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“The Edge Effect: Emersonian Transcendence and the Evolving Genre of Nature Writing”

To transcend is to overcome the barriers and impediments of one state in order to successfully achieve another. If this transcendence is spiritual the goal is, perhaps, to relinquish the dogmatic bindings of faith that are deeply rooted to the self in order to transcend the ego and heighten awareness. What constitutes a heightened awareness is not easily determined because the same language that normally precipitates clarity in our everyday lives will, with the transcendent experience, create confusion and bewilderment. Nevertheless, four American environmental writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Edward Abbey, and Peter Matthiessen, pursue and attempt to write about their experiences with spiritual transcendence. Emerson’s philosophy is foundational, and delineates the boundaries of a metaphysical landscape within which the three writers who follow him inscribe their own experiences. Emerson’s philosophy of transcendence, in which he strives for epiphany by surrendering the self-conscious ego and simultaneously maintaining his individuality, pervades the most powerful and life-changing transcendent moments for Muir, Abbey, and Matthiessen. If, however, Emersonian theory drives their experiences, the practical application of his philosophy presents unique challenges for all three writers that redefine not only the nature of the transcendent moment, but also Emersonian philosophy itself.

The individual, Emerson writes in “Nature”, is plagued by disunity: “The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit” (64). Those “demands of the spirit” arise, for Emerson, from within the core Universal energy, or Universal Being responsible for the creative energies of existence. To be “disunited with himself” is spiritual disharmony that translates to a physical separation from the natural landscape. This separation does not simply weaken visceral connections to the life sustaining powers of the land, nor is its impact circumscribed by the psychological trauma of bonds long broken between the healing and meditative powers of the organic landscape. For Emerson, all matter is contained by spirit, and therefore the natural world acts as a bridge to the spiritual reality of the Universal Being. If humans are to regain unity, their efforts must forge new relationships to the natural world that ultimately respect nature as a reflection of God.

Consequently, whether experiences exist in the material realm outside the human body, or whether they are strictly interior spiritual acts is irrelevant. For Emerson, to argue between solipsism and relativism is to miss the point because humans will have experiences despite how they are defined or understood. Every appearance in nature, therefore, corresponds to a state of the human mind: “nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (20). To achieve spiritual unification is to access a dynamic monolith of power. It is to become a functional part of all that is, was, and ever will be within an indefinable, inexhaustible fountainhead from which surges the creative energies of infinite variability. This is very important for Emerson’s philosophic world-view because unification is a choice, a possibility extended to each individual uniquely, that connects the two poles—unity and disunity—of human consciousness.

Just as every natural state corresponds to a state of the mind, “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact,” an arrangement that creates a trinity between humans, the natural

world, and the universal spirit—a trinity made necessary by disunity (23). Nature has no conscious awareness of itself. Whether life is animate and wanders on four legs across the verdant landscapes of the earth, or whether it is inanimate and thrusts itself skyward as mountains into an ether of light and air, or whether it is the very energy of the cosmos itself, everything spins about and within a single locus of power. All sentient beings, all mountains, every cubic yard of air, every wave in the ocean, all of the earth and surrounding space is unified by the singular spirit that constitutes all things. To be natural, then, is to be unified. Emerson writes, “Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. A rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature” (38). To be aware of the energy that unifies all—to be aware of unity—is to profess disunity. But this for Emerson is the gift of human existence, for to pursue unification is the ultimate act of reverence.

In a conscious effort to stray from the spiritual determinism of his predecessors, Emerson recognizes that humans are able to access and command free will as a tool of existence. If humans are not unified within themselves, they have the choice, Emerson believes, to end their suffering. As Matthew DeVoll observes in an essay examining the evolution of the intellect, Emerson believes in a “primitive, unconscious force of the mind—a force that humans inherit from animals through the medium of transcendental evolution and must learn to overmaster and use in the cultivation of moral character” (71). Consequently, if the natural world and the experiences of life leave their most indelible marks upon the mind, then a locus of power is created within the mind, as it is equally created within all things. Recognizing, consciously and actively, that this power exists within enables the human to transcend disunity within the surrounding natural world. “We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it,” (17) Emerson writes, and since “all natural objects make a kindred impression” upon the universe, Emerson is able to achieve the model of transcendent unification known famously as his transparent eyeball:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.
(8)

The essential movement in this passage is from an acute awareness of the self as grounded in the material reality of society—and the disgrace and calamity that accompanies it—to expansive awareness of all existence beyond the self. It is transcendence in which, surrounded by infinite space, the ego is annihilated and Nirvana achieved. There is no Emerson; there is only what is.

