Nature and Spirit: From Idyllic to Demonic

Richard A. Kellaway

Prelude

"Nature imitates art!" proclaimed the aesthetic genius of the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde. If Wilde had been born a half century earlier, he might have exclaimed with equal wit, "Nature imitates religion!" We experience nature through filters of cultural consciousness. Most Americans, and certainly most Unitarian Universalists, are ardently in favor of nature as part of Good Old God's Grand Design! Or Evolutions! Nature is nice! We ought to do our best for Good Old Nature! In our Unitarian Universalist consciousness, nature tends to begin somewhere in the vicinity of Concord (need I say Massachusetts) and travels all along the Concord and Merrimack rivers to the gentle glorious sea, next to Newburyport. Nature is our mother. Nature is our friend. Perhaps! What I want to share with you is an expanded awareness about the meaning of nature as expressed in American literature through the centuries.

Existence is a hologram: we can begin anywhere and experience it all. The truth is that the dimensions of what we humans (excluding our own species) label nature are infinite. If I were a Canadian, I might begin in Labrador, or New-found-land or up the St. Lawrence at Mont Real, or flow across the tundra toward the Arctic Ocean.

If I were a Native American, I might begin at the Medicine Wheel above Greybull, Wyoming, looking out across the Big Horn Basin at the Rockies across the desert.

If I were a Hispanic American, I might follow the trail of the Conquistadors and choose some missionary place in Santa Fe, Taos, or beyond.

If I were an African American, I might have found myself thrust ashore in Charleston in South Carolina waiting for the auction block, to be sold off to slave and sweat in the tidal swamps that begin at the sea and push toward the Piedmont beyond.

If I were not who I am, I might move the narrative from West to East, or South to North, or from the center outward in every direction.

Because I am who I am, my individual experiences of nature are peculiar, but they are hardly unique. I live in a particular place, in Fairhaven, in the neighborhood of New Bedford in Massachusetts. It happens to be a place with a rich artistic and literary tradition. Some of what I will share with you will flow out of that place. It is not unique, but it pleases me and I am proud of it. We can begin anywhere and experience it all.

I am part of a particular religious tradition: Universalist and Unitarian. Some of what I share with you will be the expression of Universalist and Unitarian artists and authors. Some signed membership books; others were only associated by family or friendship. Up until the twentieth century the leaders of American culture were very closely connected. Most were related by values, if not by denomination. And our foremothers and fathers were at the center. We can begin anywhere and experience it all. What I share will be a tapestry. Sometimes moving from time to time, or place to place; often an attempt to jiggle us into an awareness of our enormous diversity. Because Universalism and Unitarianism, our American consciousness of being unique, all blossomed in the nineteenth century, much of the tapestry will center there.

. . .

John Winthrop, among others, saw the Puritan's vocation as an errand into the wilderness. To tame the so-called savages? To tame all of nature? I grew up where Squanto and Samoset were household names. Friendly Indians who showed the strangers how to farm this remote and unfamiliar topography. Yes, they were savages. Yes, they were generous. Yes, they might be saved. Surely they would welcome the good news of the gospel. What was our ancestor's goal with the savages—to convert, or simply to control?

The first significant American poet was Anne Dudley Bradstreet. I am eager to share with you an aspect of her awareness of nature. And later to add three more generations of her family—John Weiss, Anne Bradstreet Stedman, and Thomas Hale. Bradstreet was confident of the superiority of our species: (This and subsequent quotations have been degenderized.)

> Shall I then praise the heavens, the trees, the earth
> Because their beauty and their strength last longer
> Shall I wish there, or never to had birth,
> Because they're bigger, and their bodyes stronger?
> Nay, they shall darken, perish, fade and dye,
> And when unmade, so ever shall they lye,
> But we were made for endless immortality.

What I hope to engage you in now is an imaginative conversation about nature. About our images, experiences, and understandings. It is no accident that I choose us. Universalists and Unitarians, unlike many other religious traditions, have long been in favor of nature. The message beginning with nineteenth-century transcendentalism has been simple and clear: what is natural is good; what denies or destroys nature is bad.

