with the natural. They reject many of the tenets of industrial capitalist life—most significantly, the notion that we should extract resources from the land just to increase personal or private profit—and offer a radical alternative way of life called Transcendentalism. Robert Frost responds with despair to the disruptions brought on by industrialism—the decline of the family farm model and thus the deterioration of nineteenth-century rural culture, the over-development of urban and suburban spaces on formerly rustic lands, the spiritual decay that attends the increased focus on materialism and consumerism. He finds that these developments remove us from our formerly strong connection with the landscape through the farming lifestyle and leave us adrift in a meaningless modern world. To combat this despair, he idealizes the old ways of life and laments our inability to go back. Henry Beston, on the other hand, responds to the disruptions by channeling a voice like Bryant's and doubling down on a romantic and intensely spiritual connection with nature as a remedy for the modernist sense of disillusionment and alienation.

This history of nature writing in New England shows, if nothing else, that

industrialism as a major disruptor to humanity's relationship with nature has scrambled the nature-lover's consciousness and forced him or her to reconcile their ideals about nature with a lived reality that is far from ideal. The trajectory of the conversation about nature in New England literature is heavily rocked by the intrusion of industrialism onto the cultural landscape in the middle of the nineteenth century. William Cullen Bryant begins the conversation by experimenting with a radical spirituality and theology that focuses on nature as divine. Emerson and Thoreau, two deeply philosophical and spiritual minds themselves, would be inspired to dive even deeper into the ideas Bryant began to dabble with. Indeed, they develop the ideology of Transcendentalism, which defines as divine all of the natural universe; however, there is much more than just a spiritual and naturalistic dimension to Transcendentalism. The other major component to their philosophy is social criticism—to argue that nature is immanently divine was not sufficient in explaining their worldview. Industrialism was changing New England culture so rapidly and pervading nearly every aspect of social and public life. As a result, they felt compelled to articulate a comprehensive vision of society that responded to and rejected industrialism and supplanted it with some new guiding paradigm. They had to do all this just to communicate the same basic truths that Bryant was more easily able to bake into his poetry.

So when the conversation passes from Bryant to Emerson and Thoreau, the latter two dive deeper into Bryant's forays into naturalistic spirituality, but also add new topics to the conversation as industrialism forces it to shift. By the time Beston and Frost begin to write, industrialism had been solidified as a fundamental component of modern life. The conversation shifts once again, from whether we should embrace or reject

industrialism to how to cope with it and the fact that it is not going anywhere any time soon. Frost seems a little defeated—his poems are mainly about decay and the memory of things being better than the present state of things. The love of nature that initiated this conversation in Bryant is still present in Frost, but only in the sense that Frost finds it upsetting that he loves the landscape that used to be idyllic but is now diminished by industrialism and modernity. Beston wards off pessimism and is able to translate Bryant's passion about nature into modernity. He finds a way to forge a new spiritual connection with nature in a time of cynic abandoning of spirituality and of destructive domination over the environment. So while Frost responds to the disruption of industrialism by lamenting the facets of life it has destroyed or degraded, Beston focuses on how we can overcome the aimlessness and ennui of modernism and environmentally destructive forces of industrialism with a new way of life that mirrors the old.

Between the final period that this thesis focuses on and the present day, there has been another shift in the conversation about nature, such that we are now engaging in a new period of conversation. We are past the point of wondering about the significance of the shift from rural, pre-industrial lifestyles to modernized, urbanized, industrialized lifestyles and now must deal with a crisis. The crisis is not the existential crisis the modernists were experiencing, but is rather a logistical one—how are we going to remedy the environmental destruction we have already wrought on the planet and how are going to sustain a healthy ecosystem that contains an ever-developing human species? More to the issue at hand, how are we going to deal with our global climate crisis? We live in a totally and irreversibly industrialized and globalized world; the challenge of our time is to harness the enormous powers of globalism and dedicate them to reforming our habits of

resource consumption to something more sustainable and less damaging. That problem is for world leaders, wealthy individuals and corporations, community organizers, nongovernmental organizations and scientists and engineers to collaborate to solve. However that project will be inevitably doomed if we do not work simultaneously on a similar project, which is that of understanding our human species and its place in the natural world.

The latter project is for humanists, scholars, religious leaders, politicians, public figures, celebrities, artists, teachers, students, and most of all, individuals to solve. It is the continuation of the project Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, Beston, and Frost have been working on. It is the project of understanding where we come from, where we go when we die, what keeps us moving while we're alive, how we relate to the rest of society, how our culture relates to the natural world, how we conceive of the natural and constructed environments around us, what we consider divine and how we can revere it. In many ways the environmental movement is helping to work on the logistical project of solving our resource crisis as well as the humanist project of understanding our place in the cosmos. While teaching us about how to properly dispose of our waste, environmentalism reminds us that the self is extended into the material world through objects and that by being mindful of our material consumption we can reduce both waste and energy use. While fighting against using land for fracking and oil pipelines, environmentalism forces us to think about how we use the land, whose land it is to use, and which practices are best for fostering the sustained health of an ecosystem. The concrete, logistical issues highlighted by the environmental movement hint at the underlying abstract questions about humanity and its place in nature.

Ecocriticism today deals with these abstract questions and analyzes our cultural constructions in light of how they affect our behaviors toward nature. If we are to solve our ecological crisis, simply teaching people how to recycle and to burn fewer fossil fuels will not be enough. We need to understand the conceptual frameworks that have gotten us into the present crisis in the first place—how the Newtonian-Baconian view of nature as domitable has led to practices of resource extraction with wanton disregard to ecological stability; how the ever-increasing technologization of society has severed our direct connections with nature which has hampered our ability to recognize when there is a problem with the ecosystem; how the capitalist drive for profit and the rendering of environmental damage as externality have made money and prosperity seem more important than a healthy ecosystem. Only when we understand these deeply embedded reasons for why we are acting the way we are toward the environment can we be able to reorient the entire human community to a more ecocentric engagement with the natural world that is healthy and sustainable.

This is a tall order. Oftentimes it seems as though the goals of environmentalists are impractical and unreachable, especially when global leaders show very little tenacity or desire to put in the hard work to form a global coalition to concoct a global solution. We do not have much of a choice, however, and now it seems that the only thing to do is to keep pressing forward and to do the very best we can. Part of that means to be mindful of our carbon footprints; to reduce, reuse, and recycle; to vote for politicians that will address environmental issues; to be active in community organization and demonstration to protect the land and to rehabilitate degraded spaces. But equally as important, we must continue to ask questions about where we have come from, how we have gotten to where



we are, and why in order to figure out where we want to or must go in the future. This thesis has begun to address those questions and has explored unique and often lonely voices who rejected the prevailing attitudes of their time for being disagreeable to a lover of nature and who instead adopted ecologically friendly worldviews. Their writings have served as fodder for environmental activists and thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Their lives continue to serve as models for how we can slough off cultural baggage that informs us to disregard the environment and replace it with a comprehensive worldview that emphasizes the health of all life on earth.

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