Significantly, Emerson’s transcendent moment bears no internal struggle. He experiences no fear. Confronted by the complete annihilation of his own singular identity—confronted, that is, by a metaphysical death—Emerson exults in new freedoms that emancipate him from his suffering. His transcendent experience contains no threshold, no edge to which he cautiously and fearfully approaches and on which he pauses for contemplation. Transcendence comes to him with the ease of a stroll through a quiet forest on a peaceful afternoon.

If there is any struggle for Emerson, it is minimized because Emerson’s language is an effort to convert; the absence of effort increases the appearance of the efficacy of his philosophy.

As such, there is no real record of the visceral experience Emerson endures to arrive at his spiritual epiphany. However, these are struggles that John Muir is enormously interested in recording and revealing in his book My First Summer in the Sierra. Muir pursues Emerson's philosophy tangentially, as a student of Thoreau, and attempts to apply the philosophy pragmatically while tending sheep in the Sierras. Unlike Emerson's quiet walk through the woods, Muir's moment of transcendence occurs where the rush of Yosemite Creek plunges over a threshold in the canyon wall and drops half a mile to the valley below. Also unlike Emerson, Muir's ability to navigate this physical and metaphysical threshold between worlds—between human disunity and the Universal Being—is marred by profound fears he must confront. But by overcoming these fears, Muir forges bonds to the natural world that surrounds him, for the natural world in which he pursues this experience is one infused by energy that is simultaneously singular and infinitely diverse. Muir writes, “[these are] noble walls—sculptured into endless variety of domes and gables, spires and battlements and plain mural precipices—all a tremble with the thunder tones of the falling water” (116). The river in Muir's writing is a symbolic conduit that carries the energy of the universe, and it demarcates a symbolic portal between the world of human consciousness and the world of unification where the water approaches and plunges over the cliff's edge.

Muir's language is infused with the rhetoric of liberation: “it descends another glossy slope with rapidly accelerated speed to the brink of the tremendous cliff, and with sublime, fateful confidence springs out free in the air” (118). As he approaches the edge of the waterfall, where the river perpetually rushes from one world to the next, he removes his “shoes and stockings” as if peeling away the insulating layers that separate him from the purity of nature (118). The closer Muir walks to the edge and the closer he comes to his own threshold of awareness, the more precarious is his path and the greater the fear he must confront. The “rough edge” that offers only “slight finger-holds” is the only way for him to approach the “brink” (119). To calm his nerves he fills his mouth with the leaves of the Artemisia plant, a symbolic communion in which he takes the body of the Earth into his mouth, provoking a symbolic unification between him and the material world that surrounds him. He shuffles to the very edge of the threshold and then moves beyond where he “obtained a perfectly free view down into the heart of the snowy, chanting throng of comet-like streamers, . . .” (120). Passing through the portal into this new realm, his fear is annihilated, he loses all sense of time, and he is unable to remember how he returns, as if by pure instinct alone—devoid of descriptive, analytical thought—he moves in oneness.

Muir recognizes the absolute power of the natural forces that surround and encapsulate him. His physical approach to the edge of the waterfall becomes a metaphorical approach to the edge of his identity, to the edge of his self-consciousness, to the edge of unification and the accompanying freedom he so desperately seeks. His language is infused with the rhetoric of liberation because he wants to separate himself from the burdens imposed by the austerity of his father's Christian orthodoxy. As John Gatta notes in an essay exploring the religious context of Muir's experiences, the wandering Muir walks “away from the God of his cultural inheritance. . . . to shed the burdensome piety of bourgeois Christianity” (11). Muir was disillusioned “with the presumption that a ‘civilized, law-abiding gentleman’ could be worshipped as Creator of the vast cosmos” (11). For this reason, Muir is hesitant to debase his experiences by describing the natural landscape in any terms that fail to exult the same wilderness that shields him from the traumas of his past. To an extent this is an unwarranted burden because the real power of his text derives from its purpose, which is to describe the exhilarating, restorative highs of the reality that

defines Muir's natural world. Nevertheless, echoes of a personally debilitating past resound throughout the book. When observing pines bent by a powerful storm, Muir remarks: "It is as if a man, whose back was broken or nearly so and who was compelled to go bent, should find a branch backbone sprouting straight up from below the break and should gradually develop new arms and shoulders and head, while the old damaged portion of his body died" (144). The rebirth Muir seeks occurs through death, or near-death, in which the husk of his former self is replaced with a realization that the wilderness that surrounds him doesn't point to God, but is God.

What dies within Muir during his transcendent experience is his narcissism. Yosemite Creek is a "death song," Muir writes (120). The experience provides him "enjoyment enough to kill" (120). And as the experience haunts him in his dreams he feels himself rushing over the edge of the waterfall proclaiming to the universe: "This time it is real—all must die, and where could mountaineer find a more glorious death!" (121). Significantly, Muir does not claim that *he* must die, but that *all* must die, as if all must pass through this transcendent death of the self in order to exist in a realm of purity, of spirit, and of oneness.