Much of this attitude we owe to the great prophet of transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Certainly if any Unitarian or Universalist in our history was in favor of nature, it was Waldo Emerson who led us on in:

> …The day, immeasurably long, sleeps over the broad hills and warm wide fields. To have lived through all its sunny hours, seems longevity enough. The solitary places do not seem quite lonely. At the gates of the forest, the surprised person of the world is forced to leave city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off the back with the first step taken into these precincts. Here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find Nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all persons that come to her. We have crept out of our close and crowded houses into the night and morning, and we see what majestic beauties daily wrap us in their bosom....

> ...We nestle in Nature, and draw our living as parasites from her roots and grains, and we receive glances from the heavenly bodies, which call us to solitude and foretell the remotest future....

Consider Concord. What an idyllic place—meadows, marshes, gentle streams. An alternation of the seasons, of course. From brisk, beautiful, sunlit winters to warm, burgeoning, generous summers! In Concord as in Cambridge, ordinarily nature was refulgent. Emerson's Nature was our friend—a bountiful bosom eager to provide for our human well-being. A generous mother eager for our contemplation and admiration when we were not otherwise engrossed in the rhythm of securing her beneficent succor.

Emerson was among the multitudes who experienced the urgency to experience the artistic, cultural, and natural grandeur of Mother Europe. But also they had the wit and the courage to rebel. To question why European was always assumed to be superior. To search for and assert what might be uniquely American. In "The American Scholar," Emerson in 1837 concluded:

> ...We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of humanity and the love of humanity shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of humans will for the first time exist, because each believes himself/herself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires us all.

If Emerson's attention was focused on literature, Thomas Cole's was not. Cole was a painter, but equally eager to celebrate the American scene. Two years earlier in his "Essay on American Scenery," he had proclaimed:

> There are those, who through ignorance or prejudice strive to maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful—that it is rude without picturesqueness, and monotonous without sublimity—that being destitute of those vestiges of antiquity...it may not be compared with European scenery....American scenery...has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe....the most distinctive, and perhaps most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness....there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent....

Easily said! Not so easily understood or expressed! The basic questions are simple: What is nature? How shall we relate to it? Unitarian Washington Allston was the brother-in-law of William Ellery Channing. His European sojourns suggest that he understood nature as the setting of a cosmic drama engaging a present and powerful deity with frail humanity.

Samuel Osgood, a Unitarian minister and younger contemporary of Emerson, was persuaded of the centrality of nature for human understanding. He outlined a variety of ways of relating:

It would be interesting to study the Poetry, Philosophy and Religion of Mankind, in the different stages of its progress, in order to learn the various views and sentiments with which Nature has been regarded. Such a study would lead us to consider all periods of our race:—the infant period when the human heart had the freshness of childhood, and in childish wonder, we saw Nature clad with the freshness of its new born beauty; the savage period, when we looked upon Nature, only as a means of supplying our physical wants, or drew from it a language for our passions; it would lead us to consider the mystic period in human progress, when as in the central oriental world, Nature was regarded as a dreamy shadow...then would come before our view, the period in which the material universe engrossed the mind, and the soul was too intent on the finite to rise to the infinite...then comes the period in which Nature is prized, mainly for her physical uses—the age of natural science and material utility. In this latter period we find our own lot to be cast....We should rejoice at those signs, that are appearing, which promise that Nature shall ere long have her due, and be looked on with the right spirit—that a day is coming, when the world around us shall be regarded, not only for its material uses, but shall be loved as the emblem of the Divine Beauty, and reverenced as being instinct with the Divine Spirit, and an expression of the Divine Wisdom, Love and Power....James Fenimore Cooper describes it in the opening chapter of his novel, *The Pathfinder*:

> The sublimity connected with vastness is familiar to every eye. The most abstruse, the most far-reaching, perhaps the most chastened of the poet's thoughts, crowd on the imagination as they gaze into the depths of the illimitable void.... With feelings akin to this admiration and awe—the offspring of sublimity—were the different characters with which the action of this tale must open, gazing on the scene before them....By letting in the light of heaven upon the dark and damp recesses of the wood, they form a sort of oases in the solemn obscurity of the virgin forests of America....It was the vastness of the view, the nearly unbroken surface of verdure, that contained the principle of grandeur....The solemn repose induced the feeling allied to awe.

Quaker Eliza Hicks shared a vision of a peaceable kingdom with Erastus Salisbury Field. Before the pioneers pushed toward the west, there was an experience of a pristine landscape looking like England, feeling like paradise. Unitarian Jones Very expressed the attitude in this poem, "Nature":

> The bubbling brook doth leap when I come by,
> Because my feet find measure with its call,
> The birds know when the friend they love is nigh,
> For I am known to them both great and small;

The flowers that on the lovely hill-side grow
Expect me there when Spring their bloom has given;
And many a tree and bush my wanderings know,
And e'en the clouds and silent stars of heaven;
For we who with our Maker walk aright,
Shall be their lord, as Adam was before;
Our ear shall catch each sound with new delight,
Each object wear the dress which then it wore;
And we, as when erect in soul we stood,
Hear from our Father's lips that all is good.

Onward toward the great mountains, grander than any heights that those who studied at the Hudson River School ever imagined existed in America. Amazingly, in the midst of the grandeur, Eden was discovered anew. The Valley of the Yosemite was awe-inspiring in its juxtaposition of the sheer face of El Capitan with the gentle meadows beside the rushing river. Mythical, magical, emblematic of divine reality, a prelude to immortality is always some meaning deeper or pointing to the beyond.

Then all the way west to the Golden Gate, the portal to the vast Pacific.

Others chose to explore and adventure in a different direction. They headed north toward the Arctic. Some got only as far as the Isles of Shoals and Star Island. Childe Hassam was associated with an artistic group which gathered around poetess Celia Thaxter.

Still others pushed on. Past Grand Manan. Past Newfoundland. On beyond Labrador. Some ventured to attempt to find a Northwest Passage to Asia. A few dared dream of penetrating all the way to the North Pole.

In the midst of the grandeur, it became easy to assume that part of the purpose of the divine creation of nature was to teach humankind moral lessons. Thomas Starr King, minister of the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco, in 1863 preached a sermon, "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada":

> The slopes and ridges invite us. Our feet may be supported, now and then, above natural elevation, and we may gain new views, truer relations between objects, grander lights, and a wider horizon of mysterious beauty. By that power of reading which God has endowed upon you, we are enabled to say if we will, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." And now going higher still on the grade of imagery, let us see what symbols our subject furnishes for private experience. There are such things as mountain principles and mountain thoughts in the individual life.
>
> There are many souls in which God creates mountains anew, every year.

Ain't nature grand! From sea to shining sea. And back on Buzzards Bay, between New Bedford and Cuttyhunk, John Weiss, minister of the First Congregational Society (Unitarian) in New Bedford, was discovering his own lesson in nature:

> ...We are religious when we remember what a little place we occupy in the universe. The soul makes one of its sublimest efforts when it adjusts itself with immeasurable time and space. In a night that was crowded with stars I lately sailed out with a few companions to be alone with them and the sky. A woman bared her arm and, leaning over the gunwale, ploughed the water with vigorous and beautiful motions to awake for me the sleeping animalcula and make them show their light. Their response was startling splendor; their rage blazed on the black boat, it leapt upon her arms and clung there, cressets for their fairness; it danced in frolic pools, it rippled away sternward and was loath to sink back into its dreams. And all the time, overhead, it seemed to me that a mightier arm was frothing up the sky in galaxies while we below imitated that billowy immensity....It was the contrast of the whole with a dot. His eternity with our second.
>
> Our little company felt itself adjusted to God's ways and caught in God's warm Gulf Stream; the boat's keel was sliding through the upper vastness and its undulations touched and stirred the farthest star. Let us go sailing in this wise forever.

Alas, even in the romantic mid-nineteenth-century era of John Weiss, there were other powerful images of nature. What had begun as grandeur easily became picturesque. Some believed that nature was a bountiful provider; others that nature's treasures needed to be wrested away.

For those who only wanted to observe, the prospects were abundant; the tourist productions were good for business. How easily the public became titillated by natural curiosities. Excursions were developed to exciting places, often at the edge of the wilderness; rarely into it. Perhaps the term "outing" is appropriate. People processed away from society, and what they imagined to be civilization, toward the exotic. Rarely did they go alone. Rarely did they pause long enough to deeply experience what they were observing.