Though Muir writes about this experience from a Romantic perspective, metaphysical death as a metaphor for rebirth is one that recurs in the nature writing of authors who follow him. Like Muir, Edward Abbey also confronts death during the experiences he records in his book Desert Solitaire, and similarly, his willingness to sacrifice his life is the engine that empowers transcendence. Even though Abbey searches for the bedrock of his existence, many of his experiences in the Southwest are profoundly sensuous. His solo hike up Escalante Canyon is a sublime, almost meditative and baptismal experience into a "rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence . . ." (221). Echoes of Emerson abound. He emerges having attained an awareness of the universal power that suffuses the landscape. Yet Abbey is continually torn between universal insight and earth-bound reality, an observation Russell Burrows explores in an article that highlights the tension between Abbey's ontology and his epistemology. As Burrows notes, Abbey is fully aware of "the possibility of the mind or of the heart actually taking some active part in creating our realities," which is the belief, he writes, in the transcendence of the Romantics (285). Simultaneously, however, Abbey's purpose is to reduce that Romanticism to an earth-bound reality that existed long before humans arrived and will continue long after they have departed.

Despite the descriptive clarity with which Abbey conveys the power of his Escalante experience, it comes to him without cost, except perhaps in slight hunger, thirst, and fatigue. On the contrary, his descent—both real and metaphoric—into Havasu Canyon very nearly costs him his life, and the risk empowers his transformation. That Abbey's hunger and thirst drive him into this experience is significant; his thirst is as much spiritual as it is somatic, and it leads him to the shortcut through Havasu. Like Muir, Abbey too approaches the edge of a deep canyon carved by water flowing across an unfathomable expanse of time. Whereas Muir approaches the edge with caution, Abbey is intrepid, perhaps foolishly so, but both are aware that by physically engaging the edge of earth and space, they transcend ordinary reality. In their experiences, the purity of water, or lack thereof, divides the two authors psychologically. Muir's Yosemite Creek is a rapidly flowing river of clear water that symbolizes a conduit of energy connecting the physical and metaphysical worlds. Abbey's Havasu canyon is filled with fetid pools of stagnant water into which he is baptized each time he lowers himself further, as if the impurities of the muck are tantamount to the impurities he confronts within. As such, the fetid pools signify Abbey's own inability to find purity of meaning or universal insight within the bedrock of his existence.

Deliverance lies in the unknown before him, and by placing his trust within it, power is bestowed in kind. He hesitates at the edge where beyond “there could hardly be any returning,” and then drops—a literal leap of faith—into a canyon from which he cannot escape (252). This is an important point, not simply because his leap leaves him trapped between an impossible ascent above and an eighty-foot fall into certain death below, but because like Muir, the power of the experience is directly proportional to his willingness to sacrifice his life. Again the death metaphor arises; by leaping, Abbey declares his acceptance of death and therefore empowers the re-birth experienced through transcendence.

Abbey’s experience, however, is far removed from the Romantic idealism of Muir’s Sierra, and is symbolic of the psychological crises—fueled by the ever-widening chasm between nature and culture—that humans confront in the postmodern era. Upon easing himself into the final chute, Abbey “let go of everything” (253). Again he is baptized in a “stinking pond,” and as he pushes the heavy scum away from his face, clearing away the miasmatic confusion of his dualistic existence, death confronts him on the other side (253). Abbey’s “first wave of panic” is followed by an almost comic image he conjures of his own “sun-bleached bones, dramatically sprawled at the bottom of the chasm,” an image that itself recalls the unification of flesh and Earth in the Buddhist sky burial. Abbey’s futile screams for help are quickly absorbed by the canyon walls and sound “inhuman” and “detached” as if this were not the same Abbey who first approached the canyon’s edge. His voice terrifies him, his efforts to climb out initially fail, and he is left to die in tears (254).

His resignation yields clarity: “I swam back to solid ground and lay down to rest and die in comfort. . . . a small white cloud was passing, so lovely and precious and delicate and forever inaccessible that it broke my heart and made me weep like a woman, like a child. In all my life I had never seen anything so beautiful” (256). This complex passage lends itself to multiple interpretations, for Abbey loses his identity by fully confronting it, then becomes the ego-less transparent eyeball so valued by Emerson, and sees in the simplest and most ephemeral natural feature the ultimate beauty of the universe. And yet, the cloud is so beautiful precisely because it is so inaccessible to him, much in the same way that a bedrock of pure experience devoid of human culture and language is unattainable. However, the relevance of Abbey’s transcendent moment is not in his ability to transcend language and culture, but ultimately to accept it as a fundamental aspect of his existence. This is Abbey’s release: he accepts his humanity, and in accepting it physical and spiritual salvation follow (257).