A favorite outing for those in the Northeast, who imagined that indeed nature must be grand, was the Catskill House in New York State beyond the Hudson. Unitarian editor George Curtis described the production:

> It was associated with an Indian legend, was located near the famous Catskill House, and had been painted by Thomas Cole and others of the Hudson River school.
>
> The process of "doing" the sight, for those who are limited in time, is very methodical. You leave the hotel and drive in a coach to the bar-room. You refresh! You step out upon the balcony and look into the abyss. The proprietor of the Falls informs you that the lower plunge is about eighty feet high. It appears to you to be about ten. You laugh incredulously....The proprietor of the bar-room is also the genius of the Falls, and derives a trade both with his spirits and with his water. In fact, if your romantic nerves can stand the steady truth, the Catskill Falls is turned on to accommodate poets and parties of pleasure. The visitor then

> paid twenty-five cents. A boy opened a sluice and the water plunged down. The tourist was "boxed up again" and delivered to the Mountain House in time for dinner—which was always formal.

For those who couldn't get there to be exploited in person, a whole new industry developed to publish views of the picturesque. Volumes of Picturesque America graced the parlors of multitudes of culturally aspiring Americans, along with picture postcards and stereopticon slides. Americans wanted to believe they loved nature. But there were doubters. Even the Nature Prophet himself: Emerson, whose forays into nature consisted primarily of rowing a small skiff around a pond and to whom the forest had a "sanctity which shames our religions and reality which discredits our heroes," was disappointed as naturalist and tourist. It was no surprise that he found that nature "converts itself into a vast promise....There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape."

Enter science. Nature was not simply to be appreciated; it is even more to understand. To understand requires us to observe, record, categorize, get everything in order. A—agronomy, A—astronomy, from Earth to stars. B—biology. B—again, botany. G—geology. N—naturalists. We must study nature in order to appreciate it.

Audubon out at the edges with all those birds. Others climbing mountains or descending into caves and valleys. Always the urgency to know, to understand. An 1828 letter to Silliman's *American Journal* remarked:

> The piles [of rocks] we trod on were the ruins of the stupendous granite mountains, elevated in ancient time, lashed by the storms, cracked by the frost, and mutilated for untold ages by the sure, although slow, agencies of Nature....The ruins are only evidence of the mighty work of demolition, which is always going on with a real although imperceptible progress.

Demolition! Progress! Perhaps! Back in New Bedford the plain Quaker and slightly fancier Unitarian merchants and entrepreneurs were far more hardheaded. On the walls of New Bedford's Free Public Library hangs a painting by Weiss's parishioner William Allen Wall. It shows a ship under construction on the ways. Beautiful! Typical of many pictures of its era. More striking than the image is the title: *The Birth of the Whaling Industry*. Industry! How unromantic. We fantasize the romance of down to the sea in ships and two years before the mast and Moby Dick.

What was whaling in reality? A business. A dangerous and dirty business, to be sure. But when a whale ship had been away for three or four years and perhaps circumnavigated the globe, the only serious question was: "How many barrels do ye have?" In its search for leviathan, a ship for months may have followed the line of the Equator all the way across the Pacific, but the only important line was the bottom line. Profits.

Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* describes one of the owners of the whaling ship *Pequod*: Captain Bildad had:

> ...been originally educated according to the strictest sect of Nantucket Quakerism....Though refusing, from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight-bodied coat, spilled tuns upon tuns of leviathan gore. How now in the contemplative evening of his days, the pious Bildad reconciled these things in the reminiscence, I do not know; but it did not seem to concern him much, and very probably he had long since come to the sage and sensible conclusion that a person's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another. This world pays dividends.

For those who headed West rather than out to sea, rivers became a basic highway for commerce: But, beyond the Mississippi and Missouri, the settlers trekked across the prairie.

Unitarian Henry Howland Crapo left New Bedford just before the Civil War to go all the way to Michigan to cut the forests and become a lumber baron. Progress.

Unitarian Agassiz went to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, found copper, created mines, and became a mineral baron. Unitarian Henry Huttleston Rogers left Fairhaven to head out to Pennsylvania, found both petroleum and John D. Rockefeller, and became a Standard Oil baron. Progress. The Universalists had their own barons. They all knew about nature and how to exploit it. Some of the barons were happy to extract and move on; others chose to settle and build.