Peter Matthiessen’s transcendent experience in The Snow Leopard differs from the immediacy of that which characterizes Muir’s and Abbey’s. For both Muir and Abbey the transcendent moment is a relatively quick rush of energy and adrenaline in a dynamic and powerful interaction with the surrounding natural world. Matthiessen’s is no less dynamic and powerful, but The Snow Leopard is written to reflect the process of Buddhist meditation or Zazen. Thus, Matthiessen’s personal narrative begins in chaos and moves steadily, interminably toward an inner and outer calm, a plateau reached after days of journeying at the Crystal Monastery. Matthiessen’s transcendent experience occupies not only a spatial expanse, but an expansive temporal one as well, which enables him to reflect upon the changes that occur within him. What binds Matthiessen’s experiences to Muir’s and Abbey’s is the precipitous edge marking the physical barrier between life and death, and the metaphysical barrier between language, culture, and Emerson’s ego-less unification. This for Matthiessen is the edge of the mountain path, and beyond it, like Muir and Abbey, is the certain death of an unimpeded fall. Matthiessen approaches the edge repeatedly as he ascends toward Crystal Monastery. He

understands the value of “centering” himself—of establishing a unified relationship between himself and the surrounding world as he approaches and walks the edge of the path. The exigency of achieving this balance is apparent, but it is not easily realized: “sometimes . . . I lose this feel of things, my breath is high up in my chest, and then I cling to the cliff edge as to life itself” (129). He perceives the ease with which the porters approach and move along the edge even at the most precarious segments of the path. They move with an “ethereal lightness, as if some sort of inner connection was lifting them off the surface of the ground” (149). Like Abbey, the connection that Matthiessen seeks is to the Universal energy in which he may annihilate any awareness of the self as a separate entity.

It is no coincidence that, as the revelation of this mystery registers with Matthiessen, he discovers prints of the snow leopard for the first time. George Schaller, Matthiessen’s companion on his quest, mutters: “It might be close by, watching us and we’d never see it” (150). This foreshadows events yet to occur in the narrative, but it also crafts the snow leopard as a metaphorical agent of transcendence. The snow leopard is an avatar for Matthiessen that symbolizes the unified energy of the universe, which can never be seen but can be felt, incorporated even, in the very quest for the oneness from which humans are so deeply divided. The absence of any material object with which he may connect his experiences becomes his transcendence. It is the silence before and after the flash of lightening that emphasizes the thunder that follows; it is the emptiness that contains the whorl of the galaxy that gives it substance; it is not seeing the snow leopard that connects Matthiessen to the Universal. He writes, “That the snow leopard *is*, that it is here, that its frosty eyes watch us from the mountain—that is enough” (242). To be seen by the snow leopard is to exist in its presence. It is to be. Hence, he declares: “Have you seen the Snow Leopard? No! Isn’t that wonderful?” (246).

Matthiessen does not achieve Zen enlightenment, for he feels that ‘now’ is not his ‘time’, but he is powerfully transformed by the experience. Descending the mountain after his sojourn at Crystal Monastery, he slips on a narrow ledge, and “in that split second, as needles of fear pierce heart and temples, eternity intersects with present time. Thought and action are not different, and stone, air, ice, sun, fear, and self are one” (249). In the moment-by-moment experience of a life deeply connected to the surrounding environment all things find themselves at the center and “have no need for any secret of true being” (249). And so, Matthiessen comes closest among the four authors to transcribing into words the wordless loss of self demanded by Emerson’s philosophy.

If Abbey, Matthiessen, and Muir do indeed inscribe their experiences within the metaphysical Emersonian landscape, their actions not only reify that landscape, they reverberate through it, recasting his ideals upon the pragmatism of their experiences. What unifies the three authors in their pursuit of the transparent Eye-ball is the extreme power of a transcendent experience that forces each to confront the self in the presence of death. Whether it occurs where a waterfall drops precipitously into a steep-sided valley, or within a slick rock canyon in the desert Southwest, or on an impossibly narrow path in the Himalayas, the Edge, both physical and metaphoric, is the nexus of this confrontation. It is the place where earth and sky, individual and spirit, disunity and oneness all converge in an ineffable confluence of energy Emerson would call Universal. Perhaps these experiences incorporate and rely upon risks Emerson would regard as superfluous and venturesome, but transcendence effects a crystallization within each author that approaches the universal changes Emerson desires for all. These are changes not likely to occur on a quiet walk through Emerson’s woods, but this isn’t to argue that quiet reflection does not lead to Emersonian transcendence; the Zen practice of Zazen meditation substantiates the

power of Emerson's ideas, and vice-versa. The experiences of Abbey, Muir, and Matthiessen extend the boundaries of that transcendence to include the intensity of the spirit as much as its quietude.

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