The barons were generous enough to pay many of our denominational bills, but we had adequate defenses to prevent them from penetrating our consciousness. For many Universalists and Unitarians, now as then, nature begins and perhaps ends along the edges of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Good old Henry David! If any of us have been in favor of nature, certainly it must be him:

> To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself! How many mornings, summer and winter, before yet any neighbor was stirring about daily business, have I been about mine! No doubt, many of my townsmen have met me returning from this enterprise, farmers starting for Boston in the twilight, or wood choppers going to their work. It is true, I never assisted the sun materially in his rising, but, doubt not, it was of the last importance only to be present at it.

How common it has been to assume that nature will provide. With enthusiasm we sing about "amber waves of grain." The imagery about the bounty moved ever westward. As farmers abandoned the barren lands of the hilly, rocky Northeast, they pushed to the Western Reserve and beyond to the prairies. The planting, cultivating, and then the harvest.

Unitarian Universalist Carl Sandberg expresses his imagery of the "Prairie" in *Cornhuskers*:

> I was born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover, the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a slogan

...
Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians,
here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and cow
pastures, the corn belt, the cotton belt, the cattle ranches.
…
The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy
in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.
After the sunburn of the day
handling a pitchfork at a hayrack,
after the eggs and biscuit and coffee,
the pearl-gray haystacks
in the gloaming
are cool prayers
to the harvest hands.

As the breadbasket of the nation moved westward, industrialization began to develop in the East. Streams and rivers were dammed, forests were cut for fuel and lumber, nature was raped and restructured to provide for ever more insistent human desires. Rural villages became factory towns which often grew rapidly into cities.

In New Bedford some whaling money stayed ashore and began to be invested in cotton mills. Wamsutta was one of the first great producers of fine cotton goods. The name is still renowned today long after the local mill closed and moved its production to the enormous mills of the South. Before the Civil War, William Wall painted a picture of the stately mill. Note the new railroad passing through the idyllic rural landscape. As with the other relics in much of industrial America, the Wamsutta mill complex still stands. The surrounding landscape disappeared more than a century ago. Progress!

Universalist Edwin Markham of the Church of the Divine Paternity in New York wondered about the condition of ordinary people, progress or not. He composed "The Man with the Hoe," written after seeing the painting by Millet:

"God made man in His own image, in the image of God made He him."
—Genesis

Bowed by the weight of centuries they lean
Upon their hoes and gaze on the ground.
The emptiness of ages in the face,
And on their back the burden of the world.
Who made them dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes...

...Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And pillared the blue firmament with light?
Down all the stretch of hell to its last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this—
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—
More filled with signs and portents for the soul—

More fraught with menace to the universe.

Many enlightened people believed nature to have great virtues for everyone—mill workers as well as managers—as a source of refreshment, renewal, and inspiration. But with the growth of cities, the building of factories, and the rise of immigration, many people had no easy access to nature. So progressive leaders began to advocate bringing nature into the cities. At the forefront were Unitarians and Universalists. Albert Fein writes: “A social and institutional ideal—the development of a superior public environment including parks, parkways, and institutions devoted to the study of history, science ,and art—remains America’s most significant contribution to nineteenth century urban design.”

It was a highly self-conscious effort on the part of America’s liberal Protestant leadership to discover a secular expression for its religious values of public harmony, health, happiness, and morality. They believed that, once realized, such an environment would dramatically alter the social values—and lifestyle—of the changing city. Liberal Protestant leaders, such as William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Bushnell, and Henry Whitney Bellows, were determined to channel the religious energy of the New England church into this new urban form.

In Frederick Law Olmsted, the urban reformers found a remarkable designer to translate their complex social goals into a clear and humane physical plan. Channing successfully prepared his religious followers to accept the concept of a natural city as being both Godly and consistent with an American democratic tradition. Nature, and not the church, was to be the foundation of this new society. Organized religion, which tended to emphasize differences between people, could only forestall the development of a truly national—moral and democratic—society. Nature, expressed through socially democratic institutions, had become for these leaders and their many devoted followers a substitute for the mysteries and revelations of formal religion. Symbolically, the public park was to replace the village common and its white steepled church.

The first great park project in America was Central Park. As New York became more and more crowded, visionaries such as William Cullen Bryant and his minister, Henry Whitney Billows, began to urge setting aside blocks of land where all classes and conditions of people could escape the congestion of the surrounding city and re-create themselves. Unitarian Frederick Law Olmsted was the great pioneer in designing the public park. Growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, in his youth his family took annual tours “in search of the picturesque.” To Olmsted creating a “natural” setting in the city did not imply simply leaving a piece of landscape alone. He had a very strong vision of what aspects of nature were most beneficial to the human spirit. In his report for the design of the second great public park, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, he preaches:

> We find in nature that class of scenery...which is termed pastoral. It consists of combinations of trees, standing singly or in groups, and casting their shadows over broad stretches of turf, or repeating their beauty by reflection upon the calm surface of pools, and the predominant associations are in the highest degree tranquilizing and grateful, as expressed by the Hebrew poet: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.”

In Central Park and his subsequent designs for cities across the nation, Olmsted engineered the reorganization of nature as he found it to conform to his ideal of what it ought to be. Nature is not simply what is; it should be re-created to become a religious metaphor for the ideal. To contradict Oscar Wilde: “Nature imitates nature.”

The vision spread even to Providence, Rhode Island. In 1869 Dr. William Francis Channing, nephew of the great divine, made a statement to the city council supporting the idea of a public park:

> The park will endow the people of Providence with sea shore, breezy hills, commanding the bay, ponds, groves, lawns, lakes. Art will add to these, in the lifetime of the present generation, drives, bridges, malls, bridle paths, shrubbery, fountains, gardens, architectural adornments. This great public benefaction, this chief means of health, pleasure and refinement to the future teeming population of this manufacturing centre, will be obtained without adding to the general taxation.

“Nature is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Indeed, when people experienced the progressive re-formation of nature, they were expected to be improved into more spiritual and virtuous citizens.

In Boston, swan boats were designed to float people toward enlightenment. Less aspiring people began to discover that being within nature, not merely observing it, could simply be a source of great pleasure. Those who had the means and time for leisure began to play within nature. After the Civil War, summer colonies began to develop where families could go to experience the delights of the out-of-doors. Fishing, hunting, sailing, even rowing for the sport of it.

Temperate climate in America; temperate experiences of nature. Grandeur, goodness, and generosity. Those who dared venture toward harsher climes quickly learned that nature could be fearfully indifferent to human hopes and needs. To more imaginative minds it could even be experienced as an intentional adversary.

Mad Ahab in *Moby Dick* imagined that the great white whale was determined to destroy him. Never mind that Ahab in his megalomania put aside his responsibility to do the business of whaling. Never mind that Ahab seduced the crew of the *Pequod* into a global search to find this singular leviathan. Never mind that Ahab’s driving passion was revenge for the lost leg snapped away in a previous encounter with Moby Dick. The whale was not seeking out Ahab. It was the human who defined nature’s creation as the enemy.

The reality is that we used up more and more of the easily available natural resources.

The Native Americans had hunted the buffalo for centuries. Because their killing powers were limited, their needs simple, and their use of the carcass almost total, the buffalo continued to thrive while providing sufficiency for their Native hunters. European Americans saw buffalo hunting as a source of sport more than sustenance. They were even shot from moving trains. Those who chose to actually deal with the carcass often

saved only the tongue as an epicurean delicacy. Within a few decades we had made the buffalo nearly extinct. We despoiled the West.

The same prodigal avarice and persistent indifference to nature's need for renewal, led the sea hunters farther and farther from the shore. South or North, the farther from the temperate, the greater the danger. But it wasn't only the individual sea hunter who was at risk. Driven by the desire for profits, highly motivated and well-equipped ships of crews ventured farther and farther north. In the polar regions a sudden shift of wind could doom even the stoutest of these ships. Barry Holstun Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams*:

> Sea harvesters wrote in earnest humble prose that they were overwhelmed by the "loveliness and grandeur." What they saw made the killing seem inappropriate; but it was work, too, security for their families, and they could quickly put compassion and regret aside. "The object of the adventure," wrote one captain, "the value of the prize, the joy of the capture, cannot be sacrificed to feelings of compassion."

A basic difference between the arctic entrepreneurs and the Eskimos whom they occasionally encountered was that the Eskimos had the experience to be profoundly and perpetually afraid. Those who live closest to nature often are those least romantic about it.

The problem was not simply one of a single captain's greed or foolishness. Shortly after the Civil War a whole New Bedford whaling fleet in search of the bowhead whale was caught north of Point Barrow in Alaska and crushed by the ice. What was especially valuable about the bowhead was not the oil, but the baleen in the mouth. These teeth-like splinters used by the creature to filter out food were also called whalebone. How many whales were slaughtered, how many seamen died, in order that fashionable women could be laced tight to conform to masculine images of beauty. Nature in the service of human needs. Isn't that the promise of the creator to our mythic ancestors, Adam and Eve. Poet Thomas Stearns Eliot, grandson of minister William Greenleaf Eliot, reacted:

> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
> Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust...
> …
> O weariness of men who turn from GOD
> To the grandeur of your mind and the glory of your action,
> To arts and inventions and daring enterprises,
> To schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited,
> Binding the earth and the water to your service,
> Exploiting the seas and developing the mountain,
> Dividing the stars into common and preferred...
> Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.

You shall not deny the Stranger.

Perhaps there is a more profound paradigm of our species's connection to the totality of nature. Perhaps nature is neither friend nor foe. Perhaps we all too quickly project human fantasies and desires on the rest of the natural order. Perhaps the disasters which the insurance companies amazingly title "acts of God" are merely acts of nature. Perhaps nature itself is the provider of the bounty as well.

e. e. cummings, son of a Unitarian minister, expressed his eagerness to be within nature, not to labor to create categories about it.

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked

thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty .how
oftn have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

Herman Melville, another Unitarian, nearly a century before also recognized the urgency to tame our awareness of nature to make our minds more comfortable. He experienced a potency within nature far beyond any ordinary human capacity to either comprehend or accept:

> But though, to landsmen in general, the native inhabitants of the seas have ever been regarded with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling; though we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita...though, by vast odds, the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who have gone upon the waters; though but a moment's consideration will teach, that however baby humanity may brag of its science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder us, and pulverize the stateliest frigate we can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, we have lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it….
>
> But not only is the sea such a foe to us who are an alien to it, but it is also a fiend to its own offspring...the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe….
>
> Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in our souls there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!"

"Rhythmic lover, death"? "And the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."—the final words of *Moby Dick*.

Of course, we are eager to find an enduring Tahiti for our own kind. Good people like us want to be friends of the earth. If we care and campaign enough, we can make polluters stop the poisoning, make bad people become good. Alas, it may be the presence of our species upon the planet, not the villainous deeds of the bad guys, that is the fundamental threat. Our very presence is the primary pollutant.

Every time we save another child, every time we prevent another disease, we create a greater danger to the fragile ecology of earth. Every year more and more species are sacrificed in order that we might continue to consume.

The Gaia Hypothesis—a fascinating new theory by James Lovelock which suggests that the planet itself is a self-regulating organism. In spite of all environmental upheavals, the planet keeps the capacity to go on. How easy to imagine that Earth has the strength to adjust to all of our human hubris—our pride that the earth is ours and the fullness thereof. Lovelock names his theory for Gaia, the Greek earth goddess. How

tempting it is to imagine that Gaia is our mother, that the earth is a source of infinite succor, that no matter how naughty we may be, Good Old Mother Earth will forgive and continue to provide.

The truth is that our species is the greatest threat to the continuance of other life on Earth. The truth is that nature does not need us to survive. To the contrary, according to Lovelock, "from the Gaian perspective, what may be important to [humans] may not be important to Gaia. In fact...Gaia is no doting mother, and if a species screws up, she eliminates it with all the feelings of the microbrain in an ICBM. To Gaia, humans may not be as important as algae."

There can be no life without death, no creation without destruction. Perhaps the true goddess of Earth is the Hindu Mother Kali, the destroyer. Stephen Jay Gould claims that our species is an evolutionary accident in no way a predictable successor to those which had gone before. Species come and go. Life goes on.

Anne Bradstreet Stedman responding to ancestor John Weiss's soliloquy affirms:

> ...Nothing, not human reason or the leap
> Of love divides me from the vacant blue.
> Life, that in earth's least creature sets a flame
> Matched in the molten suns, bears but one name.

Poor Waldo Emerson. He was a pioneer in establishing our essentially American attitudes about nature. Alas, what we got may not be what he intended at all. Bryan Jay Wolf comments, "What is important for Emerson is neither nature as image of the natural world, nor nature as figure for the human mind, nor even nature as figure for the divine mind, but the essential aloneness of the self as it confronts without intervention or mediation the sources of its sustaining power." In a central passage of his essay "Nature," he exclaims: "I am become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or parcel of God."

William James Potter was a younger contemporary of Emerson, minister of the New Bedford church and a founder and mainstay of the Free Religious Association. Conrad Aiken, his grandson, was one of the most distinguished poets of the last century. In his "Preludes for Memmon," he confronts us with Emerson's essential quest:

> You understood it? Tell me, then its meaning.
> It was an all, a nothing or a something?
> Chaos, or divine love, or emptiness?
> Water and Earth and air and the sun's fire?
> Or else, a question, simply? —
> Water and fire were there,
> And air and earth; there too was emptiness;
> All, and nothing, and something too, and love.
> But these poor words, these squeaks of ours, in which
> We strive to mimic, with strained throats and tongues,
> The spawning and outrageous elements—
> Also, how paltry are they! For I saw—
> What did you see?

I saw myself and God.
I saw the ruin in which godhead lives:
Shapeless and vast: the strewn wreck of the world
Sadness unplumbed: misery without bound.
Wailing I heard, but also I heard joy.
Wreckage I saw, but also I saw flowers.
Hatred I saw, but also I saw love...
And thus I saw myself.
And this alone?
And this alone awaits you, when you dare
To that sheer verge where horror hangs, and tremble
Against the falling rock: and, looking down,
Search the dark kingdom. It is to self you come—
And that is God. It is the seed of seeds:
Seed for disastrous and immortal worlds.
It is the answer that no question asked.

Begin anywhere on earth. Become conscious of your background, lenses, and images. Appreciate them for what they are. Seek to be yourself a transparent eyeball. Hope for those moments of illumination when you are infused with the essential energy which is at the center of all existence.

Home again! My friend Thomas Hale of our church on Martha's Vineyard writes:

> From the sea we all evolved many eons ago, and it is to the sea that I shall return someday. Is it thus the heritage of the aquatic ancestors of all of us and the salt that is in our veins that creates such a tenuous, mystical bond, stronger perhaps for some than others, between the human experience and grandeur of the oceans?...
>
> Part of this is written while crossing Vineyard Sound, a numberless passage. It is blowing hard northwest and the gray-blue sea is flecked with white as the shaft rumbles beneath me and the ferry rolls ponderously as she turns the corner by the red Great Ledge bell at the entrance to Woods Hole passage. A gull wheels beside us, hoping for a handout, while to port a scalloper is punching her way down the sound. The Island behind us is but another shade of blue gray while Naushon, close aboard, is a study in muted fall colors—yellows, ochres, brown and green—set off by rocky outcroppings and patchings of sandy beach. Just another ferry trip perhaps, but to me another chance to watch and wonder upon the ever-changing sea."

Far to the west in Taos, New Mexico, Millicent Rogers, a granddaughter of Standard Oil baron Henry Huttleston Rogers, found her spiritual home in that very different expression of nature. In her early fifties she slowly succumbed to the consequences of childhood rheumatic fever. As she lay dying, she wrote to one of her sons:

> …just remember that I want to be buried in Taos with the wide sky—Life has been marvelous, all the experiences good and bad I have enjoyed, even pain and illness because out of it so many things were discovered. One has so little time to be still and look at the Earth and the changing colors and the Forest—and the voices of people and clouds and light on water, smells and sound and music and the taste of wood smoke in the air.

And finally from Hale's aunt and my friend, descendent of the original American poet, Anne Bradstreet Stedman's response to her grandfather John Weiss's poem "In the Water":

> ...What though this whole cool chasm, this jeweled deep,
> Would weigh on heavenly scales like tears or dew?
> Nothing, not human reason or the leap
> Of love divides me from the vacant blue.
> Life, that in earth's least creature sets a flame
> Matched in the molten suns, bears but one name.